

Miroslav Sladek and The Republican Party: A Profile of the Far-Right in the Czech Republic

In the aftermath of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, right-wing, nationalist movements are appearing throughout the region. While Yugoslavia represents the most well-known and violent example, other countries are undergoing similar political processes. In the new Czech Republic, the prime mover of right-wing politics is Miroslav Sladek, a political pragmatist who preaches a combination of racial intolerance and Czechoslovak nationalism.

by Thomas Ort

When the Association for the Republic-The Republican Party of Czechoslovakia first appeared on Czechoslovakia's political scene in early 1990, few took notice and even fewer cared. After all, in the rapidly evolving political culture following the revolution, parties were multiplying exponentially in the race towards the first free elections that June. At the time, the Association for the Republic-The Republican Party of Czechoslovakia, was just another party with an anti-communist agenda and a long, boring name.

It could barely compete with the likes of the Independent Erotic Initiative or the Friends of Beer Party and got about the same number of votes.

But the Republican Party's charismatic chairman, Dr. Miroslav Sladek, did not remain in the shadows for long. Early on, Sladek made a name for himself with daring attacks on the country's hugely popular new president, Vaclav Havel. Though Sladek succeeded mainly in angering or alienating most Czechoslovak voters, to some he made sense. He struck a chord with those who felt they had missed out on the revolution—those who felt disenfranchised by communism and democracy alike, but still wanted their place in the sun.

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1989: Hardly A Revolution

The original platform of the Republican Party was unique in its rejection of the November 1989 revolution in which power was partly transferred from the communist regime to Havel's Civic Forum. The Republicans complained that the "Velvet Revolution" was not a revolution at all, but rather a transfer of power from one set of communists to another. This belief stemmed in large part from the wealth of unanswered questions concerning the revolutionary chain of events that began on November 17,

1989 and resulted in the political arrangements between Civic Forum and the KSC (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). In spite of several investigations into the circumstances, much remains unclear.

On the surface, the Velvet Revolution began on November 17, 1989, as a peaceful march commemorating the death of the student leader Jan Opletal at the hands of the Nazis in 1939. An annual event, the officially sanctioned march had been used by students for many years as a thinly veiled anti-government demonstration. The marchers were met in downtown Prague by an overwhelming force of riot police which attacked the crowd. In this "massacre" several hundred people were severely beaten and one marcher was allegedly killed.

These beatings, and especially the death of the marcher, became the focal points for popular outrage against the regime and the catalyst for revolutionary change. By the end

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Miroslav Sladek at press conference, Brno, 1992.
[Thomas Ort]

of the following week, hundreds of thousands of citizens were demonstrating all across Czechoslovakia demanding an end to the KSC's monopoly on political power. Only later was it revealed that the student who had been "killed" was most likely a secret police operative and that his death had been staged.

It is generally believed that there was some kind of collusion between elements of the StB (the Czechoslovak state security police) and certain reform-minded communists to replace the hardline government of Milos Jakes and Gustav Husak with a regime more in tune with the Soviet model of the Gorbachev era. But it is also accepted that whatever plans existed to bring in a Gorbachev-style government went awry when demonstrators rejected the reform-communist Ladislav Adamec and vociferously demanded that Vaclav Havel become president. It seems that once unleashed, the forces of the revolution and the will of the people could not be contained. In spite of important gaps in the historical record, few dispute the legitimacy of Havel's rise to power.

Even after the elections of June 1990 clearly reaffirmed Civic Forum's mandate, Sladek was among those who acted in the turmoil of the revolutionary days in order to discount the legitimacy of the new government. Sladek aligned himself with the likes of Miroslav Dolejsi, author of the appropriately named *Analysis of the 17th of November 1989*, a political treatise claiming the whole revolution to be a Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic conspiracy orchestrated by the combined powers of the StB, KGB, CIA, and Mossad. In Dolejsi's conspiracy, Havel and the opposition movement Charter 77 [founded by dissidents in 1977 following the Helsinki accords, the Charter was a call to the Czechoslovak government to respect human rights and civil freedoms] were pawns of these larger forces in the struggle for world power. Civic Forum was depicted as a group of communist arrivistes who lay waiting in the wings, ready to assume power in the event of any disturbance. Sladek wrote the introduction to an edition of the *Analysis* co-published by the Republican Party.

Though Sladek accepts Dolejsi's basic thesis, he does not delve into the particulars of the larger conspiracy. Sladek is neither a conspiratorist nor an ideologue and the Republican Party adheres to no apparent agenda. On the contrary, Sladek is a pragmatist who well understands the nature of the country's transformation and its political consequences. As early as January 1990, Sladek recognized that "the opening of the economic market, of capital, and of wealth cannot occur without a dramatic decline in the standard of living and a corresponding increase in social tension. Those things radicalize the population, and that's when our time will come." The Republican strategy has been to heighten this radicalization through hatred and fear-mongering.

Sladek easily capitalized on fears of communist recidivism. Every Republican enemy was labeled either a communist or a sympathizer. One such communist was Havel

himself, who, in spite of his years in prison for defiance of the totalitarian regime, was continually denounced by Sladek as a collaborator. Sladek preached the total elimination of the communist party and the removal of communists from all areas of power and influence within Czechoslovak society. At the same time, he called for an extension of the *lustrace* laws—a screening process designed to ferret out those who had secretly collaborated with the regime and its police.

Sweeping the Streets Clean

Sladek's stance vis-à-vis the communists became far more alarming following his notorious declaration in 1991 to "march through the streets of Prague and sweep everything into the Vltava [river]." At the time, "everything" was taken to mean all vestiges of communism, but it soon became clear that Sladek had much more in mind. "Everything" came to include all that was distasteful to the Republican Party. At the top of the list were Gypsies, followed by Vietnamese and other minorities. Not far behind were journalists, politicians, and other public figures who dared cross his path. At meetings of the Republican Party, anyone raising even the slightest objection could expect to be shouted down and quickly ushered out. Sladek was known to treat journalists with similar disdain, sometimes dismissing them with a wave of the hand and an order to his heavies: "Sweep up this mess."

But it was the Gypsies, the largest non-Slavic group in Czechoslovakia, who bore the brunt of Republican attacks. During the communist years, government policy called for the assimilation of Gypsies into Czechoslovak society. Large numbers were moved from rural Slovakia into industrial and urban northern Bohemia, to the widespread resentment of the local populations. Relations have remained tense and Gypsies are blamed today for rising burglaries and vandalism. Certain towns in northern Bohemia have declared states of emergency concerning the Gypsy population.

Anti-Gypsy racism manifested itself most openly at Republican Party rallies where Sladek typically characterized Gypsies as "inferior," as "animals" or simply as "subhuman". From rising crime to "moral degeneration", he lay the blame for Czechoslovakia's social malaise squarely on the Gypsies' doorstep. His concrete suggestions included the imposition of a curfew on the Gypsy population and even forced deportations. In one instance, he offered an Alfa Romeo sports car to the police force of the first town to rid itself of the most Gypsies.

In practical terms, the Republican Party has sought passage of an ostensible immigration law that is in fact aimed at Gypsies who are not legally registered in the Czech Republic. In a poll taken in a northern Bohemian town that voted heavily for Sladek in the June 1992 elections, the two most commonly cited reasons for voting for the Republican Party were "the Gypsy problem" and "the liquidation of the communists."

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A Call For Greater Czechoslovakia

The Republican Party also cultivated a militant form of Czechoslovak nationalism. They strongly opposed the breakup of Czechoslovakia and advocated the reclamation of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, a region of eastern Slovakia that was annexed by the Soviet Union following World War II and which now belongs to Ukraine. In March 1992, Sladek traveled to the Sub-Carpathian region and declared: "We are not on the territory of Ukraine. This is part of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic." Sladek has established a regional office of the Republican Party in Ukraine. Many months after the fact, Sladek continued to reject the breakup of Czechoslovakia and maintained his calls for the return of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia to Slovakia—a country he does not represent. Sladek's revanchism in turn played into the hands of Slovak nationalists who are sensitive to any perceived infringement of their sovereignty.

Sladek's objections to the breakup of Czechoslovakia are likewise driven by his visions of grandeur for a greater Czechoslovakia. According to the Republican chairman, fear of a resurgent Czechoslovakia drove the West to conspire for its demise. For him, the 1938 Munich Conference in which the Sudetenland was surrendered to Germany, was replaying itself: "We won't allow another Munich! Havel, [Czech Prime Minister Vaclav] Klaus, and [Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir] Meciar have sold us to the Germans. The West is afraid of a united Czechoslovakia. Today we have the best chance ever of becoming the world's fourth superpower after the USA, Russia, and China." Sladek has advanced this interpretation despite the public opposition of most Western governments towards the breakup of Czechoslovakia.

A Movable Platform

Sladek's stance betrays a profound suspicion of Western democracy and the market system. He has ridiculed Western election monitors and has brushed aside criticism of the *lus-trace* proceedings by international human rights organizations. Though he has sought to characterize himself as an economic



Czech Republic Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus.
[Thomas Ort]



Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic.
[Richard O'Rourke, *The Soros Foundations*]

reformer, Sladek may actually have more in common with Slovakia's proto-socialist Meciar, than with the Czech Republic's Thatcherite Klaus. Sladek has repeatedly criticized the sale of state-owned businesses to foreign companies as well as the large scale of foreign investment in Czechoslovakia. The details of his own economic plans remain elusive.

In actual dealings with the West, and the United States in particular, Sladek cleverly employs a double standard. In a visit to the U.S. in May 1992, Sladek cast himself as a friend of America and champion of business and the market. Taking advantage of the coincidence of names, Sladek forged a spurious link between the Czechoslovak Republican Party and the American GOP. He targeted the large Czechoslovak immigrant community of suburban Chicago and in fact received widespread support from local and national politicians of the area. American leaders were so convinced of Sladek's stature in Czechoslovakia that they literally rolled out the red carpet for him.

He was personally welcomed to Chicago by State Senator Judy Barr Topinka and Governor of Illinois Jim Edgar, who saw fit to commend Sladek for his efforts to bring "true freedom and democracy" to Czechoslovakia. Later, in Washington, D.C., Sladek met with Illinois Congressmen Hyde and Lipinsky. Photographs of Sladek with these American politicians were widely publicized by the Czechoslovak Republican Party during the 1992 election campaign, increasing the party's credibility and contributing to its electoral success. While in the United States, Sladek tailored his agenda for American consumption, softening his attacks on Havel, and even compli-



Sladek addressing the crowd, Republican Party rally, Brno, 1992
[Thomas Ort]

menting him occasionally. Back in Czechoslovakia, however, Sladek proclaimed that he had obtained material from an unspecified archive in Washington that conclusively proved that Havel had been a communist.

The Rising Cult of Sladek

Sladek's commitment to the principles of democracy has been questioned almost from the moment of his appearance on the Czechoslovak political scene. Indeed, some of the most strident criticism has come from within the ranks of his own party. In December 1991, a founding member and former Republican chairman, Jiri Kohout was expelled from the party following repeated disputes with Sladek. Soon after his expulsion, Kohout told reporters: "Republican Chairman Miroslav Sladek is a dictator. His only concern is himself and his own popularity." Sladek has often made clear that his person and the party are synonymous and that he will not tolerate any internal challenge to his authority. In subsequent power struggles within the Republican Party, several other deputies who criticized Sladek's undemocratic leadership and dictatorial management of the party have likewise been expelled.

A cult of personality has sprung up around Sladek. At a rare press conference and public address in Brno, a wide variety of Sladek memorabilia was displayed. To be sure, there were the ubiquitous Sladek pins and posters; more unusual were the paintings and articles of clothing. During the long and painful years of Communist oppression, Sladek had turned to painting for solace and had even sold some of his works for cash. Now the mustard-hued street scenes, impassive still-lives, murky landscapes and garish abstractions were all available for public scrutiny.

The clothes were relics of Sladek's fame, political and otherwise: a jacket, torn at the shoulder during a scuffle with police; a shirt, ripped during a similar incident; the tie worn in his famous poster; and a hat he once wore as an extra in a film. To devotees of the Republican cause, Sladek is a visionary—the one who showed them the forest from the trees in the chaos of post-Communist disintegration. Amidst the confusion, he has designated clear enemies and drawn the battle lines for them.

Into the Mainstream

On June 5-6, 1992, Sladek and the Republican Party shed their fringe status and entered the mainstream of Czechoslovak politics. The Republican Party won nearly 7% of the vote and gained seats in all houses of Parliament: fourteen seats in the Czech National Council, and seven seats in both the Chamber of Nations and the Chamber of the People. Economically depressed northern Bohemia emerged as a Republican stronghold, with Sladek winning over 10% of the vote in that region. In the industrial center of Usti nad Labem, the Republicans won nearly 17% of the vote, second only to the Civic Democratic Party of Vaclav Klaus.

By contrast, the elections were a major upset for Civic Movement, spiritual heir to the revolutionary Civic Forum, which failed to clear the 5% hurdle necessary to enter Parliament. Although the Republican Party ran as a national party, campaigning in both the Czech and Slovak republics, the number of votes it received in Slovakia was insignificant, establishing it firmly as a Czech phenomenon.

It was once thought that the Republican Party was nothing more than a passing distraction at the margins of the Czechoslovak political scene. Today, the party is recognized as a permanent fixture on the political landscape of the Czech Republic. It has quietly become a viable and legitimate political alternative. Moreover, the Republican Party's presence in Parliament has given it a new status. In testimony to his newly-found palatability and respectability, Sladek received a substantial number of votes from outside his own party during one of his bids for the country's presidency.

From its origins in the turmoil of the revolution to its success in the 1992 elections, the Republican Party has steadily cultivated the sentiments of the disaffected and disenfranchised in Czech society. While Sladek was condemned as a psychopath and a fool by both the media and the political establishment, he has repeatedly proven that he is not. In the Republican Chairman's own words: "So what if they don't take me seriously. One day they'll wake up and I'll be president or prime minister, and that will be bad luck for them." ●

Suggestions for Further Reading

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- Timothy Garton Ash, "The Revolution of the Magic Lantern," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 36, issue 21-22, January 18, 1990, p.42.
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- Vaclav Havel. "The Velvet Hangover," *Harper's*, vol. 281, October 1990, p. 18.
- "Uncertain Strength: An Interview with Vaclav Havel," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 38, issue 14, August 15, 1991, p. 6.