HUMAN AFFAIRS, 7, 1997, 1, 47–63

# FRENCH DIPLOMACY AND SOME ASPECTS OF THE 1946 ELECTIONS IN CZECHO-SLOVAKIA

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The article examines the question of which issues of the 1946 parliamentary elections in Czecho-Slovakia received primary attention from French diplomats working in Prague and in Bratislava: the issue concerning the elections, which was in the centre of the interest of French diplomats, namely to what extent the election results would affect the solution of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks after the war, is analysed separately. Some confidential talks between the Ambassador Maurice Dejean and President Edvard Beneš concerning the electoral prognoses and election results are described and commented on.

The analysis of the correspondence between the French Embassy in Prague and the Quai d'Orsay in Paris and between the French Consulate General in Bratislava and the French Embassy in Prague available to the author shows that in connection with the parliamentary elections in May 1946 French diplomats directed their attention to several questions: the absence of parallelism in the structure of the political parties in Slovakia and in Czech lands, efforts to do away with this status immediately before the elections by founding new political parties in Slovakia, and the aim pursued, the tactics of the pre-election struggle of individual political parties and their outlooks, pre-election procedures and the objectives of some party leaders, etc. French diplomats working in Czecho-Slovakia paid special attention to one issue, namely to the question to what extent would the election results influence the solution of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks, in other words, the state and legal arrangement of the republic. French diplomats concentrated on this issue mainly for two reasons: firstly, it was decisive for the internal strength of the republic and thus also for the unity and authority of the state which was linked with France through two inter-war decades of close cooperation and which was during the 1946 elections again a potential contract partner of the French republic; and secondly, it strongly occupied the mind of President Edvard Beneš who spoke about

it very often and from various aspects mainly with Mr Maurice Dejean, the French Ambassador in Prague.

The elections of May 1946 were considered an important event by French diplomats. It should have given the definite direction to the third Czechoslovak Republic in both domestic and foreign policy.[1] Since the results were mostly evaluated from the point of view of their impact on the internal unity of the state, for which the relationship between Prague and Bratislava was decisive, I will try to bring the view of the French diplomats of the May elections nearer from the perspective of the development of the Czecho-Slovak relationship as they had perceived it between the autumn of 1944 and the autumn of 1946. It will not be a systematic account of all circumstances associated with it, but rather an account of some background information examining these issues.

French diplomats began to pay closer attention to the issue of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks. This issue was of decisive importance to the future internal arrangement of the liberated republic, in the autumn of 1944, and the approaching defeat of Germany made the question increasingly topical. During the visit of the delegation of the Slovak National Council to London in October 1944, French diplomats, who were close to the government in exile, were of the opinion that no insurmountable obstacles would emerge in solving the question because the Slovak National Council, which played a decisive role in the preparation of the Slovak National Uprising, rejected the idea of an independent Slovakia and signified its support for the re-establishment of the Czecho-Slovak state.[2] They expected that the delegation of the Slovak National Council (SNC) would in their talks with Dr Beneš enforce a federal and not unitary arrangement of the re-established republic; but, on the other hand, they thought that there was no unanimity among the constituent parts of the SNC as far as the precise extent of the autonomy required by Slovakia was concerned; this necessarily weakened the emphasis with which the SNC might have put forward its demands. Moreover, since President Beneš and his Government made it clear that the future state's organization would be based on the equality of the Czechs and Slovaks, French diplomats thought that where the future arrangement of the republic was concerned, there would be no insurmountable hindrances in the relations between the two nations.

This idea was built on the visible shift in the opinion of London exiles concerning the arrangement of post-war republic, which took place between the summer of 1943 and the autumn of 1944. As is known, on June 30, 1943, the Czecho-Slovak govern-

[1] Telegram of the French chargé d'affaires in Prague Jean-Paul Garnier dispatched to Paris on March 4, 1946. Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Paris (hereafter MAE Paris). Europe 1944-1949. Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

[2] Confidential telegram of J.E. Paris dispatched from London on October 16, 1944. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 36.

ment in exile released a festive declaration signed by all its members which was broadcast by BBC; it followed from this declaration that Slovakia would not be awarded any political autonomy. According to the declaration, the Government accepted this decision on the basis of secret reports coming from Slovakia, which allegedly clearly proved that the overwhelming majority of the Slovaks who had earlier wanted autonomy, had since realized that it was precisely the autonomy granted after Munich that led to their slavish position.[3] However, several days after the outbreak of the Slovak uprising, the leader of London exiles Dr Beneš partly changed his opinion. This was undoubtedly due to the declaration of the SNC of September 1, 1944 stating that the Slovak National Council was the only legal representative of the Slovak nation and the only legislative and executive power in the liberated territory. Since the phraseology indicated at least indirectly that autonomy was certainly not such a compromised matter as the "secret reports" which the exile cabinet had previously received from Slovakia had indicated, Beneš changed his opinion and during the London visit of the SNC delegation he spoke as mentioned. The conviction of the French diplomats that the arrangement between the Czechs and Slovaks would be settled successfully and to the satisfaction of both sides was also corroborated by a passage from a speech by Hubert Ripka broadcast by London radio on October 8, 1944: it said that "we all agreed that exclusively freely elected representatives may discuss the future organization of the republic and that constitutionally valid decisions may only result from brother-like agreement approved by the majority of the Slovaks and Czechs. Nobody will be allowed to enforce conditions which would be against the will of the majority of both the Czechs and the Slovaks."[4]

The cited passage shows that the definite future internal organization of the republic was already at that time associated with the first free elections, at least in the minds of the decisive part of London exile. Of course, it is questionable to what extent Ripka's declaration postponing the solution of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks to the period of elections, relativized Beneš' above mentioned statement that future state's organization would be based on equality of Czechs and Slovaks. Because if Beneš' statement about the "equality of Czechs and Slovaks" reproduced by French diplomats in that form does not admit any doubts about this matter, Ripka's formulation is far from being so unambiguous. And, in spite of its apparent lack of ambiguity, Beneš' statement was not completely unequivocal either. Since it cannot be expected that there would have been any significant discrepancy between him and Ripka in judging the issue of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks, it is evident that, as the following events confirmed, it was a tactical manoeuvre in that matter on the side of the London exiles.

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[3] According to the article of Štefan Osuský published in the Catholic weekly Tablet on Sep 23, 1944.

[4] Telegram of Oct 16, 1944.

It was based on the idea, the essence of which can be seen from the strictly confidential report of the French Ambassador in London, René Massigli, sent to the Foreign Minister Georges Bidault on February 26, 1945. Massigli had met Beneš in October 1944 and after that he did not try to meet him again; but the exiled president was preparing for his departure from London, so the French Ambassador considered it impossible not to ask him for an audience. During a 45-minutes' talk Beneš spoke openly about his plans, hopes, and apprehensions. He seemed less optimistic to Massigli than usually.

The Ambassador's impression from the meeting was that the Slovak problem was theoretically resolved because President Beneš said that he had decided to go very far in terms of autonomy although his very low opinion of the way of political thought of the Slovaks remained unchanged. He said that the autonomy of Slovakia would necessarily have to include mainly autonomy in the financial field and that all accompanying expenses, which he did not specify, would have to be covered by Slovakia herself. He did not doubt that the condition, where he had no intention of making any compromise, would lead to rapid deflation of Slovak aspirations.[5] Massigli commented on it by saying that in his calculations, the President reckoned with the fact that the application of such a procedure would prove that such a system would not be sustainable for a longer time.[6]

We may deduce from the very factual tone of Massigli's telegram that the resolution of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks on the basis of equality was understood by Beneš on the threshold of peace times as a necessary tactical concession which should have regulated the course of events in the period to come. In other words, the grant of autonomy should have, according to the President's ideas, served the purpose of discrediting it and showing that it was the route leading to a blind alley. I think that this approach illustrates to what extent Beneš remained a prisoner of his pre-war visions which he wanted to defend at all costs even in the changed conditions.

It should be noted that the informed observers perceived the objective situation between the Czechs and Slovaks of that time differently, from different perspectives. The French chargé d'affaires in Czechoslovakia, Louis Keller, who was at the head of the French diplomatic mission until the advent of Maurice Dejean, was, shortly after the return of the Czechoslovak government to the capital of the liberated republic, of the opinion that the problem associated with the relationship between the Czechs and Slovaks became of an entirely different character from that before the war. He saw the change particularly in the fact that the Czechs, as he wrote in his telegram sent to Paris on 4th July 1945, could not only condescendingly invite the Slovaks to participate in state administration, and consequently, the

[5] Massigli's confidential report dispatched from London to the Foreign Minister G. Bidault on February 26, 1945. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 36.

[6] Ibid.

Slovaks would not have to combat the superiority and authority of Prague. Keller based his opinion on the fact that the Czechs lost part of their better position in relation to the Slovaks under Nazi oppression, and, on the other hand, the Slovaks made great progress in both the material and the spiritual spheres during the existence of the Slovak state; moreover, they experienced and enjoyed independence. According to Keller, the President had to take these matters into account – Beneš thought about a kind of personal union of the two states, the character of which should be determined by elections, which were pledged to take place towards the end of 1945 – the Quai d'Orsay stated in July 1945 and emphasized that if the elections were free, without any pressure from the outside, Czechoslovakia will have to accept a federal arrangement probably recalling Austro-Hungarian dualism.[7] He thought that Bohemia-Moravia, and Slovakia, would be joined by a kind of personal union and Slovakia would have an autonomous administration with its own ministries. He reckoned with the fact that the new republic would be of dual form; therefore he requested the establishment of a French consulate general with personnel of a high standard in Bratislava, which he considered to be an extraordinarily important observation point from the political point of view. He saw as the best solution the implementation of the unity accepted by both sides within the federal frame. According to Keller the elections should at the same time decide on the vitality of the new system. He saw a threat to this vitality in solving the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks on the basis of equality only in case of the victory of communists in Slovakia, which, however, he regarded as improbable in case of the normal course of the elections. Keller's formulations show that the victory of communists might be dangerous for the unity of the Czecho-Slovak state not so much because it would be a success for Slovak autonomists but rather because it might be followed by the entry of Slovakia into the Union of (Soviet) Socialist Republics.[8]

Beneš spoke about such a possibility in the development with French diplomats several times; he assigned the merit for the fact that it had not come true mainly to himself. At the beginning of the electoral year, on January 12, 1946, he had confidential talks lasting several hours with Ambassador Dejean, within which he openly touched the question. He said that Slovakia had escaped the first danger after the liberation: annexation to the Soviet Union. Beneš emphasized that Russia had thought about the annexation of this region as early as during the First World War and that some Slovak personalities supported it. However, he made a categoric stand against it together with Masaryk and won the support of France and Great Britain. In the spring of 1945 many Slovak communists wished the annexation of Slovakia to the Soviet Union and Moscow was under temptation. He saw the danger and as soon as the first opportunity emerged, he visited Košice and Banská

[7] Keller's telegram sent to the Quai d'Orsay on July 4, 1945. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 74 (Slovaquie).

[8] Ibid.

Bystrica. A warm welcome solved the question: the Soviets did not insist and resigned Slovakia.[9] This question could be considered to be resolved but there still remained the achievement of a modus vivendi between the Czechs and Slovaks. The situation was sometimes so difficult, Beneš said, that some Czechs proposed to leave Slovakia to its fate. But he was categorically against it since he realized that one has to be patient with Slovaks, help them and treat them a little bit like children, to pardon their numerous caprices and reckon with the fact that their experiences would gradually train them. They had experienced several cruel periods – German domination under Monsignor Tiso, Soviet occupation, communist administration, which still ruled. A comparison of those regimes with the regime of the first republic was driving many people to turn their eyes towards Prague as a salvation bringing hope. Beneš saw such a tendency among the representatives of the Slovak high clergy when he accepted them on 10th January. They spoke about the alleged dominion of the Czechs in the period before Munich as about the real golden age, the return of which the majority of Slovaks strongly wished, as he said to Dejean.[10]

We see that the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks mentioned from time to time by Beneš towards the end of the war as relations based on an equal position for both nations, found themselves in a different position after the war; the quest for a definite modus vivendi failed because the dual arrangement of the republic was only an ideal of the Slovak political elite, which, moreover, was unable to survive the first post-war elections because of the distribution of the political forces throughout the country and in Slovakia. The reports, which the Ambassador Dejean sent to Paris, allow us to express an idea that President Beneš was, after his return from exile, a verbal proponent of dualism at the most. He knew Dejean very well, they met frequently and they had long talks – it is therefore not probable that Dejean would have stated facts in his reports which would have been at variance with the President's views. Dejean was a convinced opponent of the dualistic arrangement of the state from his arrival in Prague in December 1945; he saw in it the most dangerous threat to the unity of the state. His report sent to the Quai d'Orsay shortly before elections shows that he considered the situation within the state as precarious since "while the Constitution of 1920 postulated the existence of a unitary Czechoslovak nation and created a centralized republic, the Košice government programme of April 1945 laid down "the principle of absolute equality between the two nations: Czech and Slovak."[11] It was the period of the actual existence of two governments joined by a personal union embodied by President Beneš, which negotiated about the formation of a real union based on equality. That took place be-

[9] Strictly confidential report by Dejean sent to Paris on January 14, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 36.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Dejean's message of May 2, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

cause in the years of captivity, the relative significance of "historic lands" was reduced and, on the other hand, Slovakia acquired the feeling of illusory sovereignty. According to Dejean, the personal position of President Beneš "fortunately" enabled the renovation of Czecho-Slovakia from the very moment of liberation but only as a free union.[12]

The first stage in the fight against dualism and for the restoration of the state's unity was marked, according to Dejean, by an agreement of June 2, 1945, which amended relations between the legislative and executive bodies of Slovakia – the Slovak National Council and Board of Commissioners on the one hand and the legislative and executive bodies of the republic as a whole on the other. Dejean thought that Czech lands paid for the return to the unity of the republic, which was rather problematic since, in his opinion, it was just a relative return because the first article of the agreement of June 2, 1945 contained the principle that the Slovak National Council was not only the recognized representative of the Slovak nation but also the bearer of all legislative, governmental and executive power in Slovakia. The French Ambassador saw the very beginning of the progress only in the fact that the agreement precisely defined the circle of questions reserved for the Czecho-Slovak law-making assembly, which seriously limited the Slovak National Council in the political, economic, administrative, and cultural domains. Diplomacy, the budget, national defence, and the constitution became "common questions" which had to be solved through a joint agreement. But according to Dejean, the agreement of June 2, 1945 meant an immense sacrifice to Prague: nine of twenty-five ministers were Slovaks, 100 out of 300 members of parliament represented Slovakia although there were 7 million Czechs and only 2.5 million Slovaks in the Republic, Dejean complained, and emphasized that critical voices were heard in Bohemia against the system which enabled Slovaks to play a decisive role in the lives of the Czechs while the Czechs had no right to intervene in Slovak affairs.[13]

Regardless of the simplification seen in Dejean's interpretation, the arrangement of the relations between the Czechs and Slovaks was still an open question in the autumn of 1945. In his radio speech on October 28, Beneš declared that relations between the Czechs and Slovaks would definitely be settled on the basis of an equal position for both nations but that the whole of their bilateral relations assumed tact, reason, and impartiality on both sides.[14] The fact that those issues were of continuous interest for the French side is also confirmed by an information prepared by the Quai d'Orsay for General de Gaulle on December 7, 1945 on the occasion of the visit of Vladimír Clementis to Paris. It pointed to the existence of the

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] According to information report prepared for General de Gaulle by the French Foreign Ministry on December 7, 1945. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 36.

movement in favour of the independence of Slovakia which had appeared recently but on the other hand it stated that not too much attention should probably have been devoted to it. The report underlined, however, that there was dissatisfaction with the given status particularly in Slovak Catholic circles and, on the Czech side voices were heard against too much influence achieved by the Slovak elements in the government and state administration.[15]

How did Dejean himself value the political situation in Slovakia before the elections? Towards the end of the first third of January he visited Bratislava, where he was welcomed warmheartedly by the chairman of the Board of Commissioners Šmidke. He announced the Quai d'Orsay that men standing at that time at the head of Slovakia, whether communists or democrats, were straightforward and resolute proponents of the Czecho-Slovak republic: they were convinced that Slovakia could not be separated from Czech lands without suffering losses itself.[16] The position of President Beneš was equally strong in Prague and in Bratislava. He was not only the symbol of the unity of the Republic both in Czech lands and in Slovakia but also a living uniting segment of the elements that constituted it. On the other hand, the Slovaks did not yield to particularism at all.[17] They wished to be treated a nation with the same rights as the Czech nation, with which it constituted the Czecho-Slovak Republic. For that reason, Slovakia wished to keep a certain number of areas in its competence – information, schools, etc., within which no intervention on the part of the Czechs would be endured. At the same time Slovakia requested influence proportional to its numerical representation within the republic in the control of the affairs of common interest – foreign affairs, army, finances, that means one third of the posts. Since the Czechs did not have their own administrative bodies, different from the organs of the republic, the Slovaks were privileged in the current situation in comparison with the Czechs. They participated in the administration of Bohemia and Moravia, while the Czechs did not share in the administration of purely Slovak matters. Since the joint competence of the Slovak bodies and the Republic as a whole was not clearly defined, it was the source of constant tension. The existing status consisting in the compromise made in Košice therefore had to be normalized, which would not avoid difficulties. The Czech stance was in principle as follows: Have your autonomy, if you wish, but cover all the costs associated with it yourself. Although the attitude seems justified per se, it met with little understanding in Slovakia,[18] Dejean confessed in his report for the Quai d'Orsay but he did not give any details.

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague on February 15, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 74 (Slovaquie).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

Dejean saw an important step towards the betterment of the situation in the agreement which the Czecho-Slovak government and the Slovak National Council had concluded on April 11, 1946 and which considerably changed matters; in his opinion, the restoration of the unity of the Czecho-Slovak state was on the right track. A signal for better times was for him also the fact of the formation of the two new political parties in Slovakia, which removed the disproportion between the political life in Czech lands on the one hand and Slovakia on the other, and which he thought to be the main obstacle to the conclusion of a complete agreement between Prague and Bratislava.[19] Unfortunately, he did not explain his opinion and therefore it can hardly be safely stated why he regarded precisely the lack of parallelism in the number of political parties in Czech lands and in Slovakia as a serious obstacle to the definitive agreement between Prague and Bratislava. Did he think that the same number of parties would convince the Slovak public about the equal position of Slovakia in the Republic at the time when doubt was cast on it by the agreement of April 11? It is hard to say. It is certain that he highly valued this agreement, about the content of which he informed the Ministry in detail: through the agreement, "Czechoslovakia slowly but without conflicts reorganizes itself. The third republic follows the track of the first one, namely continues in creating a strong, Slavic and coherent nation-state", which "is still too decentralized, but dualism is fading away; the unity of the state is again being born; power is gradually being concentrated in the hands of the leading personalities in Prague, both Slovaks and Czechs".[20] Dejean was strongly convinced that the Slovak people could aspire to free development only together with the Czech people. And, on the other hand, the Czech people could keep its position in Central Europe only on condition that it remained a state on the river Danube.

I mentioned Dejean's statement that communists and democrats were resolute proponents of the Czecho-Slovak Republic as well as his opinion that the correction of the compromise made in Košice was necessary but it could not be realized without difficulties. Since in Slovakia power was in the hands of the two above mentioned political groupings, a question arises why the correction of the Košice compromise should have been problematic. Dejean saw the source of expected troubles in the fact that the circles which were at the head of Slovakia at that time represented the minority of the nation. "The majority of the country, who are Catholics, remain out of the two so far established political parties and, consequently also outside the Government. This is a problem, which is not at all smaller than the problem of the relation between the Czechs and Slovaks" – he summed up the essence of the problem of the political life in Slovakia before the May elections; he tried to ascribe the responsibility for the given status to the mass of the less-educated Slovak peas-

[19] See Dejean's message quoted above of May 2, 1946.

[20] Ibid.

ants being firmly tied to religion and kept in the dark by priests whose concepts and influence were similar to the concept and influence of the clergy in the French part of Canada";[21] he said that the peasants did not understand at all the unpropitious role of Hitler's aide Dr Tiso: they perceived with emotion the fact that during the five years the Nazis relatively protected Slovakia while Bohemia-Moravia were exposed to harsh oppression and they remained grateful to Tiso for that. The most impartial observers stated that Tiso would have again obtained 60-70% in free elections,[22] Dejean said, and added that the main concern of those who closely observed the situation in Slovakia both in Prague and in Bratislava, was from the very beginning of the electoral campaign to achieve the entry of the Slovak Catholics into governmental political parties. He said that the recent establishment of the Labour Party did not solve the existing problem because it actually concerned the re-constitution of the Social Democratic Party under a different name and that Labour Party would be shaped to the detriment of the Communist party with the support of some voters whose affiliation to Democratic party was not their sincere conviction but only their intent to show their opposition to communism. Dejean thus actually expressed his concern because the parties supporting the unitary state were not really strengthened by establishing the third political party in Slovakia. Also for this reason the question of the fourth Slovak party remained a "much discussed question". In his opinion, it might have theoretically been a branch of the National-socialist party or the People's (Catholic) party. But he considered that variant unreal since the communists' attitude was against both solutions. Monsignor Šrámek did not hide his opposition to the establishment of the Slovak branch of the Catholic Party because he was afraid of the massive influx of Tiso's supporters. As for the National-socialist party, Dejean did not conceal his conviction that it would not be able to attract Catholics although some of them might see it as a sort of recourse. As for those who did not wish to see too many Slovak voters outside political life and therefore tried to establish "parti unique", he said that a party which lacks a precisely defined programme should provisionally replace the Catholic and national-socialist parties in Slovakia. It would gain a certain number of votes whose political significance could not be defined clearly but whose votes might be placed against the communists. And this was precisely what concerned those who fostered the establishment of the fourth political party in Slovakia vested in Juraj Slávik and Vavro Šrobár – Dejean notified the Quai d'Orsay.[23]

Dejean showed impartiality in understanding the complex political situation in Slovakia on the eve of the elections. He did not mention, however, that the problem

[21] Dejean in a telegram of February 15, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 74 (Slovaquie).

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

resulting from the absence of a political party gathering Slovak Catholics, the problem following from their lack of involvement in political life was not produced by the Slovak Catholics, but resulted from the take-over of the power by the communists and democrats as early as during the 1944 Uprising. The dilemma lay in the fact that the then power-holders did not want either to allow the establishment of a Catholic political party or to leave the Catholics outside political life, because in the electoral struggle they calculated on winning their votes.

In this connection it is worth mentioning that Dejean himself was sporadically informed about the wish of the Slovak Catholics to have their own political party because French Embassy received letters now and then from individuals expressing these wishes. Just before the February visit to Slovakia, he sent a letter to Paris in which two Slovaks had asked him, among other things, to intercede with his Government to permit the political party of Christian-social revival.[24] Since it was clear from the content of the letter that its writers' aim was also an unambiguous defence of Dr Tiso and, at least indirectly, also the renewal of the Slovak independence, it evidently could not raise sympathies in Dejean, who was a strong supporter of the unitary Czecho-Slovak state.

As for the prognoses of election results, a strictly confidential talk which Beneš had with Dejean on May 17, 1946, is interesting. The President tried to estimate the results of the coming elections and to outline the principles which he intended to follow in establishing the new cabinet. He supposed that the Communist Party – the only party that was a candidate throughout the republic – would emerge from the election as the strongest. He expected that with regard to the votes from Slovakia, it could receive or even exceed 30% of votes. He thought that the National Socialist Party would win in Bohemia and Moravia. In the whole state it would come immediately after the Communists with about 25% of the vote. According to Beneš, the People's Party would come next with 18-20% and the social democrats with 15%. The rest of votes, i.e. about 10-12% would be given to the Slovak non-communist parties – Democratic Party, Labour Party, and Party of Freedom.[25]

Beneš also said that the communists and social democrats would not achieve an absolute majority. Since no other majority could be expected, he considered it necessary to keep the coalition government on the basis of the four parties: that type of Government fitted in the tradition of the country and, according to him, it showed good results.[26]

The expected losses of the social democrats would not necessarily lead, according to Beneš, to any change in the position of the prime minister because he did not

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[24] Dejean's message to Paris of January 22, 1946, ibid.

[25] Dejean's coded telegram sent to Paris on May 18, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

[26] Ibid.

think that the Cabinet had to be led by a member of the strongest political party. On the other hand, the fact that the prime minister would be acceptable to all four main parties was very important to him. He was convinced that the elections would clear up the atmosphere but clearly could not change the trend of either domestic or foreign policy of the republic; quite the reverse – they would show the limits to the legitimate demands of everybody.[27] In spite of the fact that Beneš' prognosis was mistaken in several points, I think that it is precisely his conviction about the impossibility of change after the election in the trend of the Republic that probably serves as the best evidence of his not understanding the depth of changes that had taken place on the international scene and within Czecho-Slovakia during the Second World War and the impact of those changes on the real status of individual political subjects within the liberated country. He was probably unable to reckon on all the possible consequences of regulated democracy represented by National Front and he still based his political visions on the games of political forces observing the rules existing before the Second World War. Dejean did not seem to doubt the correctness of Beneš' predictions. He notified the Quai d'Orsay that the President energized by his immense popularity as well as trust and recognition of the powers looked with sound optimism towards the future which was one of the dominant features of his character and one of the chief elements of his activities.[28]

The election results were surprising to Beneš. On May 27 Dejean met him and the President confessed that they surprised him very much. He did not assume that communists would receive more than 33%. He thought that the position of Catholics would be much stronger. He did not reckon with such great losses for the social democrats. But the poor results of the national socialists disconcerted him most; according to his expectations they should have been a counterbalance to the communists. However, his decision was to establish the coalition government and distribute the benches exactly according to the election results. He did realize, however, that the distribution would be difficult and the existence of an absolute majority received by the communists and social democrats – although not large with its 51 %, would affect the conditions under which the coalition government could function. With the support of the social democrats the communists would practically have the right of veto, which the other parties would not have, he said to Dejean.[29] He complained that if a difference of opinions between him and the Government emerged, it would be much more difficult for him to enforce a solution using the procedures used by him so far. The President realized that, as Dejean informed the Quai d'Orsay, but, encouraged by general confidence, he intended to continue in the delicate work which was ahead of him. He congratulated himself on his good per-

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Dejean's coded telegram dispatched from Prague on May 28, 1946, ibid.

sonal relations with Gottwald who had been predetermined by the election to play a primary role in the period to come,[30] the Ambassador said.

He did not say in the cited report whether his "sound optimism" had not deserted Beneš; but we can conclude from the total shift in the power position of individual political parties owing to the election results that if Beneš could base his optimism before elections on the assumption that socialists and communists would not win the majority of votes, after the election, he could build his optimism only on keeping good personal relations with Gottwald. With regard to the political tradition of the Communist party and political philosophy of its leaders it was really a very dubious factor...

In his analysis of the election results sent to Paris on May 28, Dejean laid emphasis on the fact that, although anti-Marxist parties gained in Slovakia more than 60%, the election results brought the communists a much higher number of votes than had generally been expected. In fact, he said, the proportions as a whole were reversed in the historic lands on the one hand and in Slovakia on the other. The Czechs and Slovaks voted opposite trends, which – as it seems – would not contribute to the strengthening of the still fragile links between them in spite of the progress which had recently been achieved and about which I had informed...There was a threat that the differences in tendencies between Prague and Bratislava which had occurred in different areas would be increasingly more accentuated by the election results. All in all, the effort to preserve the unity of the state would fall on the shoulders of the Czech communists – election winners thanks to the ties of brotherhood that associate them with the Slovak communists.[31] Slovak "bourgeois nationalists" could probably tell their truth about the "ties of brotherhood"...

In contrast to Beneš, who did not expect the victory of the communists, the matters were seen differently in Washington. The French Ambassador in the USA Georges Bonnet sent a coded telegram to the Quai d'Orsay on May 31. It said that the victory of "Czech" communists and the probable appointment of Gottwald to the head of the Government did not rouse any particular disturbance in the American press and in political circles. The State Department declared that the success was predictable and did not go beyond the frame of prognosis. The American Foreign Ministry emphasized, observed Bonnet, that its attitude towards governments led by communists and those which were established under Soviet pressure was entirely different from its stance on the governments established by the free games of democratic institutions.[32]

On the other hand, the press indicated that if communists could head the Government, their activity would be limited by the fact that the number of positions be-

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Bonnet's telegram dispatched from Washington on May 31, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

longing to other parties would be increased. Commentators did not expect any innovation in the field of the constitution and, moreover, they assumed a decrease in the influence of the communists at the regional level in order to avoid any conflict with Slovakia, whose majority voted in favour of the conservative line and what would stimulate the communists to be careful. According to the press, it was very probable that Masaryk would remain in the post of Foreign Minister and certain that Beneš would be re-elected President. Bonnet stated that under such conditions, the normal course of the elections on May 26 as well as their results, were interpreted in Washington as a sign of the political maturity of Czecho-Slovakia and as an encouraging evidence of the renaissance of the democratic spirit in Central Europe.[33]

As to the opinion of the American press reproduced by Bonnet that since Slovakia's majority spoke "in favour of the conservative line", the communists would select a careful strategy not to cause any conflict with Slovakia, it should be at least said that the American press followed either did not notice or underestimated the readiness of the Czech and Slovak communists to cooperate in the interest of the party-political aims to the extent which other political parties could not approach.

Beneš did not realize the danger following from the victory of the radical left after the elections. His opinion was that the domestic situation after the election was stabilized enough so the Government could think about the strengthening of treaty links to France. He was thinking of a treaty of alliance analogous to the treaties concluded by the ČSR with the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. He intended to negotiate this question as soon as possible with Gottwald and he considered it to be very important that Dejean should notify his Government immediately of the directives about which he had informed him. He also said that the Czecho-Slovak government attached great importance to conveying the information about its intention to Moscow before the initiation of the talks. He did not think, however, that the Soviet Union intended to hinder the strengthening of the allied relations between France and Czecho-Slovakia and the establishment of simple and clear treaty relations.[34] It is well known how the matter turned out after Gottwald's and Clementis' vacillation and ultimately after Stalin's intervention in July 1947.

During his talks with Dejean, Beneš commented on the election results in Slovakia several times. He considered the victory of the democrats to be the germ of a serious crisis since he saw in it the triumph of Slovak "particularism" (he probably painstakingly avoided the word separatism) and potentially dangerous weakening of the unity of the state. On the other hand, he did not conceal that he considered the "crisis" to be actually beneficial since the communists encouraged the par-

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague on July 1, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

ticularist tendencies of the Slovaks after the liberation, but after the elections they realized how dangerous such an attitude was.[35] And that experience was undoubtedly an important step towards the treaties signed on June 27, which put an end to dualism and essentially reestablished the unity of the state, which is a considerable step forward because the Republic is evidently consolidating[36] – the President explained to Dejean.

Evidently the President had not noticed that if "communists" – he probably meant Czech communists, which is not explicit in the cited message but is seen from the context – "encouraged the particularist tendencies of the Slovaks", they did not do it because a sort of the independence of Slovakia within the republic would be a matter of great concern to them, but probably because they were playing a complicated role directed from Moscow and leading to gradual undermining and weakening of the "bourgeois" political camp. The communist strategy, which celebrated its first nation-wide success in the elections, did not actually mean any threat to the state's unity, as Beneš thought or spoke, but it was a danger to its future political system because the poor election results of the Slovak communists suddenly and for many years made of them, in the interest of the preservation of their political positions, obedient recipients of the dictates of the Prague party centre. Thus a political block was formed in the state which might have "consolidated" it indeed through its coherence guaranteed by Moscow but not according to the visions of President Beneš and the democratically oriented society.

Beneš' ideas about the beneficial influence of the election results on the state's unity were interpreted by Dejean in the telegram dispatched to the Quai d'Orsay on July 5, 1946. He accentuated that the agreement of April 11, 1946 following the 1945 treaties was a death-blow to dualism and, moreover, he emphasized, that the provisions accepted by the National Front immediately after the elections, on June 27, represented a new and a very important phase in the re-establishment of the unity of the state. It does not concern negotiations on the basis of equality between sovereign powers any more, he said, but decisions made without them by the highest and common institution "decided to maintain national unity".[37] He continued: From now on, subordination of Bratislava institutions to the Prague ones is complete from the legislative and executive perspective because "each proposal of an order of the Slovak National Council must be submitted to the central government at least two weeks before the beginning of the discussion about it. And the Government will decide whether the issue of donation concerns only Slovakia or the whole Republic". In addition, a special commission of lawyers established for the purpose of the unification of legislation "will work out and submit proposals for the laws

[35] Ibid.

[36] Cf ibid.

[37] Dejean's telegram dispatched from Prague on July 5, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 37.

valid throughout the republic to the Government – it will either propose to extend amendments valid in Czech lands to Slovakia or to adopt analogous amendments by SNC. As for the executive power, the adopted decisions are not less radical. The Board of Commissioners in Bratislava is now strictly subordinate to the Government. Every commissioner is accountable to the particular minister. He must fulfil his directives and submit reports to him. The minister reserves the right to approve or annul measures ordered by the commissioner.[38]

Dejean also stressed that as far as the appointment of state and economic administrators is concerned, categorical amendments of the agreement of April 11 were even strengthened. The immense success achieved by the Democratic Party in the elections as well as the crisis which followed, showed the first favourable results: strengthening of the Republic's unity and the state's authority. He presented the fact that in the manifesto of July 1 the Democratic party joined other Slovak parties in their demand for early and strict condemnation of Dr Tiso as evidence of the real impact and importance of the post-electoral June agreement.[39]

Dejean sent a telegram to the Quai d'Orsay on October 1, 1946 in which he again returned to the elections. He reproduced there his two-hour discussion with Beneš who disclosed his fear immediately after the elections of how the coalition government would operate after the victory of the communists. He spoke about the matter with particular carefulness in public but he had to ask himself whether the communists followed by the social democrats would not try to misuse their victory and eliminate the influence of other parties. Now, five months after the elections, the experiences persuaded him that his apprehensions were absolutely unjustified. After certain initial balancing and in spite of some incidents – for instance the one which took place after the sentence pronounced on the members of the protectorate government – the communists presented themselves as tolerant towards their partners. They clearly recognized that their partners had their own opinion of a lot of matters and understood that in working out the governmental decisions they had to be taken into account because it concerns the decisions of the Government and not of the political parties,[40] he explained to Dejean.

Beneš particularly appreciated that, in his opinion, the communists had taken a very clear stand in two crucial issues: a) they declared a stop to socialization measures and showed that currently the measures went as far as it was possible without doing harm to the renovation and development of small proprietorship and the middle class; b) they literally rejected "the dictatorship of the proletariat" as a necessary instrument for the destruction of the capitalist order and construction of the state on the basis of socialism. Beneš was the first to declare that not all countries

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Dejean's telegram sent to the Quai d'Orsay on October 1, 1946. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 38.

had to follow the same route to reach socialism and that such a highly developed nation as "Czechoslovak" could avoid the use of this form or this phase which might have been unavoidable in other countries. When he said that at the Prague university in December 1945, his words evidently stirred up discontent among communists but today Gottwald says the same, the President accentuated and added that the tolerant and moderate attitude of the communists enabled the creation of a coherent and executive ministerial cabinet as well as a rather balanced governmental system.[41]

It follows from what has been said above that Beneš remained true to his ideas which he had acquired in the spring of 1945 and which he presented to the French Ambassador in Moscow, general Georges Catroux on March 18, 1945 when in the capital of the Soviet Union he negotiated with the Moscow exiles about the members of the new government. Although the Government had not been definitely constituted yet, Beneš told the general that agreement was reached in two important points: 1) Agreement was reached between the Czechs and Slovaks on the structure of the new state which would remain unitary but if compared to the pre-war internal arrangement, some competencies of central organs would be strengthened in some areas and larger regional autonomy would be awarded in other areas. 2) The participation of the Czech and Slovak communists in the Government would be significant but would not go beyond 20-30%, meaning 6-7 ministers in the 25-member cabinet; in comparison with the members of bourgeois parties the ratio would be approximately 1 : 3. Beneš did not consider that constellation to be quite satisfactory but he valued it as acceptable and viable under the assumption that each party would be loyal to it. He had been forced to accept it in the given phase realizing that he would have to try to change it in Prague.[42]

Taking "two very important points" into account, which he had mentioned to general Catroux – that is, the unitary structure of the state and the participation of communists in the Government – President Beneš had no reasons to be discontented in the first months after the May elections. The threat of dualism which he perceived as intensively as Ambassador Dejean was a matter of the past and the threat that communists would begin to behave disloyally towards the other political parties would be fully uncovered several months later. The fact that the first free post-war parliamentary elections would also be the last for several decades could hardly has been foreseen in autumn 1946.

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Catroux's coded telegram dispatched from Moscow on March 28, 1945. MAE, Paris, Europe 1944-1949, Tchécoslovaquie, Vol 36.