

**CIVIC FORUM, PUBLIC AGAINST VIOLENCE,
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SLOVAKIA**

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Abstract: Standard narratives of 1989 in Czechoslovakia maintain that the revolution brought two civic associations into being: the “Czech” Civic Forum (OF) and the “Slovak” Public against Violence (VPN). Thorough examination of relevant archival and newspaper evidence, however, demonstrates that this belief is mistaken; in the beginning, Slovaks were just as likely to found chapters of Civic Forum as they were to establish branches of Public against Violence. This article documents this initial situation and explains how Public against Violence came to achieve hegemony over the Slovak civic movement. The author argues that this achievement was the result of a struggle between activists in Bratislava and their colleagues elsewhere in Slovakia, where the prize was the power to represent Slovakia. Ultimately, it was a struggle over rival visions of the proper political organization of Slovakia, with crucial implications for the future of Slovakia within the Czecho-Slovak federation.

Textbook accounts of the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent dissolution of Czechoslovakia relate that two separate civic initiatives emerged in 1989, channeling popular political engagement and orchestrating the democratic transition, and that one was Czech while the other was Slovak. This narrative matches what became the official position of the founders of these initiatives in Prague and Bratislava, but systematic examination of local initiative outside the capitals reveals a dramatically different story. While it is true enough that local activists in the Czech lands affiliated themselves with the association founded in Prague rather than Bratislava, it turns out that Slovaks were initially at least as likely to found chapters of the Prague initiative as they were to form branches of the Bratislava movement. This finding raises important questions about the nature of democracy, Czecho-Slovak relations, and possibilities for federation in revolutionary and post-Communist Czechoslovakia.

A handful of scholars have noted the existence of Civic Forum (the Prague-based initiative) in some parts of Slovakia, but have neither agreed on the details nor recognized its full extent. Simon Smith notes that Civic Forum (*Občianske fórum*, or OF) was founded prior to Public against Violence (*Verejnost' proti násiliu*, or VPN) in Humenné and other towns of East Slovakia, while Jan Rychlík avers that OF chapters were established in Košice and some parts of West Slovakia, and Jiří Suk writes that OF was founded prior to VPN in many parts of East and Central Slovakia. Rychlík suggests that Civic Forum's coordinating center in Prague abolished all Slovak OF chapters in late November or early December 1989, whereupon they were reorganized as branches of VPN, whereas Suk provides evidence that many chapters resisted incorporation into VPN

into 1990.¹ The truth is that Civic Forum initially enjoyed a pre-eminent position in nineteen of the 38 districts into which Slovakia was divided in 1989, and it was present in at least eight others. At its height, in other words, OF was an important force across roughly half of Slovakia's territory. Moreover, OF was dispersed across all three of Slovakia's administrative regions (East, Central, and West Slovakia), and even in Bratislava itself. While most Slovak Civic Fora did convert to VPN in late November and early December 1989, the process was not painless, and as Suk points out, many Slovak OFs struggled to maintain their original identity well into 1990.

As Carol Leff has observed, the institutionalization of separate Czech and Slovak party systems after 1989 was a factor in producing the political stalemate which led to the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic.² Though the Bratislava founders of VPN have repeatedly emphasized that their movement was conceived in solidarity with Prague and not as a kind of willful separation, the fact remains that the bifurcation of the civic movement along republican lines greatly facilitated the emergence of separate party systems.³ The extensive range of Civic Forum's appeal in Slovakia, however, suggests that this bifurcation was not inevitable. Indeed, many OF and VPN initiatives outside the Slovak capital established structures of local and regional cooperation—even

¹ Simon Smith, "Civic Forum and Public Against Violence: Agents for Community Self-Determination? Experiences of Local Actors," in *Local Communities and Post-Communist Transformation: Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia*, ed. Simon Smith (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 49-51, 79-80; Jan Rychlík, "The Possibilities for Czech-Slovak Compromise, 1989-1992," in *Irreconcilable Differences? Explaining Czechoslovakia's Dissolution*, ed. Michael Kraus and Allison Stanger (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 51, and "Průběh rozpadu Československa v letech 1989-92," in *Dělení Československa: Deset let poté...*, ed. Karel Vodička (Prague: Volvox Globator, 2003), pp. 270-271; Jiří Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce: Aktéři, zápletky a křížovatky jedné politické krize (od listopadu 1989 do června 1990)* (Prague: Prostor, 2003), p. 296.

² Carol Skalnik Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 97-99. See also Abby Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 75-76.

³ See, for example, Fedor Gál's account of VPN's origins in Ingrid Antalová, ed., *Verejnosť proti násiliu—Občianske fórum: Svedectvá* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 1999), p. 11.

federation—which might have provided generally applicable models. Given this starting point, the outcome of two democratic movements closely allied yet rigorously divided on national/republican lines is a problem to be solved. A close reading of the available archival evidence and contemporary local newspapers suggests that this outcome was the result of a struggle—a struggle not between Prague and Bratislava, as might be expected, but between Bratislava and other parts of Slovakia, in which the prize was the power to represent Slovakia.

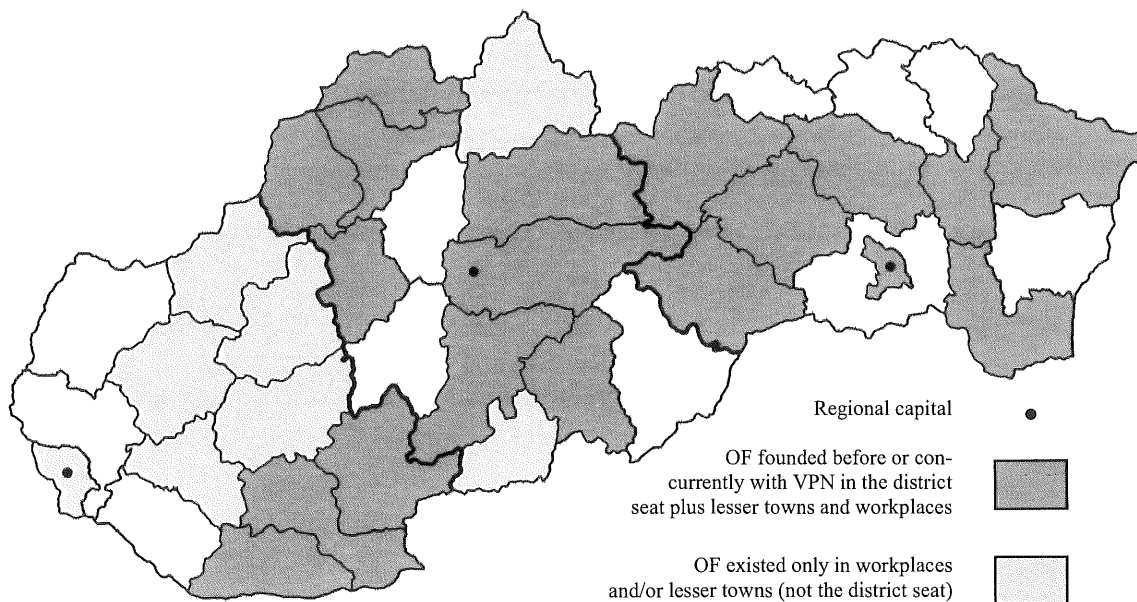
Foundation

Between the outset of revolution in Czechoslovakia on 17 November 1989 and the general strike ten days later, Civic Fora were founded in the workplaces and towns of at least 27 of Slovakia's 38 districts, including nineteen district capitals.⁴ Map 1 represents this initial dispersion of Civic Forum in Slovakia.⁵

Before examining how these Slovak Civic Fora came into being, it should be emphasized that OF and VPN were but two of many initiatives by which citizens responded to what they came to know as the “massacre” of 17 November, when police brutally suppressed a student-led march in Prague. The first groups to organize, of course, were students and actors, who began full-time strikes on 18 November and

⁴ The districts where OFs were founded in the district capital as well as workplaces and lesser towns (where such existed) were Banská Bystrica, Čadca, Humenné, Komárno, Košice, Levice, Liptovský Mikuláš, Lučenec, Nové Zámky, Poprad, Považská Bystrica, Prešov, Prievidza, Rožňava, Spišská Nová Ves, Trebišov, Vranov nad Topľou, Zvolen, and Žilina. The districts where I have thus far found evidence of Civic Fora only in workplaces and/or lesser towns are Bratislava, Dolný Kubín, Galanta, Nitra, Topoľčany, Trenčín, Trnava, and Veľký Krtíš.

⁵ Fluctuation between singular and plural forms of “Civic Forum” is not meant to jar the reader, but to reflect the multiple valences of the term in revolutionary usage. It could refer both to individual, local groups (Civic Fora) as well as the statewide network of these groups (Civic Forum). In addition, *občianske fórum* could refer both to an informal activity (as an uncapitalized common noun) and to a semi-formal association (as a capitalized proper noun). As will be shown, this versatility was part of Civic Forum's appeal.



Map 1: The Initial Dispersion of Civic Forum in Slovakia

appealed to citizens throughout the country to join them in a two-hour general strike nine days later. On 20 and 21 November, strikes broke out in universities and theaters from Pilsen to Prešov, and the first workplace strike committees began to form. Thus, when news began to spread of the founding of OF and VPN in Prague and Bratislava on 19 November, it reached a country already in motion. OF and VPN, moreover, were by no means the only civic associations of their type to be founded. The Independent Hungarian Initiative (*Független Magyar Kezdeményezés*, or FMK) was founded in the southern Slovak town of Šaľa on 18 November, and between 20 and 24 November such associations as the Liberec Initiative, the Moravian Civic Movement, and the Orava Initiative were all established, apparently without awareness of OF's or VPN's existence.⁶ In towns throughout Czechoslovakia, moreover, concerned citizens began

⁶ See "Komentář LI o shromáždění v Liberci," Liberec, 23 November 1989 (Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, Prague, [hereafter ÚSD]: archiv KC OF, box "23.11. I."); "Provolání Moravského občanského hnutí ze dne 20.11.1989," Brno, 20 November 1989 (Státní okresní archiv Uherské Hradiště: sbírka nezpracovaných materiálů, box 7, folder "Letáky a plakáty všeobecné"); and "Verejnosť proti násiliu informuje," *Orava*, 13 December 1989, p. 2.

organizing as early as 19 November, even if they gave no names to their initiatives. In the beginning, civic initiative was everywhere local and autonomous; this was genuinely spontaneous mobilization from below.

The story behind the founding of each local Civic Forum—as with each local group of VPN—was unique, but three broad patterns can be discerned. In the beginning, a small group came together and began engaging in revolutionary activity shortly after learning of the massacre and in conjunction with striking students and artists; they began calling themselves Civic Fora as early as 20 or 21 November in Košice and 23 November in Spišská Nová Ves. Later, on 26 and 27 November, they established themselves as citywide associations.⁷ The Civic Fora in large towns like Banská Bystrica, Prešov, and probably Žilina were of this type.⁸ In the second pattern, citizens demonstrating on a town square spontaneously identified themselves as a “civic forum” (that is, a group of citizens exchanging ideas about public matters) with a coordinating committee of “Civic Forum” (a semi-formal association taking inspiration from the Prague initiative) coming into being later that evening or the next day. Thus an assembly of 300 in Levice called itself a civic forum on 24 November, and a Civic Forum coordinating committee formally declared itself the next day.⁹ The story in Poprad was similar.¹⁰ In Rožňava, Civic Forum was established during a public meeting in the district House of Pioneers and Youth following the general strike, with the assembled citizens electing spokesmen from

⁷ Ivan Dejmal and Vladislav Chlipala, quoted in Antalová, pp. 14, 23; “Premeny v zrkadle týždňa,” *Spišské hlasy*, 8 December 1989, p. 1.

⁸ “Záverečné vyhlásenie,” *Smer*, 28 November 1989, p. 2; “Slovu socializmus dajme konkrétny obsah,” *Smer*, 29 November 1989, p. 4; “V centre Prešova,” *Prešovské noviny*, 28 November 1989, p. 2; “Prvé kroky na ceste k dialógu,” *Prešovské noviny*, 30 November 1989, p. 1; “Kronika uplynulých dní,” *Ciel*, 30 November 1989, p. 6.

⁹ “Svedectvo týchto dní,” *Fórum* (Levice), no. 1, p. 12; “Zhromaždenie Občianskeho fóra,” *Pohronie*, 7 December 1989, p. 1.

¹⁰ “V pondelok 27. novembra v okresnom sídle,” *Podtatranské noviny*, 30 November 1989, p. 1; “Programové vyhlásenie” and “Vyhlásenie,” *Podtatranské noviny*, 7 December 1989, pp. 1, 4.

their midst.¹¹ The final pattern was for the strike committees in a town to associate—during the general strike or later that day—and collectively establish a municipal civic association. This was the case in Nové Zámky, where the association was called Civic Forum, and in Čadca, where the initiative (in the singular) was called “OF and VPN.”¹² (Unfortunately, not enough information has yet come to light to determine which patterns the Civic Fora in Humenné, Komárno, Liptovský Mikuláš, Lučenec, Považská Bystrica, Prievidza, Trebišov, Vranov nad Topľou, and Zvolen followed.)

What accounts for the wide dispersion of Civic Forum in Slovakia? We can generally reject the hypothesis that Slovaks established Civic Fora simply because they were unaware of VPN. Perhaps in Košice, where OF was first established in Slovakia, the founders had not yet heard of VPN, but in most places it seems clear that they had. The founding declarations of OF Lučenec, OF Prievidza, OF Rožňava, and OF Žilina all explicitly expressed agreement with the demands of VPN in Bratislava as well as OF in Prague.¹³ After 24 November, when Slovak television broadcast a live debate wherein students and VPN spokesmen trounced Communist functionaries, it is difficult to imagine that anyone politically active in Slovakia could have been unaware of VPN. Most Slovak OFs, however, seem to have been founded after this date.¹⁴ Despite their knowledge of VPN in Bratislava, they *chose* to identify themselves with Civic Forum.

A hypothesis commonly advanced by those aware of the existence of Civic Forum in Slovakia is that it was founded in places with stronger personal or historic ties to

¹¹ K. Bradovková, “Občianske fórum v Rožňave,” *Zora Gemera*, 30 November 1989, p. 1.

¹² “Spoločne do ďalších dní,” “V N. Zámkoch MKV,” and “Umelci v našom meste,” *Naše novosti*, 5 December 1989, pp. 1, 3; “Občania Kysúc,” *Kysuce*, 1 December 1989, p. 4.

¹³ “Dostali sme po uzávierke,” *Ipeľ*, 28 November 1989, p. 2; “V N. Zámkoch MKV,” *op. cit.*; “Na aktuálnu tému s členom koordinačnej skupiny OF Lubomírom Šaturom,” *Prieboj*, 13 December 1989, p. 1; Bradovková, *op. cit.*; “Vyhlásenie Občianskeho fóra,” *Cieľ*, 30 November 1989, p. 1.

¹⁴ Eight OFs in district towns were definitely founded after the debate, five were definitely founded before; not enough information is yet available to date the foundings of the rest precisely.

Prague than to Bratislava. This begs the question of why these ties were stronger, but there is evidence that in at least some instances a correlation did exist. At a Bratislava conference marking the tenth anniversary of the revolution, Peter Zajac (a former spokesman for VPN in Bratislava) speculated that activists in Košice must have founded OF because someone from Prague had gone there. A former OF Košice activist, Vladislav Chlipala, rebutted this hypothesis, pointing out that no one from Prague had appeared in Košice until 23 November, days after OF Košice had been founded. This was still before anyone from Bratislava appeared, however, and Chlipala himself observed that activists in Košice ardently sought visitors from Prague, while they felt no need to communicate with Bratislava. He further acknowledged that OF Košice founders had indeed learned about Civic Forum from acquaintances in Prague, albeit not face-to-face.¹⁵ Former OF Humenné activists, in interviews conducted by Simon Smith, also recalled having more direct personal contact with Prague than with Bratislava.¹⁶ It should be emphasized, however, that whatever contact there was with Prague, it was not necessarily with OF. The first revolutionary activist from Prague to visit Košice was a student, and OF Humenné activists report that they got their information from railway workers. The OF coordinating center (*koordináční centrum*, or KC) in Prague, for its part, was oblivious to most grassroots activity in Slovakia (and even, to a surprising extent, in the Czech lands), such that by the end of November, the only Slovak Civic Fora of which it was evidently aware were Košice and Žilina.¹⁷

¹⁵ Antalová, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶ Smith, p. 49.

¹⁷ Antalová, pp. 14, 24-25; *Informační servis* (Prague), no. 10 (28 November 1989), p. 2. Other Slovak Civic Fora telephoned or sent letters or telegrams to the KC OF before the end of November, but it seems that their messages went unnoticed amid the hundreds of letters and telephone calls received daily at a time when mechanisms for processing them were still improvisational and chaotic, and when there were many other pressing matters to think about.

Even if founders of Civic Fora in Slovakia lacked personal connections with Prague, they were nonetheless likely to be better informed about developments in Prague than in Bratislava. The regional newspapers in Central and East Slovakia, and district newspapers everywhere, initially provided far more information about demonstrations in Prague, the establishment of Civic Forum, and cadre shuffling in the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party than they did about demonstrations in Bratislava, the establishment of Public against Violence, or cadre changes in the Central Committee of the Slovak Communist Party. This naturally reflected the fact that mass media were tightly controlled by the Communist Party, which despite nominal federalization, remained highly centralized. To counter lacunae in the state-run media, of course, Czech and Slovak revolutionaries developed a vast samizdat literature of flyers and bulletins that reached the shop windows and bulletin boards of every town and many villages. In most of Slovakia, however, even this literature was strongly oriented toward Prague. As a result of this information imbalance, Prague set the tone for much of the public debate in Slovakia, a fact that was reflected even in language. Activists in Banská Bystrica struggled to find a proper translation of the Czech word *mluvčí* (spokesperson), and some of the flyers and posters that circulated in central and eastern Slovakia were written in a curious blend of Slovak and Czech.¹⁸

Perhaps the most important factor behind the relative dispersion of OF and VPN in Slovakia is the way the two initiatives were understood. In general, Civic Forum was understood to be relatively more open, Public against Violence relatively more restricted.

¹⁸ Examples can be found in the Štátny archív v Banskej Bystrici, pobočka Banská Bystrica (hereafter BB): Zbierka plagátov získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; the Štátny archív v Košiciach, pobočka Košice (hereafter KS): zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder "Rôzne"; and the Štátny archív v Košiciach, pobočka Svidník: Zbierka plagátov, letákov a drobnej tlače, box 10: "Celoštátna, regionálna a okresná dokumentácia OF, VPN a SZ."

The flyers, which the coordinating centers of the two movements initially produced, and which circulated across Slovakia prior to the general strike, supported such interpretations. In their very first declaration, for example, the founders of Civic Forum described their movement as one “open to all segments and strengths of the Czechoslovak public.”¹⁹ Subsequent proclamations issued by OF Prague and OF Brno between 22 and 25 November repeatedly encouraged citizens to establish their own Civic Fora in their workplaces and municipalities, without limiting this invitation to residents of the Czech lands. Rather, they emphasized that “anyone can join Civic Forum,” and that it was “a movement of both our nations.”²⁰ VPN’s founding declaration, by contrast, allowed for the reading that it was a movement of only “the cultural and academic public,” and though it encouraged citizens to struggle “together with” VPN for dialogue and democracy, it did not actually invite people to join the association.²¹ It is perhaps for

¹⁹ “Provolání. Na setkání v hledišti...,” 19 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, boxes 2-3; Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; and Zbierka plagátov vyvesených v Banskej Bystrici v dňoch od 23.11.1989 do 27.12.1989, folder “VŠE FESCR B. Bystrica: Vyhlásenia 1989-1990”; also Štátny archív v Bratislave, pobočka Šaľa [hereafter GA]: súčasná dokumentácia, envelope “VPN Galanta. December 1989”). Reprinted in Jiří Suk, *Občanské fórum: Listopad – prosinec 1989*, vol. 2: *Dokumenty* (Brno: Doplněk, 1998), pp. 13-14.

²⁰ OF Prague, “Ku generálnemu štrajku,” 22 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, boxes 1-3; Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; and Zbierka plagátov vyvesených v Banskej Bystrici v dňoch od 23.11.1989 do 27.12.1989, folder 49; also Štátny archív v Bytči, pobočka Považská Bystrica [hereafter PX]: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”); OF Prague, “Provolání Občanského fóra,” 23 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 2, and Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”); OF Prague, “Prohlášení Občanského fóra k situaci 24. listopadu 1989 ve 23,30 hodin,” 24 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 2); OF Brno, “Výzva k zakladaniu občianských fór,” 25 November 1989 (BB: Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; also KS: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder “Rôzne”). The 22, 23, and 24 November documents are reprinted in Suk, *Občanské fórum*, vol. 2, pp. 16, 19-20, 24-25.

²¹ “Pobúrení násilnými zákrokmi...,” Bratislava, 20 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 3, and Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”; also Zemplínske múzeum, Michalovce: 1991-00109). Reprinted in Lubomír Feldek, ed., *Keď sme brali do rúk budúcnosť* (Bratislava: Archa, 1990), p. 11; in Ingrid Antalová, ed., *Verejnosť proti násiliu 1989-1991: Svedectvá a dokumenty* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 1998), p. 306; and

this reason that a group of Bratislava citizens decided in these early days to establish an independent (and ephemeral) Bratislava Civic Forum as a more open counterpart to VPN, whose spokesmen they nonetheless cheered. “We hold in deep esteem the spokesmen and activists of VPN,” they wrote, “whom we regard as genuine representatives of our city, deserving the trust of all of us... [However,] one of our main goals (by which we differ from VPN) is the mobilization and enlisting of *all* citizens.”²² VPN corrected for such misunderstandings in a proclamation of 22 November, which emphasized that the initiative was open to all citizens who rejected violence and added that VPN wanted to become “a society-wide movement,” but it still said nothing about establishing branches outside Bratislava.²³ In stark contrast with Civic Forum, it was not until 29 November that VPN disseminated any statement explicitly mentioning the possibility of autonomous branches outside the Slovak capital.²⁴

Judging by newspaper commentaries, citizen’s letters to Public against Violence, and records of district National Committees and civic associations, moreover, it would seem that many in Slovakia initially thought VPN was part of OF. Several OF Banská Bystrica documents, for example, suggest that people there thought “Public against Violence” was just the peculiar name of Bratislava’s Civic Forum, and many of the

in Jozef Žatkuliak, ed., *November 1989 a Slovensko: Chronológia a dokumenty (1985-1990)* (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku a Historický ústav SAV, 1999), p. 325.

²² “My, radoví obyvatelia mesta Bratislavy...,” 23 November 1989 (BB: Zbierka písomností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990). Emphasis added. The core group behind this initiative were probably Catholics, judging by the founding declaration’s praise for Cardinal František Tomášek of Prague and the Slovak Catholic dissident Ján Čarnogurský, as well as its stated intention of mobilizing “believers and even non-believers.” There is no trace of OF Bratislava beyond this founding declaration, which suggests that its adherents probably joined VPN once they realized they could.

²³ “Občianska iniciatíva Verejnosť proti násiliu vznikla na pôde...,” Bratislava, 22 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 3; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nezná revolúcia—1989”). Reprinted in Feldek, p. 23; Antalová, *Verejnosť proti násiliu*, p. 310; and Žatkuliak, p. 337.

²⁴ They had, nonetheless, begun to form, though it seems that the diffusion of VPN generally lagged behind that of Civic Forum.

letters received by VPN committees were actually addressed to “OF.”²⁵ Perhaps in order to gain popular recognition and support, the VPN coordinating committee (*koordináčny výbor*, or KV) in Bratislava indirectly fostered this interpretation. On 26 November, for example, it published a statement expressing full support for Civic Forum, noting that the actor Milan Kňažko was simultaneously a member of the KC OF as well as the KV VPN.²⁶ It was also significant that the name “Civic Forum” could be used as a common as well as a proper noun, and could denote an action as well as an association or initiative. VPN Púchov, for example, routinely organized public discussions that it called “civic fora,” and even as late as February 1990, in an album of sound recordings commemorating the Gentle Revolution, the KV VPN spokesman Ladislav Snopko defined Public against Violence as “a civic forum.”²⁷ As the cases of Poprad and Levice show, it was a short and easy step from participating in a civic forum to formally establishing a Civic Forum. The name “Public against Violence,” for its part, was less versatile since it could not be an action and it implied a specific program (being against violence) while “Civic Forum” was more open-ended. A comparison of the mistakes that ordinary citizens made with the two names is revealing. They were much less likely to get OF’s name wrong, and when they did they never erred with “Forum,” but merely substituted “People’s” (*Ludové*) for “Civic.” VPN—when it was not addressed as “Civic Forum”—was often called “Committee against Violence” (*Výbor proti násiliu*) or

²⁵ BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, boxes 1-2; Slovenský národný archív: Archív VPN, I. fondové odd., stanoviská k vnútropolitickej situácii.

²⁶ “Vyhlásenie občianskej iniciatívy Verejnosť proti násiliu zo dňa 26. novembra 1989, 13.00” (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, boxes 1 & 3; also GA: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Občianske fórum. VPN – súčas. dokum. 1989”; also KS: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder “Rôzne”; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”). Reprinted in Feldek, p. 37; Antalová, *Verejnosť proti násiliu*, p. 311; and Žatkuliak, p. 359.

²⁷ “VPN Púchov zvoláva občianske fórum” (PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”); VPN and Študentské hnutie, *Nežná revolúcia* (Bratislava: Opus, 1990), sound recording.

“Society against Violence” (*Spoločnosť proti násiliu*), replacing “public” with something more limited.²⁸ It would seem, then, that “Civic Forum” initially resonated with popular mentalities more readily than “Public against Violence.”

The founders of VPN in Bratislava have frequently portrayed their association as “an authentic Slovak manifestation” of the revolution of 1989.²⁹ This cannot be disputed, but it would seem worth adding that civic associations founded in other parts of Slovakia were at least as authentic as that which emerged in Bratislava, regardless of what these groups outside the capital called themselves—and regardless of whether they identified more with Bratislava or with Prague. Everywhere the initial movement was spontaneous, and there is no evidence that the founders of Slovak Civic Fora were any more manipulated than founders of VPN branches, whether by Prague or by the secret police.

Prague and Bratislava Divide the World between Themselves

Slovak OFs presented a problem for Bratislava. The VPN coordinating committee claimed to speak on behalf of the entire Slovak public and to represent the Slovak civic movement in negotiations with state and Party authorities at both the republican and federal levels. An independent association on Slovak territory, oriented toward Prague rather than Bratislava, implicitly questioned the legitimacy of the KV VPN’s claim. The fact that Slovakia’s other two regional capitals, Banská Bystrica and Košice, identified with OF (though there was an independent VPN in Košice) was particularly significant, since they could claim to be the mouthpieces of *their* entire

²⁸ ÚSD: archiv KC OF, boxes 91-98; Slovenský národný archív: Archív VPN, I. fondové odd., stanoviská k vnútro politickej situácii. It should be noted that though mistakes were more common with VPN’s name than Civic Forum’s, they were still exceptional.

²⁹ See, for example, Martin Bútorá and Zora Bútorová, “Neznesiteľná ľahkosť rozchodu,” in Vodička, p. 76.

regions. OF Banská Bystrica in fact officially declared that VPN was a phenomenon just of West Slovakia, and that civic initiatives in Central Slovakia should align themselves with OF.³⁰ It is unclear to what extent activists in Bratislava were aware of Civic Fora in Slovakia; probably they never fully realized how widespread OF was. They knew about Košice, though. Sometime between 21 and 25 November, Marcel Strýko and Erik Groch from OF Košice visited Bratislava and, according to Peter Zajac, said “We’ve founded OF in Košice, why on earth have you established some kind of ‘VPN’ here?”³¹ According to Vladislav Chlipala, Košice’s self-confident divergence from the KV VPN’s vision for Slovakia made Bratislava nervous.³²

On 29 November, KV VPN and KC OF representatives met in Prague and agreed, in the context of a declaration on cooperation, to respect each other as the “sovereign” representative of the civic movements in each republic.³³ Prague thereby committed itself to a “hands-off” policy toward Civic Fora in Slovakia. Most Prague activists, of course, knew next to nothing about life beyond the walls of their beautiful city and so had no basis for questioning VPN’s claim to representativeness; the Praguers accepted at face value everything their colleagues in Bratislava told them about the situation in Slovakia. The same day, the KV VPN devoted new attention to initiatives outside Bratislava, issuing “A Word Today to Workers and Not Just Them,” “A Proposal for the Work of Action Groups of VPN,” and an explanation of “The Internal Organization of VPN.”³⁴ In

³⁰ “Slovu socializmus dajme konkrétny obsah,” *op. cit.*

³¹ Quoted in Antalová, *Verejnosc’ proti násiliu—Občianske fórum*, p. 21.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

³³ “Spoločné komuniké OF a VPN,” Prague, 29 November 1989 (PX: Fond G1 “VPN Považská Bystrica, 1989-1992,” box 4, folder 1). Reprinted in Suk, *Občianske fórum*, vol. 2, p. 39, and Žatkuliak, p. 381. See also Rychlík, p. 271, and Jiří Suk, *Občianske fórum: Listopad – prosinec 1989*, vol. 1: *Události* (Brno: Doplněk, 1997), p. 91.

³⁴ “Slovo k dnešku robotníkom a nielen im,” Bratislava, 29 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosc’ proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 2; Zbierka písenností získaných od študentov

the first of these documents, the coordinating committee declared that “if hitherto branches of VPN have existed in the form of strike committees, it is desirable that they now come onto the platform of VPN as branches.” Without actually acknowledging the existence of Civic Forum in Slovakia, this statement made it clear that groups in Slovakia that agreed with VPN’s demands, but had up to this point affiliated themselves with other revolutionary associations, should refashion themselves as VPNs.

This placed Slovak OFs in an awkward position. They were called upon to risk confusing constituents who had already grown accustomed to using one name rather than another, and they were called upon to reorient themselves away from Prague and toward Bratislava. In other words, they were asked to undo much of what they had done. Some Slovak OFs responded to the challenge with more disgruntlement than others, but by June 1990, all had converted. We can again discern three patterns by which this occurred. The first pattern was the mutation of a single OF into a single VPN in late November or early December 1989, in some cases with an intermediary stage where the association

Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; and Zbierka plagátov vyvesených v Banskej Bystrici v dňoch od 23.11.1989 do 27.12.1989, folder “VŠE FESCR B. Bystrica: Vyhlásenia 1989-1990”; also KS: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder “Rôzne”; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”; also Štátny archív v Levoči, pobočka Poprad, Spišská Sobota [hereafter PP]: súčasná dokumentácia, box “Voľby ’91, ’92: Letáky, pozvánky, pohľadnice,” folder “Voľby 1990”; “Návrh pre prácu akčných skupín VPN,” Bratislava, 29 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, boxes 2-3, and Zbierka písemností získaných od študentov Pedagogickej fakulty v Banskej Bystrici, 1989-1990; also KS: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder “Rôzne”; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”; also Štátny archív v Košiciach, pobočka Michalovce [hereafter MI]: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie; also Zemplínske múzeum, Michalovce: 1991-00109); “Vnútná organizácia VPN,” Bratislava, 29 November 1989 (BB: Materiály získané od hnutia Verejnosť proti násiliu v Banskej Bystrici, 1989, box 2, and Zbierka plagátov vyvesených v Banskej Bystrici v dňoch od 23.11.1989 do 27.12.1989, folder “VŠE FESCR B. Bystrica: Vyhlásenia 1989-1990”; also KS: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie, folder “Rôzne”; also MI: zbierka z Nežnej revolúcie; also PP: súčasná dokumentácia, box “Voľby ’91, ’92: Letáky, pozvánky, pohľadnice,” folder “Voľby 1990”; also PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”). Copies of the first two documents are also preserved in the Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, Calif.: Slovak Subject Collection, box 5, folder “Slovakia. Political Parties... Verejnosť proti Násiliu, 1989-1990”; the second has been reprinted in Žatkuliak, p. 380. The latter two documents, incidentally, were nearly verbatim translations of OF Prague documents from the previous day, with “VPN” simply substituted for “OF” (“K práci občanských fór” and “Vnitřní organizace Občanského fóra,” reprinted in Suk, *Občanské fórum*, vol. 2, pp. 35-38).

called itself “OF-VPN.” The second pattern was the coalescence of separate OF and VPN groupings in a given town or district, also in early December. The final pattern was close cooperation between OF and VPN groupings, which nonetheless remained separate well into 1990.

The first pattern was the most common. In Liptovský Mikuláš, Nové Zámky, Prešov, Rožňava, and Spišská Nová Ves, the decision to change names and affiliation seems to have been reached fairly easily and relatively quickly. In Spišská Nová Ves the change occurred just a few hours after the city-wide initiative had been announced, evidently because newer activists persuaded or outvoted the founding core of culture workers who had established the local movement.³⁵ (This, exceptionally, was on 27 November—before the official agreement between OF Prague and VPN Bratislava.) The change in Nové Zámky seems to have been similarly unproblematic, occurring sometime between 29 November and 2 December, perhaps as the result of a visit by VPN representatives from Bratislava on 28 November.³⁶ Since OF Nové Zámky—uniquely—had expressed agreement with only Slovak students and what it called the “All-Slovak Coordinating Committee” in the founding declaration of its municipal council, it would seem that it identified itself as Civic Forum in the beginning only because it misunderstood the nature of the movement founded in Bratislava, toward which it was nonetheless oriented.³⁷ In Prešov the change, which occurred on 2 December, was evidently the subject of some discussion; the civic initiative there felt compelled to print an explanation both in the district newspaper and the bulletin of striking students at the local university. As explained in the bulletin,

³⁵ “Premeny v zrkadle týždňa,” *op. cit.*

³⁶ “Umelci v našom meste,” *op. cit.*

³⁷ “V N. Zámkoch MKV,” *op. cit.*

Directly following the shock of the brutal conduct of emergency units on Wenceslas Square [*sic*] there arose in both parts of our common state civic initiatives, mutually independent but agreeing on a common goal: Civic Forum and Public against Violence (VPN). In the short time that has passed from their founding, their program has at least partially crystallized for the immediate future and probably until the elections, which understandably will now be free. It is only natural that Prešov's Civic Forum, which spontaneously emerged perhaps a week after The Events, has now signed onto the program of Public against Violence in Bratislava. [This association]...is after all better able to consider the specificity of Slovakia—particularly regions more distant from the center, among which we must count ourselves.³⁸

In Banská Bystrica, Čadca, and Humenné, activists tried for a time to maintain orientation toward both Prague and Bratislava by calling themselves “OF-VPN” or “the Civic Forum of the Public against Violence.” Čadca, as we have seen, adopted this strategy from the beginning. In Banská Bystrica the switch from “OF” to “OF-VPN” probably took place on 30 November, but it lasted for only two days. On 2 December OF-VPN Banská Bystrica became VPN Banská Bystrica, and in the second issue of its bulletin (*Fórum*) it explained that

In our democratizing movement there have thus far emerged two currents, that of Prague and that of Bratislava, which has been reflected in the very symbols of our movement and we have presented ourselves as the Civic Forum of the movement Public against Violence. Today our movement is crystallizing and taking on the form of the Bratislava movement, which demands a change of our name as well, so that henceforth we shall present ourselves and cooperate with Bratislava and Prague as the Civic Initiative Public against Violence Banská Bystrica.³⁹

While in the first pattern a single OF transformed itself into a single VPN, the second and third patterns were more complicated, with separate VPN groupings springing up independently of Civic Forum on the same territory. With the previously cited exception of OF Bratislava, it seems that the VPNs were always founded after the OFs, but in a few cases the order is unclear. As a rule the two civic associations cooperated

³⁸ “Na vysvetlenie,” *Prešovská zmena*, no. 2 (5 December 1989), p. 5. The “brutal conduct” to which the author refers did not in fact take place on Wenceslas Square, but on National Avenue (Národná trída). See also “Postoje sa nemenia,” *Prešovské noviny*, 6 December 1989, p. 1.

³⁹ *Fórum* (Banská Bystrica), no. 2 (3 December 1989), p. 1.

with each other and ultimately merged; however, a salient difference can be seen in the extent to which the original Civic Fora resisted assimilation.⁴⁰

In Poprad, OF was established on 26 and 27 November, while VPN came into existence on 30 November. The institutionalization of the two movements came about under the auspices of socially disparate groups. Following the public assembly that called itself a civic forum on 26 November, the OF coordinating committee was created by a group of people who had organized civic resistance following the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968.⁴¹ The VPN coordinating committee, on the other hand, was established by representatives of strike committees.⁴² The two groups immediately began cooperating, and by 1 December there were plans to create a common “Emergency Committee of Civil Disobedience” consisting of four OF representatives and four VPN representatives, together with an independent secretary (OF proposed a priest or lawyer).⁴³ On 5 December, however, the civic initiatives in Poprad “decided to accept the demand of the Slovak center and present themselves henceforth as the initiative Public against Violence.”⁴⁴ In the Považská Bystrica district as well, separate OF and VPN groupings in the major towns and at the district level came into being independently

⁴⁰ A letter from OF Zvolen to OF Prague, dated 27 November 1989, suggests that there may have been exceptions to the rule of cooperation. “We deem it necessary,” wrote the author, “to draw your attention to the fact that ‘information’ is circulating in Slovakia to the effect that Civic Forum is an exclusively Czech affair and not statewide. Newly founded local initiatives of VPN are officially standing in for OF; they are interpreted in this sense as the sole Slovak ‘version’ of Civic Forum. They distribute proclamations which often have very little to do with the renewal of political, economic, and social life in the sense of the demands and goals of Civic Forum. This causes disinformation, uncertainty, and speculation. It would be desirable [*bolo by potrebné*] to clear this question up with Bratislava—it seems indeed that an intentional, destructive campaign is taking place.” (ÚSD: archiv KC OF, box 72.)

⁴¹ “Programové vyhlásenie,” *op. cit.*

⁴² “Ovzdušie otvoreného dialógu” and “Minirozhovor s Pavlom Strážayom,” *Podtatranské noviny*, 7 December 1989, pp. 1, 3.

⁴³ “Programové vyhlásenie,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ “Pod symbolom VPN,” *Podtatranské noviny*, 14 December 1989, p. 4.

of one another yet quickly established coordinating committees bearing both names. By 8 December, however, the allied initiatives had coalesced into single VPNs.⁴⁵

In the third pattern, separate OF and VPN groupings cooperated closely with one another and established common coordinating committees, but remained distinct into 1990. In Žilina, for example, VPN was established by graphic artists with connections to Bratislava on 3 December—fully a week after OF Žilina had begun functioning.⁴⁶ By 5 December the two groups had agreed to create a common “coordinating committee of OF and VPN,” and by 14 December this committee had expanded still further, to include the students of Žilina’s Higher School of Transport and Communications.⁴⁷ In Komárno the situation was even more complicated. Not only did there emerge OF, VPN, and FMK, but also a “Free Forum” (*Szabad Fórum*, or SzF) as a Hungarian mutation of OF—all by 27 November.⁴⁸ On 1 December the chairman of the district National Committee officially recognized as legitimate the demands of all these initiatives and promised to continue formal dialogue (already begun with OF and SzF) with them.⁴⁹ By 16 December the four groups had joined together to establish what they variously called the “coordinating committee of OF and VPN” or the “coordinating committee of the Civic Forum of the Public against Violence.”⁵⁰ As in Žilina, this alliance continued into 1990,

⁴⁵ VPN and OF Považská Bystrica, “Občianské iniciatívy v Považskej Bystrici informujú o nesplnených požiadavkách študentov,” 2 December 1989 (PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”); “Členovia občianskych aktivít ‘Verejnost’ proti násiliu’ a ‘Občianske fórum’, ktorí pracujete v podniku Pov. Strojárne,” Púchov (PX: súčasná dokumentácia, folder “Nežná revolúcia—1989”); “V znamení vecnosti, konštruktívnosti,” *Obzor*, 14 December 1989, p. 1.

⁴⁶ “Verejný záujem povýšiť nad osobný,” *Cieľ*, 7 December 1989, p. 3.

⁴⁷ “S podporou ľudu,” *Cieľ*, 7 December 1989, p. 1.

⁴⁸ “Požiadavky Občianskeho fóra,” “Občania vyjadrujú súhlas,” and “November 27-én alakult meg...,” *Dunaj*, 2 December 1989, pp. 3, 7; “Oprava,” *Dunaj*, 9 December 1989, p. 2; “Z doterajšej činnosti VPN,” *Dunaj*, 23 December 1989, p. 1; “A Nyilvánosság az Erőszak Ellen polgári kezdeményezés komáromi tevékenységéről,” *Dunatáj*, 23 December 1989, p. 6.

⁴⁹ “Dialóg na pôde ONV” and “A demokrácia platformján,” *Dunaj*, 9 December 1989, pp. 1, 5.

⁵⁰ “Z doterajšej činnosti VPN” and “A Nyilvánosság az Erőszak Ellen polgári kezdeményezés komáromi tevékenységéről,” *op. cit.*

with the member initiatives remaining distinct. Košice, Prievidza, Trebišov, and Vranov and Topľou also followed this pattern.

Often the transition from OF to VPN was accompanied by personnel changes, engendering some of the first acrimony that half a year later would paralyze VPN. This was most pronounced in those districts where OF and VPN groupings had sprung up independently and then agreed to merge. In Poprad, evidently, the original VPN activists defamed the newcomers from OF and ultimately excluded them from the common movement.⁵¹ Even in districts like Levice and Rožňava, where apparently a single OF became a single VPN, it is remarkable how many names of coordinating committee members changed following the mutation. Not everywhere was the transition accompanied by hard feelings, though. In Považská Bystrica, where structures of cooperation had emerged while OF and VPN had still been separate, it seems that the founders of OF were fully welcomed into VPN as equal partners.

In addition to personnel changes, the imposition of uniformity on the Slovak civic movement involved a rewriting of history, an erasure of fleeting but politically problematic memory. In December 1989, several VPN activists began using the past tense in ways that belied the original diversity of the Slovak civic movement, presenting Bratislava's vision of the way history *should* have unfolded as the correct narrative of the way it *did* unfold. Thus the KV VPN spokesman Miroslav Kusý, for example, responded to a question about Slovak Civic Fora by portraying their founding as “a misunderstanding,” since “in Slovakia, the name ‘Public against Violence’ was adopted.”⁵² What Bratislava had done, in other words, was what “Slovakia” had done,

⁵¹ “Fórum občanov,” *Podtatranské noviny*, 11 October 1990, p. 3.

⁵² *Štúdio dialóg*, Slovenská televízia, 4 December 1989.

and any local initiative that defined itself independently was aberrant. Similarly, VPN spokesmen in Prešov explained that the local switch from OF to VPN had “occurred only because, as...the actor...Mikuláš Ľaš told us, the new name is particular to the renewal movement in Slovakia, while Civic Fora emerged and exist in the Czech towns of our homeland.”⁵³ In other words, “Civic Fora did not emerge here,” and “we surrender to another the authority to determine the meaning of our actions.” One is almost reminded of Communist-era rewritings of history (e.g. Vladimír Clementis and his hat), though of course in this case there is no evidence of ill will or a premeditated plan.⁵⁴ The project was nonetheless successful, for few people today remember that OF was once as widespread as VPN in Slovakia, and no textbook mentions it.

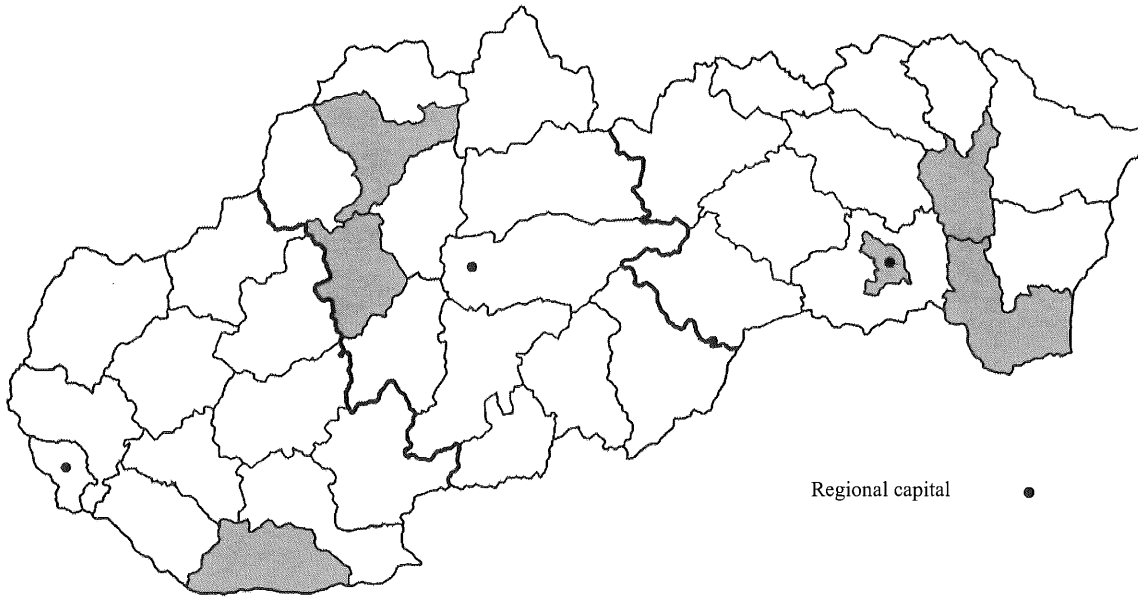
Resistance

By the end of 1989 only six of the original nineteen district-level Fora still existed, all of them formally allied to local branches of VPN. Map 2 shows their distribution. More research will be necessary to ascertain how all these OF-VPNs ultimately assimilated completely into VPN, but it seems that by June 1990 the process was complete.

The process by which Bratislava finally “conquered” Slovakia did not go without resistance. On 5 January, Marcel Strýko from OF Košice and Vladimír Komár from OF Vranov appeared in Prague to seek support from Civic Forum’s coordinating center. They informed their Prague colleagues of the spontaneous emergence of their initiatives

⁵³ “Postoje sa nemenia,” *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Milan Kundera has made the strange fate of Clementis’ hat famous by describing it in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. A photograph from 1948 originally showed Clementis next to Klement Gottwald, Czechoslovakia’s new Stalinist leader, on a balcony overlooking Prague’s Old Town Square; it had been cold and out of respect Clementis had offered his hat to Gottwald. In 1950, when Clementis was charged with treason, he was erased from the photograph, but his hat remained on Gottwald’s head. (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [New York: Harper Perennial, 1999], pp. 3-4.)



Map 2: Districts Where OF Remained on 31 December 1989

prior to contact with VPN, and of the continuance of OF in East and Central Slovakia. They explained that Slovak OFs wanted to orient themselves politically toward Prague, without having to go through Bratislava, which was pretending to national authority. Strýko and Komár added that Bratislava did not consult them nor were they invited to Bratislava to participate in decision-making, and so they requested the right to participate in conventions of Civic Forum—at least as observers.⁵⁵

This was not the first time members of the Prague center had heard of the continuing existence of Civic Forum in Slovakia. Josef Vavroušek, who repeatedly demonstrated a much keener understanding of Slovakia than any of his colleagues in Prague, had drawn attention to the situation of Slovak OFs already on 28 and 30 December, asking if it was correct that “we do not acknowledge them.” At this time, Pavel Rychetský had raised doubts about the internal strength of Public against Violence,

⁵⁵ “Zápis z Rady OF dne 5.1.1990 v 8.30 hod.” (ÚSD: archiv KC OF, folder “Zápisy z rady OF (C)”), p. 1. See also Suk, *Labyrintem*, p. 296.

concluding “We don’t need VPN, but VPN needs us.”⁵⁶ When Strýko and Komár presented their case in the midst of this ongoing debate, they met with a mixed reaction. Zdeněk Rajniš exclaimed that no one could be stopped from joining this or that branch of what he maintained was essentially the same movement. “Even Czechs can join VPN,” he said.⁵⁷ The consensus, however, was that the Prague coordinating center ought not to take any step that might harm VPN. It was therefore decided to “recommend to VPN Bratislava that it invite representatives of the regions to a convention.” Prague further resolved to invite representatives of Slovak OFs *and* VPNs to observe OF conventions, and to encourage Bratislava to give some economic resources to Košice. As a gesture of good will, the KC OF resolved to give Košice a photocopier.⁵⁸

Strýko and Komár are not listed as having attended the OF convention that took place in Prague the next day, but the issue of tensions between Bratislava and other parts of Slovakia nonetheless came up. Šimon Pánek, the student delegate to the convention, drew attention to conflict between students in Banská Bystrica, Košice, Prešov, Zvolen, and Žilina on one hand and their colleagues in Bratislava and Nitra on the other. He said the former agreed with students at Czech universities that a single student association should be institutionalized, while the latter argued for two independent associations, one

⁵⁶ “Zápis z jednání Rady KC OF dne 28.12. 1989,” p. 2, and “Zápis z Rady OF dne 30.12.1989 v 8.30 hod.,” p. 3, both in ÚSD: archiv KC OF, folder “Zápisy z rady OF (C).”

⁵⁷ “Zápis z Rady OF dne 5.1.1990 v 8.30 hod.,” p. 1. Czechs did indeed join VPN if they lived in Slovakia, while Slovaks in the Czech lands joined Civic Forum. Initially, no ethnic resonances were attached to the two movements; the distinction between them—at least as the KV VPN originally intended and the population generally understood—was strictly territorial. This changed slightly in the course of 1990, when a group of Slovaks in Prague established a branch of VPN there, and when it seems that some Czechs active in VPN in Slovakia fell under pressure to Slovakize themselves (such that they no longer used their given Czech first names, but adopted Slovak variants instead). These developments were marginal, however, and ethnicity never really trumped residence as a criterion for engagement in the civic movements.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

in each republic.⁵⁹ Josef Vavroušek followed on this report to inform delegates of the results of the previous day's meeting with Strýko and Komár. "The situation in relations between OF and VPN is not nearly so dramatic as among the students," he said.

In Central and East Slovakia there are strong Civic Fora which arose there before information about the creation of VPN arrived. Now they call themselves OF+VPN. In Slovakia there is a certain internal conflict, because centers in Central and East Slovakia feel slighted by the KV VPN in Bratislava. This will soon be resolved, of course. The KC OF in Prague will keep these [Slovak] Fora informed, but it will respect territorial jurisdiction.⁶⁰

As was often the case, this rosy prognosis turned out to be premature, and Vavroušek felt compelled once again to raise the question of Civic Fora in "northern Slovakia" at the next OF convention on 20 January. Though Strýko and Erik Groch from Košice were present (along with four VPN representatives from Banská Bystrica), the minutes do not record that they spoke up on the issue, and Petr Kučera from Prague evidently uttered the last word when he pointed to the "delicate situation" of VPN as a result of nationalism in Slovakia and said that OF must support VPN as "the most liberal element in Slovak political life."⁶¹

Thus it was that, by June 1990, Civic Forum disappeared from Slovakia. As it had been first, so Košice was apparently the last hold-out. As Chlipala recalls, "It was still called OF until just before the elections, when we realized that it was a battle of political signs; thus VPN-OF went by the wayside, for we knew that people would vote for VPN and not OF. They couldn't."⁶²

⁵⁹ "Zápis z druhého sněmu Koordinačního centra Občanského fóra konaného 6.1.1990" (ÚSD: archiv KC OF, "OF – interní písemnosti: Sněmy OF," box 1, folder "Sněm KC OF 6.1.1990"), pp. 10-11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶¹ "Zápis ze sněmu Koordinačního centra Občanského fóra ze dne 20. ledna 1990" (ÚSD: archiv KC OF, "OF – interní písemnosti: Sněmy OF," box 1, folder "Sněmy OF 20.1.1990"), pp. 1, 6.

⁶² Quoted in Antalová, *Verejnosť proti násiliu—Občianske fórum*, p. 22.

By way of a postscript, there was a short-lived attempt to resurrect something like Civic Forum in Poprad in October 1990. Following a summer characterized by the collapse of VPN's popularity across Slovakia and nasty squabbles within the leadership of VPN Poprad, three of the original founders of Civic Forum in the district reacted by creating anew a "Citizens' Forum."

Our goal will be mostly from ethical perspectives to evaluate pressing questions through print and other media. We will be critical, but we will also propose conceptually reasonable solutions. We want to be those capable of saying that the emperor is naked. The cause of democracy is sacred for us and we mean to fight for it by working together with movements and parties of the center. Those who have not profaned themselves by collaboration with the totalitarian regime and are interested in fulfilling the ideals of November, who are capable of arguing substantively and clearly formulating your ideas, join us!⁶³

There is no evidence that anything significant came of this appeal.

Conclusion

Could things have turned out differently? The evidence suggests they definitely could have. As is well known, VPN was founded after a meeting of several hundred artists, environmentalists, and others in Bratislava's Umelecká beseda on 19 November 1989. At the meeting, which lasted from five to six o'clock in the afternoon, a coordinating committee was elected, which met later that evening in the apartment of Ján Langoš. Between 8:30 and 9 p.m., this committee chose for the initiative the name "Public against Violence." By the time the whole group met again at noon the next day, however, its members had heard about the creation of Civic Forum in Prague and stormily discussed whether or not to change their name accordingly. It was decided to stick with "VPN" on the grounds that news of the emergence of Public against Violence had already been disseminated by telephone and fax across Slovakia, and that a change of

⁶³ "Fórum občanov," *op. cit.*

name at this stage would unnecessarily confuse the public.⁶⁴ As this paper has demonstrated, however, the news of VPN's founding had not spread quite as widely by this time as those who argued for maintenance of the name evidently thought, nor was Bratislava quite the model for the rest of Slovakia that denizens of the Danubian metropole assumed it was. By later forcing Slovak Civic Fora to change *their* names, VPN Bratislava may have confused even more people than if it had changed its name at the beginning. We cannot help but wonder if the "dual power" situation caused by the simultaneous existence of OF and VPN in Slovakia did not provide a model for the later emergence of rival VPNs in Slovak towns and workplaces—a phenomenon that was much more common in Slovakia than in the Czech lands and which contributed to VPN's massive decline in popularity by the June 1990 elections. We can also not help wondering if Bratislava's heavy-handedness with regard to initiatives elsewhere in Slovakia did not contribute to accusations of "VPN totalitarianism" that emerged in early 1990.

A second juncture where history might have followed a different course was when the KV VPN and the KC OF agreed not to combine their movements on 29 November. As the examples of numerous OF-VPNs elsewhere in Slovakia demonstrate, an integrated symbiosis was possible even without rejecting the name "Public against Violence." Had such a union occurred, the question of internal federation would surely have come up, just as it did within the originally unified student movement, but it might have resulted in a functional and democratic federalization that could have served as a model for other realms of political life. The question of internal democracy plagued both VPN and OF from late December onwards, with district-level activists arguing increasingly

⁶⁴ Rudolf Sikora, quoted in Antalová, *Verejnosť proti násiliu*, pp. 33-34.

vociferously that the districts were the natural building-blocks of the movements, and that collectively they should elect central decision-making bodies. The Prague and Bratislava coordinating committees, well into 1990, argued against democratization, claiming themselves to be sufficiently representative of the movements as a whole to speak in their names.⁶⁵ Had OF and VPN united, the issue would probably have come to a head much sooner than it did in the separate movements, since Bratislava would in no case have accepted virtual representation by Prague. It is possible that the negotiating positions of the districts would have been stronger in such a scenario (particularly if peripheral Czech and Slovak regions had made common cause), forcing democratization at an earlier stage and a federalization of the movement on the basis of districts or regions, rather than republics. Such an arrangement did in fact emerge in East Slovakia, where by the end of December a regional coordinating committee had been established with two representatives from each district, including representatives of both OF and VPN.⁶⁶ In a formal statewide union of the two movements, regions like East Slovakia might have been harder to ignore, possibly providing the impetus for a more democratic federalization than either Prague or Bratislava desired.

As it happened, though, the operative dynamic was not federalization, but empire. Each city desired to speak in the name of as large a territory as possible. Prague claimed to represent all of Czechoslovakia, Bratislava all of Slovakia. Banská Bystrica claimed to represent all of Central Slovakia, while Brno claimed to represent not just the South

⁶⁵ See, by the author, "Revolution and Revolt against Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1989," in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), pp. 183, 185-187; Suk, *Labyrinthem*, pp. 303-307; Seán Hanley, *The New Right in the New Europe: Czech Transformation and Right-Wing Politics, 1989-2006* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 69-70; and, by the author, "Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), pp. 283-296.

⁶⁶ "Zápis z Rady OF dne 5.1.1990 v 8.30 hod.," p. 1.

Moravian region, but all of Moravia and Silesia. Initiatives in district capitals frequently claimed to speak not just for their town, but also for the entire district. There were exceptions, of course. East Slovakia, as just mentioned, established a federal structure from the beginning, and the towns of the Považská Bystrica district worked out a similar arrangement for district-level coordination early and amicably. The principle of domination was more widespread, however, causing no end of rancor and strife within the ostensibly democratic movements. In a way, a pattern of 1848 in the Habsburg Monarchy was repeated at a smaller scale—with mid-level powers protesting the domination of higher-level powers, only to have lower-level powers appeal to the higher entities in protest of mid-level domination. Thus Olomouc and Opava appealed to Prague against the pretensions of Brno. Považská Bystrica appealed to Bratislava against the pretensions of Banská Bystrica. Ružomberok appealed to Banská Bystrica against the pretensions of Liptovský Mikuláš. And Košice appealed to Prague against the pretensions of Bratislava. In the end, towns like Brno and Banská Bystrica lost out (OF Brno never saw the institutionalization of all-Moravian structures, while VPN Banská Bystrica found itself stripped of regional authority in the spring of 1990). Bratislava won. In a very real political sense, we can speak of the period from November 1989 to June 1990 as the time when Bratislava conquered Slovakia.