
**Path of Democratization: Circuitous in Slovakia But Not in the Czech Republic**

*Paula Pickering*

Students of political development have not always been good at understanding drastic political change (Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington, *Understanding Political Development*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1994, 33). Kevin Deegan-Krause contributes to efforts to remedy this shortcoming. He seeks to answer a fascinating puzzle of post-communist transition: What can account for both the divergence and later reconvergence of democratic development in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia?

Not all East European countries sped along a unidirectional path toward liberal democracy when they threw off Soviet-backed communist rule. The zig-zag path of democratization that some post-communist states, such as Slovakia and Ukraine, have taken is a particularly interesting and important aspect of the political transition in Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike some of the cases in Latin America, the culprits for Slovakia’s and some neighbors’ regressions are not military leaders or economic downturns. Deegan-Krause adds to books, such as V.P. Gagnon’s *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005) that help to understand why some countries, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, actually regressed from the process of democratization before accelerating their progress toward democratic consolidation. Both resist blaming the attitudes of the general population for regression or showering the international community’s policies with praise for correcting them. They instead propose more complex models that focus on the dynamics of political competition in post-communist transitions. Deegan-Krause offers a convincing model that highlights the counterproductive role played in new democratizers by strategic politicians, who, when significantly challenged by the dynamics of political competition and weakly constrained by young democratic institutions, choose to exacerbate popular attitudinal differences in the name of accumulating power.

*Paula Pickering* is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at the College of William and Mary. <pmpick@wm.edu>
Observers of democratization in regions other than Central and Eastern Europe may be surprised by Deegan-Krause’s depiction of the similarities of the Czech Republic’s and Slovakia’s political cultures and institutional structures. Yet Deegan-Krause convincingly argues that the velvet divorce that ended Czechoslovakia set up a quasi-experiment that helps to isolate factors that explain the two countries’ subsequent democratization paths.

The component of democracy that Slovak leaders most jeopardized in the mid-1990s, argues Deegan-Krause, was institutional accountability, the term he uses for Guillermo O’Donnell’s concept of horizontal accountability, or mutual restraint among political institutions. It was not until late in his rule, that Slovakia’s premier, Vladimír Mečiar, threatened electoral accountability, including by apparently sanctioning violence against political rivals and altering a referendum ballot. More nefarious, argues Deegan-Krause, were Mečiar’s progressively strong efforts to undermine institutions with the constitutional authority to check the power of the premier. Rather than immediately act illegally to eliminate democratic institutions and risk raising red flags, savvy Mečiar worked first within the law to marginalize political opponents in the parliament and to make changes in executive and oversight bodies. According to the author, these steps that weakened the capacity for oversight then bolstered Mečiar’s ability to use extra-legal means to attack institutions whose members began to express increasing resistance to his political agenda. He illegally expelled opponents from parliament and interfered with the investigation of the kidnapping of the son of the president, a key rival. Though Slovakia’s Constitutional Court justices consistently showed their independence from the government and managed to slow some of the government’s encroachments, it was unable to rule on some of Mečiar’s key attacks, which skirted the court’s jurisdiction. Understanding how Mečiar’s strategy of gradually ratcheting up attacks against institutions marginalized political opponents and pushed beyond popular preferences on accountability is a valuable lesson for both practitioners advocating democracy and scholars of democratization.

Deegan-Krause succinctly characterizes the difference in approaches that the Slovak and Czech Republic governments took toward institutional accountability between 1992 and 1998. It is not that Czech elites were ardent proponents of institutional accountability. Indeed, the Czech coalition government, at one point, attempted to change the electoral law from proportional representation to a majoritarian one in order to increase its power. However, while the Czech government led by Vaclav Klaus was not a friend of institutional accountability and generally resorted to passively delaying efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, Mečiar’s 1994 coalition government engaged in systematic and active opposition to existing institutions for accountability.

The author challenges conventional arguments that Slovakia’s political culture, economic foundation, or curse of a charismatic leader meant that it
would inevitably backtrack from democratization. He downplays the impact of the policies of external actors, such as the EU’s use of aid and conditionality. Finally, Deegan-Krause points to the inability of civic organizations in both countries to compel policy changes that would enhance democratic accountability in quashing the contention that the Czech Republic’s more vigorous civil society accounted for that republic’s more consistent progress toward democratic consolidation.

Mono-causal arguments lack empirical backing at any stage in Slovakia’s democratization. However, these arguments particularly fall short in explaining Slovakia’s uneven path of democratization that allowed it to catapult from then-U.S. Secretary of State Albright’s characterization of the country in early 1998 as “a hole in the map of Europe” (p. 22) to a full member of both the EU and NATO in 2004. For example, Deegan-Krause draws on data from multiple surveys to show that Slovak and Czech attitudes about accountability, often measured by support for or against “firm-hand rule,” were similar throughout the 1990s. As a result, political culture cannot explain either the divergence between Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the mid-1990s or their reconvergence in the late 1990s.

Instead of succumbing to oversimplification, Deegan-Krause cogently argues that only a model that allows for the interaction of several different factors can explain these countries’ democratization paths. Key to Deegan-Krause’s argument is the concept of an “issue divide,” a particular type of “partial cleavage.” Returning to popular views on accountability, what matters is not the divergence in attitudes, but the political relevance of attitudes, which can better allow politicians to manipulate them. Building on literature on cleavages, Deegan-Krause (p. 17) conceptualizes issue divides as combining attitudinal difference, such as views toward accountability, and institutional difference, or party choice. An issue divide arose in Slovakia, he argues, around accountability, whereas one emerged in the Czech Republic around the market economy. What explains the initial divergence and later reconvergence of the two countries is that leaders and voters in Slovakia and the Czech Republic fought about different issues. Furthermore, the sides in Slovakia became so sharply defined and polarized as to eliminate middle-ground positions and allow for wide swings in political outcomes, with anti-accountability parties winning in 1994 and pro-accountability parties winning in 1998.

Particularly destructive in Slovakia was the interaction between the accountability divide and the national divide, or the dispute over defining the Slovak nation in a way that incorporates its territorially concentrated Hungarian minority. The Czech Republic escaped the burden of a national divide, largely due to its cultural homogeneity after the divorce. Further discussion of the relative importance of, and the interaction between, the accountability divide and the national divide would have helped to clarify the role of each in deterring democratic development in Slovakia. Deegan-
Krause asserts that issue divides’ lack of “rootedness” in socio-economic or cultural cleavages allows for leaders to play key roles in shaping issue divides and their relationship to one another. He credits Mečiar with linking issues of accountability and nationalism. Mečiar took advantage of his party’s higher degree of centralization and organization in comparison to his competitors to marginalize opposition and offer a potent mix of programmatic and charismatic incentives to ordinary Slovaks. In contrast, Klaus’s party confronted stronger competition. Deegan-Krause characterizes Mečiar as shifting from casting himself as a “no-nonsense moderate,” in the early 1990s, to “father of the Slovak nation,” by the elections in 1994, eventually using nationalism as a tool for excusing his attacks on institutions authorized to check his power (pp. 217-219). In doing so, he radicalized the national views of those who supported his position on accountability. However, understanding how Mečiar—and similar opportunists in divided post-communist states—are able to push a segment of the electorate’s attitudes on national issues deserves elaboration.

Throughout *Elected Affinities*, Deegan-Krause emphasizes political choice, the conjunction of factors, and variations in outcomes. For example, he argues that the mere presence of a territorially concentrated minority does not automatically mean that the national question will become an issue divide in a state. This reviewer applauds Deegan-Krause’s rejection of culturally deterministic arguments that doom the democratic efforts of countries with a territorially rooted minority. At the same time, I am hard pressed to think of cases in the post-communist region with a rooted minority where the national question is not an issue divide. His table of hypothesized issue divides in post-communist countries (p. 234) even recognizes national issue divides in all countries with a territorially concentrated minority.

The author devotes the bulk of the book to arguing how Slovakia managed to backtrack until 1998. And while the theoretical argument—that the issue divide of accountability was taken over by the good guys, who emphasized the benefits that restoring and strengthening institutional accountability would bestow on citizens of Slovakia (integration into Europe)—he leaves the reader wondering about the mechanisms that allowed pro-accountability forces to come out on top and engineer such a significant political shift.

Deegan-Krause’s use of multiple methods, quantitative data from a wide variety of surveys, and rhetoric from interviews and various local media strengthens his argument. Furthermore, he frequently conducts quantitative analysis on alternative measures of independent and dependent variables. However, methodologists will expect to see details that are not provided in the book. Adding a statistical appendix that discusses in more detail the statistical models used, as well as the sampling and coding for the content analysis and various surveys that he analyzes, would have bolstered his argument. More discussion of the interviews he conducted with party activists would have elaborated on elite views and strategies, as well as livened up what is
otherwise a dense read. Nonetheless, Deegan-Krause’s explicit hypotheses, clear methods of analysis, and use of many surveys accessible to scholars allow others to verify, refine, rebut, or expand on many of his findings.

In the final chapter, Deegan-Krause offers several ideas for further research. The most obvious way to build on this book is to test the hypothesized issue divides he lists for other post-communist countries (table 6.1, p. 234). Two pairs of countries that seem ripe for Deegan-Krause’s approach are Ukraine and Russia, on the one hand, and Montenegro and Serbia, on the other. Both Ukraine and Montenegro experienced “second transitions” and confront national issue divides raised by internal minorities and their putative homelands who are neighbors. In these cases, the pattern of democratic development is not one of divergence and then reconvergence, but one that appears to be simply of divergence. Ukraine is one case he foreshadows as interesting due to its development of an accountability divide in the late 1990s. Application of the issue-divide approach may identify factors that contributed to the Orange Revolution, whose leaders highlighted accountability violations of the previous communist-led government, as well as now guide the ongoing democratization process. The post-Orange Revolution governments, while voicing their desire to join European and Transatlantic organizations and diverging from the Russian government’s continued chipping away at institutional accountability, have had a harder time than the post-1998 Slovak government in strengthening institutional accountability necessary to accelerate democratization. As in Slovakia, Ukraine’s national divide means that its leaders must deal with a disgruntled minority, though one that, unlike Slovakia’s Hungarians, is lukewarm about Ukraine’s current Western tilt. Another case that appears ripe for Deegan-Krause’s approach is Montenegro, which just severed its union with Serbia. While Montenegro divorced itself from a partner considered less democratic, its own weak institutions and the existence of a national divide make Slovakia’s experience relevant. The question of whether a Montenegrin leader, such as the current prime minister, uses nationalist rhetoric, including characterizing himself as “father of the Montenegrin nation” and painting minorities as threats, in order to undermine institutional accountability deserves the close attention of scholars and practitioners of democratization. *Elected Affinities* is one of those rare books that offer fresh insights to both area specialists and comparativists, as well as to policy makers.