

Size Matters: Two Decades after the Break-Up of Czechoslovakia

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New Year's Eve is traditionally a time for celebration, reflection and looking forward with optimism. As Czechs and Slovaks mark what they call 'silvestr/silvester' by popping champagne corks and setting off fireworks, some will reflect not just on the dawn of a new year, but twenty years of separate statehood.



On the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1992 a state disappeared from the map. Czechoslovakia, which had been forged in the aftermath of the First World War, divided. A potent cocktail of different factors mixing long-standing resentments, nationalism, weaknesses in institutional design, different views of economic transformation and political opportunism proved toxic for the longevity of Czechoslovakia. The split was largely driven through by two men, Vaclav Klaus and Vladimir Meciar, who won the 1992 elections in their respective parts of the federation. They could not agree on much, but splitting the state offered an easy – if rather drastic – solution to their disagreements.

Two decades on, there appear to be few differences between the two republics. Both countries have ended up in much the same place. The post-communist challenges of democratisation, marketisation, state-building and integration into the EU and NATO, have largely been met. Moreover, relations between the two states and their citizens have perhaps never been better. The current Czech and Slovak governments of distinctly different political hues held a joint cabinet meeting earlier this year. Even TV talent shows cross state boundaries in their search for superstars from Czechoslovakia.

Nevertheless, all is not rosy and harmonious in Central Europe. Corruption still pervades too much political and business life in both the Czech and Slovak Republics, fuelling disillusionment among ordinary voters and providing plenty of ammunition for new political parties promising to eliminate shady behaviour. As the case of the Czech party Public Affairs illustrates so well, however, many of these anti-corruption parties prove in practice to be less than angelic and are just vehicles for the pursuit of other business interests.

Whilst after twenty years the end points may be similar, the journeys have been very different. The split not only strengthened the positions of Klaus and Meciar, but made it easier to pursue radical political and economic strategies, especially in Slovakia. Slovakia's sinuous path over the past two decades included periods when it was labelled the "black hole of Central Europe", a spell when it became the star in the neoliberal firmament with a radical socio-economic package including a trend-setting flat tax. More recently, under left-leaning Prime Minister Robert Fico, Slovakia was admitted into the Schengen zone and the euro. The country's radical shifts in policies over the past two decades owed much to the dominant politicians who pushed them through, but were also facilitated by a relatively weak civil society that rarely exerted influence.

Initially the Czechs seemed unburdened when they parted company with the Slovaks. The country appeared to be a trail-blazer for Thatcherite economic reform, but Vaclav Klaus's clever neoliberal rhetoric failed to match the reality. It was a social democratic government under Milos Zeman that pushed through many of the economic and political changes necessary to ensure EU accession. Klaus returned to high office in 2003 as president, using his albeit constitutionally weak position to undermine his domestic rivals and lambast the European Union with his relentless Eurosceptic rhetoric.

Even Klaus, however, recognises that there is no alternative to EU membership for the Czech Republic. Small states like the Czech and Slovak Republics are vulnerable to the harsh winds of the global markets. They need to be inside the large tent of the European internal market, not least because their prosperity is highly dependent on the motor of the European economy, Germany.

In short, the split offered domestic politicians more room for manoeuvre to pursue their preferred packages of policies, but ultimately such small, trade dependent economies need to exercise self-restraint and be participants in large regional groupings like the EU, especially in austere times. A lesson all those in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland would be well advised to heed.

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