



26.05.1946

Parliamentary election

The war's end and the relative calming of the situation brought about a certain change. An authoritative regime with a socialistic nature came to power in the restored Czech-Slovak Republic. President Beneš governed by decree, the Germans and Hungarians were deprived of civil rights and thousands of Czechs and Slovaks were accused of being Nazi collaborators. Political opposition was forbidden and all political parties had to be members of the National Front. The Democratic Party (DP) accepted active Christians-Catholics into politics. Its leadership was evangelical, declared its support of tradition in the 1944 uprising, but realised that it would not succeed without Catholic support. Many Slovak Catholics, lacking political representation after the People's Party was outlawed, became gradually aware of their power, and they witnessed the constructive force of Christianity across a war-ravaged Europe. Alcide de Gasperi in Italy, Konrad Adenauer in Germany, and Robert Schumann in France started the implementation of a new idea of Christian democracy.



The inspiration for a modern Christian-democratic system was very strong in Slovakia. The young generation was engaged in discussions in Bratislava apartments, at universities and in coffee houses. The Catholics increasingly and more strongly realised that they wanted and needed a political party to defend their interests in politics, a political party through which they could co-decide the future of the nation. They also realised that they must not and did not want to return to the outlawed People's Party to any considerable degree. Preparations for establishing an autonomous political party for Slovak Catholics progressed quickly. The Communist Party of Slovakia was uncertain. The communist headquarters in Prague accused its branch in Slovakia of Slovak nationalism and forced the replacement of personnel and a change of policy. The communists knew that they could not attract Catholics to their political party with an overtly anti-religious policy. Therefore they decided to use some Catholic priests to declare that communism and Christianity were compatible. Efforts towards establishing an autonomous Slovak Catholic political party suited them, since in that way opposition would be divided and manoeuvring easier.



At the crucial moment, the group around the Catholic activists, Ján Kempný and Andrej Cvinček, acted. They realised that forming a new political party would be an advantage for the communists. So they sought a path for an Evangelical leadership of the Democratic Party. The party accepted a proposal for an agreement. In this way, the April Agreement was concluded in Modra-Harmónia

..... on 30 March 1946. Signatories from among the leaders of the Democratic Party (DP) and Catholic activists signed the agreement the next day in the Bratislava villa of Democratic Party chairman, Jozef Lettrich. The name April Agreement derives from the executive DP committee taking personal measures following from the agreement on 5 April 1946. Based on the April Agreement, DP expanded its leadership with several Catholics. The ratio of Catholics to Evangelicals on the parliamentary candidate lists was modified to 2:1; whilst in party, financial, economic and interest organisations, it should have been 7:3. DP also adopted the principal request of Christian churches – the restoration of church schools closed in 1944.

Although the Catholic wing of DP was inspired by European Christian democracy, its Evangelical leadership was not likewise inspired; after the April Agreement was signed DP could be seen as an attempt to create a modern Christian democracy. DP as a political party that avowed to Christian and national values, and also offered itself as a realistic alternative to the aggressive Communist stream, was attractive to Slovak voters. The aim of unifying the Catholics and Evangelicals in DP was described by DP general secretary Ján Kempný in the Čas daily newspaper dated 9 May 1946: ‘This does not concern the Democratic Party, this concerns everybody who avows to Christianity and democracy [...] this election is not only a fight of forces between political parties, but is a plebiscite, i.e. how many Slovaks avow to a Christian understanding of democracy.’

Although political opposition was forbidden, voters saw DP as an alternative to the Communist Party. The parliamentary election was held on 26 May 1946 across the state. DP won handsomely in Slovakia with 62 percent of the votes. The Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) won 30.37 percent of votes. KSS did not get as much support in Slovakia as had been expected by the communist headquarters in Prague and Moscow. While in Bohemia, the socialist parties (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak Social Democracy, Czechoslovak National Socialistic Party) won a combined 79.41 percent of votes (of which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia 40.17 percent), in Slovakia the socialist parties (Communist Party of Slovakia and Labour Party) won only 33.48 percent (of which the Communist Party of Slovakia 30 percent). The reasons for the contrasting election results in Bohemia and Slovakia are based on the model of a two-party political system that was created in Slovakia during the 1944 uprising, and which continued to the post-war period. The other two political parties – the Freedom Party and Labour Party – were founded only shortly before the election and thus lacked voter awareness. However, the main reason for the strong DP election victory was that it was supported by Slovak Catholics. Czech voters’ stronger trust in left-wing political parties inclined towards radical or mild Marxism resulted from the different developments in Bohemia and Slovakia during 1939 to 1945. While Slovakia as an independent state did not experience the mass long-term persecution of residents except for communists, Jews and Romani, the Nazi occupiers ruled in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia from the beginning, which was associated with the persecution of a wide range of residents, especially the intelligentsia, and a process of Germanisation. In a clever political tactic, the Communists, as a governmental political party, attracted Czech farmers, who were given land allotments as part of the agrarian reforms. After taking power in 1948, the communists’ tactic changed – they started to collectivise land.

The election represented a break in the attitude of Czech and Slovak communists towards the Slovak issue. Slovakia became a non-self-governing territory, completely subordinated to the Prague centre of power. The Communist power wanted to eliminate the DP electoral success and defeat the Communist

Party of Slovakia. This plan was implemented by the directed compromising of DP by accusations that it negotiated with members of the prohibited Hlinka's Slovak People's Party and with Slovak emigrants from 1945. Minister of Finance Václav Kopecký was shocked by the Slovak political orientation. According to him: 'the entire result of the election in Slovakia represents [...] a serious danger, and it proves the anti-Soviet, anti-progress and anti-Czechoslovak attitude of the majority of Slovaks.' An integral part of the post-election communist campaign against DP was the show trial of Jozef Tiso, the former president of the first Slovak Republic. The trial ended with a death sentence declared on 15 April 1947 and his execution three days later. By not reacting to this execution with an objective assessment of responsibility or guilt, the Communist Party leadership sought to initiate internal disputes in DP that would lead to the party's disintegration. In September 1947, state security controlled by the communists revealed a conspiracy against the state in Slovakia, which it perpetuated itself. In this way, the weakening of DP was achieved.

DP did not find stronger support even among Czech civil political parties. They instead supported the communists in their fight against the alleged threat of Slovak separatism. Paradoxically they helped to isolate and weaken DP, strengthen the Communist Party, and finally extinguish the last of democracy in the country. The success of Slovak democrats in the election was a Pyrrhic victory from the political-pragmatic viewpoint. Slovakia sent a clear signal to the world that it rejected the ideology and practice of communism and wanted to develop on its own terms. From the point of view of the post-war process of Sovietisation as implemented in countries under the Soviet Union's sphere of power, Slovakia attracted attention as a 'weak element' – an area where 'an ideological and class-divided enemy' could take root. Therefore, the Slovaks had to pay a high price for their 1946 election results in the subsequent decades of communist totality – the price of freedom, property and lives.

Translated from Slovak to English by Darren Chastney, proofread by Dr Ian Copestake



Prof. Mária Tonková, Prof. Róbert Letz, Prof. Anna Bocková



References: