A Deliberate "Yes" to the Dissolution of the ČSFR?

The Image of the Parties and the Split of Czecho-Slovakia in the Eyes of the Slovak Population

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Abstract: Based on the data from repeated sociological surveys conducted in post-Communist Slovakia in the years 1990-1992, this study describes the elements of the political awareness of the population that played an important role in the process of the dissolution of Czecho-Slovakia. Special attention is paid to the image of the political parties in the pre-election period and to the reactions of the population to the division of the country.
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The milk is spilt: Czecho-Slovakia has split. Ideas about the possible benefits from the Czecho-Slovak coexistence based on a new partnership that some Czech and Slovak sociologists formulated in October 1990 at the Alšovice seminar [Budúcnosť 1990] did not come to life in the context of a single state.

At the turn of 1993 the freely elected surgeons on both sides of the Czecho-Slovak border put down their scalpels and congratulated one another on a successful surgery; the stitches on the divorce velvet still look elegant, almost imperceptible. The surgery went on uneventfully; the town squares were empty rather than swarming with crowds of protesters appealing for preservation of the common state or voicing support for the referendum which failed to evoke a response.

Slovakia's population thus did not say its decisive civic "no" to the breakup of the country. This came not only as a surprise to more than one observer from the outside, but also to a number of direct participants: for, as late as shortly before the 1992 election, the surveys were concordant in reporting that the desire to safeguard the common state in Slovakia prevailed with a great deal of inertia over the will for independence [*Slovensko* 1992]. The centrifugal force of the "election vector" further reinforced by the resignation of President Havel started to act literally overnight.

But neither did nor does a vocal "yes" sound for the Slovak statehood. Instead of lightning flashing over the Tatra Mountains, there is silence. Euphoria over the newly acquired independence definitely did not overcome the wide masses of the population. Not even the sporadic bonfires lit to mark the sovereignty or the champagne corks shooting forth at the meetings on the day "zero" of the Slovak statehood did much to ease the lethargy. Joy over the "nation's coming of age," largely organized from the top, is waning and attention is turning more to the worries and problems of the citizens in the new state [Krivý 1992, Šoucová 1993].

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Until recently most citizens of the ČSFR and even a number of domestic and foreign politicians and political scientists trusted the ability of Czecho-Slovakia to hold fast in the presence of tendencies to disintegrate and obsessions with national emancipation which were gradually holding fast to the multinational or multiethnic post-communist countries. But today two new independent states are lying next to one another whose creation took place with a dizzying irreversibility which provokes thought and analyses.[1] The aim of the present article is to characterize some typical elements of the political or broader social consciousness in post-communist Slovakia and to outline those of them with special significance toward the dissolution of the country - be it in the form of collective perceptions or misperceptions. We shall leave aside the "objective reality" of historical facts, political events and interactions or of the real economic and social situation. Instead, we shall focus more on how people in Slovakia constructed the actual sociopolitical world surrounding them, how they were charting their course in this world and which ideas or underlying motives determined their electoral preferences. This may help us shed light on the torpor of the"silent majority" which, until not so long ago, was silently supporting the Czecho-Slovak coexistence and then was taken by surprise by the declining relevance of their opinions and passively but ultimately accepted the impossibility of influencing the dismantling process of the common state.

Let us have a look into the rear-view mirror represented by surveys conducted by the Center for Social Analysis in Bratislava.[2]

1. Disturbing Signals

According to some commentators, during the second parliamentary election the citizens of Slovakia gave an affirmative answer to the question of ending the Czecho-Slovak statehood as a precondition for completing the process of national emancipation. But survey results do not seem to corroborate this view.

The pre-election climate in Slovakia was in marked contrast to the euphoria of the November days. An almost universal distrust rooted itself among the population against the new power elite, represented primarily by the political parties, the Public against Violence and the Christian-Democratic Movement. It was fed by disappointments with the work of the new parliaments and weariness from lengthy and difficult-to-read talks on constitutional issues. An authoritarian nostalgia was gaining ground with widespread yearning for a strong hand policy

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[1]) There are several possible frameworks of interpretation. We have also made an attempt at interpreting some underlying reasons for this process e.g. in [Bútora, Bútorová 1992; Bútora, Bútorová, Gyarfášová 1993].
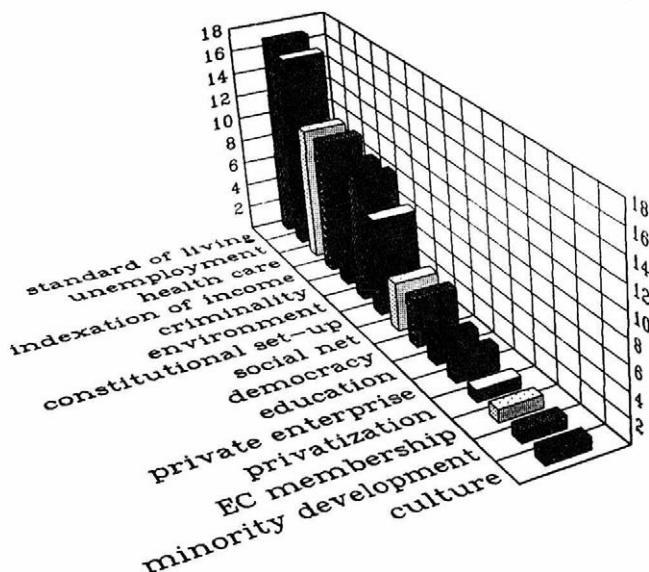
[2]) Center for Social Analysis is an independent research organization. Since the spring of 1990, the C.S.A. team has conducted eleven representative surveys of the attitudes of the Slovak population to current social, economic and political problems; two of them had the Czecho-Slovakia wide coverage. The sample surveyed was always representative and, as a rule, it never comprised less than 1,200 respondents from the Slovak Republic. Research carried out in April 1992, to which reference is made in the present text, was comprised of as many as 2,890 respondents.

and decisive action for installing order and doing away with chaos and anomie [*Výzkum* 1991, *Aktuálne* 1992, *Slovensko* 1992, *Výsledky* 1992].

The feeling of alienation from the power elite had a different background in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia it was nurtured by general dissatisfaction with the post-November developments; frustration over the threat of weakening social securities; declining support for the new regime, more conciliatory attitudes to communists; less frequent stress on personal accountability; more frequent state paternalistic orientations; more deeply embedded egalitarianism; distrust in entrepreneurs; privatization; and more frequent anti-Western attitudes [*Výzkum* 1991, *Aktuálne* 1992, *Slovensko* 1992, *Výsledky* 1992, Krivý 1993].

As Figure 1 suggests, the issues which became most prominent in the hierarchy of social problems as experienced by the Slovak population were unemployment and endangered social securities; this was largely due to more severe social implications of the economic reform.[3] These issues weighed so heavily on the minds of the population that they pushed the problems of the country's constitutional structure into the background [Slovensko 1992].

Which of the Problems Do you Consider to Be the Most Urgent?
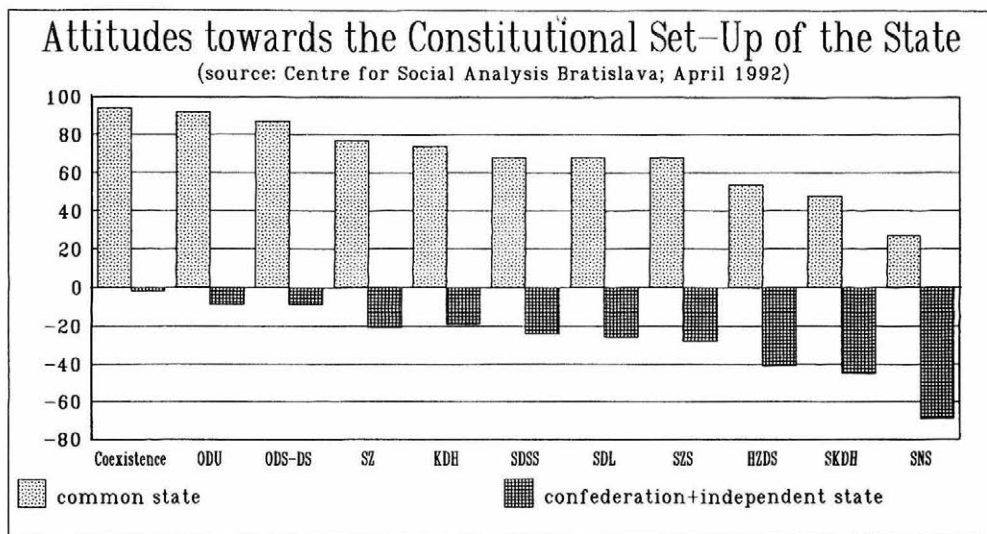(According to the Citizens of Slovakia – C.S.A.; April 1992)

The study of the Czecho-Slovak relations expose certain paradoxes. On the one hand, the partisans of the common state could, until the last moment, get

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3) The respondents were instructed to select from among the problems specified in the Figure 1 three problems that they consider to be the most urgent. Percentages shown in the Figure apply to all the answers.

confidence from the poll results according to which the numerical prevalence of common state supporters over their opponents continued to hold fast in Slovakia.[4]

At that time most people in both republics were convinced about the redeeming values of the coexistence of the Slovak and Czech people: in April 1992, 77% of the respondents from Slovakia agreed with the statement that the ties binding the Slovaks with the Czechs should not be broken. Support for the common state prevailed among partisans of all the parties with the exception of the Slovak National Party. Those who were in favour of the common state prevailed, prior to the election, even among supporters for the future victorious movement, the HZDS (59%). Twenty-two percent of them supported the programme for the creation of a confederation while only 19% supported the demand for Slovak state sovereignty [Slovensko 1992].

Attitudes towards the Constitutional Set-Up of the State
(source: Centre for Social Analysis Bratislava; April 1992)

Categories along horizontal axis: Coexistence, ODU, ODS-DS, SZ, KDH, SDSS, SDL, SZS, HZDS, SKDH, SNS

Legend: ▦ common state ▦ confederation+independent state

On the other hand, several disturbing signs started to signal a change in the perception of the Czecho-Slovak coexistence. First, throughout the entire series of intensive constitutional negotiations, very important misperceptions about the problem of constructing a constitutional structure persisted. Only a small part of the population had a coherent idea about the attributes of individual constitutional
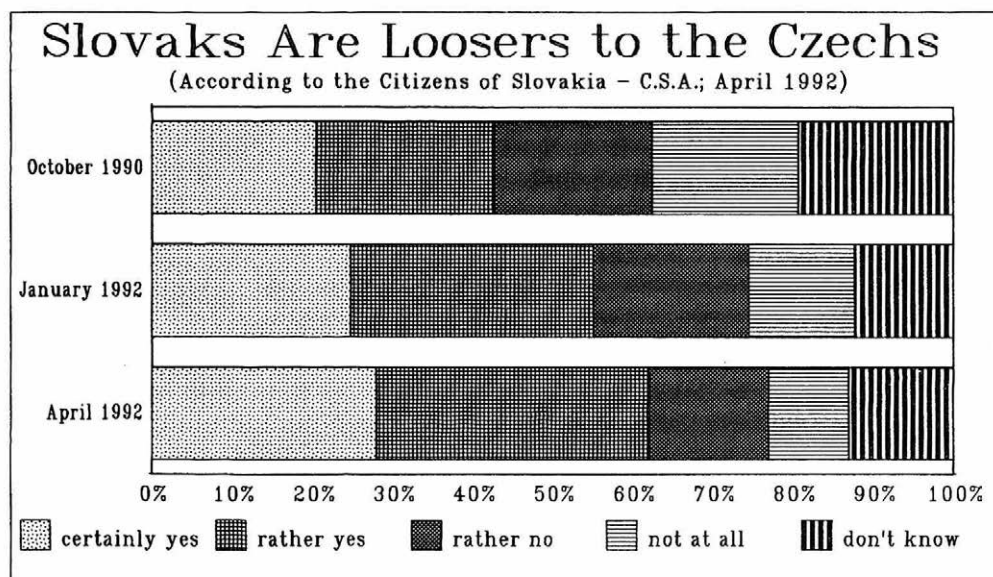
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[4]) According to the C.S.A. research [Slovensko 1992], one month before the elections there was a 20% support for the unitarian state, 7% for the Länder organization, 27% for a two-component federation, 8% for a three-component federation. As for the confederation, it was supported by 14%, and the independent state by 17% of the Slovak citizens; 6% of the respondents were undecided. The Prague IVVM survey of April 1992 indicated a different, almost double percentage (28%) of the advocates for a confederation in Slovakia. This may be due to a much too small sample for Slovakia but especially to the fact that the IVVM questionnaire does - unlike all other forms - explain this form of constitutional set-up and the commentary to it is relatively favorable and unproblematic; the respondent is to judge a "confederation of two independent republics with a common president and defense".

forms [*Aktuálne* 1991; *Aktuálne* 1992; *Slovensko* 1992; Frič, Bútorová, Rosová 1992; Krivý 1993]. The cognitive helplessness of the population was far from being limited only to the constitutional "mist" and received its full reflection in the 1992 elections. As reported by V. Krivý and I. Radičová, in comparison with the Czech population of that period, the Slovak one was characterized by greater atomization and lacked consistency in its perception of the individual aspects of social life [*Aktuálne* 1992, Krivý 1993].

Second, and even more significant, was the fact that the Slovak Republic inhabitants failed to recognize the significance of the interconnection between the desire for economic prosperity and the conviction that it can be best achieved if the economic reform scenario continues. On the contrary, convictions toward the opposite were growing stronger. In May 1991, 43% of the Slovak population were worried that the reform would weaken national interests of the Slovaks and 57% expected the gap between the Czech and the Slovak economies to grow [*Aktuálne* 1991]. In January 1992, 53% of the respondents anticipated the Czech economy to grow more rapidly at the expense of the Slovak economy [*Aktuálne* 1992]. More and more people started to believe that the Czechs felt themselves superior to the Slovaks; while in October 1990 61% of the respondents thought that the Czechs did not consider Slovaks to be equal partners; by January 1992 that percentage grew to 81%. An increasingly large number of people started to believe that the Slovaks had a losing relationship with the Czechs: in October 1990 this opinion was held by 43% of the population, in January 1992 this proportion grew to 55% and by April 1992 to 62% [*Slovensko* 1992].

These data indicate that in the period between the first and second parliamentary elections the feelings of injustice were gaining ground in the minds of the Slovak population. The demand for modifying the economic reform to be more sensitive to social issues and more responsive to the specific situation and national interests of Slovakia was finding greater and greater support. It may be legitimately assumed that it was the very ability to take advantage of this combination of arguments and demands in order to create a popular image for individual parties seeking electorate support which won the power struggle in Slovakia.[5]

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[5]) For information on the development of the political scene in Slovakia after 1989 see, e.g. [Bútora, Bútorová, Gyarfášová 1993]. Concerning other attributes of the political parties such as the social and demographic structure of their supporters, their value backgrounds, regional distribution of political preferences, etc. see [*Aktuálne* 1991, *Aktuálne* 1992, *Slovensko* 1992].

Slovaks Are Loosers to the Czechs
(According to the Citizens of Slovakia – C.S.A.; April 1992)

October 1990	
January 1992	
April 1992	

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

▨ certainly yes ▦ rather yes ▨ rather no ▤ not at all ‖‖ don't know

2. Image of the political parties and movements in the eyes of the voters: who promotes the interests of Slovakia?

One month before the election, in April 1992, the C.S.A. conducted an extensive study which made it possible to characterize the image individual parties had in the eyes of potential voters. The party image was drawn using several dimensions and methods: e.g., using pairs of contradictory statements expressing the political orientations of individual parties, their potential and the means they would use. Respondents were instructed to answer to each statement by indicating the parties or movements (maximum three) to which the given statement is most fitting. The following image dimensions and statement pairs were used.

a. Guarantee for economic prosperity:

  positive: Their victory at the elections would bring economic prosperity to the country.

  negative: Their victory at the elections would bring economic decline for the country.

b. Social sensitivity:

  positive: They show their concern for ordinary people.

  negative: They do not care about ordinary people.

c. Democratic attitudes:

  positive: Their victory at the elections would guarantee democracy.

  negative: If they win the election they will try to introduce a totalitarian regime.

d. Defending the interests of Slovakia:

  positive: They defend the interests of Slovakia.

  negative: They act against the interests of Slovakia.

e. Position on the common state:

positive: They are really concerned about safeguarding the common state.

negative: They pretend to be in favour of the common state, but the reality is different.

f. Tolerance to national minorities:

positive: They are tolerant to national minorities.

negative: They incite ethnic tensions.

g. Political means used:

positive: They tell the truth and are honest even if it may harm them.

negative: In the name of their power interests they do not hesitate to lie and to use improper political tactics.

h. Human potential of the party:

positive: They have enough capable politicians among them.

negative: They do not have enough capable politicians among them.

Which parties, in the eyes of the respondents, were viewed as the most typical holders of individual positive and negative characteristics? The following two tables outline the answer to this question.[6]

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[6] Positive and negative characteristics are represented by letters a - h in the above order where a = guarantee of economic prosperity, b = social sensitivity, etc. Percentages in brackets express the proportion of the respondents who relate the given statement to a specific party.

Explanation of abbreviations:

HZDS - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, formerly a part of the VPN (Public against Violence);

MOS - Hungarian Civic Party, formerly MNI (Hungarian Independent Initiative);

KDH - Christian Democratic Movement;

ODÚ - Civic Democratic Union, formerly VPN (Public against Violence);

SDĽ - Party of the Democratic Left, formerly KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia);

SDSS - Social Democratic Party of Slovakia;

SKDH - Slovak Christian Democratic Movement, formerly a part of KDH;

SNS - Slovak National Party;

Együttélés - Co-existence.

Table 1. Positive party image - parties with highest percentage

Characteristics	1.	Order of the parties 2.	3.
a.	HZDS (44)	SDĽ (19)	SDSS (15)
b.	HZDS (44)	SDĽ (28)	SDSS (19)
c.	HZDS (43)	SDĽ (21)	SDSS (21)
d.	HZDS (57)	SNS (44)	SKDH (22)
e.	ODU (20)	SDĽ (19)	SDSS (19)
f.	HZDS (21)	KDH (15)	SDSS (13)
g.	HZDS (38)	SDĽ (24)	SNS (17)
h.	HZDS (55)	SDĽ (30)	SNS (22)

Table 2. Negative party image - parties with highest percentage

Characteristics	1.	Order of the parties 2.	3.
a.	KDH (30)	ODÚ (22)	Együt. (21)
b.	KDH (34)	ODÚ (27)	SKDH (10)
c.	KDH (35)	SDĽ (20)	SNS (17)
d.	Együt. (34)	MOS (33)	KDH, ODÚ (23)
e.	KDH (35)	HZDS (16)	SKDH (14)
f.	SNS (37)	Együt. (36)	MOS (32)
g.	KDH (40)	ODÚ (27)	SKDH, SNS (15)
h.	KDH (22)	ODÚ (18)	Együt., MOS (16)

Let us have now a closer look at the image of individual parties (movements) which are listed according to the position they obtained in the election.

Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS):

The victorious political movement represented primarily by the robust figure of its chairman, Vladimír Mečiar, attracted the voters with its argumentation containing elements of social demagogy and appealing emancipation rhetorics which aptly blurred the constitutional issue. The HZDS was unrivalled in gaining a positive image, although only 17% of the respondents considered the movement a guarantee for safeguarding the common state. This in no way scathed the widespread belief that the HZDS was the best defender of the Slovak interests. This finding gives clear evidence that already before the election the HZDS sympathizers did not see the survival of the common state any longer as a condition for the favorable economic, political an social development of Slovakia.
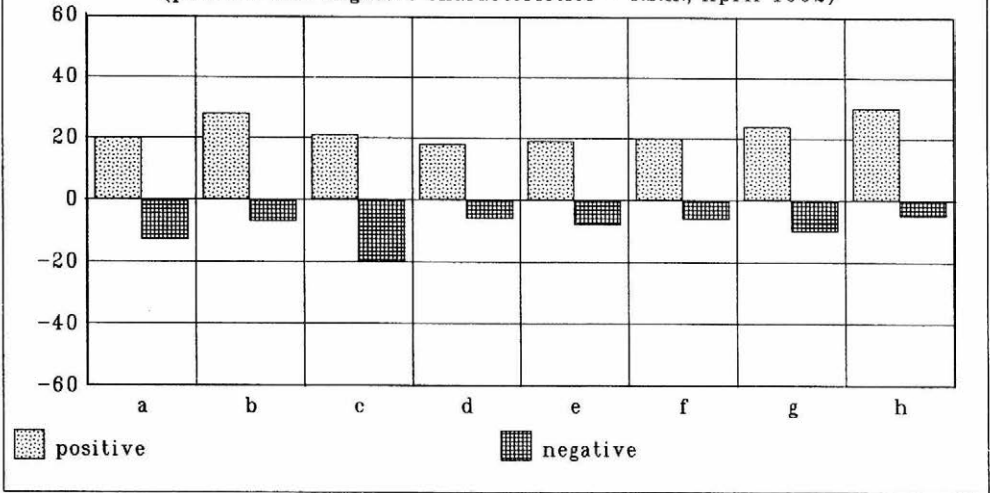
Image of the HZDS in the Eyes of the Slovak Population
(positive and negative characteristics – C.S.A., April 1992)

Party of the Democratic Left (SDĽ):

According to the respondents the greatest aspects of the SDĽ were seen in its social orientation and in its strong foundation of political personalities and specialists. By proposing a model of a "loose federation with elements of confederation," the SDĽ representation managed not to raise suspicion of holding extreme positions either in the direction of Czechoslovakism or Slovak nationalism. The SDĽ image changed beyond recognition during the last two years. Let us just remember that before the 1990 election the KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia), its predecessor, was the most strongly criticized and the most widely rejected party. [Bútorová, Rosová 1990].

Image of the SDL in the Eyes of the Slovak Population
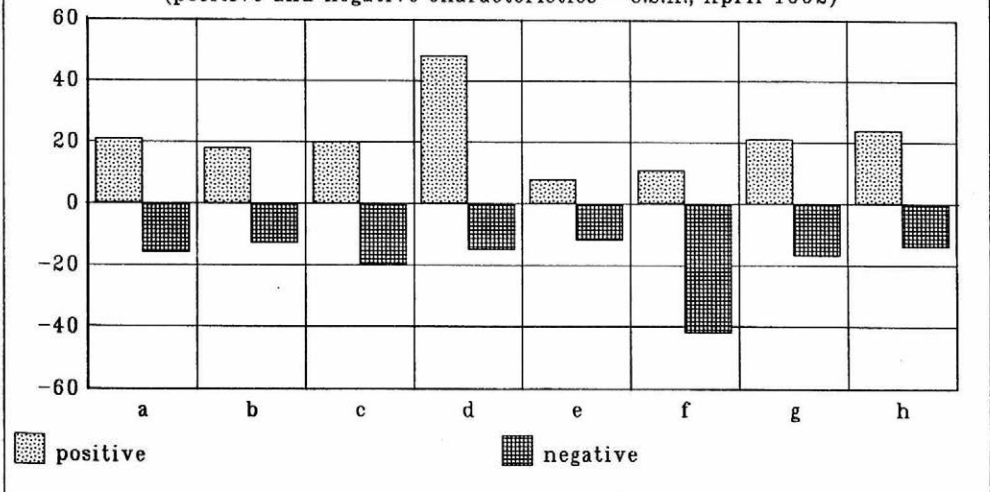(positive and negative characteristics – C.S.A., April 1992)

Slovak National Party (SNS):

The SNS pursued very straightforwardly the idea of an independent Slovakia practically since its formation and presented almost Janus-like opposite faces to the population: on the one hand, it projected the image of a defender of Slovak interests, on the other hand, it was considered to fuel ethnic tensions. The SNS image reflects the fact that throughout its existence it had a "monothematic" attitude - national and/or nationalistic - and its other features were much less distinct and recognizable for the population.
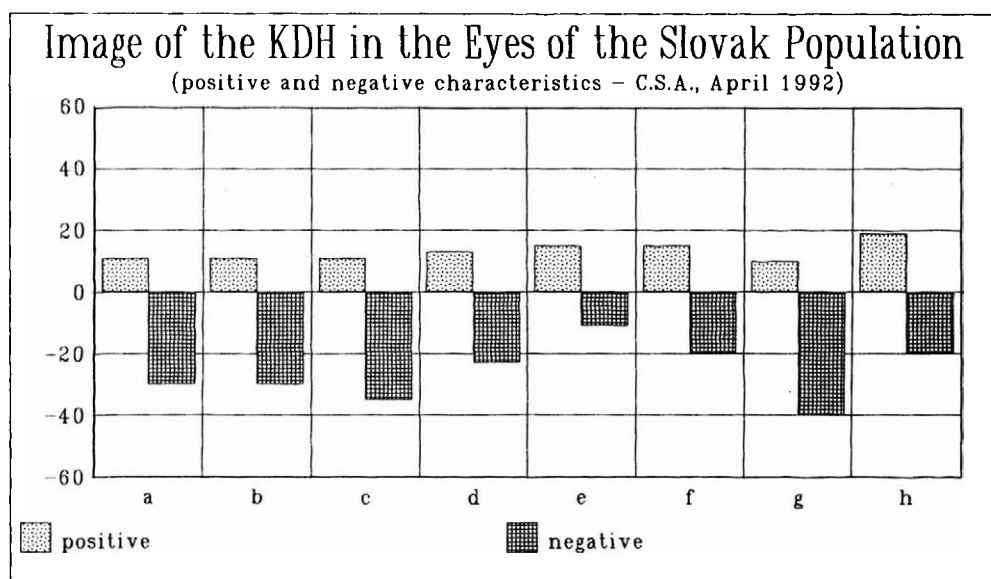
Image of the SNS in the Eyes of the Slovak Population
(positive and negative characteristics – C.S.A., April 1992)

Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH):

The KDH came to be recognized in the minds of people by its "moderate" separatism": it was to first to come up with the concept "of a Slovak chair and star". The KDH declared its intention to divorce from the Czechs which, however, should be postponed to a more propitious moment. This idea, instead of coloring the image of the movement as a defender of Slovak interests, harmed its image. The KDH, personified by the Prime Minister J. Čarnogurský, carried the burden of the population's greatest aversion. A considerable number of people perceived the movement to be non-democratic (stirring wide and spread concern about "black totalitarianism" and objections to the abortion law) and to be incapable of guaranteeing economic prosperity or bearing the interests of the common people in mind.
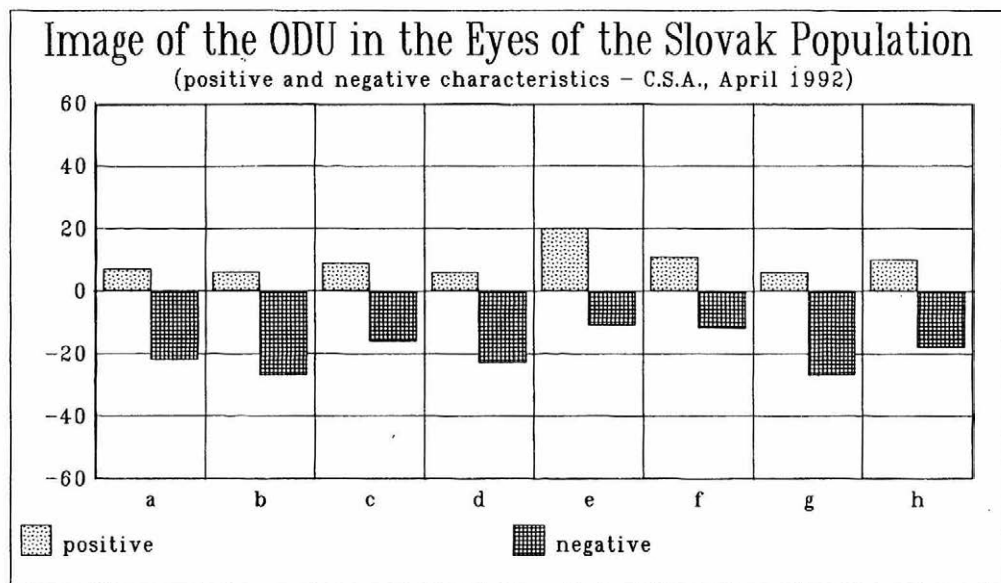
Image of the KDH in the Eyes of the Slovak Population
(positive and negative characteristics – C.S.A., April 1992)

Co-existence (Együttélés):

In accordance with the prevailing support for a Czecho-Slovak statehood among members of the Hungarian ethnic minority [Rosová, Bútorová 1992], the political leadership of these parties took a consistent pro-ČSFR stance. Citizens of Slovak nationality viewed the party as "Hungarian" and, consequently, as not to be trusted. Dominant among negative allegations was that the party acts against the interests of Slovakia. In this respect the Hungarian parties - just like before the first parliamentary election [Bútorová, Rosová 1990] - aroused more negative emotions than any other party.

Civic Democratic Union (ODÚ):

This party was the most consistent advocate for the common state and radical economic transformation. It was, however, deeply distrusted by the population. The most common objections included: lack of interest for ordinary people, the use

of illicit tactics, inadequate defense for the interests of Slovakia, and inability to secure economic prosperity. The ODÚ image is in sharp contrast with the unambiguously positive expectations connected to its predecessor, The Public against Violence [Bútorová, Rosová 1990] before the first parliamentary election. In the second parliamentary election it suffered a defeat and did not even obtain enough votes to gain a seat in the parliament.

Image of the ODU in the Eyes of the Slovak Population
(positive and negative characteristics – C.S.A., April 1992)

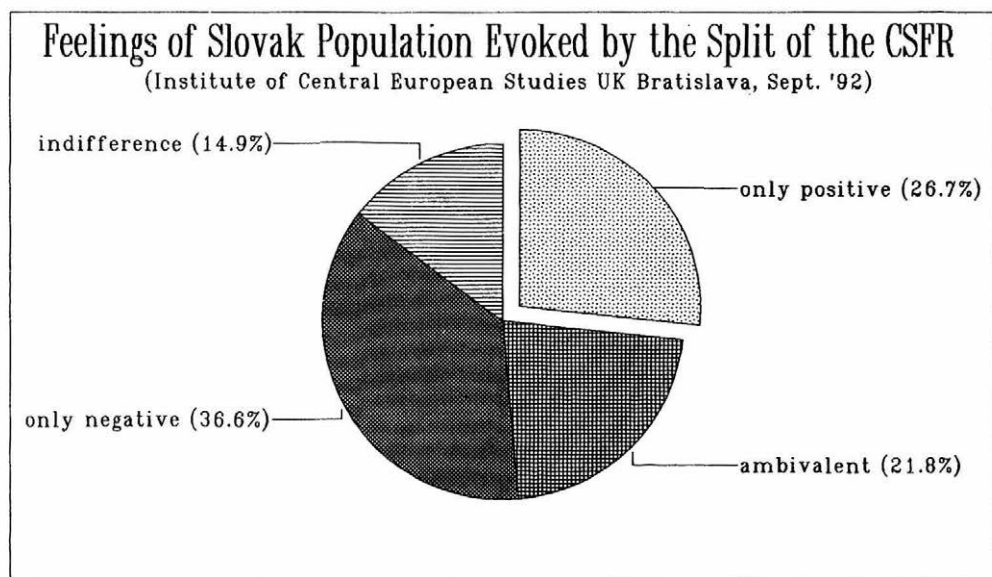3. **Worries and hopes in the period of a crumbling federation**

It seems as if ages have gone by since the pre-election poll had been taken. The pre-election prediction, by 32% of the Slovak population, that the common state would not survive was fulfilled; while the expectations of that such a possibility is completely ruled out, held by 46% of the Slovak population, proved to be false [*Slovensko* 1992].

In contrast to the accelerated pace that took the grand party politics, the rank-and-file Slovak citizens seemed to have frozen in a kind of entranced anticipation. The dismantling of the common state soon became *fait accompli*. As late as one month after the election, in July 1992, the IVVM survey indicated that 55% of the respondents called for the continuation of talks designed to safeguard the common state. In the eyes of the Slovak citizens, the responsibility lied with the politicians who should be brought to their senses; 79% of the respondents felt that "ordinary people would find a consensus if the politicians did not set people against each other". One month after the election 86% of the respondents were in favour of the referendum as the only possible and legitimate way of way of splitting the federation. But this wish remained unfulfilled [*Signálne* 1992].

And thus, only two months later, in September 1992, the research done by the Institute of Central European Studies, Comenius University, indicated that

only 18% of the respondents admitted it is possible to create a common federal state which would meet the expectations of both the Czech and the Slovak sides. At that time, the steps taken towards the SR's state independence were supported by 57% of the respondents, only 27% of whom had considered them as appropriate right from the beginning. The other 30% simply did not see any other possibility. In Slovakia 34% of the citizens verbally rejected action taken toward Slovak state independence.

Although the division of the ČSFR was taking place without any expressions for revolt or collective dissatisfaction, it was not greeted enthusiastically. According to ISŠ FM UKo data in September 1992, this process evoked an unambiguously positive response among only 27% of the respondents. Thirty six percent clearly had negative feelings, 22% mixed feelings and 15% were indifferent [Krivý 1992].

Feelings of Slovak Population Evoked by the Split of the CSFR
(Institute of Central European Studies UK Bratislava, Sept. '92)

indifference (14.9%)

only positive (26.7%)

only negative (36.6%)

ambivalent (21.8%)

The way in which the supporters of the parliamentary parties experienced the breakup of the country essentially coincided with the distribution of their views concerning the best constitutional arrangement prior to the election, as represented in Figure 2. Positive feelings were observed most often among supporters of SNS and HZDS; on the contrary, negative feelings were found especially among the sympathizers for MKDH, Co-existence and KDH (the SDĽ sympathizers being close to the latter) [Krivý 1992].

The cheerless mood accompanying the split of the country is motivated by fears of social and economic difficulties. Compared to the pre-election period, the climate is palpably more pessimistic. Shortly before the election, 38% of the respondents hoped that the decline of the living standard would stop and 37% expected the unemployment rate to lower [Slovensko 1992]. Five months later, in September 1992, only one third of those optimists expected positive developments with respect to the standard of living and unemployment in the near future [Krivý

1992]. During the last month of the ČSFR existence, only 5% of the SR citizens expected an improvement in their social situation [Šoucová 1993]. This shift is probably due to the change in tone of the media and the leading HZDS figures; the latter, after having received power, abandoned their pre-election rhetorics and started to stress the need for sacrifice in the interest of building a new state. Appeals for unity and loyalty to the new state started to be voiced with increasing urgency. Warnings about "endangering the interests of the country" and "enemies of the Slovak people" grew increasingly louder. Unmistakable evidence of the violation of democratic principles appeared.

This may be one of the reasons for increased pessimism in relation to the prospects for political democracy, although the HZDS representatives adamantly deny to the media the occurrence of any signs of antidemocratic development. While in April 1992, 47% of the SR population expected the strengthening of democracy after the election [*Slovensko* 1992], in September less than 30% of the SR citizens predicted that the first year of Slovak independence would bring more freedom to the citizens and better TV and radio information [Krivý 1992].

It must be stressed however, that in spite of the growing pessimism in assessing the outlook for the independent Slovakia, practically no change has taken place in the Slovak population's affiliations with individual parties during the period between the election and the last days of the ČSFR. According to an investigation of the Slovak Bureau of Statistics, 82% of the former HZDS voters, and 79%, 76%, 74% of the former SNS, SDĽ, KDH voters, respectively, would have repeated their June decisions. It is therefore impossible to speak at this point about disappointed voters with HZDS. Rather, the HZDS leaders seem to have strengthened their image as pragmatic and determined professionals in the eyes of their voters because of their cooperation with the Civic Democratic Party during the split of the ČSFR.

A great many people have thus probably abandoned any possible critical evaluation of the victorious movement and supportive parties for the Slovak independence. It will be a period when many voters will be compelled to weigh their recent lack of anticipative thinking with their personal experience. The question as to where the confrontation of pre-election promises and expectations with post-election actions and realities will lead - to what political interpretations and political acts - remains open.

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