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Snags in the velvet divorce

Divorce appears inevitable in what one wag has called the state of "Czech-NoSlovakia." The Czech lands are scrambling westward while Slovakia risks being ensnared in Balkan-style conflicts, deepening new fissures in Europe. The United States should develop policies designed to limit further polarization in Europe.

Unfortunately, a predominate trend in Europe today is the search for a purer form of nation-state in which ethnic and political borders are coterminous. In Germany, the process resulted in political union, as it might for Romania and western Moldova. In such multi-ethnic states as Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and now, Czechoslovakia, the process has indeed led to destruction of an existing state.

In the Czech and Slovak case, divorce was not always inevitable. There is no dark history of ethnic violence between these groups. The June parliamentary elections created no mandate for divorce. But they did undercut bungling centrist parties and yielded pluralities for the right in the Czech Lands and for the left in Slovakia. A July opinion poll shows that 75 percent in the Czech lands and 49 percent in Slovakia still want some form of federal state. Others in Slovakia wanted a looser confederation, but few wanted immediate independence. More than 80 percent in both republics want the issue decided by referendum.

But leaders of both pluralities perceived an interest in tearing apart the existing state, and responsibility for the division must be borne equally by both sides. Slovak leader Vladimir Meciar opened with demands for confederation to rectify years of second-class citizenship and the unequal impact of Prague's shock therapy economic policies. He reached too far, calling for separate Slovak economic, defense and foreign policies.

On the Czech side, Civic Democratic Party leader Vaclav Klaus called Mr. Meciar's bluff, surprising him with an all or nothing response. His bold move is based on the electoral map that gives the political right control in the Czech lands but not in the nation as a whole. Mr. Klaus' choice was to continue economic reforms in half a nation or face deadlock in the whole nation. Mr. Klaus prefers amputation.

The United States has several objectives to pursue now that divorce is a near certainty. It must help ensure that the divorce is indeed soft as velvet. It must also try to offset German economic dominance in the Czech lands. And it must seek to avoid clashes between Slovakia and Hungary over the Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia.

The key question is which state will be the legal successor to Czechoslovakia, and here the United States has some leverage. Prague wants to inherit the estimated 2,800 bilateral and multilateral treaties ratified by Czechoslovakia, and it is willing to assume the entire Czechoslovak international debt to make it happen. Prague is also trying to force Slovakia to secede, legitimizing the Czech lands as the sole successor state. These maneuvers threaten the velvet divorce and should be countered by the West. Since the blame for the separation is shared equally, both states should inherit equal privileges from the international community.

After separation, the new Czech state will be even more vulnerable to

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German political influence than it already is, and this worries many in Prague. The Czech lands were absorbed by Germany just prior to World War II, and Czech memories are long. Nearly three-quarters of all the foreign investment now flowing into Czechoslovakia is German. If separation disrupts commercial links with Slovakia and trade links with the East, the Czech dependence on Germany will soar. That would not be all bad because Germany could accelerate Czech admission to the European Community. But to keep some diplomatic balance in Prague, the United States should seek to encourage greater American investment in the Czech lands and to use its influence to discourage a trade war between the republics.

Perhaps the most serious impact of divorce could be heightened tension over 580,000 Hungarians living

in Slovakia. In the euphoria of nationhood, Slovakian will become the national language, and the Hungarian minority stands to lose many of its language rights. The Hungarian Parliament is already championing autonomy for many Slovak areas that historically have belonged to Hungary. But Slovak officials claim that only two of Slovakia's 34 districts have a Hungarian majority and they reject any thought of autonomy for Hungarians.

Ethnic tensions are exacerbated by a dispute over the Gabčíkovo Dam that Slovakia hopes to have partially operational by October. The dam, which would divert and control the flow of the Danube, was built with Hungary's active support. Now Budapest charges it will produce an ecological disaster, but the investment has been made and Slovakia plans to proceed.

The referendum, favored by former President Vaclav Havel as a way to save the nation, is unlikely to take place despite its popularity, because neither leader wants to risk a policy reversal.

The United States can act together with its European allies to dampen these tensions. Bratislava must recognize that minority rights should not be reversed or economic penalties will be imposed by the West. At the same time, Hungary must be warned that encouraging secession in a neighboring state will also carry penalties. If the West acts quickly, this ethnic problem might be dealt with before it explodes. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe's newly created high commissioner for minorities might take on these problems as a first assignment.

It is too late for the United States to try to reverse the division of Czechoslovakia. Earlier Western efforts might have moderated the positions of Messrs. Meciar and Klaus. The best that can be done now is to limit the damage.



RAW Vaclav Havel

Unfortunately, it is a little too late for the United States to try to reverse the probable division of Czechoslovakia.