

### After the split: Slovakia, Czech Republic and the path to democratic consolidation

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Annie Verderosa

**After the Split: Slovakia, Czech Republic  
and the Path to Democratic Consolidation**

**60**<sub>/2007</sub>

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## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Research Design .....</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1. <i>Research Question .....</i>	4
2.2. <i>Definition of the Dependent Variable .....</i>	5
2.3. <i>Definition of the Independent Variables.....</i>	6
2.4. <i>Operationalization of the Variables.....</i>	8
2.5. <i>Hypothesis.....</i>	9
<b>3. Theory and Methodology .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>4. Analysis .....</b>	<b>11</b>
4.1. <i>Case 1: Czech Republic .....</i>	12
4.1.1. <i>Economic Development.....</i>	12
4.1.2. <i>Ethnic Homogeneity .....</i>	13
4.1.3. <i>Political Strategy .....</i>	13
4.1.4. <i>Institutionalization of Democratic Rules and Behavior.....</i>	13
4.2. <i>Case 2: Slovakia .....</i>	15
4.2.1. <i>Economic Development.....</i>	15
4.2.2. <i>Ethnic Homogeneity .....</i>	15
4.2.3. <i>Political Strategy .....</i>	16
4.2.4. <i>Institutionalization of Democratic Rules and Behavior.....</i>	16
<b>5. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>17</b>

**After the Split: Slovakia, Czech Republic and the Path to  
Democratic Consolidation**

## **Abstract**

Guided by the observation that consolidated, liberal democracies have not been the outcome of all transitions from communism, this paper sets out to analyze the reasons behind the divergence shown in the paths of two very similar countries, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, in their first years of postcommunist development. The analysis examines the influence of two structural factors – level of economic development and level of ethnic homogeneity – on democratic consolidation. By tracing their role in shaping postcommunist political strategies and in institutionalizing democratic principles and behaviors, the analysis offers strong support for the hypothesis that such oft-underemphasized structural factors are significant to a country's prospects for consolidated democracy.



## 1. Introduction

Well over a decade into the transitions from communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, it is evident that transition can produce a range of outcomes, some democratic, others less so. These outcomes show variation in both the rate and depth of societal transformation; in some cases, reversals even in the direction of transformation can be observed. While the collapse of communism was immediately heralded a victory for democracy and the emerging new regimes invariably described as in transition ‘to democracy,’ it has since become clear that this paradigm is inadequate for treating the full range of postcommunist outcomes.<sup>1</sup> For some, the dream of a ‘return to Europe’<sup>2</sup> has been nearly fulfilled, as quick reforms and consolidated democratic practices have yielded membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. Yet the forms of governance practiced elsewhere in the region, despite featuring regular elections, bear little resemblance to the liberal democracies of the West, or indeed, even their Central European counterparts. Still others are caught in a ‘gray area,’ where prospects for democratic consolidation remain uncertain. While political change can happen almost overnight, democracy consolidates only over time, and, as the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic illustrate, can be aided or impeded by a particular alignment of circumstances.

It is this elusive phenomenon – consolidated democracy – that will be the focus of this paper. By examining the cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic from the time of the ‘Velvet Divorce’ marking the disintegration of Czechoslovakia to the electoral defeat of the autocratically-inclined Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia in 1998, this paper intends to explain how the paths of two countries could – and did – diverge so markedly on the path to consolidated democracy. The cases of Slovakia and the Czech Republic present a particularly compelling comparison because they endured communism and the early years of transition as a single federal state, a fact that invalidates the many hypotheses that depend on legacies of communism or modes of transition to

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<sup>1</sup> For a full critique, see Carothers 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Prague’s Civic Forum organized around this theme during the Velvet Revolution.

explain regime outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, although it is not the focus of this paper, this case is significant because it demonstrates, as was the case with Slovakia, that a turnaround in the prospects for consolidated democracy after a period of decidedly non-democratic governance is indeed possible. A more comprehensive inquiry might also consider how the Mečiar regime came to be defeated in 1998 or why it is the case that Czech Republic and Slovakia stand again today at a comparable level of democratic development. In the interest of space and clarity of structure, however, the argument presented here is intended only to set the stage for such further inquiry by developing an explanation for the dramatic variation in regime type observed through 1998.

## **2. Research Design**

A snapshot of democratic development in the two states of the former Czechoslovakia in the year 1997/1998<sup>4</sup> would capture two very different pictures. Whereas the Czech Republic established itself a front runner among the region's 'successful' reformers, earning early invitations to join first the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, then NATO and the European Union, Slovakia became known in the years following independence as quite the opposite: a 'laggard' among the Visegrad states.

### *2.1. Research Question*

Much of the political science literature exploring transitions from authoritarian rule, particularly that characterizing the 'third wave' of democratization which began its advance in 1974 and reached Southern Europe, Latin America, and Eastern Europe in the span of two decades,<sup>5</sup> attaches significance to the modalities of and choices made by actors involved in a transition situation as determinants of the successor regime's characteristics. The question explored in this paper inquires after the factors that may account for

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<sup>3</sup> Huntington's *The Third Wave*, published in 1991, described four types of transitions: transformations, replacements, transplacements, and interventions, where the type of transition is theorized to determine the resulting regime outcome. This work built on the insights advanced most prominently by O'Donnell and Schmitter in their 1986 *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, which established an actor-centric approach to analyzing the Southern European and Latin American transitions in the 1970s and 80s.

<sup>4</sup> The data collected for this analysis are taken from 1997 figures, the last complete year of data available before the September 1998 parliamentary elections that displaced the Mečiar regime in Slovakia.

<sup>5</sup> Huntington 1991.

variance in regime path or outcome when differences in the modalities of transition could not possibly have been the proximate cause. If Slovakia and Czech Republic exited communist rule from the same point of departure and negotiated the transition as a single state, why did the degree to which liberal democracy had been consolidated in each by 1997/1998 differ so dramatically?

## 2.2. *Definition of the Dependent Variable*

As the transformation process has worn on, scholars have turned their attention from the characteristics of regime change to the characteristics of the resulting regime. This latter phase of democratization refers to regime ‘consolidation,’ in which the principles of democracy become embedded and therefore likely to endure. As Guillermo O’Donnell has noted, two transitions are thus required to complete the transfer from authoritarian to democratic regime. The first transition involves the “installation of a democratic regime,” while the second “consolidates” democratic institutions and practices, leading to the enduring and effective functioning of democracy as a system.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis presented in this paper conceptualizes the meaning of “democratic consolidation” according to Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan’s definition, which recognizes consolidated democracy as “a political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, ‘the only game in town.’”<sup>7</sup> Their conception elaborates as follows on the behavioral, attitudinal, constitutional dimensions of consolidation:

*Behaviorally*, a democratic regime in a territory is consolidated when no significant national, social, economic, political, or institutional actors spend significant resources attempting to achieve their objectives by creating a nondemocratic regime or by seceding from the state. *Attitudinally*, a democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion, even in the midst of major economic problems and deep dissatisfaction with incumbents, holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life, and when support for antisystem alternatives is quite small or more-or-less isolated from prodemocratic forces. *Constitutionally*, a democratic regime is consolidated when governmental and nongovernmental forces alike become subject to, and habituated to, the resolution of conflict within the bounds of the specific laws, procedures, and institutions sanctioned by the new democratic process.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> O’Donnell 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Linz and Stepan 1996, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

As this definition illustrates, consolidation requires that change take place in multiple dimensions and on several levels.<sup>9</sup> A significant shortcoming of the theoretical work on democratic consolidation to date is that the definitions employed tend to be so descriptive that it is difficult to separate the concept from its causes. Empirical data that are called indicators by some authors are described as causal variables by others.

As throughout the consolidology literature, the definition of democracy applied here refers to the idea of liberal democracy, rather than any of its lesser subtypes.<sup>10</sup> This definition derives from Robert Dahl's concept of "polyarchy," which requires substantial freedoms and pluralism in addition to electoral competition and participation.<sup>11</sup> Although it is certainly true that less desirable forms of democracy share some prospects for longevity, the term "consolidation" as it is applied in this paper implies democratic quality in addition to regime stability.

### 2.3. *Definition of the Independent Variables*

In order to avoid the tautological problems discussed above, this analysis introduces two structural factors as the independent variables, both of which are hypothesized to be significant in constraining postcommunist reform strategies. While it is certainly true that the primary responsibility for institutionalizing democratic structures and behaviors lies with *people*, more prominently postcommunist elites, this paper argues that a state's level of economic development and ethnic homogeneity represent two important structural factors that shape the choices available to those elites in setting the agenda for postcommunist reform.

The analysis draws on Andrew Janós' typology of postcommunist political strategies – civic-liberalism, technocracy, and neo-populism – to describe the political strategies employed by the winners of founding elections in each case.<sup>12</sup> As will be elaborated below, these political strategies provide the link between the

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<sup>9</sup> Diamond 1999.

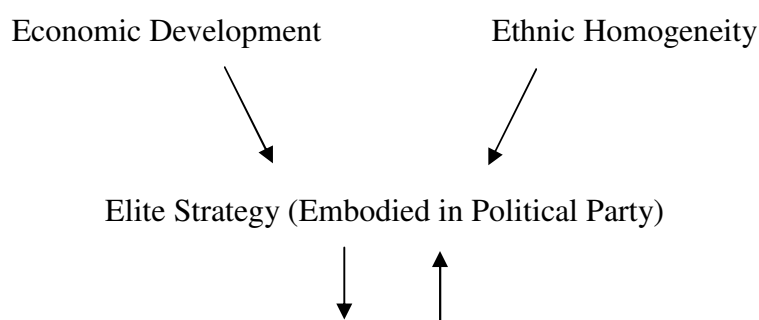
<sup>10</sup> An unpublished survey by David Collier and Steven Levitsky titled "Democracy with Adjectives" counted more than 550 types.

<sup>11</sup> Dahl, Robert A. 1971: *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, cited in Diamond 1996, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Janós' definitions are discussed and applied in the case study section of this paper. See Janós 1994, pp. 14-27 for in-depth discussion of the three types and classification of the region's communist successor parties.

independent variables – economic development and ethnic homogeneity – and the outcome of consolidated democracy. Elites do not consciously choose consolidation or non-consolidation, but both outcomes are nevertheless the product of elite choice. That choice, in turn, necessarily depends on the availability of options. The structural variables not only shape and constrain the menu of choice for political parties as they develop platforms and strategies, they provide the basis for electoral support favoring a particular strategy over another in the first place. The strategies adopted as a consequence then play an important role in the institutionalization of democratic structures, behaviors, and attitudes.

Elite strategies probably have the most direct and observable impact on the creation of specific institutional forms, but they are a driving force behind the institutionalization of attitudes and behavior as well. Elite strategies reflect democratic – or non-democratic – attitudes, and these influence the beliefs developed by the broader public in response. This paper acknowledges a two-way relationship between the strategies pursued and the development of democratic attitudes, but asserts that the five-year time period under analysis represents a unique situation in which the attitudes of both elites and the masses toward democracy were formed largely in response to parties’ initial performance. As Larry Diamond has found, “[c]itizens weigh independently—and much more heavily [than historical or economic factors]—the political performance of the system, in particular, the degree to which it delivers on its promise of freedom and democracy.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, elites’ behavior is observable within the framework established, and multiple criteria are available for judging whether it can be accepted as democratic or not. When both structures and behavior are consistent with the democratic beliefs that bind them, democracy can be said to be consolidated. Thus, the causal chain can be constructed as follows:



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<sup>13</sup> Diamond 1999, p.192.

Democratization of Attitudes/Beliefs (Elites and Masses)



Institutionalization of Rules and Elite Behavior



Democratic Consolidation

#### 2.4. *Operationalization of the Variables*

To observe the dependent variable, degree of democratic consolidation, this paper relies on the data collected annually by Freedom House and reported in its Political Rights and Civil Liberties indices. Freedom House compiles ratings for both indices on a scale of 1.0 to 7.0, with higher scores indicating a higher degree of restrictiveness. Moreover, it offers a classification of countries according to their status as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free,” and judges whether they can be deemed “consolidated democracies,” “transitional democracies,” or “consolidated autocracies.”<sup>14</sup> The Political Rights dataset might be loosely interpreted as a measure of the institutionalization of democratic structures, while the data on Civil Liberties might be viewed as an indicator of the institutionalization of democratic behavior. This paper recognizes that these data measure freedom, not democracy, and are not a measure of consolidation, narrowly defined, but maintains that they offer a strong indicator of a country’s progress in reforming the relevant areas of political society. Likewise, observing these data over time provides a reasonable indicator of a country’s reform trajectory.

The independent variables – level of economic development and ethnic homogeneity – are operationalized using standard economic and census data, respectively. These data are given in absolute figures but discussed largely in relative terms, as it would be purely arbitrary to set a significant threshold for either one. The economic data considered include per capita GDP and rates of growth, inflation, and unemployment. The ethnicity indicators include the size of minority groups, measured as a percentage of the total population, as well as their strength as a political force, measured by the cohesiveness of minority parties and

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<sup>14</sup> Freedom House 1997.

the number and size of other organized civic groups. Janós' typology of political strategies is then used to relate these variables to developments along the three dimensions of democratic consolidation.

## 2.5. *Hypothesis*

Complementing Linz and Stepan, Diamond notes that consolidation encompasses a shift from “‘instrumental’ to ‘principled’ commitments to the democratic framework, a growth in trust and cooperation among political competitors, and a socialization of the general population.”<sup>15</sup> Democratic consolidation in its very essence, then, is a matter of transformation in political culture. It occurs when all significant actors converge upon the understanding that they are stakeholders who stand to make gains in a democratic system.<sup>16</sup> However, there are certain structural factors – namely, the level of economic development and ethnic homogeneity – that can be mistreated by politicians in such a way as to prevent public discourse from ever reaching this level.

As outlined above, it is possible to explain the difference in outcomes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia by 1997/1998 as dependent on the strategy pursued by the majority party or coalition that emerged from each country's founding elections. Returning briefly to the definition of the dependent variable, democratic consolidation is comprised of three elements: structures, attitudes, and behavior. In order to achieve a situation in which the democratic behavior of actors matches the democratic ‘rules of the game,’ both democratic rules and democratic behavior must dominate. Prevailing democratic attitudes lead to the institutionalization of democratic rules and behaviors.

When the level of economic development is relatively high and ethnicity homogenous, there exists an opening for a party or coalition defined by a civic-liberal strategy to emerge. First, it is more likely under these conditions that such a party will be victorious in founding elections, and second, it is more likely to pursue a reform path in line with this strategy, particularly in the realm of institution-building. Here, elites' self-interest aligns rather closely with the goals of the democratic system, and their actions, although often unintentionally, contribute to heightened medium- and long-term prospects for that system. Their

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<sup>15</sup> Diamond 1999, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Przeworski 1991.

successes then reinforce their commitment to democratic behavior and build public confidence in the new democracy. Consolidation is likely.

By contrast, when low economic development and a heterogeneous ethnic population provide opportunities for reformers to adopt a technocratic or populist strategy, they may often discover it preserves their own self-interest to do exactly that. Ethnic diversity is not an obstacle to consolidation in itself; rather, it can make a group or society vulnerable to the threat of ethnic nationalism, which can then be manipulated by elites to mobilize political will. As Kitschelt warns, “[e]thnic mobilization often leads to the discrimination against members of an outgroup and thus puts universalistic political and civic freedoms at risk.”<sup>17</sup> It can be hypothesized that in this scenario, should elites choose a technocratic strategy, they may build institutions that reflect their stated commitment to a democratic path, but these will be democratic in form and not in substance. In response to the lacking attitudinal and behavioral commitment on the part of elites, the public will not be willing to invest the confidence in democratic procedures that is necessary for consolidation. Under such circumstances, consolidation by our definition is impossible, even if the regime does enjoy some measure of stability. Such an outcome more closely resembles the ‘illiberal’<sup>18</sup> or façade democracy that is widely discussed in another branch of the literature.

In short, relative economic prosperity and a more homogenous ethnic composition bode well for democratic consolidation. Lower levels of economic development and an ethnically heterogeneous society do not alone undercut the possibility of democratic consolidation, but they do represent vulnerabilities that can be exploited by anti-democratic forces. Regardless of the degree of economic development it is coupled with, the presence of significant ethnic minority populations offers a challenge to reformers. On the other hand, the level of economic development is not strong enough to independently tip the balance in either direction, but rather serves to exacerbate ethnic tensions where development is low and mitigate them where it is high.

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<sup>17</sup> Kitschelt 1999, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Zakaria 1997.



### **3. Theory and Methodology**

The literature on democratic consolidation does little to advance theory about how, when, why, or where democracy comes to settle as “the only game in town.” As O’Donnell points out, “[a]ll we can say at present is that, as long as elections are institutionalized, polyarchies are likely to endure.”<sup>19</sup> This requirement for institutions is taken as the basis for the hypothesis explored in this study. Following the definition outlined previously, this paper’s understanding of what must be institutionalized goes beyond elections to incorporate the broader spectrum of political structures – elective offices, bureaucracies, parties, and the rules governing them – as well as democratic attitudes and behaviors within them.

Although the widely held thesis that modalities of transition set the pace and framework for the course of events to follow does not account for the variance between the two cases presented here, the analysis nevertheless relies on the same institutionalist framework from which that thesis derives. The methodology applied here is the comparative case study method. The two selected cases, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, are compared on the dimensions of economic development and ethnic homogeneity. The hypothesized relationship between these two factors and the politics of reform in each country are then examined. The latter analysis proceeds by assessing secondary source material on institution building and subsequent behavior within those institutions.

### **4. Analysis**

The transition from communism in Czechoslovakia could be characterized as one of regime capitulation, with the communists relinquishing control at the last minute and leaving no negotiated imprint on institutions. The intellectual- and dissident-led social movements active in the ‘Velvet Revolution’ – the Civic Forum in the Czech Lands and its sister organization Public Against Violence in Slovakia – emerged as the basis for subsequent party development. Czechoslovakia’s founding elections in June 1990 were more a referendum on the fall of communism than a choice of parties or programs, despite the total participation of 23 parties.<sup>20</sup> As the only interwar democracy in Central Europe to last into the 1930s, Czechoslovakia had some democratic experience and usable

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<sup>19</sup> O’Donnell 1996, p. 39.

<sup>20</sup> Agh 1998.

models with which to pursue institution-building. The nationality question, however, dominated every aspect of these endeavors. Following elections in June 1992, in which two opposing parties were elected in each of the two republics – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) in the Czech Lands and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) in the Slovakian part – the parties’ leaders negotiated the founding of two independent states.

#### **4.1. Case 1: Czech Republic**

Freedom House’s 1997 *Nations in Transit* report afforded the Czech Republic the ranking of “consolidated democracy” with the score of 1 for Political Rights and 2 for Civil Liberties for the fourth consecutive year. The report notes specifically that “the June 1996 parliamentary elections [...] heralded the end of the transitional phase in the Czech political scene, with two strong parties on the left and right in the Western European mold emerging from transition.”<sup>21</sup> The unreformed Communist Party and the “extremist nationalist” Republican Party remained marginalized, despite each achieving approximately 10% of the popular vote. Like those held in June 1990 and June 1992, these elections were also evaluated by foreign observers as free and fair. While attributing some problems in the area of judicial process to inexperience, the report found that, overall, the Czech Republic had succeeded in establishing an independent judiciary, upholding the rule of law, and observing citizens’ legal and constitutional rights.

##### 4.1.1. Economic Development

Czechoslovakia ranked second only to Hungary in terms of 1989 level of economic prosperity, and much of this productive power was concentrated in what was to become the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic entered independent existence with a 1993 GNP per capita of \$7,910 US dollars. The country recorded its first year of positive growth in 1994, reaching 5.2% in 1995. This trend continued until taking a slight downturn in 1997. Inflation stood at 20.8% in 1993, and was slashed to 10% in 1994 and further to 9.1% in 1995. The unemployment rate was held low, at around 3% through the decade.<sup>22</sup> The 1997 Freedom House report also praised the Czech Republic for its economic progress, crediting the 5%

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<sup>21</sup> Freedom House 1997. p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development *Transition Report* 1995, cited in Olson 1997, p. 158.

growth rate, low inflation, and low unemployment to the labor market reforms pursued since 1990.

#### 4.1.2. Ethnic Homogeneity

Czech Republic inherited a relatively homogenous population, with 94% claiming Czech ethnicity. Slovaks comprised 3% and Roma approximately 2%. There is also a small ethnic German population.

#### 4.1.3. Political Strategy

In keeping with Janós' typology, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) that became dominant after the Civic Forum splintered is best characterized as a party with a civic-liberal orientation. Parties of this stripe believe "that the main problem their countries face is the backwardness of their economies, and that this condition may be best overcome by adjusting their economic, political, and legal institutions to models presented by the more advanced West."<sup>23</sup> The terms of mainstream political debate in the Czech Republic were set by the dissident leaders of the Civic Forum, many of whom remained active in the Civic Democratic Party. These leaders derived their legitimacy from their pro-democracy credentials and therefore cast the debate in terms of liberalizing market reforms and realizing ambitions for integration with the West. As David Olson notes, Czech politics seemed to be structured around two major issue dimensions: economy and liberty-authority issues.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4.1.4. Institutionalization of Democratic Rules and Behavior

Wary of centralized authority, the Chamber of Deputies adopted a constitution in December 1992 that provided for a bicameral parliamentary system with a strong prime minister. The inspiration for this model can be traced to the Czechoslovak First Republic's (1918-38) constitution and its parliamentary system based on proportional representation. Elections to the Senate, however, were first held in November 1996, meaning one less check on Prime Minister Klaus' power for much of the period under discussion. The constitution also mandated a presidential head of state in the First Republic's tradition of the

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<sup>23</sup> Janós 1994, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Olson 1997.

President as a powerful moral leader, a role for which President Václav Havel seemed especially well-suited.<sup>25</sup> The president is elected by parliament rather than by direct vote. A personal rivalry developed between Prime Minister Klaus and President Havel, coloring Czech politics throughout much of the 1990s. However, their disagreements were largely over policy preferences and thus were non-threatening to the new democratic system.

The middle of the 1990s was remarkable in terms of its political stability and policy continuity, with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) leading a right-wing coalition that achieved electoral victory in 1992 and again in 1996.<sup>26</sup> By 1996, Klaus was the only prime minister in Eastern Europe to have lasted a full four-year term.<sup>27</sup> However, consolidated democracy also implies that parties and leaders can lose elections. After the 1996 elections, the center-left Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) emerged as a significant opposition party. The collapse of the ODS government in November 1997 represented, as Michael Kraus notes, “an acute political crisis whose resolution was a major test of democratic consolidation.”<sup>28</sup> Amid an economic downturn, trouble in the financial sector, and a major financing scandal within the ODS, the Klaus government self-destructed, and Klaus reluctantly resigned from office.

Although this turn of events naturally had an undermining effect on public confidence, most observers’ assessment of the situation matches the following account: “Though a severe test of the young Czech democracy, the crisis was nonetheless resolved in accord with the constitution and on the basis of the established rules of procedure. Clearly democracy was the ‘only game in town.’”<sup>29</sup> David Olson’s analysis of public opinion data collected over the decade supports this assessment: he characterizes public opinion as cautiously optimistic about the new political system, a bit cynical about individual politicians, and similar to that observed in established democracies with regard to its high confidence in the president, least trust in parliament, and moderated stance towards the government.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fitzmaurice 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Agh 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Kraus 2003.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Olson 1997.

## 4.2. Case 2: Slovakia

Freedom House classified Slovakia as “partly free” in 1997, scoring it at 4 for Civil Liberties – higher (meaning more restrictive) than the 3 it received in 1995 and 1996 – and at 2 for Political Rights. The change in ranking on Civil Liberties was attributed to government pressure on the freedom of expression and minority rights. Parliamentary elections held in 1994 were deemed free and fair, and Vladimír Mečiar’s comeback after having been removed from office was conducted legally. On the consolidation measure, Freedom House placed Slovakia in the “transitional democracy” category.<sup>31</sup>

### 4.2.1. Economic Development

Czechoslovakia may have been well off in the region comparatively, but Slovakia emerged from the ‘Velvet Divorce’ with much less of that advantage than did the Czech Republic. The lands that were to become Slovakia industrialized under communism, and independent Slovakia therefore faced a more difficult transition to the market.<sup>32</sup> Its per capita GNP in 1993 stood at \$6,660 US dollars. After recording negative growth in 1993, the economy grew 4.5% in 1994 and 6.6% in 1995. Inflation steadily decreased, from 23.2% in 1993 to 13.5% in 1994 and 9.9% in 1995. Unemployment also decreased, though not significantly: it remained 13.1% in 1995.<sup>33</sup> Despite a troubled political climate, the economy performed well, continuing to attract foreign investment over the decade.

### 4.2.2. Ethnic Homogeneity

In its prewar experience, Slovakia’s sense of national identity developed in relation first to the Hungarians of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later to Czechs.<sup>34</sup> The national question had long been on the agenda. Moreover, the country’s population includes a large and politically active Hungarian minority. The country’s ethnic composition breaks down as follows: 82% Slovak, 11% Hungarian, 5% Roma, and 1% Czech. The Hungarian minority was represented by

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<sup>31</sup> Freedom House 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Wolchik 1997.

<sup>33</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development *Transition Report* 1995, cited in Wolchik 1997, p. 217.

<sup>34</sup> Wolchik 1997.

well-organized political parties that typically received more than 90 percent of the ethnic vote.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.2.3. Political Strategy

Janós' typology classifies Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) a technocratic party of the right. The "technocratic" label refers to a political formula which favors some planning and regulation over a pure market mechanism. As Janós explains, these technocrats were frequently ex-Communists who, burdened by the past failings of communism, had to struggle for popular support and found in ethnic nationalism a strong opportunity to do so. Many, like Mečiar, were willing to speak and, even to some extent, behave like democrats, but they lacked the vision or will to transform the state. After the split in the Public Against Violence movement, new fronts mobilized around the national question instead of the issue of economic reform as was the case in the Czech Republic. Janós summarizes postcommunist political strategy as a "critical choice between the political idiom of universalism and particularism."<sup>36</sup> This reduction seems to describe the alternatives preferred by leaders in the Czech Republic and Slovakia very accurately.

#### 4.2.4. Institutionalization of Democratic Rules and Behavior

Slovakia built democratic institutions that were very similar in structure to those being undertaken in the Czech Republic. It implemented a parliamentary system of government comprising only one house. Slovakia's system features a non-executive president elected by parliament, but the Slovak presidency is instilled with greater executive power than the Czech Republic's. In contrast to the Czechs, however, Slovakia elected to draft an entirely new constitution to enter force with its independence. Not surprisingly, chief among criticisms of it was that it offered inadequate protections for minority rights.<sup>37</sup> The Slovak constitution also established a Constitutional Court, which has used its mandate to adjudicate between sparring branches of government and in so doing has proven itself a force for democratic preservation. The party system in Slovakia remained

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<sup>35</sup> Vachudova and Snyder 1997.

<sup>36</sup> Janós 1994, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Fitzmaurice 1998.

unstable during the 1990s, dominated by a polarizing figure in the person of Mečiar.

Repeated conflicts between Mečiar and President Michal Kovács contributed to instability. Mečiar sought numerous times to have Kovács removed from office, but was never able to achieve the three-fifths parliamentary mandate required to do so. Some observers have identified elements of a “tyranny of the majority” in Slovak postcommunist politics: concentration of political power, discrimination against opponent parties, intimidation of journalists, and disregard for the rule of law.<sup>38</sup> Troubling for many, above all, was the Mečiar government’s hostility toward initiatives by ethnic Hungarians to strengthen minority rights and its rejection of the idea of introducing a civic definition of the state by means of constitutional amendment. In addition, Mečiar’s attempts to unconstitutionally reconfigure the balance of power, his political clientelism, and his use of corrupt tactics in privatization proceedings demonstrate that, based on the behavioral scorecard of its elites alone, Slovakia in 1997/1998 was not a consolidated democracy.

Despite these disturbing activities, Mečiar remained popular, suggesting that political culture in the broader population had also not reached the threshold of democratic consolidation. Mečiar’s legitimate return to power in October 1994 elections – after his ouster in a no-confidence vote had yielded nine months of moderation under Jozef Moravčík – lends credibility to the argument that Slovakia’s political culture was inhospitable to further democratic consolidation.

## **5. Conclusions**

The analysis presented in this paper offers strong support for the hypothesis that structural factors such as economic development and ethnic homogeneity – often overlooked in the transitology literature – are important factors in democratic consolidation. In fact, level of ethnic homogeneity alone may be sufficient to provide a strong indication of a society’s future democratic prospects. But more important than the fact of ethnic heterogeneity is the choice made by political leaders – and their supporters – to lead with this issue in a polarizing way or to neutralize nationalist tendencies by including minorities in the institutional design.

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<sup>38</sup> Bútorá 1999.

In this respect, the analysis presented here has not yet captured the entire picture. Further research should seek to explain what drives elite behavior or where their demonstrated preferences come from. These structural factors certainly play a role in limiting the menu, but there is still plenty of room for individual agency. The sources of a political leader's legitimacy seem to be quite important in this regard, as does his or her relationship to the *ancien regime*. Quite possibly, the outcomes in the two cases examined here were more personality-driven than hypothesized. This analysis has argued that elite choices are shaped by structural factors – and it is a strength of the argument that it is able to account for *who* the elites in power were as a product of these same structural factors. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to assess why it is that certain parties, leaders, or elites seem to be differently inclined in their willingness to exploit such structural factors once in the position to do so.

It also remains largely unclear exactly how economic development influences democratic consolidation, but the perspective presented here makes a plausible case for the primacy of a cultural factor – national identity – with economic development playing a supporting role. What is encouraging for the prospects of consolidated democracy worldwide is that such a factor is more malleable than most.

What *is* clear is that institution-building did not play nearly as significant a role in these two cases as it is posited to in the literature. The institutional arrangement theorized to make the greatest difference is the choice between presidential and parliamentary systems; in this sample, both countries opted for the same course. Differences between the institutional structures established in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are few, and in fact, we could expect what few there were to have exercised the opposite influence that they did. For example, despite a stronger presidency in Slovakia, the prime minister developed autocratic tendencies that the Czech prime minister, operating under fewer institutional constraints, did not.

Developments observed in Slovakia since Mečiar's defeat in 1998 lend further support to the argument that the policies and strategies undertaken by political elites are critical to any explanation of regime variation. A coalition of opposition parties that removed Mečiar from office in 1998 attracted an 84 percent voter turnout with their electoral campaign organized around the theme of



“change.”<sup>39</sup> The opposition victory in 1998 and subsequent shift to a civic-liberal strategy suggest that democratic political culture was taking root in the country during the Mečiar years, despite elite behavior to the contrary. In part, the fact that the political institutions established in the young country were largely democratic in character may have built a platform that contributed to the successful defeat of illiberalism in Slovakia. Following those elections, committed democrats who sought to affirm their credibility by respecting the rule of law and introducing economic reforms were able to chart a new course for the country’s transition with relative ease. As suggested above, this ‘second transition’ should be the subject of more extensive inquiry. To conclude this work, however, it is significant to note the quick turnaround achieved in Slovakia both as evidence of the importance of postcommunist political strategy and as an indicator of the complex interaction between democratic institutions, democratic behavior, and democratic attitudes in consolidating democracy.

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<sup>39</sup> Bútorá and Bútorová, 1999.

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