

Peaceful democratic transitions: the Czech and Slovak experiences
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Keynote speech by Dr. John Maré

From Czechoslovakia to the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic: South African Perspectives on a Peaceful Evolution

The discussion of today focuses especially on the peaceful evolution of the current Czech Republic and Slovak Republic from the former Czechoslovakia which formally ended at midnight on 31st December 1992 with the two new states joining the international community on 1st January 1993. This event which happened 20 years ago, inter alia being accompanied with the opening of diplomatic relations between both of them and South Africa, was the result of a negotiated and mutually acceptable process which is one of the best examples of how such major political change can take place in such a peaceful diplomatic manner. It should be remembered however that this peaceful split was only possible because it was based on the foundations of what had been achieved by the peaceful “velvet revolution” in November 1989, another prime example of profound revolutionary political change in the face of strong opposing forces through non-violent actions. These events were of significance for Europe and the broader global community but perhaps especially important for South Africa (SA) and if one takes some SA perspectives of these events into account something that is immediately noteworthy is that there are many strong similarities.

It was in early 1990 that the National Party (NP)- led government of what was still apartheid SA made the crucially important decision to move ahead with the abandoning of any attempts of apartheid in the governing of SA, announcing that it would normalise SA society and politics, unban political parties then banned, release political prisoners and open the way for a fully inclusive democratically elected government of a single united country. Thus began a generally peaceful process, despite ad hoc turbulence, towards the country’s first fully inclusive democratic elections in April 1994 and the subsequent peaceful installation of a government of national unity under the presidency of President Nelson Mandela. The country’s new constitution is said to be one of the most liberal and democratic in the world inter alia entrenching freedom of speech, political and economic freedom, the rule of law and human rights with no discrimination allowed on any basis.

In both SA and Czechoslovakia there were peaceful revolutions in 1989 and 1990 respectively. In both cases there had been moves away from authoritarian regimes which were oppressive, un-democratic, discriminatory, and with varying dimensions of totalitarian characteristics which included in the case of Czechoslovakia one of the most repressive regimes in the old East Bloc. In both cases the initial peaceful revolution led to peaceful processes towards governance systems ascribing to very similar values. In both cases the new leader had been a political prisoner but based his new leadership on an accommodating and non-vindictive approach towards old regime leaders. While the SA experience has resulted in a unitary country which endeavours to be inclusive of SA’s broad range of different peoples and cultures the situation in Czechoslovakia was quite different and the two main groups of such peoples, ie the Czechs and Slovaks, democratically decided to separate into two separate countries despite remaining intertwined in many ways. While in the “old” Czechoslovakia and SA attempts had been made to control the arts, religious institutions and certain freedom of expression in academia with strong opposition from many in civil society, in both cases

such civil society opposition helped create strong “platforms” to help support the growth of a future peaceful revolution and the subsequent changes.

In the revolutions which swept Central and Eastern Europe in 1989/90 bringing about the end of the Cold War and changed nature of the new world order the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia was possibly of central relevance as it signalled the point of no return at the time more than the other moves then afoot in the region, helping inspire them to continue to ultimate conclusion along with new revolutions soon following in such countries as Romania, Bulgaria and ultimately the Soviet Union itself. One can argue that the peaceful nature of the 1989 Czechoslovakian revolution and the subsequent process towards its division into the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic had a strong influence in maintaining a generally peaceful evolutionary democratic process in the entire region including the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the end of 1991. Unfortunately of the historical changes then underway in Central and Eastern Europe the revolution/s and dissolution of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which commenced in 1991 did not follow the golden example of Czechoslovakia. Like Czechoslovakia the old Yugoslavia had been cobbled together at the end of World War I by the victorious allied powers from various bits of recently fallen empires, in the case of Czechoslovakia from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire and in the case of Yugoslavia from both Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires.

The fall of the old Communist East Bloc in 1989 helped liberal reformers in the SA government to bring about the changes in early 1990 which unleashed an unstoppable process towards the “new” SA, and probably helped ensure no back-tracking by militant conservative SA elements to hinder Namibian independence in April 1990. While the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia was a key facet of fall of the old Communist East Bloc the fact that it was peaceful no doubt helped inspire a peaceful revolution in SA as much as it did in the Central/Eastern European region. Similarly the civilized peaceful manner in which the “velvet divorce” in Czechoslovakia led to its division possibly helped inspire an on-going peaceful process of change in SA as much as it helped support peaceful change in Europe.

The peaceful manner in which in Czechoslovakia, and subsequently the Czech and Slovak Republics, have tried to deal with many problems which also challenge SA possibly continues to have a small influence on SA but certainly offers potential for far greater reflection and possible lessons for SA. In some cases the opposite may be true but certainly on-going similarities offer scope for co-operation. These common challenges include the preservation of hard won liberties, land reform with equitable fair systems of land ownership and usage, the curbing of corruption, the creation of employment opportunities, and how to continue to entrench human rights and freedoms with the constitutionally based rule of law.

In the post 1989 and 1992 situations Czechoslovakia, and subsequently the Czech and Slovak Republics, have returned to, and strengthened, a stronger relationship with the Euro-Atlantic community. Increasingly stronger regional integration in their immediate regions has played a key role and such regional processes led to a post-1992 customs union arrangement followed by both new republics being in a regional Visegrad grouping, but culminated in both becoming members of the European Community (EU). Both have also further strengthened their ties into the Euro-Atlantic community by becoming members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Both strive to establish new ties with the broader international community with their strategic geo-graphical position in central Europe with the Euro-

Atlantic community to the west and the frontiers of Russia and the Black Sea/Caspian regions to the east helping open many possibilities.

Similarly the “new’ SA has been able to return to, and has strengthened, its relationship with the immediate Southern African region as well as the broader African region. While not going into such strong regional structures as the EU, in recent times SA strives to improve its regional integration inter alia in the creation of a free trade area from Cape to Cairo. Also SA has moved towards new relationships and here its inclusion in the BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India and China along with SA especially opens many new possibilities given SA’s linkages between the others and the broader African region. As with the Czech and Slovak Republics such countries as Japan and those of Latin America are of great interest to SA with the increased utilisation of multilateral relations and groupings being of particular relevance for all of them.

Similarities in geo-political settings offer many forms of possible cooperation and sharing of experiences. This potential offers opportunities for synergies ranging from both SA and the Czech and Slovak Republics having potential strategic” gateway” locations in their respective regions, both immediate and broader, and the multilateral realm. The possibility of trilateral activities which include SA and one or both of the Czech and Slovak Republics along with others offer further options both in or outside formal multilateral structures. Such formats as the EU and the varying forms of African organisational structures are especially relevant option especially along with the BRICS and the broader Euro-Atlantic community.

The SA perspectives of the Czechs and Slovak Republics are multi-fold but it is clear that there is much which is mutually relevant and the potential for co-operation exists on an increasing number of fronts. Apart from the format used such issues as trade, transportation routes, cooperation in R&D and innovation across a wide variety of sectors are among the possibilities. As regards practical and business-related matters food health and food scarcity concerns as well as clean energy and water usage are but a few possible areas of synergies. In addition dialogue and strategic cooperation in the fields of security and human rights would seem to be among some of the areas where synergies have almost immediate benefits for the countries concerned, their regions and the international community.