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The Role of Political Elites in the Devolution of States from the Comparative Prospective¹

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In order to compare three case studies it is vital to clearly define the criteria eligible for comparison. For the analysis of the pressures of decentralization on a political system at the turn of the 20th to 21st century I have chosen at first sight three dissimilar cases: 1) the case of a successful and non-conflictive devolution of a state unit (Czechoslovakia), 2) the case of the successful establishment of a federalization which did not prevent the strengthening of centrifugal tendencies but so far it has not lead to the realization of the requirement to divide the state unit (Belgium), and finally 3) the case when devolution has opened space for a referendum about independence of one part of the state unit (United Kingdom). The chosen cases are not dissimilar only by the „outcome of the decentralization policy “ but also by the character of their society, in which these processes took place, or are still taking place. While Belgium and the United Kingdom have come across the process of decentralization from the position of a stable democratic system, the case of Czechoslovakia is an example of disintegration in the process of transition that was at a time of significant social as well as political change. That is why it is often put as a contrast to the tragic happenings accompanying the devolution of former Yugoslavia or is put into the same category as the Spanish transition. What can the comparison of processes that took place or are still taking place in a democracy as well as at times of the creation of democracy as a political system offer?

In my opinion such a comparison enables us to emphasize general features of the process of the deconstruction of state units at the turn of the 20th to 21st century and show that it is a process that is not, respectively primarily is not, dependant on the status of the society (democracy versus the transition towards a democracy). At the same time it provides space to cast doubts on universally spread notions that the devolution of a state or its internal change is an accompanying feature (or a result) of national emancipation, more precisely the emancipation of a “supressed” nation, a nation that has been since the times of W. Wilson demanding the right for self-determination: in the specific cases of the Slovaks, the Flemish and the Scots.

The thesis about the causal relationship between national interests and disintegration of multinational states is not currently in my opinion absolutely incorrect but quite often it favours in the theory the deep-rooted idea above the reality of political circumstances accompanying the specific process. If we were to accept the thesis about the disintegration of multinational states as a natural result of pollicisation of national identity”, it would be enough to follow the way how the concrete national identity of a non-state nation (M. Hroch) enforces in the time of its political visibility, that is in the time when its representatives form political requirements for an individual autonomous state or a seemingly more

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moderate version of the same that being the establishment of an independent connection of this new autonomous nation defined by the state unit with the original state unit (federalization, alternatively devolution). My aim is on the contrary to look at the processes of decentralization at the present time as a result of the political fight for power between the players, whose interests are not “national”. The question is why this “ordinary” fight for power among political elites ends up as a fight for national self-determination.

1) The president of the republic – a symbol of unity or active party member?

The stage setting for the fight over power that resulted in all the three selected cases in the restructuralization of the state (its decentralization, or abolishment) is a parliamentary democracy. While in the British and the Belgian case the framework is a monarchy, in the case of Czechoslovakia it is the establishment of a republic. Can this factor have an influence on the power dispute over the future shape of the state?

Though the answer is yes, it definitely cannot be said that it is a dissimilarity that would be on its own essential for the integrity of the state. It actually stands that the heads of states in both monarchies are not the symbols of state integrity but they still play an important part as the symbolic bolt of the society. [Young 1994]

In the case of Czechoslovakia, the situation was different. Václav Havel as the first president of Czechoslovakia after November 1989 experienced great authority with both the Czech and Slovak public as well as among the establishing political elite. This is where the analogy with the British and Belgian case ends. Contrary to the monarchs of these states he also had great ambitions to enter the political scene as an active initiative and authoritative player. There is no need to analyse the reasons that lead him to that with respect to his activities in the years that he was a dissident. The important thing is that as a president he did not achieve his ambitions.

Havel’s attitude towards complementary institutions, such as the federal parliament and government had several shapes. Quite openly he ignored the chairman of the Federal Assembly A. Dubček, who was recognised by most Czechs but above all by most Slovaks [Rychlík 2002]. Towards the members of the Federal Assembly who were mostly positively inclined towards him, he adopted the attitude of an authoritative personality who has the right to expect that the proposals he submits will be realized without delay. This is how he had already introduced his proposal to change the name of the republic in January 1990 (the omission of the characteristic “socialistic”), the change of state symbol and the change of the title of the army. Each of the proposals if they had been politically talked over beforehand would have had a high chance to succeed. Havel’s decision to present the proposals without preliminary discussion and demand prompt approval, collided both with the process requirements as well as with the reluctance of members of parliament to accept the de facto dictatorship of the president. In those days even among the former dissidents there were considerations concerning the fact whether Havel actually wished to preserve the parliamentary system. Even if it is without doubt that Havel did not have in reality any intentions to change the character of the parliamentary regime, he did not manage to estimate in time that he was entering – though in good will – into the constitutional space of another institution.

Though the legitimacy of the Federal Assembly was more revolutionary rather than electoral (up to the elections in June 1990 there were residing members of parliament

from the former November 1989 times together with members of the newly co-opted parliament post November 1989), Havel's actions de facto allowed even the newly co-opted members of parliament to realise that the institution that they are newly members of has its legitimate role and power and as a legitimate institution and it is not subordinate to the president. Havel had a sensible proposal whose sense was not questioned by anybody, but the creation of the democratic rules of the game were already by the time he actually proposed it in front of the Federal Assembly so far in the process, that they declined his revolutionary proceedings based on the legal legitimacy of his actions. From this perspective Havel's appearance in front of the Federal Assembly can be labelled as positive though for him personally the discovery that his power has its limits more likely was of a negative nature.

It is necessary to judge Havel's speech rather differently in the context of the Czech-Slovak relationship. Havel made it de facto politically visible the topic of the relationship of Czech and Slovaks in the federation without realizing that he had opened Pandora's box. The process of transformation had different priorities in those days (primarily it was to maintain democratic rules for the functioning of institutions and to retain constitutionality), Havel has moved the "changing points of history" to the least desired track.

2) The trustworthiness of institutions in transition

Public opinion surveys that were to find out the level of trustworthiness of the inhabitants of ČSFR (Czechoslovak Federative Republic) in the institutions showed in years 1990-1992 a clear dependency on expected changes or disappointment of the fact that development did not correspond with those expectations. The most significant decrease of trustworthiness in institutions manifested itself in connection with the enforcement of economic reforms, the proponents of which were mostly on the Czech political scene. Yet it is expressions such as *impatience*, *improvisation*, *amateurism*, *dilettantism* in the decision making process about specific questions concerning state administration and governance of the economy, that were used by the actual new players on the post November 1989 political scene to reflect their own actions in post November 1989 politics. [Jičínský 1993]

The second characteristic feature of the post November 1989 development was the steadily large credibility in the state organs of the republic than in the federal institutions. The trustworthiness of the public in the importance of Federal Assembly radically declined from March 1991 in connection with the increasing pressure to move the competencies towards republic parliaments and national councils.

The only exception at the federal level was V. Havel. Even he had to gradually come to terms with losing the trustworthiness of the inhabitants especially in Slovakia where he was replaced by the chairman of the Slovak government V. Mečiar. On the Czech side Havel still retained the confidence of the public but even here he had to come to terms with the fact that he has a serious competitor. That was Václav Klaus, the main advocate of the economic transformation. [Kopeček 2010]

The most significant feature of these three political scenes (Czechoslovak, Czech and Slovak) was major personalization of the politics. Havel-Klaus-Mečiar – three significant though in character and in programme different personalities symbolized various aspects of the transformation. This personalization of politics was "natural considering the old, that is pre November 1989, system", in which there were not any "significantly positive personalities" [Jičínský 1993: 53]. And it was the factual non-existence of new strongly structured po-

litical institutions in combination with the credibility of some politicians that caused many problems and conflicts that had a major impact on the political life in the country including the relationship between Czechs and Slovaks.

3) Personalization of politics and interinstitutional tension: federations versus republics

From November 1989 to the elections in June 1992 tensions were rising in several directions. On one side it was the tension among ideology programs represented by political parties that can be described as “natural” considering the creation of a functioning party system. It was topped up by the increase in personal grudges among politicians. On one side there were those that could by their often very vigorous manner manage to create the impression among the voters that they are able and willing to stand up strongly for themselves while it was not important if they have a clear programme (V. Klaus and his version of economic transformation which he pushed through) or if they change their opinion every day (V. Mečiar). Together they managed to publically attack those who behaved more moderately (President V. Havel) and were trying to search for “sensible compromises” (the prime minister P. Pithart). In the decisive moments when the split up of ČSFR was to be decided about (that is after the elections in June 1992) it was fundamental that “*coldly thinking pragmatic*” V. Klaus with V. Mečiar “*hot blooded populist with immature visions, full of promises and frequent disclamation of his own statements*”, were brought to one table by “*the longing for power, determination to govern and force with which they pushed through their ideas*” [Vodička 2003: 223].

4) Republic politic party systems

Despite all that has been briefly stated concerning specific features of the institutional transformation of Czechoslovakia post November 1989 it is necessary to remark also a system deficiency. That was the absence of relevant federal political players, that is whole state political parties i.e. parties which contained a proportional amount of Czech and Slovak politicians. There were tries to create such czech-slovak parties but at the republic level they failed to achieve the proportional balance necessary. To add to it only two years proved to show that political democracy in combination with economic reform is not a suitable environment for the establishment of a single, that being a federal political system, if the economic and social conditions are significantly different in both republics. [Musil 1995]

It cannot be claimed though that the enforcement of the model of a republic anchored to a political party system had to be necessarily the obstacle of a united state unit. A politically sufficient condition would have been if the winners of the elections at the republic levels were able to create a federal government from the partners that were willing (and able) to cooperate. The elections in 1992 showed though that the Czech and Slovak electorate had such different preferences that it was impossible for the winners of the election to form an alliance. In the Czech region the winning political party was ODS with the leader V. Klaus whose interest about economic reform overweighed the willingness to search for political compromises that could have negatively influenced reform. Slovak voters mainly supported HZDS with its leader V. Mečiar, whose political party in its election programme

emphasized disagreement with unity which is at the centre of the federal level of government economic transformation. Even the first political analyses of the situation after the elections in 1992 stressed that: *“With Mečiar, the Slovaks did not vote for the split with the Czechs but for a strong man from whom they expected to be able to enforce with large vigour their interests against the Czechs. At its core it was a protest vote against economic ‘shock therapy’ prescribed from Prague. In the surveys concerning party images HZDS was called a party that has the best politicians and the best economic concept and that would be the most able to increase the standard of living and maintain social security – but not a party that would be the most able to guarantee the Slovak national interests.”* [Vodička 2003: 236]

5) The devolution of ČSFR as a manifestation of the need to protect the national interest?

The answer based on the analyses of the overall development of ČSFR post November 1989 entitles us to make a definite statement: that national emancipation, respectively national interest on the Slovak or Czech side was not the key factor in the devolution of the federation. That does not mean that there were no national orientated statements, there was also a political party with a definite national programme: the Slovak national party. It only gained 9 % of the votes from the Slovak voters in the elections of 1992 and it was not able to compete with the winner HZDS.

The devolution of ČSFR was unequivocally the result of a pragmatic agreement by politicians, from whom the two with the most power after the elections – Klaus and Mečiar – though they did not have any legal legitimacy to end the life of the federation, there was not anybody who could have stopped them either. Attempts to stop them such as petitions asking for a referendum concerning the question were ignored by them. Those who supported the rights of the citizens to express their opinion in the matter did not have at the time the necessary political power. After November 1989 the newly establishing political elite had also another important feature and that was political accountability. The Czech and Slovak public somehow reacted subconsciously to the split up of the state in the same way that they used to react pre-November 1989 to the steps of the representatives of the communist party: disagreement without any political dimension.

The role of the significant personalities leading the politic system was in the first years of freedom post November 1989 so significant that it could not have been replaced. The voters did “subordinate” to democratic voting process but the trust in personalities definitely outweighed the trust in institutions. A politician that lost this trust in personality did not have many chances to address the public (it is significant in this context the change in the position and influence of Václav Havel).

The case of the devolution of the ČSFR can be used as evidence of the role of the political elites in transforming political systems. When compared to the process of devolution in the UK and with Belgian the gradual process of transformation of a unitary state to a federation it is clear that if the political rules of the game are generally accepted and followed, the ambitions of politicians who would have a tendency to adjust the rules to their own personal interest, can be more successfully faced.

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