From Democrats to Liberals

The Ambiguous Origins of Liberals and Civil Society in Slovakia after 1989

Matej Ivančík

Department of General History, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava

The difference between the so-called negotiated and democratic concepts of the 1989 revolutions not only affected the revolutions as processes in themselves, but also the post-socialist realms within the East Central European framework. While the democratic protagonists of Poland and, to a certain extent, Hungary were able to offer an authentic liberal politics, the Czechoslovak, and particularly the Slovak situation, was different. Although I acknowledge a certain degree of an established ideological background for the pro-democratic dissidents, I maintain that the very nature of the regime change contributed significantly to both the form and content of the nascent political landscape after 1989. More precisely, in Slovakia, the political division ran along ethno-nationalist vs. liberal-institutionalist lines. However, the two camps were far from established. Instead, we need to understand the ways in which they formed as part of specific developments, which stemmed directly from the revolution and its aftermath.

The early protagonists of the Slovak post-socialist transformation were no strangers to the broad discussions on democratization and liberalization in the formerly anti-democratic states. Their understanding of the dynamics between these two concepts was, however, rather practical and predominantly served to delegitimize Communist attempts at returning to power. In addition, the post-revolutionary elites became strong supporters of a flourishing civil society. In this way, the post-dissident elites were helping in the establishment of a “liberal consensus”, as Ivan Krastev put it.¹ I examine how liberalism, liberal policies and politics were born, and subsequently how they were established in Slovakia after the democratic revolution. The Slovak case proves to be a valid example of how liberal democracy was pursued with little to no experience in liberalism within the former dissident intellectual milieu, or for that matter in Slovak history more

¹ KRASTEV, Ivan: Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus. In: *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2007), pp. 56–57.

broadly. Even so, the examination provides us with the picture of how inextricably linked were the various outcomes resulting from the very process of democratization in post-Communist countries.

The Ever-Lasting Continuity

"Every now and then, we tend truly to hesitate for a long time, we are being overly cautious – we are sling shooting until the enemy shoots from a cannon!"² This description, or rather a sceptical sigh uttered by one of the members of Public Against Violence (*Verejnosť proti násiliu*, VPN), Soňa Szomolányi,³ offers a good depiction of where the politically unembedded Slovak democratic movement found itself as it considered its future strategies for maintaining power. More poignantly, VPN appeared to be lacking a clear ideological direction after their initial success in forcing the Communist regime to sit at the notorious roundtable. Eventually, one of VPN's most prominent members Vladimír Mečiar⁴ ended up leading a counter movement which defeated VPN in 1992, making him the force that shaped the next steps in the political development of Slovakia.

Fast forward to the 2006 elections, the post-VPN right-wing, liberal conservative political elite lost the election to Robert Fico, a "leftist-nationalist-conservative" figure. One of the main campaign strands against Fico led with the slogan: "Do not vote for the next Mečiar!"⁵ Even though the end of the transformation period does not yet lean towards a definite result, we may be able to extract some results from the political conflicts that unfolded during the very period.

² *Slovenský národný archív* [The Slovak National Archives], Bratislava (hereafter *SNA*), fond [collection] (hereafter f.) *Verejnosť proti násiliu* II. [Public Against Violence, II. Section] (hereafter VPN II.), kartón [box] (hereafter b.) 24, inventory number (hereafter inv.) 105, Szomolányi on strategy [addressed to Vladimír Mečiar]. All the *SNA* documents cited in this article are undated and untitled folios embedded in VPN internal dossiers. They form part of internal VPN analysis, and were most likely addressed to, or directly submitted to, Vladimír Mečiar.

³ Soňa Szomolányi is a political scientist, sociologist and philosopher. Within the VPN organizational structure, she was part of the Political Department and was responsible for contributing to the development of the political programmes.

⁴ Vladimír Mečiar became the first prime minister of the Slovak government after the June 1990 elections.

⁵ SITA [Slovenská informačná a tlačová agentúra – Slovak News Agency]: Fico nie je alternatívou, tvrdí Občiansko-demokratická mládež [According to the Civic Democratic Youth, Fico is Not an Alternative]. In: *Hospodárske noviny* [online], 09. 05. 2006. [Accessed 2021-11-19.] Available from: <https://denik.hnonline.sk/slovensko/156809-fico-nie-je-alternativou-tvrdi-obciansko-demokraticka-mladez>.

The period from 1989 to 1992 is traditionally understood as an *intermezzo* that was defined by the gradual acknowledgment of the “true nature” of Vladimír Mečiar by the pro-democratic forces: VPN and the Christian Democratic Movement (*Kresťansko-demokratické hnutie*, KDH) among others.

Public Against Violence emerged as the most significant representative of the broad democratic movement that arose in Slovakia as the result of the democratic revolution of November 17 in 1989. Like its Czech counterpart, the Civic Forum (*Občanské fórum*, OF), it did not last long. More precisely, its political appeal gradually receded through its transformation from a democratic movement to a liberal democratic political entity. The main members of VPN came from diverse backgrounds, with civic activist and environmentalist Ján Budaj and actor Milan Kňažko as the publicly most recognized figures. However, its Coordination Committee, the decision-making body through the initial phase, consisted mainly of intellectuals and artists, such as sociologists Fedor Gál and Martin Bútora, literary scholar Peter Zajac, dramatist Ladislav Snopko, writers Eugen Gindl and Ľubomír Feldek, and painter Miroslav Cipár, among others.

Similar to developments in other Central European countries, the legitimate representatives of the “battle” against the communist regime grew their own internal opposition from within. In Slovakia, this formerly recognized internal opposition, led by future autocrat and “founding father” of independent Slovakia Vladimír Mečiar, emerged as the main political force, which countered the goals of rapid economic transformation and liberal democratic institutionalism. In other words, they earned the populist trademark, which within the particular Czecho-Slovak conditions acquired rather strongly vocalized ethno-nationalist features. When asked about the mistakes made after the revolution, Martin Milan Šimečka,⁶ a young but instrumental protagonist of the democratic upheaval of November 17th and the transformation process that followed, concluded that no major mistakes were made immediately after the revolution, that is in 1990. The following year, in 1991, however, he argued that VPN “did not get” what democracy was: “We thought that we could let everything be, we could let someone else ‘make democracy’, and yes, Mečiar, and like-minded people took over.”⁷

There are two problems with this perception. Firstly, it acquires an ahistorical *ex post* appreciation of the post-1989 events. Secondly, it draws the attention

⁶ Martin Milan Šimečka is a writer, political commentator and journalist, the son of the prominent dissident Milan Šimečka, and a vital member of the VPN Coordination Committee.

⁷ ŠIMEČKA, Martin M. [interview with]: *Demokracia je ako záhrada, ak ju neokopávate, zarastie burinou* [Democracy Is Like a Garden, if You Don't Look After It, It Will Be Taken Over by Weeds]. In: *SME.sk* [online], 08. 11. 2019. [Accessed 2021-11-19.] Available from: <https://video.sme.sk/c/22255562/november-1989-martin-m-simecka-video.html>.

away from the more important questions that have barely been posed by Slovak historiography, i.e. what created the spectre of nationalism in Slovakia? In addition, perhaps even more acutely, what are the nature and origins of this particular kind of Central European liberalism? I maintain that the Slovak case can shed much light on the historicization of the current (non)understanding of the conservative populist threat to the liberal democratic environment.

Shortly after the June 1990 elections, VPN addressed the emerging need to frame itself organizationally, strategically and, indeed, mainly politically. Although there had been glimpses of attempts at forming its political and ideological profile since the beginning of 1990, the main incentive, however, came after the parliamentary elections, and mainly after the regional (municipal) elections in November 1990, which VPN lost to the KDH.⁸ Internal documents act as a rather insightful witness to the VPN's "transformation" from a democratic movement to a political party dubbed as liberal, liberal-conservative or liberal-democratic.

Methodological Frame

I aim to undertake an inquiry into how Slovak liberal politics, liberalism and, more broadly, a liberal democratic understanding of both politics and of the state in general came into existence. My methodological inspiration stems from two lines of thought. The first one is Robert Brier's reading of Skinnerian intellectual history as a methodological tool.⁹ The second one places great emphasis on the historical analysis of the liberal democratic nature of VPN by considering Daniel Hirschman's and Isaac Ariail Reed's understanding of "formation stories".¹⁰ The former approach relies on the understanding of ideas that are not merely produced but also intended to be used in political arguments. In other words, as contributions to specific discourses.¹¹ Robert Brier utilized this approach when analysing Adam Michnik's usage of the term "totalitarianism" in the period both before and after the regime change in Poland. According to Brier, ideology played

⁸ Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana*, SNS) ended up with a poor showing of three per cent at the election. The nationalist threat was thus heavily overestimated.

⁹ BRIER, Robert: Adam Michnik's Understanding of Totalitarianism and the West European Left. In: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2011), pp. 197–218.

¹⁰ HIRSCHMAN, Daniel – REED, Isaac Ariail: Formation Stories and Causality in Sociology. In: *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (2014), pp. 259–282.

¹¹ Quentin Skinner proposes that we read source texts as attempts to sustain or subvert the conventions and ideas governing the political discourse (BRIER, R.: Adam Michnik's Understanding of Totalitarianism, p. 198).

little role in Michnik's understanding of totalitarianism. Rather, he understood it as a broadly described political system that aimed at the total repression of independent social activity.¹² Michnik's understanding of the words "totalitarian" and "totalitarianism" was based on his historical experience rather than on a conceptual grasp of the expression. This, in my opinion, makes it politically more valid and topical, and for that matter politically constitutive. Similarly, the case of VPN shows there was little to no understanding among its members of what liberalism, liberal or liberal democracy meant other than what meaning they gained through the very political change that occurred as a result of the democratic revolution. In other words, as I show, the liberal tradition in the Slovak intellectual milieu was extremely marginal. Or, more accurately, even if there was some liberal tradition, it would not matter to a large extent, as it only mattered precisely because of the gradual reception of "liberal democratic" ideas through the events that defined the emergence of the actual political landscape, as well, as by the VPN members' active usage of liberal democratic language, within the post-revolutionary Slovak political and intellectual milieu.

In terms of this provision of ideas with both historical as well as constitutive importance, my article focuses on the VPN's understanding, performance and political usage of the concepts of liberalism, democracy and liberal democracy from the democratic revolution of 1989 to 1992, when the movement lost the election to a newly emerged Movement for Democratic Slovakia (*Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko*, HZDS). The most emphasized period within this frame is the years 1990 and 1991. Two major events shaped the development of VPN: the first democratic elections in June 1990 and the emergence of the faction For a Democratic Slovakia (*Za demokratické Slovensko*, ZDS) within VPN, which later became HZDS.

Brier's approach proves valuable for two main reasons. Firstly, it does not turn all our attention on understanding the emergence of the party-political landscape as merely the result of personal or factional antimonies. Although my intention is not to dismiss this explanatory frame completely, it lacks contextualization and does not lead to a usable interpretation of why and how VPN evolved. Secondly, it shifts our focus from a sociological class-based explanation of the political differentiation that occurred in Czechoslovakia, which eventually led to the state's dissolution into two separate states. This view is mainly advocated by Gil Eyal.¹³ Eyal's reasoning provides an indispensable interpretation of the late socialist and the early post-revolutionary periods, emphasizing the role of unequal

¹² Ibid., p. 200.

¹³ EYAL, Gil: *The Origins of Postcommunist Elites: From Prague Spring to the Breakup of Czechoslovakia*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 2003.

development in an almost centre-periphery manner. Even so, from the perspective of understanding the post-revolutionary political space as purely contingent, rather than teleological or merely transitional,¹⁴ we must analyse the utilization of the historical discourse by the actors active in the very shaping of the political space. Thus, I maintain that ideas transferred, adjusted and disseminated but first and foremost produced by VPN members as well as the very recognition and their perception of the political space and political struggle mattered.

In contrast, Hirschman's and Reed's approach allows me to focus more on the collective settings. The theory of formation stories, as stated by Hirschman and Reed, stresses the variable ontology of the social and rejects the assumption of fixed entities. Instead, as an act of a vital historicization it traces how entities came into being or how they were shaped.¹⁵ Although Hirschman and Reed tend to point to more complex and long-term issues within their departures from the more "traditional" sociological approaches, such as public opinion or the economy, the underlying principle of their paper is to demonstrate that existing social kinds are real entities with real consequences and with real histories. Such an emphasis is the opposite of considering the subject of analysis, namely the conservative, liberal democratic party, as a mere material substratum of social life.¹⁶ Instead, I will analyse what made and in what context it emerged as a conservative, liberal democratic party.

Two more key principles are, however, vital for Hirschman's and Reed's formation stories theory. Firstly, tracing the formation of kinds, categories and entities involves linking together actions, communications, various kinds of material, etc.¹⁷ This is then dubbed as the tracing of an "assemblage". Within my analysis, this is represented by the understanding of the networks, personal inputs, writings, activities and other involvement of the main subject of the transformation of VPN towards a political party with a particular image and ideological

¹⁴ See CAROTHERS, Thomas: The End of the Transition Paradigm. In: *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 5–21, here pp. 7–8. Carothers points to the then existing assumptions on how transition from undemocratic regime to democracy should work, and how it was considered common sense by transitologists. Within the transitological perspective, the political frame or the very notion of a political struggle, as well as other important factors, tended to be side-lined. The only key decision for the country to make in order to democratize was the elites' decision to democratize. For an intellectual history analysis of transitological assumptions in the CEE region see: KOPEČEK, Michal – WCISLIK, Piotr (eds.): *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*. Budapest – New York, Central European University Press 2015.

¹⁵ HIRSCHMAN, D. – REED, I. A.: Formation Stories and Causality in Sociology, p. 267.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

orientation. The idea of tracing the “assemblage” holds a remarkable value when attempting to trace the intellectual history of the post-revolutionary political landscape. Precisely because the short period after the fall of the communist regimes in the Central and East European region could easily be understood as transitional only through the lens of hindsight, I maintain that we need to place the content, transmission, translation, diffusion and reception of ideas within the historical post-revolutionary context.¹⁸ Thus, tracing the “assemblages” as provided by Hirschman and Reed helps direct our focus to historical linking actions, communications, etc.

Secondly, to support my argument I borrow another feature stressed by Hirschman and Reed in their reading of Ian Hacking’s dynamic nominalism which points out the ability of names to reshape the thing being named if, and only if, the subject in question is somehow aware of the name it is being given.¹⁹ This is where the aforementioned sociological approach intertwines with an approach of intellectual history which contributes constitutive powers to ideas within historical, political and other landscapes. Here, this can be observed particularly in the endeavours of the VPN’s members to present the movement as liberal-democratic as well as in their efforts to search for a place within the political map of Slovakia. We can also observe these efforts in general.

To underline what the formation stories presented by Hirschman and Reed means for the sake of my argumentation, let us hear from them: “To summarize, then, when we speak of *formation stories*, we refer to explanatory accounts of how social kinds are shaped, reshaped, or brought into being; in contrast to forcing causes, these stories take as their points of reference the nonfixedness of social entities, the eventfulness of social life, the emergence of social entities from processes of assemblage, and the dependence of such assemblage and non-fixedness on representation.”²⁰

Democrats

I focus on the VPN’s gradual embracing of the tag “liberal democratic” and what it meant for them as well as the general political environment in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. One has to acknowledge that there was an almost

¹⁸ WHATMORE, Richard: *What is Intellectual History?* Cambridge, Polity Press 2016, p. 14.

¹⁹ HIRSCHMAN, D. – REED, I. A.: *Formation Stories and Causality in Sociology*, p. 267. Hirschman and Reed also add knowledge and theories to the name’s ability to reshape.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

non-existent liberal political platform within the Slovak intellectual milieu.²¹ This held true mostly due to historical reasons and was most poignantly expressed by philosopher and political scientist Miroslav Kusý, who maintained that the Slovak so-called “parallel polis” existence during the communist regime could have emerged solely within the religious sphere.²² Moreover, the protagonists of the 1989 democratic revolution, students, workers, actors, artists and a few intellectuals, could hardly be understood as liberals. This very lack of a liberal tradition is what influenced to a major extent the emergence of liberal democratic politics and policies. This is also why I maintain that we need to address other factors which might have contributed to the nature and form of the Slovak liberal democratic environment. The main source of these is to be found in VPN’s internal analyses of the political situation, the need for its transformation into a solid political party, and the very movement itself. All in all, my reading of the shaping and forming of the liberal-democratic political representation and a more generally defined liberal-democratic environment thus seems to be founded on an event-based understanding. However, this is too strong a claim to support without presenting an analysis of the dissident period. Thus, my argument strictly focuses on an analysis of the intellectual history of the post-revolutionary dealings, which can be understood as the emergence of the political landscape after the democratic revolution of 1989 in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia.

Last but not least, I call for an inquiry into more continuous historical research on how particular events influenced and produced the very nature of liberalism, democracy or populism in Slovakia, since this has substantially been overshadowed by research on the dissolution of the common Czech-Slovak state in 1993.

In Czechoslovakia, the Round Table talks did not occur until the outbreak of the revolution on November 17, 1989, thus giving more importance and a higher

²¹ See KOPEČEK, Michal: *Dissent jako minulost, liberalismus jako projekt: Občanské hnutí – Svobodní demokraté v české polistopadové politice* [Dissent as Past, Liberalism as Project: The Civic Movement – Free Democrats in the Czech Post-November Politics]. In: GJURIČOVÁ, Adéla – KOPEČEK, Michal – ROUBAL, Petr – SUK, Jiří – ZAHRADNÍČEK, Tomáš: *Rozdělení minulosti: Vytváření politických identit v České republice po roce 1989* [Divided by the Past: Political Identities in the Czech Republic after 1989]. Praha, Knihovna Václava Havla 2011, pp. 61–106, here p. 71. On the ambiguous nature of the post-dissident liberalism see also LACZÓ, Ferenc: From “Liberal Minimum” to the “Complete Catalog of Human Rights”: On Central Concepts of Hungarian Postdissident Liberals. In: *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2013), pp. 106–118. An exception, however, can be found in the lack of a liberal tradition in Slovakia. However, liberal patriotism can be found, as represented by Miroslav Kusý. See AUER, Stefan: *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe*. London, Routledge Curzon 2004, p. 19.

²² KUSÝ, Miroslav: *Slovenský fenomén* [The Slovak Phenomenon]. In: IDEM: *Eseje* [Essays]. Bratislava, Archa 1991, p. 172.

moral ground to the protesting people, and at the same time attributing less credit to the rather loosely institutionalized talks in the defeat of the regime. Although this might have led to a more or less chronological lag in the outcome, I would argue that it had in fact weaponized the collective action with a stronger potential legitimacy, which not only strengthened the position of VPN in their dealings with the communist party but also – and this is crucial – constrained its future actions when attempting to establish itself as a solid political entity with a direct message and a coherent programme.

Michal Kopeček highlights that the revolutions of 1989 in East Central Europe were marked by a remythologized national pathos where the historical change was represented as a national liberation struggle, in which the nation stood up as a unified entity and swept away communism.²³ While this imagery might hold true for the East Central European revolutions in general, it certainly has value in the case of Czechoslovakia. Here, people could see signs of the democratic transformation literally unfolding in the actions of the population.²⁴ James Krapfl claims that the most fundamental sign of the revolution was the aspect of participation.²⁵ Although one can argue whether this was the case in the actual toppling of the communist regime, there is an undeniable understanding of the people as subjects of the revolutionary movement, and therefore of legitimacy. This legitimacy, however, was pronounced by a multitude of languages or discourses which, I would argue, shaped the emerging political landscape directly or indirectly.

Similarly, Jeffrey Isaac highlights the participatory aspect of the 1989 revolutions.²⁶ Although he does not state that it played a considerably bigger role than the liberal transformations, he does attribute relevance to the phenomenon of democratic participation. Isaac's interpretation is highly valuable here, as it draws attention to the dynamics between two meanings of 1989.

²³ KOPEČEK, Michal: Human Rights Facing a National Past: Dissident "Civic Patriotism" and the Return of History in East Central Europe, 1968–1989. In: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2012), pp. 573–602, here p. 595. Such an interpretation serves perfectly in understanding the issue of November 17, as mentioned above.

²⁴ I am in no way suggesting that Poland or Hungary do not represent such cases. The situation in Czechoslovakia, however, brought about a more dynamic shift from a substantially less liberalized environment precisely thanks to popular pressure.

²⁵ KRAPFL, James: *Revolúcia s ľudskou tvárou: Politika, kultúra a spoločenstvo v Československu po 17. novembri 1989*. Bratislava, Kalligram 2009, p. 233. (Original edition: *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992*. Ithaca (N.Y.), Cornell University Press 2013.)

²⁶ ISAAC, Jeffrey C.: The Meanings of 1989. In: *Social Research*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (1996), pp. 291–344, here p. 294.

There is strong evidence that the participatory democratic imagination occurred as one of the dominant forces which shaped the development of the Czechoslovak internal political realm. I argue that it is within this frame that we must analyse the variety of political languages that left their mark on the development in Czechoslovakia after the 1989 revolution. I feel a strong urge to point out that in no way do I suggest this analysis provides an explanation for the dissolution of the common state. Instead, I argue it offers a more long-term insight into the challenges faced, as well as their respective historical forms, which emerged as a result of the dynamics between the rather elitist, liberal understanding of the revolution and the more popular participatory one.

No other author has examined the dynamics between the two aspects or interpretations of democracy, albeit in a broader schematic perspective, or in a more profound manner than the French historian and sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon.²⁷ His premise is that citizenship is not merely a form of belonging but rather a form of social power, which properly captures the revolutionary outburst in 1989 Czechoslovakia.²⁸ His notion strongly coincides with Krapfl's well documented emphasis on the "citizenry" democratic participatory aspect of the Velvet Revolution as the one considerably decisive element.²⁹ Even if we may assume that the international or economic, as well as political, factors contributed substantially to the regime change, we cannot simply erase the social power, as Rosanvallon put it, which had endured through and beyond the period of crowded squares.³⁰

A brief episode must be mentioned here. Before the June 1990 elections, a nationalist element emanating from the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská národná strana*, SNS) and associated cultural organizations, such as Slovak Matica (*Matica slovenská*) and Ľudovít Štúr Society (*Štúrova spoločnosť*),³¹ started to occupy streets in Slovak cities and towns, as well as public spaces in general, with an agenda that included the issues of the state language and constitutional re-arrangements. These endeavours gradually gained track through the following

²⁷ I would like to express my gratitude to Michal Kopeček, who introduced me to Rosanvallon's work.

²⁸ SEBASTÁN, Javier Fernández: Intellectual History and Democracy: An Interview with Pierre Rosanvallon. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2007), pp. 703–715, here p. 706.

²⁹ KRAPFL, J.: *Revolúcia s ľudskou tvárou*, pp. 232–233.

³⁰ This is also highlighted with an emphasis on an interpretative political change by Bruce Ackerman. The fall of the Berlin Wall demonstrated how a substantial social force influenced the legitimacy of the Round Table talks in Poland. (See ACKERMAN, Bruce: *Revolutionary Constitutions: Charismatic Leadership and the Rule of Law*. Cambridge (MA) – London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2019, p. 255.)

³¹ RYCHLÍK, Jan: *Rozdělení Československa* [The Division of Czechoslovakia]. Praha, Vyšehrad 2012, pp. 121–123.

months and years, until the dissolution of the common Czecho-Slovak state in 1993. It would, however, be a grave mistake to observe some kind of a natural development in the dissolution. The underlying argument is simply that it is ahistorical to consider the period as though it was formed solely through a nationalist agenda. Instead, what mattered more was the economic discourse of a rapid transformation presented as a discourse of democratization which occupied the political arena. Alongside it, nationalists rejected the rapid transformation and searched instead for some specific approach to the Slovak economy. The underlying division between these two imageries of development is, however less visible. I maintain we should draw attention to the ideas of democracy and ideological imaginations that suited the post-revolutionary scope the most. In doing so, we give a greater perspective to the agency of the people and individuals.

Becoming Liberals

In the traditional post-dissident historiography of the post-1989 development, the story goes as follows: there were liberals and democrats on the one hand, and there were nationalist totalitarians and ex-communists on the other. The only problem, as Martin Milan Šimečka put it, was that the liberal democrats did not recognize this early enough.³² The archival documents, however, point to a rather different story. The VPN liberals underwent a well thought through transition from being democrats to embracing liberal democratic policies.

Before the June 1990 elections, VPN would characterize itself as a democratic movement: a civic movement organized on a bottom-up principle.³³ There were, however, attempts at finding the ideological direction of the movement. This can be traced by observing the two main elements. First, the common realization that the state did not work properly, as reflected in the acknowledgment of the need for both political and economic transformation. The upper echelons of VPN leaned towards a rapid transformation to proper marketization, with the “loudest” protagonist being Jozef Kučerák.³⁴ There was, however, no consensus

³² ŠIMEČKA, M. M. [interview with]: *Demokracia je ako záhrada, ak ju neokopávate, zarastie burinou* [online].

³³ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 104, Návrh stanov [Draft of statutes].

³⁴ KUČERÁK, Jozef: *Nespoliehať sa na centrum* [Let's Not Rely on the Centre]. In: *Verejnosť*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1990), p. 1; IDEM: *Na zdravých princípoch* [On Healthy Principles]. In: *Ibid.*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (1990), p. 5.

on this issue. Nonetheless, the liberal side prevailed.³⁵ The domestic political base for adjusting to liberal democratic principles was highly influenced by the dissident culture which, I argue, stemmed primarily from their respective understanding of politics, and the role of politics in society. Regardless of the intellectual background of individual VPN protagonists, a focused endeavour to maintain a more solid political and ideological affiliation can be observed even before the 1990 elections.

The idea of political framing bore an element of dissident legacy too. It was mostly visible in the need to address the issue of totalitarianism, as voiced by the VPN. A great part of its future political development is thus to be understood as a result of the “primordial” struggle against the communist regime before 1989. Then after the democratic revolution, the struggle was to frame the emergence of the new regime as pursuing an anti-communist or antitotalitarian direction while at the same time being in dialogue with the representatives of the very regime that the VPN aimed to annihilate. Therefore, the situation was challenging for VPN not solely due to the fact that the former dissidents lacked an ideologically liberal background, but also due to the difficulties that any aspiring liberal or, for that matter, even a conservative political force would experience when finding itself in such a tricky environment. In other words, formulating one’s movement or party on the basis of rather strict principles that are in an ideological contrast with the communists was a tough sell and it could bode ill with the voters. Politics based on moral and ethical principles appeared in no contradiction with the efforts that VPN tended to follow. This is, however, not to say that VPN did not work on its ideological affiliation.

In April 1990 a political and artistic symposium called “Ethics and Politics – Art Against Totalitarianism” took place at Bratislava castle.³⁶ From the perspective of ideological framing, it is rather instrumental for understanding by whom and how the VPN higher ranks were shaped. The ideas presented were even the subject matter of internal VPN debates that concerned the party’s future

³⁵ One can go even as far as to suggest that the “neoliberal consensus” prevailed. See the chapter on “competitive signalling” in: APPEL, Hilary – ORENSTEIN, Mitchell A.: *From Triumph to Crisis: Neoliberal Economic Reform in Postcommunist Countries*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2018, pp. 16–20.

³⁶ *Etika a politika: Umenie proti totalite. Bratislavské sympóziu*, Vol. 1 [Ethics and Politics: Art Against Totalitarianism. Bratislava symposium]. Bratislava, Slovenská národná galéria 1990. The symposium took place on April 5–6 under the auspices of President Václav Havel. It consisted of seminars and conference contributions and an exhibition of artists, mostly those who were either not officially recognized by the communist regime or who had simply not been permitted to present their artwork before.

profiling too.³⁷ In terms of the participants and issues, the whole palette of contemporary thought was conveyed by important figures, such as Hungarian sociologist Péter Kende and writer György Konrád, French philosopher Paul Ricœur, Czech-French political scientist Jacques Rupnik, Polish priest and philosopher Józef Tischner, Czech writer and publicist Pavel Tigríd as well as Miroslav Kusý and Adam Michnik among many others.

Pavel Tigríd acquainted the audience with the Fukuyama “end of history” debate,³⁸ providing no other options than that of liberal democracy. He, nonetheless, introduced a required limitation to a purely institutionalized liberalism based on individual freedoms and market economy, i.e. certain republican virtues that each and every member of society should impose on themselves.³⁹ The same principles can be observed in the VPN 1990 election programme.

Adam Michnik emphasized yet another aspect of liberal politics pursued by the main democratic protagonists. The consensual transformation with no revanchist ambitions, a sense of compromise, or as the Havelian notion appropriated for the post-revolutionary period, the power of the powerless (*moc bezmocných*).⁴⁰ Ethics understood within such a framework can also be traced not only in practice but also in the programmatic documents of VPN.⁴¹ More importantly, the notion of a nonviolent regime change contributed heavily to the nature of Slovak liberalism.⁴² One further aspect needs to be acknowledged. The symposium was created and organized by the Austrian education and research minister Erhard Busek, Ladislav Snopko and László Szigeti. Snopko was the Minister of Culture in the newly formed Slovak government. His position was thus more than justified. However, journalist and writer László Szigeti played an instrumental role within the future development of the liberal intellectual milieu in Slovakia.

³⁷ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, Martin Šimečka on Adam Michnik; *ibid.*, VPN on György Konrád, Paul Ricœur and other participants of the *Etika a politika* conference.

³⁸ Francis Fukuyama has been one of the most influential thinkers of liberal thought in the last decades. In 1989, he published the essay entitled “The End of History?”, which was later developed into a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992. See FUKUYAMA, Francis: *The End of History and the Last Man*. London, Penguin Books 2020, p. 440.

³⁹ TIGRID, Pavel: Na prahu liberální éry [On the Threshold of the Liberal Era]. In: *Etika a politika*, p. 72.

⁴⁰ MICHNIK, Adam: Siahání po pravde [Reaching for the Truth]. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

⁴¹ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, various materials relating to the VPN programs.

⁴² See MARK, James – IACOB, Bogdan C. – RUPPRECHT, Tobias – SPASKOVSKA, Ljubica: *1989: A Global History of Eastern Europe*. Cambridge – New York, Cambridge University Press 2019, pp. 99–120. The global perspective of policing violence and the imagery of non-violent transformation needs to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, he became a vital figure in VPN's cooperation with the Hungarian minority party, the Hungarian Independence Initiative (*Független Magyar Kezdeményezés/Madarská nezávislá iniciatíva* – FMK/MNI).⁴³ The Hungarian element emerged as a key component in adding and establishing the necessary institutional qualities to liberal democracy in Slovakia. Secondly, and more importantly, László Szigeti later founded the publishing house Kalligram⁴⁴ which went on to publish the major works of global and Central European liberals and to some extent also conservative and traditional works. The authors who participated at the Bratislava symposium were heavily promoted too.⁴⁵

VPN's origin was described as coming from both individual and collective endeavours which had created an environment for independent thought against the totalitarian malpractice of the previous regime.⁴⁶ This was present throughout the future attempts made by VPN too. However, it was transformed into an argument on legitimacy. Fedor Gál implied this at the VPN congress in Topoľčany in 1991. As he put it: "the source of our legitimacy is our history".⁴⁷ The very fact that VPN protagonists would stress their legitimacy stems from the revolution itself and it does not merely mean that they were taking all the credit for it. More importantly, it shows that the idea of their legitimacy was still valid and pretty much alive. At the same time, we should understand it as a "political commodity" that was up for grabs. In other words, democratic legitimacy was a matter of political discourse.

Soňa Szomolányi, one of the contributors to the political form of VPN, to its strategy and image, as well as an internal political commentator, stressed that the political differentiation occurred as a natural consequence of the VPN's endeavour to transform state and society. Szomolányi understood VPN as a precursor to political differentiation itself.⁴⁸ She realized that the economic transformation to capitalism, i.e. privatization, would not be possible without a strong capital holder elite and an existing strong middle class, and that the process of transformation would contribute to the social transformation of the state. Thus,

⁴³ See MARUŠIAK, Juraj: 1989 in Slovakia: Between Reform and Radical Change. In: *Securitas Imperii*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2020), pp. 82–122, here pp. 96–99.

⁴⁴ See CHMEL, Rudolf: *Bolo raz jedno vydavateľstvo* [Once Upon a Time There Was a Publishing House]. Bratislava, Absynth 2021.

⁴⁵ One must not omit the Archa publishing house led by Martin Milan Šimečka.

⁴⁶ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 104, Návrh stanov [Draft of statutes].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, inv. 105, Fedor Gál, Topoľčany congress contribution, 23–24 February 1991. The "ideological father" of Fedor Gál's contribution at the congress was according to the archival material Peter Zajac, literary scholar and a major figure in VPN political circle.

⁴⁸ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, Soňa Szomolányi on strategy [addressed to Vladimír Mečiar].

she “predicted” that after the anti-totalitarian and nationalist waves, a “social” wave would occur.⁴⁹ The occurrence of the “social” wave, according to her, meant that society would not be resilient to left-wing demagoguery, which will, eventually, prevent the economic transformation from taking place.

Indeed, such a categorization of the revolutionary dynamics brings a historic aspect to our understanding of the post-revolutionary development. However, it omits a crucial discourse, or even the textual aspect of the VPN intellectual context. Here, it is instrumental to understand that the three waves Soňa Szomolányi pointed to were contextually intertwined.

According to the instructions of Peter Zajac addressed to Fedor Gál, VPN was a voice of pluralism, a force to build a society based on the plurality of opinions. The opponents, naturally, represented the opinions of totalitarianism.⁵⁰ Needless to say, this mindset dominated the VPN intellectual milieu. Accordingly, the programme theses of VPN represented this pluralism and democracy. Therefore, economic transformation and privatization were understood as fundamental expressions of those concepts. Within this context, Zajac profiled VPN as a right-wing, centrist political movement whose anti-thesis was a nationalist and a leftist one. Nationalist and leftist affiliations were understood as being the same because both put a strong emphasis on the state and protectionism. More importantly, both had proved historically wrong, inefficient and totalitarian.⁵¹ As Soňa Szomolányi put it: “It is thus not surprising at all that the majority of the population tends to lean more towards the ‘left’ rather than to a conservative right, even though ‘one leftist party’ brought us to both economic and civilizational decline. Seemingly paradoxically, this is caused by a traditional Slovak anti-liberal approach represented also by Andrej Hlinka and his People’s Party.”⁵² What we encounter here, is the dissident legacy at its purest. The behaviour of the majority of the population was in no way predicted to incline towards either the left or the right.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ SNA, VPN II., b. 20, inv. 91 and b. 24, inv. 105, Peter Zajac’s notes for Fedor Gál, working paper before the Topoľčany congress on 23–24 February 1991.

⁵¹ When considering totalitarianism, Adam Michnik’s inspiration is crucial, especially in understanding totalitarianism as a force primarily within society and individuals’ inner totalitarianism. However, Ján Budaj, one of the most important faces of VPN, particularly during the first phase of the democratic revolution, called for the abandonment of the individual’s totalitarian inner self too. See BUDAJ, Ján: Premôžme totalitu v nás [Let’s Overcome the Totalitarianism Within Us] (speech). In: *Verejnosť*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1990), p. 1.

⁵² SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 05, Soňa Szomolányi on strategy [addressed to Vladimír Mečiar]. Andrej Hlinka was a major political figure, leader of the Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (HSLS) from 1925 to 1938.

Furthermore, the process of becoming liberals had to be grasped within a crisis of legitimacy that emerged as they faced new challenges. Even though VPN won the June 1990 election by a significant margin, it was challenged by the ascending SNS and, more strikingly, KDH, the winner of the November municipal elections. Both KDH and SNS were focused on building regional party structures. VPN was stuck in a post-revolutionary legitimacy riddle that had no simple solutions. The political profile-building process is thus to be understood as VPN's transformation from a movement to a party, which provided the necessary navigation through the movement-to-party transformation. However, part of VPN's legitimacy relied on denouncing the party system as such, and the concept of a political party in general. Instead, it derived its power from its broad horizontal and loose structure, which helped mobilize people and attract various groups through the most important revolutionary events (environmental activists, students, artists, actors, workers, etc.). Yet, at the same time, VPN leaders perfectly understood that in order to persist and promote their ideas, some restructuring was needed. Initially, the democratic nature of the movement prevailed and all the regional organs had their say in what kind of a party they would have preferred.⁵³

In the spring of 1991 VPN had to deal with inconsistencies and dissent within its own ranks. Vladimír Mečiar (and Milan Kňažko), the Slovak prime minister, and the future leader of the Slovak independence project, sensed a disparity emerging between liberal institutionalism and the disappointment of the population. The former was gradually being addressed more and more by the leading VPN figures, members of parliament and ministers, such as Jozef Kučerák, while the latter were increasingly left unnoticed. The political leadership of VPN recognized this pattern, and in the face of emerging political opponents, decided to fully embrace the dichotomy suggested by Soňa Szomolányi earlier before, and even went on to nurture it. Within this context, we are able to observe their attempt to be formalized as a liberal-conservative-democratic political party.⁵⁴ In other words, they had to find new sources of legitimacy which, however, would do as little harm as possible to their original source of legitimacy, i.e. the revolution. The Slovak case of the VPN demonstrates the fluidity of concepts emerging through the early post-revolution steps, such as participation, democracy and

⁵³ SNA, f. VPN, II., b. 24, inv. 104, Suggestions to VPN bylaw.

⁵⁴ The attempt at a conservative profile was understood rather ambivalently. It mostly referred to the British Conservatives as role models. The appeal stemmed from the idea of a minimal state. Such an inclination can be found in Peter Zajac's understanding of the VPN's future or in Marcel Strýko's contemplations on the ideological development of the movement. See SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, Marcel Strýko: „Otvorená spoločnosť“ [“Open Society”].

even dissent. The former dissent became the establishment. However, when dissent from the establishment occurred, it did not gain this label. Instead, it was dubbed as anti-democratic, totalitarian and statist.

Concluding Remarks

When it comes to liberalism and liberal democracy, it is hardly true that VPN protagonists did not understand the trivia of liberalism. It is, however, much harder to imagine their programme as ideologically liberal. More likely, liberalism seemed to appear as a pragmatic choice to counter the previous regime's wrongdoings and misconceptions.⁵⁵ We find vast materials supporting this approach in the archival sources concerning VPN too. Liberalism focused on the rights of the individual, it understood the necessity of private ownership, human rights and dignity, all of which suited the post-revolutionary elite's narrative of legitimization.⁵⁶ Yet I maintain that the choice of being liberals was also accompanied by other factors.⁵⁷

First, the aforementioned struggle to define a new source of legitimacy required relatively loose constraints for the regional VPN structures. The appearance of liberal democratic politics was in this case the only possible way to hold the structures together. However, what Szomolányi and others did not include in their analyses of possible voter attraction, was the potential failure to address the continuity of legitimacy, even though the VPN programme substantially changed from the democratization of society to its liberalization. Too often these two concepts are understood as being the same.

Second, and more importantly, the liberal democratic orientation, besides being necessary when embracing market principles and the rule of law, suited VPN's political purposes. In addition to the existing opposition, both outside and within the government coalition, there were the strongly conservative (KDH), the nationalist (SNS), the leftist (the Communist Party of Slovakia-The Party of Democratic Left – *Komunistická strana Slovenska-Strana demokratickej ľavice*, KSS-SDĽ) and the rather marginal (the Democratic Party – *Demokratická strana*, DS). When the

⁵⁵ KOPEČEK, M.: Disent jako minulost, liberalismus jako projekt, pp. 70–71.

⁵⁶ SNA, f. VPN II., b. 20, inv. 90, Theses on aims and strategy of VPN; Political formation of VPN.

⁵⁷ I use the expression "choice" intentionally because the archival documents show a major tendency to discuss the political direction on almost every level within the VPN structure. See SNA, f. VPN II., b. 24, inv. 105, Fedor Gál, Topolčany congress contribution, 23–24 February 1991.

platform For a Democratic Slovakia (ZDS) arose from within the VPN, it was labelled with the terms used for all the potential opposition parties, i.e. conservative, nationalist, and for this reason leftist, and first and foremost, totalitarian and undemocratic. To understand liberal democratic politics and policies in Slovakia, one has to acknowledge a gradual dissent from understanding democracy as participation to understanding democracy as a conservative-liberal institutionalized order which prevents mass participation from influencing the rapid economic and institutional transformation to a certain form of capitalist society. I am, however, in no way, suggesting that the HZDS movement embraced a mass democratic, leftist populist, one might say, approach. More accurately, the dynamics between these two political forces, i.e. VPN and their successors on the one side, and HZDS (as well as later SMER-SD) on the other side, may rather have prevented such politics and policies from emerging. Yet, a comment needs to be added. My intention is far from accepting the necessity of a “populist reason” in the terms used in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s argumentation.⁵⁸ It is solely to direct the research focus towards understanding the historic nature of the dichotomous political environment which tends to produce the current demand for conservative/national (right-wing) populist approaches to the problems that Central and East European countries face. As for the emergence of Slovak liberals and/or modern liberalism in Slovakia, I prefer a realm where the phenomena are not understood as fully formed entities, but rather the result of a dynamic structure.

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract No. APVV-18-0333.

Abstract

This paper critically examines the process of politicization of the Slovak democratic protagonists gathered in and around the civic movement Public Against Violence (Verejnost proti násiliu, VPN), from the 1989 democratic revolution to the 1992 elections. By politicization I mean the process through which the examined subjects underwent a transformation from a democratic movement to a liberal-democratic political party. I focus on particular protagonists within VPN as well as on their interactions with other political subjects. For this purpose, I employ two methodological approaches. The first is borrowed from Robert Brier’s reading of Skinnerian intellectual history, as applied to Adam Michnik’s use of the term “totalitarianism”.

⁵⁸ LACLAU, Ernesto – MOUFFE, Chantal: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London – New York, Verso 2013, p. 208.

The second is informed by Daniel Hirschman and Isaac Ariail Reed's understanding of "formation stories". This allows me to focus on a subject-driven analysis of key concepts, practices and political ideas that shaped the nascent pluralist environment in early post-socialist Slovakia. Liberalism, as represented by VPN, seemed to appear as a pragmatic choice to counter the Communist regime's wrongdoings and misconceptions. Yet at the same time, to understand liberal democratic politics and policies in Slovakia, one has to acknowledge the gradual dissent from approaching democracy as participatory to imagining democracy as a conservative-liberal-democratic institutionalized order.

Keywords:

Slovakia; Czecho-Slovakia; civil society; liberal democracy; post-socialism; Verejnosť proti násiliu – Public Against Violence; intellectual history; 1989 democratic revolution