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## Debates Were to Be Held in the Parliament, but it Proved Impossible: The Federal Assembly and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989<sup>1</sup>

### IZVLEČEK

V PARLAMENTU NAJ BI POTEKALE RAZPRAVE, VENDAR SE JE TO IZKAZALO ZA NEMOGOČE: ZVEZNI PARLAMENT IN ŽAMETNA REVOLUCIJA NA ČEŠKOSLOVAŠKEM LETA 1989

Leta 1989, ko se je zrušil komunistični režim, se je na Češkoslovaškem pogosto ponavljala zahteva, da bi bilo treba pomembno politično razpravo o usmeritvi države voditi zlasti v parlamentu. Vendar se je parlament vse leto izmikal bistvenim političnim razpravam. Zakonodajno telo ni postalo politični oder in forum za pomembne razprave ali prizorišče merjenja moči nasprotnikov. Članek opisuje poskuse pooblastitve parlamenta in analizira razloge za njihov neuspeh. Osredotoča se zlasti na nekaj tednov po padcu berlinskega zidu, ki so na Češkoslovaškem dosegli vrhunec z izvolitvijo Václava Havla in Aleksandra Dubčka na vrhovni ustavni funkciji predsednika in predsednika zveznega parlamenta.

*Ključne besede:* Češkoslovaška 1989, parlamentarizem, zvezni parlament, komunistična partija Češkoslovaške

### ABSTRACT

During 1989, the year of the collapse of the Communist regime, a claim was often repeated in Czechoslovakia that substantive political debate about the direction of the country ought to be held particularly in the parliament. Yet the key political debates shun away from the parliament for the entire year. The legislature did not become the stage for politics, a forum for substantive debates or the arena for competing forces. The article maps the attempts to empower the parliament and analyses the reasons for their failure. Particular focus is given to the few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall that culminated in Czechoslovakia with the election of Václav Havel

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During the breakthrough year of 1989 a claim was often repeated in Czechoslovakia that substantive political debate about the direction of the country ought to be held particularly in the parliament. Yet the key political debates shun away from the parliament for the entire year. The legislature did not become the stage for politics, a forum for substantive debates or the arena for competing forces. This study maps the attempts to empower the parliament and their failure. Particular focus is given to the few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall that culminated in Czechoslovakia with the rise of Václav Havel and Alexander Dubček to the supreme constitutional posts of the President and Chairman of the Federal Assembly.<sup>2</sup>

The Berlin Wall fell on 11 November 1989. On 17 November police in Prague intervened against student demonstration in a manner that triggered mass demonstrations in the coming days in Czechoslovakia as well. Most gatherings took place just a few metres from the Czechoslovak federal parliament – the Federal Assembly, which, however did not merit their attention. During the first street protests the massive flow of protesters repeatedly headed towards the parliament. Yet that was not their destination: the crowd passed the building without major interest and continued a few steps further to the headquarters of the Czechoslovak Radio to demand true information about the developments in Prague. The initial ignorance of the federal parliament building by the protesters shows their realistic assessment of the role of the legislature and its crew in the power gear.

To enhance the role of representative assemblies during socialism was one of the slogans of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. They had been also translated, quoted and repeated in Czechoslovakia. The parliament was to enhance its autonomy and become "a powerful agent of socialist democracy."<sup>3</sup> Possible outcome was only tested

<sup>2</sup> The best summary publications about the Czechoslovak November and December 1989: James Krapfl, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013). Jiří Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce. Akteři, zápletky a křižovatky jedné politické krize (od listopadu 1989 do června 1990)* [Through the Labyrinth of the Revolution. Actors, Plots and Crossroads of A Political Crisis (from November 1989 to June 1990)] (Praha: Prostor, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Gorbachev speaks of "Soviets" that were known as the "National Committees" in Czechoslovak terminology, whilst the three supreme assemblies were called differently: The Czech National Council, the Slovak National Council (the supreme soviets in the republics), and the Federal Assembly. In his criticism of the existing situation Gorbachev used to say: "... the role of the Soviets was weakened. What emerged was what we call the replacement of the roles and activities of the state and administrative bodies by the party organs. (...) In brief, there was a specific deformation of the entire activity of the democratic body which owes its existence to our socialist revolution. Thus the major task that arose in front of us during the reconstruction: to fully renew the role of the Soviets, as the bodies of political

by individuals in Prague before the Autumn of 1989. Among them was Evžen Erban, retired high official of the Communist Party. As the first and only more noteworthy politician he invited Václav Havel for a meeting in the Summer of 1989. At one point of his long political monologue he told Havel: "I might be arrested in the afternoon ..." to add: "They cannot! They cannot! I have parliamentary immunity!" and pulled out his parliamentary ID card.<sup>4</sup> The scene offers a glimpse on some significance attached to parliamentary immunity when deciding about the degree of political courage vis-à-vis political breakthroughs. Yet there is only limited evidence of the kind in Czechoslovakia.

When testing the limits of how far one could have gone in using the federal parliament and uncensored rostrum, Lubomír Štrougal went farthest. Another of the political veterans, having served the top power posts for thirty years, Štrougal withdrew to seclusion probably in hope that he would be invited back. In the Summer of 1989 he reminded the Party leadership of their guilt for the failure of the earlier reform attempts. He skilfully used a language different from that prescribed by the Party leadership. Instead of reconstruction he spoke of "radical reform" and criticised the abandonment of economic policies of the Prague Spring.<sup>5</sup> His address on 20 June 1989 to the plenary session of the Federal Assembly met with silence among the MPs and the media.

Another attempt was made a few months later by Štrougal's successor in the post of the federal Prime Minister, Ladislav Adamec. As constitutional official the Prime Minister was answerable to the federal parliament. At the same time, as member of the Communist Party, he was bound to conformity with the Party leadership. In the Autumn of 1989 Adamec tried to weaken the dependence on the Party leadership by transferring the hitherto internal discussion from the Party grounds to the parliament. Yet the report he had drafted was not approved by his superior Party bodies. Hence on 11 November 1989 the Prime Minister, bound with discipline, had to read to the Federal Assembly statements that included some points that were

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power, as bearers and powerful carriers of socialist democracy". Michail Sergejevič Gorbačov, *Přestavba a nové myšlení pro naši zemi a pro celý svět* [Perestroika and New Thinking for Our Country and the Whole World] (Praha: Svoboda, 1987), 96–97.

<sup>4</sup> Václav Havel seemed so captivated by that moment that he has not forgotten about it when, from the distance of a few weeks, he recounted the unique encounter of 15 November to Irena Gerová. Irena Gerová, *Vybrábáčky: Deníkové zápisy a rozhovory z let 1988 a 1989* [Digs: Diary Notes and Interviews from 1888 and 1989] (Praha, Litomyšl: Paseka, 2009), 137. For additional testimonies about Erban's activities see Zdislav Šulc, *Z jeviště i zákulisí české politiky a ekonomiky* [From the Stage and Backstage of Czech Politics and Economics] (Brno: Doplněk, 2011), 197.

<sup>5</sup> "Politics is the art of the possible, whilst the possible was affected not only by internal, but also international context. (...) The abandonment of the economic reform in the early 1970s was a grave mistake," stated Štrougal. *Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna* [Common Digital Czecho-Slovak Parliamentary Library], Federal Assembly 1986–1990, Joint Sessions of the House of People and the House of Nations, Stenographic records, 14<sup>th</sup> session, 20. 6. 1989, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1986fs/slns/stenprot/014schuz/s014017.htm>. Cf. Jaromír Sedlák, *Muž nad stolem, aneb Byl jsem Štrougalovým poradcem* [A Man Over The Table or I Was Štrougal's Adviser] (Praha: BVD, 2010), 131.

in contradiction to what he had wanted to say. Nonetheless, he did not give in and spoke later in the debate together with other MPs. With a slight delay he presented his own version of the thesis about the need for political reform. Those passages were, however, later censored by the media upon intervention from the Party headquarters. Such was the infamous fate of the key attempt to transfer political debate from Party corridors to the parliament.<sup>6</sup>

The attempt by Adamec did not become publicly known and has not entered history: in the days that followed it was outshone by new, more far reaching events. The Civic Forum was established as a wide coalition of those outraged by police brutality against the demonstration in Prague on 17 November 1989. After a few days of mass rallies it became apparent that the retiring power structures were giving up their power quite willingly. Guided by the logic of the existing power system, the attention focused on the development within the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The parliament and other political institutions respected the hierarchy.

Personnel changes in the presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia were bound to signal a major power shift. The Central Committee was a federal body: two thirds out of the hundred and fifty full members were Czechs. The assembly of the actual power holders convened on 24 and 25 November.<sup>7</sup> A few candidates for political leadership spoke actively, including the two aforementioned speakers from the parliament – Lubomír Štrougal and Ladislav Adamec. Yet none of them was given a mandate. A dramatic clash of long warring factions gave rise to the Communist Party leadership to neutral, feeble candidates. The choice meant actual and virtually immediate extinction of the influence of the Party headquarters.

The disintegration of the old institutional centre opened space for activities at other platforms. The first in line to benefit from this for some time was the federal Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec. He held operational power and entered, on his own, into talks about further developments with the Civic Forum. The demands by the Civic Forum headed towards transformation of the political system: a revision of the Constitution, preparation of elections, changes in state posts. All that called for the involvement of the parliament.

As the events evolved, the significance of the parliament rose notably. Yet there was a glitch: mandates were required in order to move political debates to the parliament. Nevertheless, none of the new members of the temporarily governing group surrounding Prime Minister Adamec had them. Adamec himself was not member of the parliament. Naturally, the Civic Forum did not have any parliamentary rep-

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<sup>6</sup> Miloš Hájek, *Paměť české levice [The Memory of the Czech Left]* (Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2011), 295.

<sup>7</sup> Recordings of both session, after which the leadership was altogether replaced: *Poslední hurá. Stenografický záznam z mimořádných zasedání ÚV KSČ 24. a 26. listopadu 1989* [The Final Hooray: Stenographic Record from Extraordinary Sessions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia on 24 and 26 November 1989] (Praha: Agentura Cesty, 1992).

representatives. Meeting in the federal government building, only one of the seventeen people who gathered on 28 November as part of the delegations of the federal government and the Civic Forum to plan the future of their country, held parliamentary mandate: Bohuslav Kučera, the Chairman of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party.

Who then actually was represented in the parliament? Who were the people who held, at the moment of political change, the 350 mandates? The national key served as the basis of parliamentary mathematics at the Federal Assembly. At the core of the entire complex structure of the institution was representation of deputies from both parts of the federation in the two Houses of the Federal Assembly. The representation in one of them, the House of Nations, was equal. Moreover, the deputies from the Czech Republic and from Slovakia voted separately on Constitutional changes and other major issues subject to debate on which the Constitution stipulated “a ban on majorisation”. Hence the need for identical consensus by both Czech and Slovak majority. In the other chamber, the House of People, the twice more populous Czech Republic had the corresponding majority of mandates.

Additional crucial parliamentary mathematics was based on power control through the privileged and disciplined Communist Party. The thoroughness that gave the Party members priority rights and leading posts was, in the case of the parliament, brought to perfection. Following the elections in 1986, 69 percent of MPs came from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.<sup>8</sup> The second most numerous group was the “non-partisan” members, representing 18.3 percent. It was an atomised crowd of women and men organisationally linked to the apparatus of the Communist Party.<sup>9</sup> The only four individual organisations with some degree of autonomy were represented far more scarcely. The two Czech political parties, the Czechoslovak Socialist Party and the Czechoslovak People’s Party held identical 5.5 percent of mandates in the Federal Assembly. Each of the two Slovak parties, the Freedom Party and the Party of Slovak Revival held only 1.1 percent.

A simple look at the data that were undisclosed at the time in the raw form, shows quite clearly the developmental options for the Federal Assembly: the fundamental question was what would the total of 87 percent of MPs representing the Communist A-team (the faction of the Communist MPs) and the associate B-team (non-partisan MPs), the hitherto pillars of power do. What would they do in the uncertain times when their power centre was falling apart?

The first joint session in the revolutionary weeks was called for Thursday 29 November. The main points in the agenda arose from the government talks with the

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<sup>8</sup> For the list of MPs elected in 1986 with their political identification and other characteristics see *Československo dnes: Zastupitelské sbory, vlády, diplomatické styky, školství, zdravotnictví, ekonomika, kraje ČSSR* [Czechoslovakia Today: Representative Assemblies, Government, Diplomatic Relations, Schools, Healthcare, Economics, and Regions in CSSR] (Praha: Pressfoto, 1987), 20–56.

<sup>9</sup> The easiest way to describe this is an atomised team of reliable friends of the Party in power, representing some features prescribed by the doctrine of socialist parliamentarism that detailed all qualities and their proportion as ought to be present in the assemblies.

Civic Forum. The deputy Prime Minister in the Adamec cabinet was to address them. On their way to the parliament the MPs had to pass by instructions from the revolutionary street, saying: “Deputies, vote for your voters, not for yourselves!”<sup>10</sup> The joint session of the two Houses opened after lunch in somewhat chaotic atmosphere. “Quite an unrest reigned in the building of the Federal Assembly during the lunch break,” recalled MP Karel Löbl later. “We did not have any information about the agenda of the joint session. It seemed that an unusual number of guests were present. One could hear the echo of the protesters chanting outside by the statue of St. Wenceslas. (...) When the hitherto Chairman Indra stepped down, Slovak Communist Janík, lacking relevant experience, took over chairing the session. Moreover, the atmosphere in the Federal Assembly building echoed responses to the morning closed session of the Communist faction where the Minister of Defence General Václavík was allegedly in a warring mood when reporting on the readiness of the military to intervene. Being non-Communist, I was not there. The non-Communist MPs were, however, disturbed by that the Communist MPs had already available in advance some printouts of the agenda of the afternoon session.”<sup>11</sup>

At their joint session, the two Houses of the Federal Assembly quickly met all fundamental demands by the Civic Forum, yet by means most advantageous for the parliamentarians. Within a few hours the discredited veteran Alois Indra disappeared as the leader of the Federal Assembly, as did the passages in the Constitution about the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and of Marxism-Leninism. A commission for the oversight over the investigation of the intervention on 17 November was set up. All that happened broadcasted live by the Czechoslovak Television and the Czechoslovak Radio.

Yet the parliament also adopted its own resolution on the political situation. Speakers from different political currents represented in the parliament agreed in that the political decision-making finally got to the parliament from the Party bureaus, as well as from the streets and squares. It belonged there and was to remain there. The resolution adopted by both chambers of the Federal Assembly as “the representative of the people of Czechoslovakia” subscribed to all “progressive demands that lead to further development of socialist societal relations, to the improvement of socialist democracy and living conditions of the people.” It reminded that a number of reform laws have reached an advanced stage of draft and were to be adopted within “a few days”, whilst MPs were drafting additional ones. At the same time they explicitly mentioned the need to adopt new regulations for the press, association, and the right to petition and defence law. Furthermore, “at the same time we deem it of prime duty to promptly complete the work on the new Constitution.” The parliament further emphasised both steps that preceded the adoption of resolutions and

<sup>10</sup> “Poslanci, hlasujte za své voliče, ne za sebe!” *Svobodné slovo*, November 30, 1989, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Karel Löbl, *Naděje a omyly. Vzpomínky na onu dobu* [Hopes and Errors. Memoirs of An Era] (Praha: Academia, 2012), 641–42.

meant satisfaction of the main demands of those on strike. That meant setting up the parliamentary commission and abolition of the Constitutional article about the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

Constitutionally speaking – and altogether in contrast with the vision of the revolutionary forces – the Federal Assembly became the sovereign. Whilst its declaration did not explicitly emphasise that and only hinted at it by praising the government for “the dialogue with the representatives of civic initiatives”, by expressing support to the planned changes in the government and also with a few formulations attempting to define the government powers: “The Federal Assembly commits the government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic to carry out dialogue whilst being aware of responsibility for the socialist future of our nations and ethnic groups. At the same time it commits it to systematically continue in following the foreign policy line contained in its manifesto adopted in November 1989 at the joint session of the Federal Assembly.” Finally, the Federal Assembly stated: “We assure the people of our republic that we shall continue to do our utmost to secure content life of the peoples in our socialist republic in line with the principle: ‘All power in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic belongs to the working people.’”<sup>12</sup>

The parliamentary attempt to take over activity as an indispensable institution was, in the hours that followed after the end of the televised broadcast, commented upon far less than was the audience experience of it. The breakthrough events were increasingly broadcast by the state television and radio. The first televised live broadcasts from Wenceslas Square were aired on 22 November, a week prior to the broadcast from the Federal Assembly. Ever longer broadcasts and transmissions followed, all of which were less and less tailored to satisfy the needs of the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.<sup>13</sup> The highlight of the development came as soon as Saturday 25 November when the first federal channel showed alternatively live broadcasts of thanksgiving mass for the canonisation of Agnes of Bohemia with Cardinal František Tomášek serving at St. Vitus Cathedral; from press conference on the extraordinary session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; and from the biggest of mass demonstrations in Prague, which was alternated with a concurrent conference of the Prague branch of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia held in the Palace of Culture. In the evening after the extended main news, the television repeated twice a special televised address by the new secretary general of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Karel Urbánek. In

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<sup>12</sup> “K současně vnitropolitické situaci. Prohlášení FS ČSSR” [On the current political situation. Declaration by the Federal Assembly of CSSR], *Svobodné slovo*, November 30, 1989, 3.

<sup>13</sup> The director general of Czechoslovak Television Libor Bartla announced on the news on 23 November that the television was directly run by the federal government; i.e. it was the government instead of the hitherto unlawful direct control by the apparatus of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Mirka Spáčilová, “Televize v rukou vlády?” [Television in the Hands of the Government?], *Mladá fronta*, November 24, 1989, 5. Cf. Milan Šmíd, “Česká média a jejich role v procesu politické změny roku 1989” [Czech Media and Their Role in the Process of Political Change in 1989], accessed May 15, 2013, <http://www.louc.cz/pril01/listopad.pdf>.

between, within an improvised 45-minute bloc of interviews “On Current Issues”, Václav Havel spoke for the first time more continuously on cameras.

The programme deserves recognition for the speed, quality and representative nature of political debate on television and its broadcasts, that was achieved as early as during the weekend of 25 and 26 November. Apart from the television, other media, radio and daily press tried hard as well. It ought to be noted in order to understand the preserved scope of – largely disenchanted – responses to the first live broadcast from the Federal Assembly in the afternoon of Wednesday 29 November. From the perspective of television viewers, the session of the legislative body was to be yet another part in the series on the revolution. The core roles that otherwise were to be played by the parliament, had been already well served by other fora, as had been also noted by MPs. Compared to the televised platforms, some representatives had been missing altogether whilst others were superfluous. The final impression was thus somewhat skewed and incoherent with the ongoing debates in Prague and Bratislava.

Those characteristics come out most clearly in the case of Anton Blažej who became, for three weeks, the leading figure of the emancipation effort at the Federal Assembly. Rector of the Technical University in Bratislava since 1969, Blažej appeared in front of the cameras on 29 December as spokesman of the Communists in the parliament. He gave a major political address about the emergent situation. On behalf of the Communist majority he recognised and welcomed the *de facto* completed régime change: “We, the Communist MPs, have to primarily state in public that those were our own faults and mistakes, as well as the mistakes of the Party, our erroneous interpretation of socialism, our flawed understanding of the leading role of the Communist Party ...” He explained to the viewers that the federal parliament was being transformed along with the wider changes, and was gaining stronger position. He criticised the previous policy, welcomed constitutional changes and talks with the Opposition, and stated that the Communists would try to succeed in the coming elections: “Communist MPs support most actively the democratic elections and the emergence of the coalition government. If we wish to genuinely unite on the principles of building modern, democratic, human, and industrially advanced socialist Czechoslovakia, I think we have every capacity to find a common ground.” According to Blažej, within the coming hours the Federal Assembly was to meet all student demands it was able to satisfy, and the youth would then be free to part and return to their studies.<sup>14</sup>

It would have been a fine address and perhaps even effective, had it not been given by an unknown man in his sixties and without Miloš Jakeš and other infamous faces of the old leadership seated to his left. They evidently considered it their duty not to be missing in their seats at the presidium. Even though they no longer had

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<sup>14</sup> *Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna* [Common Digital Czecho-Slovak Parliamentary Library], Federal Assembly 1986–1990, Joint Sessions of the House of People and the House of Nations, Stenographic records, 16<sup>th</sup> session, 29. 11. 1989, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1986fs/slsn/stenprot/016schuz/s016001.htm>.



any influence on the content of Blažej's speech or on anything else what was going on that day in the Federal Assembly, with their mere visual presence they set the background to the effort of most speakers. They sat without responding to Blažej or the others who were escalating the general condemnation of the previous decades and the criticism of particulars. Yet, according to the rules of procedure, as members of the presidium they were entitled to priority intervention in the debate. From among the Czech politicians representing real power, only the Minister of Defence General Milan Václavík was to speak. He was invited directly by the deputy chairman of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party Karel Löbl to tell the plenary whether there were any grounds for concern about military intervention. The Minister, dressed in uniform as was customary, indignantly rejected the concern.<sup>15</sup>

On behalf of the Czech part of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, two common MPs spoke up: Jana Pekařová and Hana Návrátová. It was their address that, in the coming days, triggered major debate within the Czech context. One might rightly assume that theirs were to be complementary speeches to that given by Blažej. The Czech women-mothers spoke after a man, an academic with his rational arguments. The division was common in similar arrangements and the two MPs introduced themselves to the viewers and listeners accordingly. After the conflict in the Communist faction at noon, it was unlikely to be an authoritatively drafted script for the debate, but somewhat an intuitive balancing and repetition of morning debates in front of the television cameras. According to the testimony by Ms Návrátová, MP, the Communist MPs no longer had any firm leadership that day after the noon meeting of the faction, and their presentations came out in an improvised manner.

In case of the Czech female MPs on television the impression was not given that much by their message, but their looks and presentation. In a concentrated form the addresses contained vast amount of patterns and canonical formulations by lower rank officials who reproduced the official propaganda with least investment in thought or language, yet with high personal commitment. That immediately triggered allergic reactions among a part of audience in spite of the fact that the addresses by the two MPs were de facto quite forthcoming. Both were plainly supportive of the Adamec cabinet against possible attacks by the Party apparatus. Yet most audiences had been unable to decode this. Not only were they accustomed to "switch off" when listening to official speeches. The speeches suggesting emancipation of Communist MPs from the leadership by the Party apparatus that were in part pursuing the pre-November institutional attempts and intraparty struggles, were unintelligible to the uninitiated audience. Within the context of the new discourse and situation they came across as inappropriate and out of sync with the debate on the squares.

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<sup>15</sup> Karel Löbl, *Naděje a omyly. Vzpomínky na onu dobu* [Hopes and Errors. Memoirs of An Era] (Praha: Academia, 2012), 641. Address by Löbl and Václavík: *Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna* [Common Digital Czecho-Slovak Parliamentary Library], Federal Assembly 1986-1990, Joint Sessions of the House of People and the House of Nations, Stenographic records, 16<sup>th</sup> session, 29. 11. 1989, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1986fs/slsn/stenprot/016schuz/s016004.htm> ff.

The Adamec cabinet had an opportunity on the day to test its ability as the new centre of power to mobilise the majority in both Houses. The test brought relatively positive results: except for a handful of succinct commentaries, its opponents from the Communist Party were silent in the plenary. Support to the federal government and to the Prime Minister personally came out from most speakers. For instance, Slovak independent MP Gejza Mede appealed: “We, the parliament, have already shown that we are at the level that we can criticise the government when appropriate and in the interest of the society, of our voters. Yet has this parliament reached the level that it can help the government when help is needed?”<sup>16</sup> Prime Minister Adamec and his team followed the debate on television and were responding to some statements by telephone. “Adamec followed my address on television and immediately phoned my secretariat,” recalls Karel Löbl who has known Adamec well for the nearly two decades of their service to the Czech government. “His secretary Dáša only got hold of me the next day when the Prime Minister thanked me for support and critical suggestions, and expressed belief in positive developments. I acquired an impression from the debate that he was not fighting as much the emerging Civic Forum, but some people in his own Party.”<sup>17</sup>

The first debate evidenced fairly advanced split in the Czech and Slovak politics, different role of debates in the two national communities at the Federal Assembly, as well as the different position and perspective of the Communist Parties in Czech and Slovak politics. Though the Communist faction formally presented all Constitutional changes, a number of disparate groups were within the brand, all standing on historical crossroads where they split into a number of groups. Anton Blažej was given space in front of the cameras. As the subsequent debate and events over the coming weeks and months showed, the rector from Bratislava used, in an improvised manner, his perspective and rhetorical skills. Yet de facto he did not represent any significant faction within the disintegrating Party. The moments that were deciding their fate occurred elsewhere, mainly in the central apparatuses in Prague and Bratislava and within the executive.

The other components of the parliament to draw attention by their activity during the first televised debate were the smaller Czech and Slovak political parties. The Czech Socialists, who emerged strong with a team of five well prepared speakers during the debate over the first point on the agenda, were gradually joined by others. Thus during the evening tuning of the parliamentary declaration in the plenary, each particular matter was discussed by a Czech and Slovak Communist MP along with MPs from the Czechoslovak People’s Party, the Party of Slovak Renewal, and the Freedom Party. The common problem of all these voices lay in the proportion between their quantity and representativeness. Unlike the readers of this text, television

<sup>16</sup> *Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna* [Common Digital Czecho-Slovak Parliamentary Library], Federal Assembly 1986–1990, Joint Sessions of the House of People and the House of Nations, Stenographic records, 16<sup>th</sup> session, 29. 11. 1989, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1986fs/slsn/stenprot/016schuz/s016002.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Löbl, *Naděje a omyly*, 643.

viewers were not warned in advance about the weight of individual organisations. Thus the debate might have led them to a false conclusion about the political weight of individual addresses.

The assessment of the four legal political parties differed substantially in the Czech and Slovak society, ranging from quite benign ideas about the prospective role of these parties as the nuclei of pluralistic political life (what was the evident long-term aim of, for instance, their newspapers), to bitter condemnations of the operetta mini-parties led by police agents and frightened corrupted officials whose activity created smokescreen for democratic socialism.

The particular status of these parties within the political system emerged as an improvisation in an effort to retain, in the newly seized countries in the Soviet bloc, some ornamental differences related to local customs.<sup>18</sup> It was similar to the Moscow decision to retain Presidency in Czechoslovakia, a post that was functionally superfluous and inexistent in the Soviet model. The Soviet political reforms at the end of 1980s led to democratisation of internal life of the Communist Party. They did not offer any example for the leaders of non-Communist parties in the Soviet satellites. Not that the leaders of those parties did not know what could be expected of them. Visions of equality and greater share in the government were a natural part of their existence. Throughout the forty years all such efforts ended where they began. Other organisations were not allowed to take part in the decision-making. They were merely permitted to elaborate or provide for the adopted decision. It was the Communist Party that had the patent to govern. The situation at the end of the 1980s seemed to a part of the lower rank officials of both larger Czech satellite parties, the People's and Socialist, as untenable. Pressure on the leadership was rising and the activities in both parties were called a "reviving current."

The idea that they would significantly increase their influence in the future was largely based on analogies with Czechoslovakia's interwar politics. Similarly to other areas, such as the economy or culture, there was a widespread belief in the Czech society that the future development would return to the developmental trends suppressed or eliminated by the Communist rule. Other future was hardly conceivable.

Hence the quite widespread belief that the Socialists and Populars represented, albeit in a distorted form, traditional mass political currents identified with by a substantial part of the population, and that some sort of restoration of influence was about to come. Václav Havel thought along the same lines. In the middle of the Summer of 1989, he grasped an accidental informal opportunity to send, faced by a number of witnesses, a flirty message to the central secretary of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party, Jan Škoda, addressing his former schoolmate and fellow scout with

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<sup>18</sup> Non-Communist parties as part of the state-socialist governments worked in East Germany (4), Czechoslovakia (2+2), Poland (2) and Bulgaria (1), as well as in Vietnam (2 destroyed in 1988) and China (8). In Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and other countries of the Soviet bloc non-Communist parties were altogether suppressed.

an old nickname: “Dear Nosák [Nosey], I hope we meet soon at some roundtable. Václav Havel.”<sup>19</sup>

The Czechoslovak Socialist party was the first to join the newly formed coalition as soon as in the first hours of the demonstrations against the police intervention on 17 November. When Škoda, directly invited by Havel, came to the founding meeting of the Civic Forum, he was listed among the representatives of the dissident groups and strike committees. In the tumultuous events of the coming days the Czech Socialists were present and accepted everywhere, and, given their mediation skills, they were also liked to be seen in the old government institutions and in the headquarters of the Civic Forum. The chairman of the party, Kučera, ceremoniously used his many posts in the political system to involve the Civic Forum in the game and in the removal of the Communist Party headquarters. The star day came during the parliamentary debate in front of the television cameras on 29 November.

Whatever was said above about the party of Czechoslovak Socialists also held true with some variations for the Czechoslovak People’s Party. The first major difference was the threefold membership base: there were about fifteen thousand socialists and some forty thousand Populists.<sup>20</sup> The other distinction was such a cautious party leadership that, apart from pacifying its own fellow party members, throughout 1989 it did not exert any noteworthy activity. In order for the People’s Party to join the main stream of political events, the leadership had to be replaced, which happened on Monday 27 November.<sup>21</sup> With the new leadership, the Czechoslovak People’s Party joined the Czech Socialists. Richard Sacher attended with Jan Škoda as an ally leadership meetings about further action at the Civic Forum. The new party chairman, Josef Bartončík, showed himself in live televised broadcast as skilled speaker and strategist.

None of that could be said of any of the Slovak parties. Their status was a magnitude weaker, although some symmetry in the political system concealed the reality. The deputy chairmen of the Federal Assembly included Josef Šimúth, the chairman of the Party of Slovak Renewal (renamed Democratic Party from 1 December) as well as Ján Pampúch, deputy chairman of the Freedom Party. Yet each had only four MPs in both chambers of the Federal Assembly, including their own mandates. The nature of the groupings that were not exceeding fourteen hundred members across Slovakia in the Autumn of 1989<sup>22</sup> and their sparse representation in the executive institutions caused that, in Bratislava, they did not play any visible role similar to that assumed by the Socialists and Populists in the Czech Republic during the fall of the old régime. On 29 November in front of the television cameras at the Federal Assembly they tried as best as they could, yet their diligence added the deliberations

<sup>19</sup> Gerová, *Vyhrabávačky*, 51.

<sup>20</sup> Löbl, *Naděje a omyly*, 583.

<sup>21</sup> Břetislav Daněk, *Československá strana lidová – její krize a obroda* [Czechoslovak People’s Party – Its Crisis and Restoration] (Praha: Vyšehrad, 1990), 130.

<sup>22</sup> Lubomír Lipták, *Politické strany na Slovensku, 1860–1989* [Political Parties in Slovakia 1860–1989] (Bratislava: Archa, 1992), 293–300.

blindingly grotesque features. In the silence of the parliamentary constitutional majority, Josef Šimůt managed, throughout the day, to deliver to the cameras three major speeches. That made him the busiest speaker of the day.<sup>23</sup> He touched upon a number of substantial political and economic issues. As the first MP in the plenary of the Federal Assembly he also managed to criticise the planned Constitutional changes and to demand a better role for Slovakia.

When exploring the response to the first televised broadcast from the federal parliament, the sources unveil a few discrete scenes. Joining the winning revolution, the media aired in devastating condemnations in the coming days. "The live broadcast from the parliament beats the worst of expectations. I am in no mood for this farce," Václav Bartuška, one of the leaders of the student committees in Prague, noted in his diary. He did not endure watching the broadcast, at the end of which he was elected by the parliament for the parliamentary commission for the oversight over the investigation of the police intervention on 17 November. *Mladá fronta*, the daily of the Socialist Youth Union, reported with the same air of disdain. To describe the broadcast, it used the most emotional statements by the most radical segments of the society, the leaders of the student strike committees at the Prague schools. After a week of reign over public spaces in the centre of the capital city, they only had condemnation and ironic comments for the sticking and dashed spectacle from the parliament: "There is no life to it. It is a typical example of speaking in the supreme institutions. (...) The winter hibernation that breaths from the parliament is truly striking."<sup>24</sup> The comment by one of the revolutionaries applied here to the debate, its proceedings and aesthetic. Yet it altogether missed the point that the live broadcast was just showing the key postulates by the student rebellion being met.

Those most vocal voices, however, were by far not the only feedback to confront the MPs after the television première of the live broadcast from the Federal Assembly in the days to come. The abolition of the postulate of the rule of the Communist Party transformed the holders of the federal mandates into a choir without which no further step was possible, as all actors were quick to realise. The federal executive was leaving and the preparations for the early elections, which no one doubted anymore, would not do without a number of legislative measures.

When the Federal Assembly reconvened to address these issues two weeks later, it offered an altogether different picture: most of the legislature came back to life. The familiar faces of the old régime left their visible seats and joined the MPs down below. The new spokesmen of the Communists led by Anton Blažej revelled with confidence and latching activity. The altogether worst proposal for the Civic Forum that

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<sup>23</sup> Bohuslav Kučera, the chairman of the Czech Socialists, was the only one to be at the microphone more often than Šimůt. Yet the former only five times glossed the procedure or specified some situations as one who attended the earlier talks between Adamec and Havel. He managed to deliver two of his own speeches on that.

<sup>24</sup> Zdeněk John and Petr Šabata, "Studenti poslancům: Budíček" [Students to the Deputies: Wake Up Call], *Mladá fronta*, November 30, 1989, 1–2.

came out from the televised session on 13 December 1989 was Blažej's suggestion that the new President was not to be elected by the Federal Assembly but the people in a referendum. That dramatically lowered Havel's chances and raise the hopes of the members of the then establishment (such as Adamec) or the figures of 1968 (Alexander Dubček or someone else). From the perspective of the revolutionaries, the very fact that the parliamentary soil came to life as the key playground without the Civic Forum having control over it, was bad enough news. The student siege of the building and pressure on the MPs in their constituencies, both applied already for a number of weeks, were instruments with limited effect.

Following the resignation of the hitherto officials, Blažej was elected chairman of the House of Nations on 12 December. He gave a programmatic address about the new role of the parliament as an active and autonomous institution with its own specialist base that "will not only be considering government proposals, but will also be presenting its own initiatives," whilst "starting to execute a genuine control over the government" and becoming "the conscience of the work of the government." The Federal Assembly would thus earn "respect and gain authority prior to the elections" which, as Blažej rightly predicted, would be held in about six months. It was to be used in order "not to lose continuity and to create real conditions for the functioning of the parliamentary system within the context of legal democratic state."<sup>25</sup>

The next two weeks had shown that the development was to follow a different path. The Civic Forum established itself as the new power hub. A part of the elderly political establishment of the old régime was withdrawing to privacy and the youths were offering themselves to serve the new régime. Its fundamental institution became "the government of national unity" which was the name for the reshuffled federal cabinet with multiple representation with former dissidents complementing the ranks of relatively unknown bureaucrats.<sup>26</sup> The government emerged outside the parliament and without participation by MPs: none of the ministers were members of the Federal Assembly. The government was named on 10 December by President Gustav Husák who abdicated immediately afterwards to free his Presidential post.

Blažej's vision that the parliament would oversee the new executive proved to be an illusion. In a few days everything was the other way round. It was Václav Havel and his colleagues from the leadership at the Civic Forum to design the progress of the key moments of the next sessions as a staged production. They discussed in de-

<sup>25</sup> *Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna* [Common Digital Czecho-Slovak Parliamentary Library], Federal Assembly 1986-1990, The House of Nations, Stenographic records, 6<sup>th</sup> session, 12. 12. 1989, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1986fs/sn/stenprot/006schuz/s006001.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Government posts in the previous régime were not held by the actual rulers who were based at the superior Party apparatus; federal ministers were hardly present in the media, their names and faces were hardly discernible even by political professionals. Václav Havel, as can be seen in the recordings of meetings within the Civic Forum, took a while to remember the name of Marián Čalfa, Adamec's successor in the post of the federal Prime Minister. Čalfa was in the government since 1987 and was deputy to Adamec in the last year.

tail individual roles with relevant actors or sought willing executors among MPs.<sup>27</sup> Except for those who retreated to seclusion and Blažej, all officials within the Federal Assembly came forward. Already a favourite in the Presidential elections to be held in a few days by the federal parliament following the desires of the Civic Forum, Havel explained to his less initiated colleagues: “Everything has been agreed with the people, they all know it and are prepared for the arrangement (...) Apart from Mr Blažej. The arrangement has not been agreed with him.”<sup>28</sup>

The concept of “national unity” in Czechoslovakia at the break of 1989 and 1990 went without the autonomously acting institutions. Blažej was removed from his post on 28 December having led the Federal Assembly for three weeks. The new leadership of the Communist Party that arose from the extraordinary Congress on 20 and 21 December 1989 agreed with the reshuffle in the leadership of the House of Nations. Blažej was replaced by Jozef Stank, another Slovak with Communist membership. Although, at the time of the election, he identified with the agenda of his predecessor, in practical politics of the coming months he became a willing executor of the will of the new President and of “the government of national understanding.”

The parliament soon returned to the dependence on the executive. Blažej’s failed attempt for the more independent parliamentary politics was among many failures, albeit the most visible and interesting. Overall statistics lay beneath: none of the 350 holders of the federal mandates as of 17 November 1989 served a year later in any significant post; only a handful were given further federal mandate in the next elections but none have appeared in the governments. Such degree of discontinuity was not a norm but an absolute exception in Czechoslovak political institutions where, for example, Marián Čalfa, the former deputy of Adamec, was the federal Prime Minister until the summer of 1992.

The main reason is called co-optations: the replacement of a part of deputies. It was created by agreement between the old and new political forces at a roundtable and was part of conciliatory accord about the occupation of governmental posts, the office of the President and early elections. The present power apparatuses – the leadership of the Civic Forum and its Slovak counterpart, the new leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the four non-Communist political parties – agreed that, within the framework of the politics of “national understanding”, they would bring to the Federal Assembly MPs from the Civic Forum; at the same time, the individual parties could replace their MPs at their own discretion.<sup>29</sup> The new political élites thus gained the missing political representation and, from Spring 1990,

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<sup>27</sup> Meeting of representatives of the Civic Forum Coordination Centre and the Coordination Committee of the Public Against Violence on co-optations of deputies to the Federal Assembly and on the election of its chairman and presidium, 22 December 1989. Jiří Suk, *Občanské fórum, listopad-prosinec 1989, 2. díl – dokumenty* [Civic Forum, November–December 1992, volume 2: Documents] (Praha-Brno: Doplněk, 1998), 261.

<sup>28</sup> Suk, *Občanské fórum*, 262–63.

<sup>29</sup> For details of the genesis and the process see the study by Petr Roubal in this issue.

the role of the parliament has indeed increased. Only it did not happen through the rising authority of MPs, but by their replacement for political officials who gained their de facto power before and elsewhere. They moved their political debates to the parliament, having taken over parliamentary seats by the means of revolution. The list of their names shows that they were renowned dissidents, skilled leaders of local rebellions of November 1989 in the regional centres or political talents of the Communist Party grabbing high posts in the rejuvenating apparatus. Whilst it holds true that none of the three hundred and fifty holders of the federal mandates as of 17 November 1989, none of the deputies became any significant political or public figure in the coming years, the opposite holds true for the one hundred and fifty co-opted deputies:<sup>30</sup> among them were two future Presidents, a number of Ministers, Constitutional Judges as well as a range of other leading figures in the coming two decades of Czechoslovakia and, after 1992, in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

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<sup>30</sup> For a list of co-opted MPs see Petr Roubal, *Starý pes, nové kousky. Kooptace do Federálního shromáždění a vytváření polistopadové politické kultury* [Old Dog, New Tricks: Co-optations in the Federal Assembly and the Development of the post-November Political Culture] (Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny Akademie věd České republiky, 2013), 94–102.



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Tomáš Zahradníček

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V PARLAMENTU NAJ BI POTEKALE RAZPRAVE, VENDAR SE JE TO IZKAZALO  
ZA NEMOGOČE: ZVEZNI PARLAMENT IN ŽAMETNA REVOLUCIJA NA  
ČEŠKOSLOVAŠKEM LETA 1989

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P O V Z E T E K

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Študija je osredotočena na vlogo češkoslovaškega zveznega parlamenta v političnem prevratu leta 1989. Na podlagi institucionalne perspektive predstavlja novo analizo prelomnih tednov. Z vidika parlamenta so bile spremembe nenavadno hitre. V nekaj tednih od padca berlinskega zidu do konca leta 1989 je državi uspelo zamenjati izvršilno oblast (zlasti predsedstvo – Václav Havel je nadomestil Gustáva Husáka), pri čemer parlament ni odigral pomembne vloge.

Predhodna vlada in vodje Državljanskega foruma so sklenili dogovor, ki je vključeval tudi naloge, ki bi jih moral izpolnjevati parlament, tako da je bila odločitev formalno ustrezna. Ključna pogajanja se sploh niso približala parlamentarnemu odru.

Medtem so si številni tedanji poslanci, izvoljeni leta 1986, pa tudi parlament kot institucija, razlagali zlom predhodne strukture moči kot priložnost za neodvisnost, zato so se poskušali vključiti v pogajanja, vendar brez uspeha. Slovaški poslanec Anton Blažej, ki se je javno zavzemal, da bi neodvisni parlament postal "vest vlade", je na čelu zveznega parlamenta preživel samo tri tedne, preden ga je od-slovila nova izvršilna oblast z novoizvoljenim predsednikom Havlom.

Istočasno so v parlament začeli vstopati predstavniki nove oblasti in zasedli prazne sedeže poslancev, ki so odstopili ali bili razrešeni. Po skoraj dveh mesecih improviziranja se je parlament spet vključil v politiko. To se ni zgodilo zaradi njegove neodvisnosti ali splošnih volitev. Formalnopraven prihod predstavnikov nove oblasti na vodilne položaje je bil resnično revolucionarno dejanje. Institucionalna perspektiva nam omogoča, da precej jasno prepoznamo tovrstno naravo te politične spremembe.