Liberalism in Czechoslovakia and Slovenia During Transition – Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

To help understand issues and changes discussed in this paper, we must state what we understand by the terms *Liberalism*, *Transition*, and why we are illustrating it through the example of Czechoslovakia and Slovenia.[1]

Liberalism is a political philosophy with deep roots in the 17th century which values social justice, civil rights and public welfare while emphasizing the protection of individual freedom. In the post-socialist context, liberalism refers to a political and ideological framework that helped Eastern European countries, after the fall of communism, transform into democratic, pluralist and predominantly market-oriented societies. It was both a political project and a symbolic promise that the events of 1989 represented. In this paper, liberalism is understood as a multidimensional concept.[2] *Political liberalism* refers to the establishment of democratic institutions, constitutionalism and civil liberties. *Economic liberalism* incorporates market reforms and privatization efforts. In Slovenia and Slovakia, elements of *cultural liberalism*, such as civic pluralism and linguistic autonomy, played significant roles.[3] Finally, *neoliberalism*, which dominated Western political and economic thinking in the late 1980s, strongly influenced the economic transformation of post-communist states, particularly through policies of deregulation and shock therapy.

1 This article is the outcome of a seminar I attended during my Erasmus exchange at the University of Primorska in Koper, Slovenia, as part of the course *Slovenska zgodovina – raziskovalne vsebine*. The class focused on Slovenian liberalism during the transition period, specifically the shift "from party liberalism to liberal democracy, 1965–2004" (*Slovenski tranzicijski liberalizem: od partijskega liberalizma do liberalne demokracije, 1965–2004*). Since I was the only foreign student in the course, the topic developed "automatically." I added a comparative dimension by introducing the Czechoslovak experience. What follows is therefore a reflection written for a Slovenian audience, completed under time pressure and with some inevitable simplifications and gaps in the literature. I hope the text nonetheless offers a useful starting point for thinking about liberalism in Central Europe in the decades after 1989.

2 Michael FREEDEN, *The morphology of liberalism*, in: Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford 2015, s. 55–70.

3 Adéla GJURIČOVÁ – Tomáš ZAHRADNÍČEK, *Návrat parlamentu: Češi a Slováci ve Federálním shromáždění 1989–1992*, Praha 2018, s. 11–28.; Jure GAŠPARIČ, *Rok 1989 jako začátek konce Jugoslávie – slovinská perspektiva: Slovinské veřejné mínění a povaha federace*, Soudobé dějiny 28(1), 2021, s. 70–98.

Distinguishing between these layers of liberalism allows for a more nuanced analysis of how it functioned in each national context.

Transition refers to the period following the collapse of socialist regimes when countries move towards market economies and democratic systems. This transition involves significant economic and political reforms, including privatization, deregulation and the establishment of multi-party democracies. In our case it's a period from 1989 to 2004.[4] Although Czechoslovakia and Slovenia had different geopolitical positions, one a Soviet satellite, the other a federal republic within socialist Yugoslavia, they shared a common historical turning point: the collapse of communist rule around 1989–1991 and the challenge of constructing new liberal democratic orders. This moment is often described as a shared Czechoslovak experience, but Czech and Slovak societies approached liberalism from different historical and ideological starting points. These distinctions are especially visible after 1990 and are addressed in the comparative sections that follow.

This paper explores how liberalism has developed and shaped the political and civic transitions of post-socialist societies, using Czechoslovakia and Slovenia as comparative cases. The central question is: How did liberalism, as both a political ideal and an institutional project, evolve in the Czech, Slovak and Slovenian contexts between years 1989 and 2004 and to what extent did it fulfil the hopes of the transition period?

Comparative analysis of the Liberalism in Czechoslovakia and Slovenia During Transition

Historical Preconditions

To fully understand the societal changes of the turbulent transition years, we must briefly look back at the formative decades that preceded them.

In Czechoslovakia, collective memory holds the interwar period, marked by social liberalism and the birth of a democratic republic, in high regard. This era is often remembered with nostalgia as the "good old days", and it served as an inspiration for the post-communist vision of national renewal. After 1989, many looked to revive the ideals of that earlier liberal democracy. A strong dissident culture had developed under late socialism, particularly after the 1968 Prague Spring and the following Soviet-led invasion. The "invisible violence" of the Normalization period further shaped the opposition's language of human rights, democratization, and

4 Michal KOPEČEK – Piotr WCIŚLIK, *Introduction: Towards an Intellectual History of Post-Socialism*, in: Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 1–38.

rule of law, all of which became central to civil society after the Velvet Revolution in November 1989.[5]

Slovenia, by contrast, lacked an interwar liberal tradition, but its experience within Yugoslavia offered a different starting point. Yugoslav federalism allowed some regional autonomy and introduced a distinctive economic model of workers' self-management, which mirrored aspects of the free market more closely than the Soviet model. In the 1980s, a cultural and civic revival emerged,[6] driven by tensions between Slovenian autonomy and the centralizing tendencies of the federal government. Liberal movements, mainly those connected to the magazine *Nova revija,*[7] called for democratization and federal reform.[8]

Each country entered the post-1989 transition with different liberal traditions and motivations: in Czechoslovakia, particularly in the Czech lands, a liberal revival rooted in historical memory; in Slovenia, a civic push for emancipation, framed by federal tensions and the desire for national self-determination.

The Transition Period (1989–1992)

The consolidation of Czechoslovak society after the 1968 Soviet intervention created a vacuum, one in which violence and the repression of marginalized groups became invisible, hidden behind the bureaucratic walls of late-socialist institutions. Unlike the monster trials of the 1950s, the violence of the 1970s was subtle but no less pervasive. Dissidents were isolated, and movements such as Charter 77 were

5 Paul BLOKKER, *The (Re-)Emergence of Constitutionalism in East Central Europe*, in: Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 139–169; Marcus COLLA – Adéla GJURIČOVÁ, *1989: The Chronopolitics of Revolution*, History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History 62(4), 2023, s. 45–65; Pavel KOLÁŘ – Michal PULLMANN, *Co byla normalizace?: studie o pozdním socialismu*, Praha 2016, s. 85–98; Michal PULLMANN, *Konec experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*, Praha 2011, s. 185–216; Milan ZNOJ, *Václav Havel, His Idea of Civil Society, and the Czech Liberal Tradition*, in: Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 109–138.

6 Known as Slovenian Spring. Term refers to the period of political and cultural awakening in Slovenia, marked by growing demands for democratization, national sovereignty, and human rights. It culminated in the formation of opposition movements, the publication of critical texts, led to Slovenia's independence in 1991.

7 The *Nova revija* journal provided an intellectual platform for Slovenian liberal and national discourse in the 1980s, playing a key role in shaping the ideological foundation for the Slovenian Spring.

8 J. GAŠPARIČ, *Rok 1989 jako začátek konce*, s. 70–98; Marko ZAJC, *When the Slovenian Spring Turned into a Hot Summer*, in: Włodzimierz Borodziej – Joachim von Puttkamer – Stanislav Holubec (edd.), From Revolution to Uncertainty. The Year 1990 in Central and Eastern Europe, Abingdon 2019, s. 142–163.

widely perceived not as a broad moral force, but as a closed circle of Prague intellectuals. This perception shifted in January 1989, during Palach's Week, when the regime responded violently to peaceful demonstrations. Police intervention, culminating in the beating of student protesters on 17 November at Národní třída, shocked a society unaccustomed to undisguised violence. These events gave the dissident movement an opportunity to expose the regime's repressive nature. Criticism of violence became one of the strongest motives of the Velvet Revolution,[9] but the unity forged around the ideal of non-violence began to dissolve rapidly after 1990.[10]

The Slovenian Spring refers not only to the period of political transition but more broadly to the intertwined processes of emancipation and democratization. The reappearance of Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s triggered Slovenian opposition forces, who united around a discourse of democracy, human rights, and linguistic sovereignty. This culminated in a plebiscite held on 23 December 1990, in which 88% of voters supported Slovenian independence. On 25 June 1991, Slovenia declared independence, followed by a Ten-Day War with the Yugoslav Army. The country's transition, from a semi-autonomous republic within a socialist federation to an independent parliamentary democracy, was carried out gradually and with a high degree of societal consensus.[11]

In both Czechoslovakia and Slovenia, liberalism during the transition was deeply tied to the language of democracy and civil rights. Yet, while Czechoslovakia emphasized civic unity and anti-violence, in Slovenia liberalism was more directly linked to national self-determination and framed as part of a broader independence project.

9 One of the main slogans: "We have bare hands" illustrates that the principle of non-violence was the highest priority of the public protests. P. KOLÁŘ – M. PULLMANN, *Co byla normalizace?,* s. 85–99; For more see: Ivo MOŽNÝ, *Proč tak snadno: některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce: sociologický esej*, Karolinum 2022; Jakub RÁKOSNÍK, et. al., *Milníky moderních českých dějin: krize konsenzu a legitimity v letech 1848–1989*, Argo 2018, s. 251–294.

10 P. BLOKKER, *The (Re-)Emergence of Constitutionalism in East Central Europe*, s. 139–169.; M. COLLA – A. GJURIČOVÁ, *1989: The Chronopolitics Of Revolution,* s. 45–65.; Stanislav HOLUBEC, *The Formation of the Czech Post-Communist Intellectual Left (Twenty Years of Seeking an Identity)*, in Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 397–430.

11 J. GAŠPARIČ, *Rok 1989 jako začátek konce*, s. 70–98; M. ZAJC, *When the Slovenian Spring Turned into a Hot Summer*, s. 142–163.

Nationalism and State-Building

Until the final days of the communist regime, Czech-Slovak relations were a politically sensitive topic, closely monitored by state censorship. After 1989, the discourse of national identity re-emerged and the political power which remained largely Pragocentric, was fuelling growing dissatisfaction in Slovakia.[12] In Slovakia, nationalist rhetoric, personified by politician Vladimír Mečiar, began to challenge the legitimacy of the federal state. On the contrary, many Czechs grew increasingly detached from the idea of a common Czechoslovak identity, often viewing the federation as a burden.[13] Slovak nationalism had developed in opposition to Hungarian assimilationism and Czech political dominance. These identity-building processes and inferiority complex created a desire for political sovereignty.

Czechoslovakia peacefully dissolved in what became known as the Velvet Divorce on 1 January 1993. The formation of an independent Slovak Republic marked a symbolic "year zero" - a new state with new symbols and new narratives of power. In the post-1993 context, Slovak national discourse focused on struggle and emancipation, overshadowing the civic ideals of the Velvet revolution.[14] Unlike the Czech experience, which emphasized continuity with liberal traditions, Slovak nationalism was more strongly shaped by struggles for recognition, both within the Hungarian kingdom and the Czechoslovak federation.

In Slovenia, nationalism played an important role in the transition, but it presented itself as a mild, civic-oriented, and unifying force. Tied to the longstanding dream of independence dating back to 1848, Slovenian nationalism was often framed as part of a broader liberal-democratic consensus. Unlike the violent ethno--nationalism seen in the former Yugoslavian republics, the Slovenian version projected an image of cultural pride, European values, and defensive unity. However, this liberal-national consensus began to unravel after independence, giving way to elite fragmentation and growing disillusionment within civil society.[15]

12 See Pomlčková válka (Hyphen War/Dash War) – dispute over the name of Czechoslovakia after November 1989.

13 A. GJURIČOVÁ – T. ZAHRADNÍČEK, *Návrat parlamentu*, s. 178–180.

14 Juraj BUZALKA, The Political Lives of Dead Populists in Post-socialist Slovakia, in: Michal KOPEČEK (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 313–334; Stevo DURAŠKOVIĆ, *From 'Husakism' to 'Mečiarism': The National Identity-Building Discourse of the Slovak Left-wing Intellectuals in 1990s Slovakia*, in: Michal KOPEČEK (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 525–552.

15 Marko ZAJC, *The Politics of Memory in Slovenia and the Erection of the Monument to the Victims of All Wars*, Zeitgeschichte 46(2), 2019, s. 225–240.

Political Liberalism and Civil Society

In the Czech Republic, Václav Havel's ideal of "anti-political politics", grounded in dissident ethics and civil society, gradually gave way to technocratic governance, particularly under Václav Klaus. Havel's 1990 call for a "second revolution" was a response to what he perceived as a moral failure of early post-transition politics, especially the rise of "mafia capitalism",[16] in which emerging elites manipulated economic liberalization. The enthusiasm for civic participation was even more muted by the co-optation of the revolutionary parliament and the lustration laws. Disillusionment deepened after the Opposition Agreement (Opoziční smlouva) in 1998, which was a strategic deal between ČSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party) and ODS (Civic Democratic Party) that enabled Miloš Zeman's minority government to function without parliamentary opposition. While technically legal, it was widely seen as a betrayal of the democratic spirit of 1989, because it eliminated real political competition, reduced transparency, and consolidated power between two elite parties. Critics viewed it as a step toward cartel democracy, further alienating citizens from the political process.[17]

In Slovakia, the last decade was represented by the populist rule of Vladimír Mečiar. However, unlike in Czechia, civil society started to reunify and started to play a corrective force. NGOs, media, and civic campaigns, most notably the OK '98 initiative,[18] mobilized against Mečiar's authoritarian tendencies and helped Slovakia to return to a liberal-democratic trajectory.[19]

In Slovenia, the early post-independence period was marked by a broad liberal consensus. Yet, this unity was short-lived. By the mid-1990s, politics became increasingly elite-driven, with fragmentation, declining public trust, and the spread of conspiracy theories undermining civic engagement.[20]

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16 More about terms "second revolution" and "mafia capitalism" see: Václav HAVEL, *Projevy z let 1990–1992: Letní přemítání. Spisy 6*, Praha 1999; Václav HAVEL, *Projevy a jiné texty z let 1992–1999. Spisy 7*, Praha 1999; Václav HAVEL, *Projevy a jiné texty 1999–2006: Prosím stručně; Odcházení. Spisy 8*, Praha 2007.

17 James MARK et al., *1989 After 1989 (Remembering the End of State Socialism in East-Central Europe)*, in: Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 463–504; Milan ZNOJ, *Václav Havel, His Idea of Civil Society,* s. 109–138.

18 The OK '98 campaign was a non-partisan civic initiative that mobilized media, NGOs, and youth to promote fair elections and voter turnout, contributing significantly to Mečiar's electoral defeat.

19 Lucia FERENCEI, *OK kampaň ´98 na Slovensku,* Disertační práce, Filozofická fakulta, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Olomouc 2020, s. 129–143.

20 M. ZAJC, *When the Slovenian Spring Turned into a Hot Summer*, s. 142–163.

Economic Transformation

In the Czech Republic, transformation was rapid and ideologically driven. Under the leadership of Václav Klaus, the state embraced a form of neoliberal economic liberalism that emphasized rapid privatization, with a strong state to enforce the rules of the free market. The key mechanism of transformation was voucher privatization, which allowed citizens to buy shares in formerly state-owned companies.[21] While this was meant to democratize ownership, in practice, the voucher system unintentionally enabled rapid accumulation by insiders and foreign investors, fuelling public resentment, and a sense of betrayal. Resulted into widespread corruption, asset stripping, and the rise of politically connected oligarchs. Disappointment with economic transformation led Václav Havel to describe the result as "mafia capitalism" - a term that captured the gap between liberal ideals and the realities of economic reform. By the late 1990s, disillusionment spread into the public sphere. In 1999, the protest movement "Thank you, now leave!" (Děkujeme, odejděte!) mobilized mass demonstrations, calling for the resignation of the political elite. However, the movement eventually collapsed due to internal disagreements and lack of direction.[22]

In Slovakia, economic liberalization was more chaotic and heavily politicized under Vladimír Mečiar. The period was marked by crony privatization, with state assets handed over to regime allies, undermining public trust and international credibility. It was only after 1998, with Mečiar's fall from power, that Slovakia began to stabilize economically and align more closely with European standards.[23]

In Slovenia, by contrast, the transformation was gradual and socially minded. The state retained a strong role in economic planning, and reforms were introduced through negotiation and consensus. This path was not without its critics, but it provided a more stable environment for consolidating democracy.[24]

These contrasting models: Czech neoliberalism, Slovak crony capitalism, and Slovenian gradualism, illustrate the diverse ways in which economic liberalism was interpreted and applied. Each model shaped not only economic outcomes, but also the broader public perception of what post-socialist liberalism meant in practice.

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21 Petr ROUBAL, *Anti-Communism of the Future Czech Post-Dissident Neoconservatives in Post-Communist Transformation*, in: Michal Kopeček (ed.), Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989, Budapest 2015, s. 171–200.

22 M. ZNOJ, *Václav Havel, His Idea of Civil Society*, s. 109–139.

23 L. FERENCEI, *OK kampaň ´98 na Slovensk*u, s. 155–162.

24 M. ZAJC, *When the Slovenian Spring Turned into a Hot Summer*, s. 142–163.

Liberalism by 2004

The accession of Czechia, Slovakia, and Slovenia to the European Union and NATO in 2004[25] marked a symbolic conclusion to the transition that began in 1989. It represented international recognition that these post-socialist countries had fulfilled the formal conditions of liberal democracy: free elections, market economies, the rule of law, and human rights protections. However, beneath this surface-level, the internal trajectories and quality of liberalism in each country were significantly different.

In the Czech Republic, liberalism came to be associated with an elite-led project, shaped by technocratic governance and neoliberal ideology. The early idealism of the Velvet Revolution gave way to a sense of civic detachment. Political institutions remained formally liberal, but public enthusiasm and participation declined, as many citizens grew disillusioned with the gap between revolutionary hopes and the everyday realities of economic transformation.

Slovakia, after its turbulent 1990s under Vladimír Mečiar, experienced a notable rebound in civil society. The anti-authoritarian mobilizations of the late 1990s helped re-anchor the country within the liberal-democratic sphere, making accession to the EU and NATO not only possible but politically meaningful. Civil society had proven its ability to act as a corrective force.

In Slovenia, the early post-independence period was marked by a strong liberal consensus, rooted in the ideals of the Slovenian Spring. Yet, by the early 2000s, this unity had fragmented. Liberalism survived institutionally, but became increasingly technocratic, with politics dominated by party elites and declining civic engagement.

By 2004, all three countries had completed their formal return to Europe, but their liberal trajectories varied: elite-driven in Czechia, civic-corrective in Slovakia, and fragmented but stable in Slovenia. These differences would shape the legacy of liberalism in the years that followed.

Conclusion

The fall of communism promised a new era of liberal democracy and freedom for the post-socialist world. But more than three decades later, the legacy of that promise appears fractured. In certain ways, the spirit of 1989 was institutionally fulfilled: all three successor states achieved rule of law, free elections, and European integration. But the moral and civic hopes that the revolutions promoted were harder to sustain. Liberalism took different paths: in the Czech Republic, it became increasingly legalistic and technocratic. In Slovakia, it was nearly undermined

25 The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 together with Poland and Hungary.

by populist nationalism, only to be rescued by civil society in the late 1990s. In Slovenia, it emerged as an emancipatory force during the struggle for independence, but faded into fragmentation and technocracy once statehood was achieved. The memory of 1989 now varies by country. In Czechia, it is framed as a moral triumph, centred around Václav Havel. In Slovakia, it is overshadowed by the struggle for national independence. In Slovenia, the unity of the transition period has become a mythic contrast to today's political disunity.

Neoliberal individualism, with its vague belief in the market's promise of a comfortable life, bears unsettling resemblance to the apathy and conformism of the late-socialist era. Those who challenge this vagueness - activists, dissidents, ecological or religious communities, are often dismissed as extremists, disrupting a public sphere that preferred not to ask what a "good life" really means.[26]

So, what remains of the 1989 hopes? In addressing the question of how liberalism evolved in the Czech, Slovak, and Slovenian contexts, this paper has shown that while liberal institutions were established, the broader hopes of 1989 were only partially realized.

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26 P. KOLÁŘ – M. PULLMANN, *Co byla normalizace?*, s. 191–201.