

# **The Autonomy Discourse in Parliamentary Debates during the First Czechoslovak Republic and after the Velvet Revolution**

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# The Autonomy Discourse in Parliamentary Debates during the First Czechoslovak Republic and after the Velvet Revolution<sup>1</sup>

Elisabeth Bakke

“We approve the political program, which endeavors to unite the Czechs and Slovaks in an independent state of the Czech lands and Slovakia. Slovakia shall have its own administration, its own parliament and its own courts. The Slovak language shall be the official language in the school, in office and in public life in general. The Czecho-Slovak state shall be a republic, its constitution shall be democratic. [...] The detailed regulations for the establishment of the Czecho-Slovak state are left to the liberated Czechs and Slovaks and their legal representatives.”

## The Pittsburgh Agreement of May 30th, 1918<sup>2</sup>

Slovak autonomy was on the agenda throughout Czechoslovakia's 74 years of existence, from the beginning to the bitter end. Although it may be argued that inexperienced politicians, short deadlines, rigid constitutional amendment procedures and conflicting economic priorities also played a role in the breakup, the long-term conflict that drove Czechoslovakia apart were the closely-related matters of political autonomy and recognition of the Slovaks as a separate nation.<sup>3</sup> What was at stake was not only the institutional set-up and division of power; for the Slovaks, separate political institutions were also important symbols of national individuality and ownership to the shared Czecho-Slovak state.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the 34th National Convention of the AAASS in Pittsburgh, 21–24 November, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> This Agreement was signed by the Slovak League of America, the Czech National Alliance, the Alliance of Czech Catholics, representing Czech and Slovak émigré organizations in the USA, and Tomáš G. Masaryk, President of the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris. I have quoted the English version from *The Slovaks and the Pittsburgh Pact* (Chicago: The Slovak Catholic Federation of America, 1934), 27. The Slovak original is reprinted in Edvard Beneš, *Světová válka a naše revoluce*, Vol. III (Dokumenty), (Prague: Čin-Orbis, 1929), 365. See also M. Mark Stolarik, “The Role of American Slovaks in the Creation of Czecho-Slovakia, 1914–1918”, *Slovak Studies* VIII (Rome, 1968) for a very interesting account of the circumstances that led to its signing and the subsequent course of events in the newly-founded Republic.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the breakup see Eric Stein, *Czecho/Slovakia. Ethnic Conflict, Constitutional Fissure, Negotiated Breakup* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Jiří Musil, ed., *The End of Czechoslovakia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995); Jan Rychlík, *Rozpad Československa. Česko-slovenské vztahy 1989–1992* (Bratislava: AEP, 2002); Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics. Nation Versus State* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

The roots of the conflict go back to the founding of Czechoslovakia in October of 1918. The Czechs and Slovaks had no prior shared statehood traditions (save perhaps Great Moravia in the ninth century), and independence was not even on the agenda before World War I. Starting in 1915, the independence movement abroad, with Tomáš G. Masaryk at the helm, tried to convince the Allies that a Czechoslovak Republic should be established, invoking the principle of national self-determination on behalf of the “Czechoslovak nation.” In the First Czechoslovak Republic the idea that the Czechs and Slovaks were one nation (albeit with two tribes) became official state ideology, and it went hand-in-hand with political centralism.<sup>4</sup> However, a substantial part of the Slovak political elite opposed both, demanding recognition of the Slovak nation and autonomy for Slovakia. The Pittsburgh Agreement became important both because it defined the contents of Slovak autonomy and because Masaryk had signed it.

After World War II, Czechoslovakism was abandoned, but political centralism was not, and the federalization of Czechoslovakia after the Soviet invasion in 1968 did not give Slovak political institutions any real decision-making power. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, political autonomy for Slovakia reappeared on the agenda, and became a major issue in the dispute over Czechoslovakia’s new constitution.

The main purpose of the present article is to compare the autonomy debates during the First Republic and after the Velvet Revolution, in order to establish continuity and change. The research questions are: 1. How were the demands for autonomy substantiated, and what were the main arguments against it? 2. What role did the principle of national self-determination play in the debates in the two periods?

The First Republic was a unitary state, and autonomy as such was never on the agenda of the Parliament in the interwar period. Of the three autonomy proposals that made it to the Parliament, two were blocked in committees, while the third was adopted without any debate after the fateful Munich agreement in 1938. My analysis of the interwar discourse is therefore based on a selection of government inauguration debates and budgetary debates, as well as clippings from *Slovák*, the main autonomist newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

After 1989 several debates were relevant to the autonomy discourse: In the *Federal Parliament* I have analyzed the 1990 “hyphen debate,” the debate on the competency law, and the two debates about the break-up of Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1992. In the respective Czech and Slovak National Councils (Republic Assemblies), I have analyzed the 1992 debates on the Slovak Declaration of Sovereignty, the Slovak Constitution, and the Czech Constitution.

I will structure the article around the following three points:

1. The institutional set-up and the *contents* of the autonomy demands.
2. The composition and stability of the *elite constellations* on either side of the conflict.
3. The *main arguments* a) in favor of autonomy and b) against autonomy, with special emphasis on how they relate to the principle of national self-determination.

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<sup>4</sup> For details see Elisabeth Bakke, *Doomed to Failure? The Czechoslovak Nation Project and the Slovak Autonomist Reaction 1919–1938* (Oslo: Series of Dissertations submitted to the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo, no. 11/1999).

<sup>5</sup> The analysis of the debate in the interwar period is a condensed version of a part of Chapter 13 of my PhD dissertation. For details see Bakke (ibid, 1999).

## 1. The Institutional Set-up and the Contents of the Autonomy Demands

Czechoslovakia was from the outset presented as the nation-state of the Czechoslovak nation.<sup>6</sup> This was codified in the 1920 Constitution, which also gave the First Czechoslovak Republic a unitary, centralized state form and a bicameral legislature. Czechoslovakia was at first divided into 22 counties, but the county system was implemented only in Slovakia and from 1928, four provinces replaced the counties (see table 1).

In the interwar period, the demands for autonomy were defined in terms of separate Slovak institutions with decision-making power in matters of vital importance for the Slovaks as a nation. The core demands were that Slovakia should have “its own administration, its own parliament and its own courts,” cf. the Pittsburgh Agreement. Most of the autonomy proposals also included a separate Slovak government, but none of the three autonomy proposals that made it into the Parliament went beyond an asymmetric federation.<sup>7</sup>

The 1938 Constitutional amendment that inaugurated the short-lived Second Republic was based on the third autonomy proposal of the Slovak People’s Party, which had been submitted in August 1938. The Second Republic combined a federal state form with separate Slovak institutions: a legislative assembly (Diet), a separate administration and separate courts. The Slovak government was accountable to the Diet, and received executive power in all matters under its jurisdiction, as well as many matters under central jurisdiction. Slovak became the official language in Slovakia, and separate citizenship was introduced.

After World War II, the Czechoslovak government recognized the Slovaks as a separate nation and the Slovak National Council (which *de facto* controlled the liberated parts of Slovakia) as its representative. An executive Board of Commissioners was also established. However, through the three Prague agreements and the two first postwar constitutions, Slovak institutions were gradually stripped of their power and competence, and Czechoslovakia returned to a centralist, unitary state form, with a unicameral legislature.<sup>8</sup> Part of the reason for the clampdown on the Slovak organs was the victory of the Democratic Party in the 1946 elections, which convinced the Communists that Slovakia could not be trusted.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In reality, the Czechs and Slovaks together comprised 65.5 percent of the population, Germans 23.4 percent, Magyars 5.6 percent, Ruthenians 3.5 percent, Jews 1.4 percent, and Poles 0.6 percent in the 1921 census. See *Sčítání lidu v republice československé ze dne 15. února 1921*, Díl I. (Prague: Státní úřad statistický, 1924).

<sup>7</sup> See Bakke (ibid., 1999), pp. 465–77 for a more detailed overview of the autonomy proposals. See also James Ramon Felak, “At the Price of the Republic”. *Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party, 1929–1938*, (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1994), especially pp. 30, 80–1, 191–92.

<sup>8</sup> The 1960 Constitution abolished the Board of Commissioners. See *Program prvé domáci vlády republiky vlády národných fronty Čechů a Slováků*, (Prague: Ministerstvo Informací, 1945), 16–17; Jaroslav Chovanec & Peter Mozolík, *Historické a štátoprávne korene samostatnosti slovenskej republiky*, (Vydavateľstvo Procom, Bratislava, 1994), 38, 114–122; Michal Barnovský, “Tri pražské dohody”, in *Česko-slovenské vzťahy – Slovensko-české vzťahy* (Liberec: Technická Univerzita, 1998), 119 ff.; Elisabeth Bakke, “The Principle of National Self-determination in Czechoslovak Constitutions 1920–1992”, *CEPSR*, no. 10 (2002), 173–98.

<sup>9</sup> The Democratic Party received 62.0 percent of the votes in Slovakia. See Michal Barnovský & Edita Ivaničková, eds, *Prvé povojnové voľby v strednej a juhovýchodnej Európe* (Bratislava: VEDA, 1998), 215–18.

**Table 1: State Form, Administrative Structure and Institutional Set-up in Czechoslovak Constitutions and Constitutional Amendments**

Year	State-forming nation	State form	Administrative structure	Institutional set-up
1920	Czechoslovak nation	Unitary	22 counties; from 1928 four provinces	Centralized, bicameral legislature
1938	Czech and Slovak nations	Federal	Four provinces: Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia	Asymmetric; bicameral & separate Slovak institutions with extensive powers
1948	Czech and Slovak nations	Unitary	Two provinces, the Czech lands and Slovakia	Asymmetric; unicameral & separate Slovak institutions with limited powers
1960	Czech and Slovak nations	Unitary	Two provinces, the Czech lands and Slovakia	Asymmetric; unicameral & separate Slovak institutions with more limited powers
1968	Czech and Slovak nations	Federal	Two republics, the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic	Symmetric; bicameral, federal & separate Czech and Slovak institutions

Source: All constitutions can be found in *Sbírka zákonů a nařízení státu československého*.

During the Prague Spring of 1968, the question of Slovak autonomy reappeared on the agenda. The initiative to amend the constitution came from the Slovak National Council, and this time a symmetric solution was proposed, symbolizing the equality of the two state-forming nations.<sup>10</sup> According to the 1968 Constitution, Czechoslovakia became a federation of two republics, the Czech and the Slovak Republics, each with their own assemblies (National Councils), and their own governments. The bicameral federal legislature consisted of the proportionally elected Chamber of the People, and the Chamber of Nations where the two Republics were represented on equal terms. For important decisions, a majority was required in the People's chamber, as well as in the separate Czech and Slovak parts of the Chamber of Nations, in effect giving the Slovaks veto powers.

The 1968 Constitution provided the institutional foundations for Slovak autonomy, but in practice the political system remained centralized. The original division of power in the 1968 Constitution changed in favor of the federal level during the "Normalization" of the early 1970s, and formal decision-making rules and division of powers did not matter much during Communism. As Carol Skalnik Leff has pointed out, however, federation plus

<sup>10</sup> The process towards federalization is documented in Jozef Žatkuliak, *Federalizácia Československého Štátu 1968–1970. Vznik česko-slovenskej federácie roku 1968* (Brno: Nakladatelství Doplněk, 1996). See also Jaroslav Krejčí & Pavel Machonin, *Czechoslovakia 1918–92. A Laboratory for Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 45–7; Chovanec & Mozolík, (op.cit., 1994), 48–52; Aleš Gerloch, Jiří Hřebej & Vladimír Zoubek, *Ústavní systém České republiky* (Prague: Prospektrum, 1999), 51–4; Carol Skalnik Leff, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 243 ff.

democratization was a power equation.<sup>11</sup> After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the 1968 Constitution acquired new importance; first, it determined the *procedures* for the adoption of a new constitution (a three-fifths majority in all parts of the federal parliament), and second, it became the point of departure for the negotiations about the *contents* of a new constitutional settlement. Under the new, democratic conditions, the Slovak minority had an excellent bargaining position, since any constitutional settlement required Slovak consent. After 1989 the question was, therefore, not whether Slovakia should have autonomy, but the *extent* of that autonomy. Separate Slovak institutions were taken for granted, and autonomy now became a matter of allocating more decision-making power to the Republics.

The “hyphen debate” in the spring of 1990 was a foreboding of the problems that lay ahead. It was President Václav Havel who inadvertently started it. In January of 1990, without prior consultations, he submitted a constitutional amendment to the federal Parliament, proposing to drop the word “Socialist” from the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. Much to his and many others’ surprise, this triggered a bitter dispute about whether the name of the Republic should be spelled with or without a hyphen. The main alternatives were the “Czecho-Slovak Republic,” favored by a majority of the Slovaks, and the “Czechoslovak Federal Republic,” favored by a majority of the Czechs. Stalemate in the federal Parliament at first resulted in the absurd decision to spell the word “Czechoslovak” in one word in the Czech Republic and with a hyphen in Slovakia. This was presented as a concession to “Slovak grammar.” This decision caused demonstrations in Slovakia, after which the Parliament made a hasty retreat and settled for the “Czech and Slovak Federal Republic.”<sup>12</sup>

Negotiations about a new Czechoslovak Constitution started after the elections in June of 1990, but soon ran into trouble. As before, the Czech political elite was generally in favor of more centralized solutions than the Slovaks. The difference was that the Czech majority, realizing that a unitary state was not an option, now favored a “functional federation,” while the majority of the Slovak political elite increasingly leaned towards confederal rather than federal solutions.<sup>13</sup> A temporary settlement was reached in the Competency Law of December 1990, which more-or-less reestablished the competency division of the 1968 Constitution. However, while this was about as far as the Czechs were willing to go, the Slovaks looked at the Competency Law merely as a point of departure for further negotiations.

The core of the conflict was the allocation of competence and power in two specific areas: Economic policy and international relations. The majority of the Slovak elite pressed for Slovak “visibility” in international relations, and wanted to allocate more power in economic matters to the Republics. The Czech side wanted the federal level to be strong enough to carry out the economic reforms necessary for the transition to a market economy, and wanted the state internationally to speak with one voice.

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<sup>11</sup> Leff, 132–33.

<sup>12</sup> Milan Šutovec, *Semióza ako politikum alebo “pomlčková vojna,”* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1999), 299 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Opinion polls consistently showed that the public in the Czech Republic preferred a unitary state, with a federation as the second most popular option, while a confederation never exceeded 6 percent support. By contrast, a confederation or a federation was the preferred state form in Slovakia. See table 12.3. in Sharon L. Wolchik, “The Politics of Transition and the Break-up of Czechoslovakia,” in Jiří Musil, ed., *op.cit.*, 235.

The negotiations failed to produce an acceptable compromise before the 1992 elections,<sup>14</sup> and since the victorious Czech and Slovak parties disagreed fundamentally on the issues of economic reform and state form, they decided to divide the state. It turned out that both sides preferred a break-up rather than accepting the favored state form of the other party, despite the fact that before the elections, the future existence of Czechoslovakia was still taken for granted. The only party that advocated secession was the Slovak National Party.

## 2. The Composition and Stability of the Elite Constellations

In the inter-war period, the elite constellations facing each other were clear-cut and quite stable. A clear majority of the Czechoslovak parties was centralist and in favor of Czechoslovakism. This camp comprised the entire Czech political elite and a substantial part of the Slovak political elite. Interestingly, the major centralist players in the interwar clashes about autonomy in the Parliament were *Slovaks*, not Czechs, and like their adversaries, they were posing as the champions of Slovak interests/the Slovak nation. The two most influential Slovak centralists were the Agrarian Milan Hodža (1878–1944) and the Social Democrat Ivan Dérer (1884–1973). They represented their parties in the Parliament during the entire First Republic and between them, the two men served as ministers for 23 years. Milan Hodža even became the first Slovak Prime Minister in 1935. Apart from these two, the Agrarian Anton Štefánek (1877–1964) and the Czechoslovak National Socialist Igor Hrušovský (1872–1937), both seasoned parliamentarians, played an especially active role in the debates.

By contrast, two Slovak parties represented the autonomist camp, arguing that the Slovaks were a nation of their own and, therefore, entitled to autonomy.<sup>15</sup> The largest autonomist party was the Slovak People's Party. Its co-founder and chairman Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938), whose name was added to the party's title in 1925, was a dominating figure in the struggle for Slovak autonomy until his death in August of 1938.<sup>16</sup> Ferdinand (Ferdiš) Juriga (1878–1950) had been the only Slovak deputy in the Hungarian Parliament of 1914 and he continued to defend Slovak autonomy in the Parliament also of the First Republic. Jozef Tiso (1887–1947) played an important role in the 1930s, as did editor-in-chief of *Slovák*, Karol Sidor (1901–53). The Slovak National Party never had more than one deputy – its chairman Martin Rázus (1888–1937) – and played a more peripheral role.

After the Velvet Revolution, elite constellations were more volatile. The Slovak political elite was from the outset divided on the question of state form, the preferred solutions ranging from mildly federalist to a loose confederation. From 1991 the Slovak National Party started to advocate independence, but already in 1990 the chairman of the Christian Democratic Movement, Ján Čarnogurský, argued that Slovakia should enter the European Community as an independent state. His party was early in favor of a confederal solution, but only as a temporary solution, until both Republics joined the European Community.<sup>17</sup> Public Against

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<sup>14</sup> The negotiators did reach a compromise in the spring of 1992, but this was turned down by the presidium of the Slovak National Council. See Rychlík, *Rozpad*, 218–20.

<sup>15</sup> In addition, some of the national minority parties and the Communists supported autonomy, but for other reasons.

<sup>16</sup> See Felak, *At the Price of the Republic*, 1994; Alena Bartlová, *Andrej Hlinka*, (Bratislava: Obzor, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Stein, *Czecho/Slovakia*, 67, 93–4.

Violence was being pulled in opposite directions, and when the circle around Vladimír Mečiar broke out and formed the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia in 1991, the liberal, federalist oriented wing remained, while the national populists with confederal leanings followed Mečiar. In the 1992 election Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia appeared as the main champion of Slovak interests.

The Czech political elite was from the outset more indifferent to the national question. While Public Against Violence had the national question as one of its top priorities, it was completely absent from the agenda of Civic Forum in the first election. Instead, "back to Europe" and elimination of communism were the top priorities.<sup>18</sup> Especially after the "managers" around Václav Klaus won over the dissident wing of Civic Forum in 1991, the leading Czech political elite united in favor of a strong federation. In the 1992 election Klaus' Civic Democratic Party came out as the main champion of a federal solution.

The Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and the Civic Democratic Party won the election in their respective Republics, while parties that took a more moderate stand on the question of state form lost. Once the victors with Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar at the helm had decided to divide the state, former enemies became allies, and the elite constellations changed accordingly. The former opponents in the negotiations on state form now united in favor of a break-up, against a motley crew of opposition parties, comprising Czech and Slovak Communist and Social Democratic parties, as well as Miroslav Sládek's ultra-nationalist Republican Party of Czechoslovakia.

### 3. The Arguments in Favor of Autonomy

If we turn to the actual arguments, the main impression is that there were elements of continuity as well as change when we go from the interwar period to the post-Communist period. On the one hand, the arguments in favor of autonomy were located within the same nationalist discourse in both periods. On the other hand, the *composition* of the arguments in favor of autonomy changed, and so did the contents of the autonomy demands, as we have seen. In the interwar period, the principle of national self-determination was used as an argument in favor of an asymmetric federation; after 1989 it was first used as an argument in favor of confederal solutions, and then in favor of an independent Slovak state.

#### Arguments in Favor of Autonomy During the First Republic

In the inter-war period, the cornerstone of the autonomists was the existence of an individual and sovereign Slovak nation, and the core message was that this Slovak nation was entitled to autonomy. The premise linking national identity to the matter of state form was the principle of national self-determination, understood as the right of culturally distinct nations to self-governance.<sup>19</sup> In the autonomist scheme, the Slovak nation had used this right to divorce the

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<sup>18</sup> Oskar Krejčí, *Kniha o volbách*, (Prague: Victoria Publishing, 1994), 210–11.

<sup>19</sup> The principle of national self-determination can be interpreted in at least two other ways; as the right of the people to choose their government without coercion, i.e. popular sovereignty – or as the right of independent states to manage their affairs without foreign intervention. See e.g. Øyvind Østerud, *Nasjonenes selvbestemmelsesrett*, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984), 150 ff.

Magyars and join the Czechs in a Czech and Slovak nation-state. Moreover, as a free and equal nation, the Slovaks were entitled to manage their own affairs and, therefore, to autonomous political institutions. In practice, autonomy demands were always made on behalf of Slovakia, yet for the autonomists this amounted to the same, since they regarded Slovakia as the homeland of the Slovaks, despite its substantial national minorities.

The Slovak autonomists argued along three main lines. First, they argued that Slovakia was discriminated against in various ways, and that autonomy was necessary to alleviate Slovakia's ills. Second, they argued that Slovakia was entitled to autonomy by virtue of various "contracts" (e.g. the Pittsburgh Agreement). Finally, they argued that the Slovaks had the right to autonomy simply because they were a nation (the classical nationalist argument).

The point of departure for the *deprivation arguments* was that the Slovaks were an individual nation with separate national interests, and that these national interests were not properly looked after under the present centralized state form. Here Slovak grievances were turned into reasons for autonomy, and autonomy was the solution to everything. Most of the grievance arguments for autonomy were associated with the use of Slovak as the official language in Slovakia and with (white-collar) jobs for the Slovak intelligentsia. The signal words were "Slovak bread". For instance, before the 1929 election, the autonomist newspaper *Slovák* argued that "autonomy does not only mean political rights, but also bread. When we get our own administration, our own assembly and our own courts, only Slovaks will be employed there. [...] The autonomous administration of the Slovak homeland will compel the employers first and foremost to grant the Slovaks work and bread."<sup>20</sup>

According to the *contract oriented* line of arguments, Slovakia had the right to autonomy by virtue of certain (allegedly) binding documents or "contracts". The point of departure was again that the Slovaks were an individual and sovereign nation, and that Slovakia was the homeland of the Slovaks. The argument was that Slovakia had been promised autonomy, and that this promise was legally binding. However, for a contract to be valid, it must be stipulated that the signatories had the right to sign agreements on behalf of those they were said to represent – in this case the Czech and Slovak nations.

Several of the many declarations and agreements that were formulated during World War I were used as arguments for (or against) autonomy. However, two documents stand out: The *Pittsburgh Agreement* of May 30th, 1918, and the *Martin Declaration* of October 30th, 1918. The former was a clear asset, while the latter soon became a liability (see next subsection).

The Martin Declaration had been adopted at an assembly of all Slovak political parties in Turčiansky Svätý Martin. For the autonomists, the significance of the Martin Declaration was that through this act, the Slovaks had voluntarily joined the Czechs as equals in one state, and they had therefore an equally large part in its founding as the Czechs. Moreover, as an equal nation which had entered the state voluntarily, the Slovaks had the right to autonomy. In effect, the autonomists gave the Martin declaration state-forming significance. This was also reflected in repeated attempts to turn October 30th into a national holiday.

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<sup>20</sup> *Slovák* no. 240, 22 October 1929, p. 3.

Compared to the other wartime declarations, however, the Pittsburgh Agreement had some obvious advantages. First and foremost, it had greater symbolic potential as an official agreement binding the government, because Czechoslovakia's first president and co-founder Tomáš G. Masaryk had signed it, along with Czech and Slovak émigré leaders in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Second, the Agreement contained the most important autonomy demands. From the moment the Pittsburgh Agreement became known in Slovakia in the spring of 1919, it was invoked in every single debate where autonomy was mentioned. At first glance, this Agreement would seem to be a stable element in the argumentation for Slovak autonomy. However, the usage varied. Early in the period, the autonomists would present the Pittsburgh Agreement as a *Magna Charta* granting the Slovaks the right to autonomy. Later, it became more common to present it as a *binding contract*.

The concept of a Magna Charta brings to mind a sovereign granting his subjects certain rights and privileges, and it was Masaryk who (implicitly) had this role. When the Pittsburgh Agreement was presented as a contract, the contracting partners were at first the Czech and Slovak nations. However, especially after it became public knowledge in 1922 that President Masaryk had actually *drafted* it, he was increasingly presented as a contracting partner. This shift can also be seen as an answer to the centralist claim that the American Czechs and Slovaks were not the legitimate representatives of their co-nationals at home.

However, the third and most common use, especially in the 1930s, was the Pittsburgh Agreement as “our program” or as an expression of the will of the Slovak nation (not just a small faction, but of *all* Slovaks). The point of departure was that the Slovaks were an individual nation with a natural right to self-determination, and therefore to autonomy *if it so wishes*. This usage was associated with the third, *classical nationalist* line of argument, which rested on three premises: 1. that the Slovaks were an individual nation; 2. that nations had the right to self-determination; and 3. that the Slovak autonomists represented the true will of the Slovak nation – which was autonomy. The second premise was often implicit, while a lot of effort was put into defending Slovak individuality and the right to speak on the Slovaks' behalf.

The autonomists employed two main strategies to substantiate their claim. One strategy was to argue from the majority, which meant resorting to “advanced math”. Election results here came in handy. In a parliamentary debate in 1933, Jozef Tiso argued that as a majority, the autonomists had the right to speak on behalf of the Slovak nation. Upon subtracting the stipulated Czech and Magyar votes from the votes cast for the centralist parties in Slovakia, he ended up with 402,320 votes for the centralist parties and 427,443 votes for the Slovak People's Party and the Slovak National Party put together.<sup>22</sup>

A second strategy was personal attacks (*argumentum ad hominem*), which were often used to defend the existence of a Slovak nation as well as the claim for autonomy. The autonomists would then accuse Slovak deputies belonging to the Czechoslovak parties of being

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<sup>21</sup> Masaryk was not President at the time, of course, but on the initiative of the Slovak League he signed a calligraphed version of the Agreement on November 14th, 1918, the very same day he was elected President of the Republic. Besides, on October 31st, 1918, the Czechoslovak National Committee had declared as binding all actions by members of the provisional government abroad (including Masaryk). It may be argued that if the declaration of the establishment of the Czechoslovak state was valid, then the authorization of Masaryk's actions was valid as well. In practice, the validity of the Pittsburgh Agreement was a political, not a legal matter. For the text of the statement, see Beneš (op.cit., 1929), 490. See also M. Mark Stolárik (op. cit., 1968), 49.

<sup>22</sup> 301. schůze poslanecké sněmovny N.S.R.Č. dne 29. listopadu 1933, in *Těsnopisecké zprávy o schůzích poslanecké sněmovny Národního shromáždění republiky československé*, III. volební období, (Prague, 1929–35), 47–50.

“renegades,” “Pharisees,” “sodomites” and “careerists,” and, therefore, not worthy of representing the Slovak nation. In his rather biblical language, the chairman of the Slovak People’s Party, Andrej Hlinka, argued in 1927 that “Slovakia is ours, only we are Slovaks, you sold out the Slovak language for a bowl of Czechoslovak lentils eight years ago.”<sup>23</sup>

### Continuity and change after 1989

After 1989, the core message was still that the Slovaks were entitled to national self-determination “qua nation,” although the contents of this self-determination had changed from an asymmetric federation to confederate solutions or even independence. The most important changes compared to the interwar period were, first, that there was no longer any need to defend the existence of an individual Slovak nation, since that was taken for granted, and second, a change in the composition of the arguments. Deprivation arguments and contract oriented arguments were nearly absent, while classical nationalist arguments now dominated, and the principle of national self-determination was invoked more explicitly.

There are, of course, some differences between the various debates, which is perhaps not surprising, since the topics of the debates also differed. The principle of national self-determination was most explicitly voiced in the 1992 debates in the federal parliament (the two debates on the break-up of Czechoslovakia), and in the Slovak National Council (the debates on the Slovak Declaration of Sovereignty and the Slovak Constitution). Conversely, this principle was more implicit in the 1990 “hyphen debate”.

The “hyphen debate” is perhaps the most atypical, in terms of topic (“Czecho-Slovak Republic” with a hyphen versus “Czechoslovak Federal Republic”) as well as types of argument. First, this is really the only debate where identity played any major part. Identity arguments appeared in two forms: On the one hand, it was argued that for the Slovaks, to spell the word Czecho-Slovak without a hyphen was tantamount to accepting the aberration of Czechoslovakism. On the other hand, it was argued that the hyphen expressed Slovak national individuality and the equal standing of the Czech and Slovak nations in the federation.

Second, the hyphen debate is the only debate where the Pittsburgh Agreement was mentioned more than once. However, of the six speakers referring to it, one appealed to the Agreement to substantiate the claim for a hyphen in the “Czecho-Slovak” Republic, (this is how the word was spelled in the original), while the rest basically referred to it as an expression of the equal status of the two nations entering the state, or as a part of the historical narrative leading up to the federalization. Nobody referred to it as a contract, and the Czech National Socialist Blanka Hyková even quoted Masaryk to the effect that it was only an agreement between American Czechs and Slovaks.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hlinka, *Slovák* no. 86, 16 April, 1927, p. 1. “Sodomites” referred to Social Democrats, as a play on words.

<sup>24</sup> See Zpráva o 26. společné schůzi sněmovny lidu a sněmovny národů, 29.3.1990, in *Federální shromáždění Československé socialistické republiky V. volební období, (1986–90)*, 251, 253, 256, 270, 304.

*Contract oriented arguments* thus disappeared altogether, and references to the Pittsburgh Agreement and/or the Martin Declaration were rare. Autonomy was explicitly mentioned in the context of the Pittsburgh Agreement only once, in the second debate about the break-up of the state. According to Ivan Šimko from the Christian Democratic Movement, Slovak organizations in the United States had made an agreement with Masaryk “as a leading personality of Czech political life” to form a shared state where Slovakia was to have an autonomous position. This agreement was unfortunately not honored, he argued.<sup>25</sup>

*Deprivation arguments* were also rare. The phrase “Slovak bread” occurred only once: In the first debate on the break-up of the state in September 1992, Michal Kováč from the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (later to become Slovakia’s first president) argued that in a normally functioning federation, it would not be possible for the standard of living in Slovakia to drop as much as it had in only two years. In another four years, he argued, “Would we not be in the historical situation where we have already been, that the Slovak nation would have to go abroad for bread, because there would not be bread for people in Slovakia? And we would be as weakened as we once were under dear father Masaryk.”<sup>26</sup>

However, in the interwar period “Slovak bread” was usually tantamount to white-collar jobs for the young Slovak intelligentsia in Slovakia, while here the lack of “bread” obviously refers to general unemployment. The problem was real enough – in the early 1990s the unemployment rate in Slovakia was three or four times the Czech average.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, compared to the interwar period, *classical nationalist arguments* were much more common, and the principle of national self-determination was invoked more explicitly. In the debate about the allocation of competence between the Republics and the Federation it was used as an argument in favor of returning to the original 1968 Constitution.<sup>28</sup> Yet, the most common use of the principle of national self-determination was as an argument in favor of establishing an independent Slovak state or dividing Czechoslovakia. There are, however, some interesting national differences between actors in how they used it.

*Slovak* deputies speaking in favor of Slovak independence invoked the principle of national self-determination on behalf of the Slovak nation. They regarded it as an inalienable, natural right, and in one instance, even as a God-given right.<sup>29</sup> An independent Slovak state was presented as the fulfillment of 1000 years struggle for Slovak individuality and sovereignty, and as the result of a natural, historical process of national emancipation. In the words of HZDS deputy chairman Augustín Marián Húška, “the Constitution is the fulfillment and legal

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<sup>25</sup> Zpráva o 5. společné schůzi sněmovny lidu a sněmovny národů, 18.11.1992, 25.11.1992, in *Federální shromáždění České a Slovenské Federativní republiky*. VII. volební období, (1992), 717.

<sup>26</sup> Zpráva o 4. společné schůzi sněmovny lidu a sněmovny národů 29.9.1992, in *Federální shromáždění České a Slovenské Federativní republiky*. VII. volební období, (1992), 601.

<sup>27</sup> 11.8 percent in Slovakia versus 4.1 percent in the Czech Republic in 1991; 10.3 percent versus 2.6 percent in 1992. *Transition report 1996*, (London, The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1996). However, the difference was even larger in 1993, the first year of independence...

<sup>28</sup> Zpráva o 9. společné schůzi sněmovny lidu a sněmovny národů, 11.–12.12.1990, in *Federální shromáždění ČSFR*, (1990–1992), <[www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/sln/stenprot/009schuz/s009077.htm#\\_d](http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/sln/stenprot/009schuz/s009077.htm#_d)> [2 February, 2004]. See also the debate on the Slovak declaration of sovereignty, *Stenografická správa o 3. schůdži Slovenskej národnej rady* konanej 17. júla 1992, <[www.nrsr.sk/indexarch.asp](http://www.nrsr.sk/indexarch.asp)> [4 February, 2004].

<sup>29</sup> Šedovič (Slovak National Party), Zpráva o 5. společné schůzi SL a SN, 18.11.1992, in *Federální shromáždění České a Slovenské Federativní republiky*. VII. volební období, (1992), 788.

enactment of the right to self-determination. (...) To the Slovaks, whose consciousness was molded by more than a thousand years under foreign rule, the feeling of dependence had become second nature. Slowly, but persistently they formed an awareness of the need for self-determination, the need to search for, find, express, and at last realize sovereignty.”<sup>30</sup> Slovakia was in other words pictured as a nation-state and the Slovaks as the state-forming nation. However, in the debates in the Slovak National Council, Slovak deputies, including Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, at the same time promised to respect the equal rights of all citizens, national minorities and ethnic groups.

Deputies representing the *Magyar* minority in the Slovak National Council recognized or even supported the Slovak right to self-determination, but argued that the principle should also apply to the national minorities. This was an argument in favor of autonomy. At the same time, Magyar deputies argued that Slovakia should not be presented as a nation-state in the Constitution, because it was not nationally homogeneous. Founding the state on the national principle meant turning the minorities into second-class citizens, they argued.

*Czech* deputies consistently presented the break-up of Czechoslovakia as a matter of self-determination for the Slovak nation. The 1992 election, the Slovak Declaration of Sovereignty, and the Slovak Constitution were taken as proof that the Slovak nation *did* want independence. In the words of Prime Minister Václav Klaus of the Czech Republic: “The Slovak nation used the opportunity to complete its national emancipation by founding its own state. This is a reality we must respect.”<sup>31</sup> The argument that the Czechs had no right to deny the Slovak nation its right to self-determination was also used against holding a referendum in the Czech Republic; Czech citizens could not decide whether the Slovaks should become a state-forming nation or not. Interestingly, the principle of national self-determination was not even once invoked on behalf of the *Czech* nation.<sup>32</sup> The reason is obvious: The Czechs did not regard the establishment of the Czech Republic as a state-forming process, but as a restoration of Czech statehood, which explicitly included Czechoslovak state traditions. But then the Czechs always regarded Czechoslovakia as their state.

Apart from the principle of national self-determination, the main line of argument in favor of dissolution may be termed realist. It was argued that the federation did not work or that it was already dead, that it was too late to save the state, and now the important thing was to end the state in a peaceful, orderly, cultivated, adult and legitimate fashion, and to ensure good neighborly relations between the future independent states.

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<sup>30</sup> For Húska’s statement and the debate on the Constitution, see *Stenografická správa o 5. schôdzi Slovenskej národnej rady* konanej 31. augusta a 1. septembra 1992, <[www.nrsr.sk/indexarch.asp](http://www.nrsr.sk/indexarch.asp)> [4 February, 2004].

<sup>31</sup> Klaus in the debate on the Czech Constitution, *Česká národní rada 1992–1992. Stenoprotokoly. 10. schůze, 16.–17.12.1992.* <[www.psp.cz/eknih/1992cnr/stenprot/010schuz/](http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1992cnr/stenprot/010schuz/)> [3 February, 2004].

<sup>32</sup> The principle of national self-determination was invoked on behalf of the “Moravian nation” (1.5 million, according to the 1991 census), but then as an argument in favor of Moravian autonomy in a Czecho-Moravian federation. See especially the speeches of deputies Jan Jegla and Jiří Bílý (both from the Moravian movement HSD-SMS), *Česká národní rada 1992–1992. Stenoprotokoly. 10. schůze, 16.–17.12.1992.* <[www.psp.cz/eknih/1992cnr/stenprot/010schuz/](http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1992cnr/stenprot/010schuz/)> [3 February, 2004].

#### 4. The Centralist Arguments Against Autonomy

If we turn to the centralist side, discontinuity is the word that first comes to mind. In the interwar period, the centralist arguments against autonomy were located within a nationalist discourse, and mirrored the autonomist arguments to a large extent, the difference being that the centralists based their arguments on an alternative national ideology – Czechoslovakism. After 1989, the “centralist” arguments changed profoundly. Czechoslovakism had been abandoned already in 1945, and the unitary state form in 1968. The “centralists” after 1989 were, therefore, centralists only relative to those advocating confederate solutions, and in the last instance, independence for Slovakia.

##### Centralist Arguments during the First Republic

In the inter-war period, the cornerstone of the centralist argumentation was that the Czechs and Slovaks were one Czechoslovak nation (albeit with two tribes), and the core message was that a centralized state form was necessary to preserve national unity and the integrity of the state. The premise linking national identity to state form was the principle of national self-determination. According to the centralists, the Czechoslovak nation had used its right to self-determination to reunite in a Czechoslovak nation-state, and this unity had to be preserved.<sup>33</sup> Autonomy for Slovakia was seen as a threat to Czechoslovak national unity as well as state integrity, first because it would drive the two tribes of the Czechoslovak nation apart, and second, because granting Slovakia autonomy would be tantamount to recognizing the Slovaks as a separate nation, which would jeopardize the state’s *raison d’être*.

The centralists countered the *deprivation arguments* of the autonomists in two ways. On the one hand, they denied that the Slovaks were discriminated against, and on the other hand, they rejected autonomy as a suitable remedy to Slovakia’s alleged ills. What was needed to help Slovakia was not autonomy, but more unity, especially economically, the centralists argued. This was entirely in line with their overall “strength through unity” message.

However, their main artillery was aimed at the *contract-oriented arguments*, and especially the Pittsburgh Agreement. The main arguments were: 1. The American Czechs and Slovaks were not legitimate representatives of their co-nationals at home, and had no right to decide on their behalf; 2. The Pittsburgh Agreement was one of many, and thus had a certain historical value; but in order to be valid, it would need the consent of Czechs and Slovaks at home; and 3. Legitimate Slovak representatives had consented to Czechoslovak national and state unity in the Constitution of 1920, as well as at assemblies before and after Pittsburgh. The first argument was especially damaging, since it went to the core of all the autonomist arguments associated with the Pittsburgh Agreement, invalidating the Agreement as a Magna Charta, as a binding contract, and as an expression of the will of the Slovak nation.

It was more difficult for the centralists to denounce the legitimacy of Masaryk as a representative of the Czechoslovak state, but the President did his best to free himself and the government of any obligation. Masaryk claimed that he had signed the Pittsburgh Agreement in order to “appease a small Slovak faction that dreamed of God knows what sort of independence for Slovakia,” and dismissed it as “a local pact between American Czechs and

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<sup>33</sup> There was no big difference between the Slovak autonomists and the Czechoslovak centralists in terms of the contents of national identity. In both cases, national identity was defined in terms of culture, language and ancestry. See Bakke (op.cit., 1999), especially Chapter 10, for documentation.

Slovaks, signed by American citizens.”<sup>34</sup> There is little doubt that Masaryk drafted the Agreement in order to appease a part of the Slovak League, but one may wonder why this was important to him if he regarded them merely as American citizens. I think Mark Stolárik has a valid point when he argues that the American Slovaks helped legitimize the creation of Czechoslovakia in the absence of a mandate from the Slovaks in Hungary (caused by war censorship).<sup>35</sup>

Masaryk also tried, unsuccessfully, to discredit the Pittsburgh Agreement through quasi-legalistic arguments. In a letter to Andrej Hlinka on October 12th, 1929, Masaryk claimed that the Pittsburgh Agreement was “a forgery,” because at the time, the émigré organization of the Slovaks present in Pittsburgh, “the [Slovak] League legally did not exist, and it was recognized by the Government only in 1919.” Hlinka evidently wrote the Slovak League, which retorted that there was “no doubt about the authenticity of the Pittsburgh Agreement,” and American legal experts confirmed that there was no difference between chartered and unchartered organizations with respect to entering such agreements.<sup>36</sup>

To prop up the claim that legitimate Slovak representatives had consented to Czechoslovak national and state unity after Pittsburgh, the centralists preferred to use the Martin Declaration of October 30th, 1918, since this Declaration had been unanimously accepted at an assembly of all Slovak political parties. In the beginning, they also used the 1920 Constitution for the same purpose, but the trouble was that the Slovak Club in the Constitutional Assembly was co-opted, and arguably not representative of Slovak opinion.

The main reason why the Martin Declaration was such an asset for the centralists, was the sentence stating that the “Slovak nation is linguistically as well as culturally-historically part of the unitary Czecho-Slovak nation.” Moreover, the assembly at Martin had demanded national self-determination on behalf of this “Czecho-Slovak nation,” while at the same time it was silent on autonomy. The centralists thus used it as proof of Czechoslovak national and state unity, and as proof of the will of the Slovaks to enter such a unity. (Rumor in Slovakia had it that the passage on Czechoslovak national unity was not in the original text. This was, however, refuted in 1923 by Emil Stodola and Samuel Zoch, who had drafted it).<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the centralists countered the *classical nationalist argument* by rejecting the first premise, that the Slovaks were an individual nation, and the third premise, that the autonomists represented the true will of the Slovak nation. They presented the Slovaks as a tribe of the Czechoslovak nation, and the Slovak members of the centralist parties as the legitimate Slovak representatives. At the same time, they accepted the second premise, that nations had the right to self-determination, but as we have seen, they invoked this principle on behalf of the Czechoslovak nation. An Ivan Dérer specialty was the argument that *if* the Slovaks had been an individual nation, then they would have the right to secession, not only to autonomy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Tomáš G. Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, (Prague: Orbis a Čin, 1925), 262–263.

<sup>35</sup> M. Mark Stolárik (op.cit., 1968), 54.

<sup>36</sup> The letter is published as Document No. 30 in Joseph A. Mikuš, *Slovakia. A Political and Constitutional History*, (Bratislava: SAP, 1995) 209–210. The answer of the Slovak League was published in *Slovák* no. 194, 27 August, 1930, p. 1. See also M. Mark Stolárik (op. cit., 1968), 48–49, 52.

<sup>37</sup> Václav Chaloupecký: *Martinská deklarace a její politické osudy* (Prague, 1928), 19–20.

<sup>38</sup> Ivan Dérer, *Československá otázka*, (Prague: Orbis, 1935), 88–90.

Both sides had their share of argumentation errors. The centralists argued from majority (*argumentum ad populum*) in the early 1920s, when *they* received the majority of the Slovak votes, and personal attacks (*argumentum ad hominem*) were actually most common on the centralist side, probably because they fitted so well into their general strength-through-unity argument. The Slovak autonomists were accused of being “Magyarones” or “new Slovaks,” thereby implying that they had other loyalties or identities,<sup>39</sup> and of being paid by the Hungarian government. In both cases, the Magyars had the role of “bogeyman”.

This Magyarone card was used to explain why the Slovaks had turned away from the Czechs in the past and in the present, and to counter the autonomist claim that they were the sole legitimate representatives of the Slovak nation. If the centralists believed that Slovak autonomy would jeopardize Czechoslovak national unity and the integrity of the state, it was quite logical to accuse the autonomists of being renegades (though probably not very smart).

### Profound Changes after 1989

After 1989 there was not much left of the former centralist arguments, which is not surprising considering that Czechoslovakism had been abandoned and a unitary state form was no longer an option. The “centralists” still accepted the principle of national self-determination; however, they now recognized the Czechs and Slovaks as equal, state-forming nations and Czechoslovakia as a Czech and Slovak nation-state. As long as state form was still on the agenda, the players on the “centralist” side were mostly Czechs, and the task was to defend a “functional federation,” which meant to preserve the powers of the federation vis-à-vis the Republics. Once the break-up of the state appeared on the agenda after the 1992 elections, however, the “centralist” players were Czech and Slovak opposition parties and the task was now to preserve a common Czechoslovak state.

In the hyphen debate, as well as in the competency debate, Czech deputies explicitly presented the federal state form as an expression of the equality of the Czechs and Slovaks. The main Czech arguments against the hyphen were that it was divisive, and that it was unacceptable to the Czech public. This probably had something to do with the fact that the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic (1938–39) was spelled with a hyphen. It was also argued that it was grammatically problematic, that the original spelling had been without a hyphen (an historical argument), and that the Moravians would feel offended (an identity argument). The main arguments in favor of a strong federation were that it was necessary in order to carry out the economic reforms and to fulfill Czechoslovakia’s international obligations. For the Czech elite, the power and competency of the Czech Republic was irrelevant. In fact, I have only found one example of a Czech deputy invoking national interests, and he argued that a confederate solution would be contrary to Czech interests.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Both labels were commonly used about people of Slovak origin who had become more or less assimilated during Hungarian rule, but who turned back after 1918. There were some known Magyarones among the autonomists (chiefly František Jehlička and Vojtech/Béla Tuka), but the leading figures (Hlinka, Juriga) had defended Slovak interests also under Hungary. The total number of people who actually switched national affiliation from Magyar to Slovak in the first ten years of Czechoslovakia cannot be ascertained precisely, but an educated guess is that it was between 250,000 and half a million. See Bakke (op.cit., 1999), 305–307.

<sup>40</sup> Mandler (Liberal Democratic Party). Zpráva o 9. společné schůzi SL a SN, 11.–12.12.1990, in *Federální shromáždění České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky VI. volební období (1990)*, <[www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/slsn/stenprot/009schuz/s009077.htm#\\_d](http://www.psp.cz/eknih/1990fs/slsn/stenprot/009schuz/s009077.htm#_d)> [4 February 2004].

The Czech and Slovak opposition parties that defended Czechoslovakia's existence in the debates in the fall of 1992 were mostly Socialists and Communists, but also included the ultra-nationalist Republicans. Even though this opposition accepted the principle of national self-determination, they mostly interpreted it in the original meaning – as popular sovereignty. The totally dominating line of argument was that the only legitimate way of dividing Czechoslovakia according to the principle of self-determination was to let the citizens decide by popular vote, and that it was unacceptable to divide the state against the will of the people. In the first debate on dissolution, this was supported by a historical analogy. By accident, the debate was held 54 years after the fateful Munich agreement, and the opposition argued that a new Munich was about to happen: Again the fate of the Czechoslovak state would be decided without asking the people. In the first debate the opposition parties advocated a referendum before the decision was made; in the second debate a ratifying plebiscite. The motive was obviously to save the state, since all opinion polls showed that a clear majority in favor. However, very few deputies actually defended the merits of Czechoslovakia, although a handful of Czechs professed their love for the shared homeland, or invoked the legacy of the founding fathers, mostly T.G. Masaryk and Milan Rastislav Štefánik.

Finally, a weak echo of the interwar debate could be heard in claims that separation would be a threat to the future existence of the Czech and Slovak nations (reminiscent of the strength-through-unity argument), and in charges of treason (personal attacks). Neither line of argument was very common. The claim that voting in favor of dissolution was an act of treason was a preserve of the ultra-nationalist Republican Party of Czechoslovakia.

The debates also had their amusing sides, for instance in the use of metaphors. The federation was alternately seen as a leaking ship, a train being pulled in opposite directions, and an old patient with a severe heart condition, while the establishment of the new states was compared to giving birth to twins!

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

In the inter-war period, Czechoslovakia was a unitary, centralized state, and autonomy was a matter of separate Slovak institutions. After 1989, Czechoslovakia was a symmetric federation of two national Republics. Separate Slovak institutions were, therefore, no longer an issue, and autonomy became a matter of allocating more decision-making power to the Republics. However, in both cases, there was a conflict over state form, and in both cases the content of that conflict was how centralized the state should be.

As for the *actors*, the elite constellations were most stable in the interwar period. However, as long as the conflict was about state form, the Czech political elite was in favor of the most centralized solution, while the Slovak elite was divided. Once the break-up of Czechoslovakia was on the agenda, there were Czech and Slovak parties on both sides.

If we focus on the *main arguments* on either side, we can observe continuity as well as change. During the First Republic, the arguments of both sides were located within a nationalist discourse, but they founded their argumentation on alternative national ideologies. The centralists invoked the principle of national self-determination on behalf of the “Czechoslovak nation”, the autonomists on behalf of the Slovak nation. After the Velvet Revolution, the autonomist arguments were still located within a nationalist discourse, and when the victorious parties in the 1992 elections decided to divide the state, the Czech side

simply adopted the Slovak arguments. By contrast, the “centralist” arguments in the debate on state form were mainly economic, while the arguments in the debate on the break-up of Czechoslovakia were procedural. The most striking feature of the autonomy discourse after 1989 is therefore the *asymmetry* of the arguments on both sides.

Let us now address the question of how the arguments related to the principle of *national self-determination*: On the autonomist side, the core message was the same in both periods; that the Slovaks were entitled to autonomy or self-determination “qua nation.” However, the principle of national self-determination was invoked more explicitly after the Velvet Revolution. On the centralist side, the principle was used as an argument against autonomy in the interwar period, and with a certain twist, against the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1992. In the latter case, self-determination was understood as popular sovereignty – i.e. as a democratic principle. It is also interesting that after 1989, the principle of national self-determination was consistently invoked on behalf of the Slovaks, not on behalf of the Czechs, other than in the context of Czechoslovakia as the nation-state of two individual, sovereign nations.

In conclusion, the continuity was strongest on the autonomist side, although the contents of national self-determination changed from autonomy to independence. On the “centralist” side, most of the ammunition against Slovak autonomy was gone once the concept of a Czechoslovak nation was abandoned.