

# Will Czechoslovakia break into pieces?

by Angelika Beyreuther-Raimondi

With a voter participation of 85%, Czechs and Slovaks went to the polls over the weekend of June 6-7 in order to choose their respective state parliaments in Prague and Bratislava, as well as the federal parliament in Prague. The voters' choice was clear: Many of the so-called "dissidents" who shaped the political climate immediately following the 1989 revolution, have dropped out and were not reelected. Nor was Foreign Minister Jiri Dienstbier able to make it over the 5% hurdle with his Citizens' Movement.

In these times of uncertainty and transition, about one-third of the Czech electorate sought refuge with Czechoslovakia's "strong personalities" and with "Mr. Shock Therapy," Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus. The core of Klaus's campaign team consisted of an American consulting firm, with plentiful funding and equipped with a bank of psychologists and advertising specialists. They cleverly and accurately assessed the current popular mood. The youth especially went for Klaus "the American." Nevertheless, Klaus's expectations of getting more votes, and consolidating all the voters of the earlier Citizens Forum, did not pan out. Indeed, Klaus's cohort, the neo-liberal economics minister and "Mr. Shock Therapy No. 2," Vladimir Dlouhy, did not even make it into the Czech state parliament with his Democratic Citizens' Alliance (ODA).

Many votes went to small parties. Out of a total of 42 parties, however, only a few made it over the 5% hurdle into the parliament. More than one-third of the Slovakian electorate chose the populist Vladimir Meciar.

Meanwhile, bitterness over the course of developments since the 1989 revolution is on the rise; there is great fear of unemployment and of the enormous growth of criminality. Even though the living standard did not drop any further during the months leading up to the election, a second big wave of price hikes is expected to hit as soon as the new government is formed. Apparently, the young people who helped Vaclav Klaus with their votes did not care to believe the statistical data about the immense collapse of industrial production in the country, or did not understand that the death of Czechoslovakia lies in following in the footsteps of the United States.

President Vaclav Havel has now assigned Vaclav Klaus the task of forming a government. The two winning parties, Klaus's Czech Democratic Citizens' Party (ODS) and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) of Slovakian

former Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, have begun talks which are expected to lead to forming a coalition government.

Vaclav Klaus has stated that the economy will continue to be converted to the market principle at a whirlwind pace, and that the Czechoslovak state, which has now been put into question by many Slovaks, must continue to exist as a functioning federation: But, "if we are unable to hold Czechoslovakia together as a reasonable federation, then we will quickly and reasonably decide otherwise." In that case, according to Klaus, the "silken revolution" will be followed by a "silken divorce."

Meciar, along with all other Slovakian political figures, has been pointing to the devastating effects of Klaus's shock therapy program on the Slovakian part of the country, and won the election only because he promised more social safety nets along with a slower "reform agenda" with more state economic dirigism. But it is doubtful whether Meciar will be able to force the monetarist Klaus into adopting a different economic and financial policy. Since Klaus's ODS badly needs a large Slovakian coalition partner in the government, it will most likely make some concessions in Slovakia's favor. According to Meciar, "Slovakia will only be ripe for the market economy in the far distant future. The state can't just suddenly leave its citizens in the lurch." But Meciar insists that Vaclav Klaus is still the only Czech politician "who is respectable and who keeps his word."

## A young state

Czechoslovakia is a young state. It was founded in 1918, and its two constituent republics were only formally subordinated by the constitution it adopted in 1968. Whether Czechoslovakia will continue on as a federation, or will take the form of a loose alliance of states, or even separate into two completely independent, sovereign nations, is an open question. Meciar wants to secure Slovakian sovereignty by having it adopt its own constitution, confirmed by a referendum. If it comes to that, the Czech region is sure to follow suit with its own referendum over the future form of the state. But regardless of the outcome, the prospective Klaus-Meciar government will doubtless be a transitional one. The federalist Klaus insists on a common economic and financial policy, and Meciar will not be able to make this palatable to his constituency.

Moreover, the particular form of government will not be the crucial question for the future of the citizens of Czechoslovakia. If economic and financial policy remains in the hands of the monetarist Klaus, this crucial region of central Europe will not become the flourishing, prosperous industrial and agricultural surplus producer which it should become in order to counteract the growth of poverty worldwide. Instead, tensions and easily provoked conflicts between national groupings will turn this region into another permanent crisis zone.