

DOSSIER / 1918 - 2018: 'Czech and Slovak Century'

**Czechs and Slovaks, 25 Years
After the "Velvet Divorce"**

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A young man holds Czechoslovak flag at the Wenceslas Square where gathered thousands of people in November 1989

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25 Years After the 'Velvet Divorce'

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by **Genç Mlloja**
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As 25 years have passed since the "Velvet Divorce", a reference to the non-violent "Velvet Revolution" in 1989 ending four decades of communism in Czechoslovakia which was ensued by its dissolution on January 1, 1993 into today's Czech and Slovak Republics, it can be said that both countries have strengthened their roles as nation-states. Both of them are full-fledged members of the European Union and NATO and all international organizations; they are also part of the Visegrad Group along with Poland and Hungary. Unlike the breakups of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the split of Czechoslovakia happened peacefully and one of the most unique characteristics of such a process is that these independent and sovereign countries do not have any border problems.

In the meantime, although the 25th anniversary of their split happens to coincide with the centenary of Czechoslovak independence in 1918, the two countries and people have gradually accepted the change and there is no party or movement today advocating a return to a common state. Politicians and diplomats and scholars admit that, as in many divorces, relations are better than ever since the two sides have greater respect for each other. So, both countries have

officially turned 2018 into a jubilee anniversary to celebrate, to recall the events that have accompanied Czechs and Slovaks throughout the century, to get inspiration by the people who have moved them forward thanks to their thinking.

On such an occasion, the Embassies of Czech and Slovak Republics in Tirana had recently brought to Tirana two prominent figures from Bratislava and Prague, Mr. Slavomír Michálek, Director of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Mr. Pavel Mucke, Vice-Director of the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, who shed light on different aspects of the division process of Czechoslovakia into two states, that is the Czech and Slovak Republics, with their contributions in a seminar attended by Albanian officials, representatives of the diplomatic corps, scholars and journalists.

A CZECH HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As the well known Czech professor, Pavel Mucke noted in his contribution since the outset of his contribution, "To talk about Czechoslovak "Velvet Divorce" cannot be done without basic review of

previous events and processes, which brought "short" 20th Century and which have determined Czech-Slovak relations."

According to him, the birth of Czechoslovak Republic as an immediate consequence of WWI on October 28, 1918, was followed by other developments as a consequence of Munich Agreement and Vienna Arbitration in October/November 1938 and the country was finally destroyed by the Nazi occupation of Czech lands and the declaration of the pro-Nazi Slovak Republic in March 1939.

"However due to successful resistance movement and the Allied victory in WWII, Czechoslovakia was re-established on May 8, 1945," the professor said, noting that a communist regime was established in Czechoslovakia in 1948 that was followed by another important step, that is the official declaration of the "transition to Socialist country" in July 1960. That step was demonstratively visible in the change of name of the state: Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

"Another crucial point came with the political liberalization in 1968, which also brought "new round" in dealing with Czech-Slovak relations. During the Prague Spring a reform of

national and state-building policy was prepared, which was - despite August 1968 occupation and up-coming of conservative "consolidation"- finally executed. The constitutional law about Czech-Slovak federation was approved on October 28, 1968. In the frame of this reform, a formally decentralized model of state was created with new constitutional bodies - federal state bodies (e.g. National Assembly, Federal Government, Supreme Court etc.) and two Republics - the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic formed a Federation. During that time many non-formal rules were established, including a "national perspective" principle in personal policy on Federal level (if the President of Republic was of Slovak origin, Prime Minister was of Czech origin). This principle was used not only on the Federal Government's level, but also in other federal bodies," said Mr. Mucke, who quoted Czech historian Jan Rychlík, as saying that due to the lack of democracy "federation became a dead shell" in everyday reality; federal and Republics' bodies were under direction of the Communist Party politics, mainly of Prague politbyro and supervision of Moscow.

Speaking of the Velvet Revolution of 1989 he explained that a spontaneous political movement of students and artists emerged in response to communist police attack on legal student demonstration in Prague on November 17, 1989.

"It absorbed anticommunist opposition and dissent, including Vaclav Havel, who became the main leader of revolution in a few days. All over Czechoslovakia spontaneously (and "from below") civic quasi-parties had been formed (as a pure "products" of Havel's "non-political politics"): Civic Forum (Občanské fórum - OF) in Czech lands and Public against Violence (Verejnostiprotinasiliu - VPN) in Slovakia. For the future development in national relations it was crucial that all revolutionary acts were coordinated by Czech and Slovak revolutionary leaders. These activities finally brought a peaceful fall of communist regime in Czechoslovakia, accompanied by formation of new "government of national understanding" (which also adopted non-formal principles of "national" nominations) led by Slovak communist, Marian Čalfa. Revolution also brought a demission of President Gustav Husák and nomination and election of Vaclav Havel (as

Czech) for the President of the Republic in December 1989."

Further on Professor Mucke dwelt at length on the events after January 1990 like the change of Republic's name from Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) to Czechoslovak Republic, which was the first appearance of "nationalism" and disagreement between Czech and Slovaks in (post) revolutionary politics and public discourse and as a result the new official name of the country was approved as "Czech and Slovak Federative Republic" (CSFR) on April 23, 1990. A shift in national relations was also visible because of limited functioning of federation in new democratic environment, according to the professor, who considered as a symbolic break point in the atmosphere of "public fatigue and frustration" from long "national-defining" debates (especially on Czech side) the parliamentary elections of 1992. Elections had brought a huge victory of right-wing parties (with secessionist agenda) in Czech lands (ODS and KDS) and of centrists (with strong national program) in Slovakia (HZDS). Their leaders Vaclav Klaus (ODS) and Vladimir Meciar (HZDS) decided to become Prime Ministers of national governments, which also symbolized their reserved political attitudes towards the idea of federation. In July 1992, Slovak National Council voted a "Declaration of Sovereignty", which can be interpreted as a gradual step towards the independence.

"Former revolutionary leader and Czech-Slovak Federal President Vaclav Havel, as a great supporter of saving the federation till that time, was not successful with his attempts to re-start Czech-Slovak agenda. He was not elected President again because of hostility of the Slovak leading party HZD and finally he resigned not only from his position, but also to defend federal agenda (and his presidential competencies were in the hands of federal Prime Minister Jan Strasky). Since Summer 1992 Havel started, as "private person", to participate on preparation of new Czech constitution," he said.

In November 1992, a Czech-Slovak federation was finally dissolved by Constitutional law, which was paradoxically approved by Federal National Assembly, and voted for its own dissolution. Separation of the Republics, the "Vel-

vet Divorce," was finally realized on January 1, 1993, when two new countries emerged.

The professor underlined that during 1990s Slovaks identified themselves with their new state relatively quickly and they finished 20th Century with happy end as the most optimistic state-nations in the world, while for the Czechs, probably more "paternalistic" in their sentiments, a newborn Czech Republic meant mentally still "a smaller Czechoslovakia".

"Anyway, the case of Czechoslovakia and a story about its end can serve as a historical contribution to the long-term debates, how (not) to deal with issue of nationalism in multinational (or "supranational") states. From my personal perspective it is more actual topic all around the world than it seemed a few years ago," noted Mr. Pavel

unintentional consequence of Gorbachev's politics," said at the outset of his contribution Mr. Slavomir Michalek, Director of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

According to him, the speed at which the dissolution of the Eastern bloc and the USSR itself happened surpassed all other falls of empires in history. Basically, question number one was reunification of Germany. Since the victorious allies of WWII had divided Germany, their approval was required for reunification.

"Neither Great Britain nor France were pleased about the prospect of German reunification. It meant a significant reinforcement of its economic and political role in Europe. The opinion that if reunification was to happen, it should be the result of a long process of changes in all of Western

outburst of fierce discussions about the new constitutional organization and the quick turn towards the division of the common state seemed a surprise, an unexpected twist. Numerous distorted ideas about Czechoslovakia's development ignored important facts. Moreover, the break-up of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republics (CSFR) took place in the shadow of the Yugoslav war and the dissolution of the USSR. It is, however, necessary to remind another factor, only rarely dealt with in the literature: some Western European politicians were afraid that a peaceful, cultivated and institutional Czechoslovak break-up would contaminate Western Europe. Therefore, many expressed support for maintaining the common state. Concerns about additional complications were behind this attitude: in the

unfold in a "velvet" fashion, politicians who had intense or even friendly relations with the Czechoslovak governing elite considered the break-up at least as regrettable accident," he said, adding that from a foreign perspective, it was no unique event; it was only perceived as a "civilized," peaceful and even boring version of disintegration, because the disintegrations in the Balkans and the former USSR had a much more tragic and violent character.

To the two major questions if the break-up had been necessary and, whose had been the fault asked by certain Western European political, journalistic and academic circles, professor Michalek has the answer as following: "A simplistic explanation read that the so-called traditional Slovak separatism was to blame. As indicated above, the view that Slovak nationalism and anti-Czech feelings were the main causes of the "unwanted break-up" was also shared by parts of Czech society and the intellectual elite. This attitude was closely related to the Czech elite's general belief that they embodied a "Western, civil type of nationalism", that Czech nationalism was rational, distinguishing it positively from the post-communist states further to the east. Most of the foreign analysts shared this view. The Czechs were Europeans, while the balkanized Slovaks were under the East's influence. Slovak nationalism could be explained by the lack of a democratic past, and the growth of authoritarianism in Slovak society was considered a logical consequence of Slovak history. While the Czechs were influenced by the democracy of the First Republic, the Slovaks carried the historic burden of past military alliance with Nazi Germany. Many politicians saw the break-up as a march of the Czechs and Slovaks into different worlds. From the West's viewpoint, the break-up was the result of the conflict between Czech rationality and Slovak emotionality, between "Western values" and "Eastern chaos." Such one-sided evaluations did not help the independent Slovak Republic in establishing itself on the international scene."

The general conclusion of Mr. Slavomir Michalek, Director of the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, is: "Today, Slovakia and Czech republic are an integral part of the democratic Europe."



During the conference on 'Velvet revolution and divorce'

Mucke, Vice-Director of the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

FOREIGN POLICY CONTEXT OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S BREAK-UP

"Developments in Czechoslovakia between 1989 and 1992 were a part of the historic events after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the most striking symbol of the Cold War and the break-up of Germany and Europe. As Gorbachev, the top leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and later president, left the countries of the Eastern bloc to themselves, signaling that he would not intervene, he stripped the rulers of the satellite states of their only legitimacy and power - the threat of Moscow's military intervention. Gorbachev thus ensured the success of the revolutions in the Central and Eastern European countries. The dissolution of the USSR, which made the USA the only superpower, was thus another

Europe, prevailed in other Western European countries too. Furthermore, Paris, London and Washington relied on Gorbachev to veto the German reunification," said professor Michalek.

As far as the Soviet Union's attitude was concerned, it was influenced mainly by the fact that the state, led by Gorbachev, had so many problems of its own that it simply did not have any power left to exercise a veto, he said.

Seeing developments in Prague and Bratislava from an international viewpoint between 1989 and 1992, Mr. Michalek believed that they were more or less a "marginal issue."

"In the early 1990s, Czechoslovakia was seen abroad as a top Central European country that followed the democratic traditions of the interwar First Republic. Only few foreign observers realized the problematic relation between the Czechs and the Slovaks. The

case of a CSFR break-up, new EU association agreements would have to be signed with both successor states."

According to the professor, unlike the Czech Republic, Slovakia, as a part of the CSFR or an independent state, was unknown and internationally invisible - and if at all visible, the country did not enjoy a very good reputation. Hardly anybody could estimate to what extent Bratislava would be able to overcome the problems of democratic transformation.

"The attempt to create "socialism with a human face" in 1968 had prompted great response throughout the world. The country of the "Velvet Revolution" enjoyed, thanks to the dissident elite, namely V. Havel, J. Dienstbier, but also Alexander Dubcek, the main protagonist of "Prague Spring", a very good reputation and position abroad. Although it was clear that the separation would not be violent and