Politics After Communism

As we saw in Chapter 1, peacetime Czechoslovakia in the interwar period was the most stable and genuinely functional liberal democracy in the region. After 1989, the Masaryk inheritance therefore served as a reminder to Czechoslovak, and above all Czech, citizens that the standards they now aspired to had once been achieved before. The ideals of liberal democratic government, the rule of law and pluralism did not exist as mere abstractions. In the consciousness of the people, the transition to democracy could be taken as a reassertion of the national heritage and not as something alien or imposed from outside.

Quite how this expresses itself in the realm of practical politics is difficult to say. Its importance can perhaps be gauged by considering the experience of other countries in the region – Slovakia, as we will see in Chapter 8, is a good example – where anti-democratic forces have drawn inspiration from mythical golden ages when leaders earned their people’s loyalty through strong or absolutist rule from the top. As communism gave way to freedom, dictatorial inclinations and national pride could easily become enmeshed. For Czechs, the great era of national assertiveness coincided with the flourishing of liberal democracy. Authoritarianism and nationalism represented a bad fit.

A decade after the Velvet Revolution it seems reasonable to ask how far the Czech Republic has managed to translate this initial set of advantages into practice. Above all, does it still remain appropriate to refer to the Czech Republic as ‘post-communist’ at all, or do the country’s political problems roughly correspond to those which also affect the more developed democracies of the West?
The battle ground for this debate is clear enough.

The pivotal period for Czech politics in the 1990s after the split with Slovakia came with the fall of Prime Minister Václav Klaus’s centre-right coalition in late 1997 until the establishment of a social democratic alternative with support from Klaus the following summer.

The rise of the moderately leftist social democrats at the 1996 elections had altered the balance of power by depriving the centre-right of a working majority, but late 1997 marked the first time the country had seen a government fall, and it represented the point at which all the main forces on the Czech political scene came out into the open.

President Havel used the full authority of his office to condemn important features of the transition to date; the long-standing but partly submerged hostility between Klaus and the president and between Klaus and the other centrist and rightist members of the government was made public; the corruption which had done so much to undermine public confidence in the reform process became a key issue in the party political debate; finally and partly underpinning all of this, the period coincided with the descent of the economy into serious recession, bringing into question the entire economic reform project and especially the credibility of those that had conducted it.

The crucial result of all of this was that the party political system temporarily broke down. It was necessary to appoint a non-party government headed by central bank governor Josef Tošovský, and it became clear that stable parliamentary majorities were going to be difficult to achieve for a long time to come. The relationship between the presidency and the party system also, and for connected reasons, reached crisis point.1

With so much going on during this period and so many factors coming together at once, we need to pull the main elements apart, examine them separately and then see why the parties, and simultaneously the party system and the president have found consolidation and cooperation so difficult. This is not merely an exercise in proving that the direction of Czech politics has been determined by a particular communist past, although it will become clear that this is so. Since it is now apparent that the specific problem of Czech politics is the failure of democratic elections to produce viable governments, the country is considering changes to the electoral system aimed at promoting greater political unity. Long term success or failure in this