

# Political Participation in Czechoslovakia

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From Velvet Revolution to Velvet Divorce



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## **Executive Summary**

The objective of this dissertation is to investigate the reasons for a low political participation in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, which started on 17 November 1989, by a literature review. The Czechoslovak citizens reacted on several developments in their surrounding countries, the most prominent of which was the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Velvet Revolution went without much bloodshed and the Communist regime was overthrown rather quickly.

The greatest challenge for Czechoslovakia after the revolution lay in rebuilding the country and establishing a democracy. Despite high political participation during the Velvet Revolution, with the vast majority of the people protesting out on the streets, this political participation diminished, surprisingly, significantly after the revolution, measured by the levels of discussing politics, party membership and voter turnout.

This thesis argues that the Communist legacy, distrust in political institutions, public disillusionment and a weak civil society were the causes for this low political participation in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution. The Communist legacy played a large role in political participation and the other causes were directly linked to this because of the bad experience the citizens had with the Communist regime, making them rather sceptical towards politics.

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## 1 Introduction

On 17 November 2014 it was exactly 25 years ago that the Velvet Revolution started in Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia, the surrendering of the Communist regime went relatively smooth and without much bloodshed, hence the name 'Velvet Revolution'. Typical about this Velvet Revolution is that after it happened the political participation simply dropped in spite of very active people during the velvet revolution. The rapid manner in which the Communist regime was overthrown by the citizens is best described by Timothy Garton Ash (1990), who predicted: "In Poland it took ten years, in Hungary ten months, in East Germany ten weeks: perhaps in Czechoslovakia it will take ten days!".

After the Velvet Revolution, a democratic administration consisting of newly formed, mostly right wing, parties was established. But the rest in Czechoslovak politics never really returned. Most of the Czechoslovakian citizens looked at politics suspiciously after the Velvet Revolution. As Holy (1996) mentions: 'many dissidents had been (Communist) activists of the Prague Spring and suffered the reprisals that followed, and ordinary people tended to view them as politicians desperately trying to stage a comeback' (p. 31).

During the Velvet Revolution political participation was at a high because so many people participated in the protests. But after the first democratically elected government was installed and the promises they made were not fulfilled, the citizens of Czechoslovakia lost trust in political institutions and became apathetic, causing a decrease in political participation. This pattern of participation was puzzling. First there was the Velvet Revolution where people went on the streets to let their voice be heard and right after that when they achieved what they wanted they went back to minding their own business and there was a total disinterest in the political situation. In other words, first there was this tsunami of political participation and then it was followed by a surprising demise.

While most people know about the revolutions in Romania or Poland, the situation in Czechoslovakia with the Velvet Revolution is not very well known worldwide. Because of this Czechoslovakia might not be an obvious choice to research, but it is a very interesting one indeed. As part of the Visegrád countries, The Czech and Slovak republics do rather well economically. Politically, however, there is still room for change. It appears that even today, the attitude towards politics could be called passive. Another reason why Czechoslovakia is interesting to research is because of the claim that the fall of communism went completely peaceful and without bloodshed. Although it is doubtful that this was truly the case, in comparison to for instance Romania or Poland the revolution in Czechoslovakia went relatively smooth.

Over time, political participation in Czechoslovakia has deteriorated, therefore this dissertation will examine the Czechoslovakian society closely and determine why general political participation by the mass has crumbled in the years between the Velvet Revolution and the eventual split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This is particularly interesting to research because this period is a critical time of transition where the new system of democracy set itself in place. For this report extensive research has been done on the political participation in Czechoslovakia in the first years after the Velvet Revolution. The central research question for this research report will be:

What are the causes of the low political participation in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution?

During the investigation, several questions arose, such as how does the Communist legacy influence the relationship between people and politics? How can we explain the patterns of political participation in the years before the 1992 split up of Czechoslovakia? Why was the upsurge in participation during the Velvet Revolution followed by such rapid decrease in interest in politics? How does the distrust in formal organisations affect the political participation? The answers to these sub-questions will emerge in the conclusion.

## 2 Methodology

The aim of this dissertation is to identify the causes of the low political participation in Czechoslovakia right after the fall of Communism, marked by the Velvet Revolution. A literature review is used to answer the research question. This is a deductive method meaning that general ideas and theories are applied to particular situations. The conclusion is drawn by connecting the different theories. To understand and interpret the phenomenon of political participation in Czechoslovakia right after the fall of Communism a qualitative study is most suitable.

This study is based on secondary sources, so already existing data. To get this data, extensive desk research has been done. The following search mechanisms were used: My Library Account, Google Scholar and the Online Library of JSTOR. Another way of searching for literature was looking at the reference list of books and articles that were used a lot. Further, books were retrieved from the Royal Library and the university libraries of both the Hague University and Coventry University. The select relevant literature for this dissertation the following terms were used in the search mechanisms and in the library: Velvet Revolution, Czechoslovakia, communism, post-communism, political participation.

It should be noted that four books by Czechoslovakian authors are particularly used since they highlight all the important aspects and events that happened in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution, from the perception of Czechoslovakians. It is particularly important to include authors from Czechoslovakia, because it gives a much better perspective than when only sources from 'western' countries would have been used, since these authors might see things from a different viewpoint. Furthermore, these Czechoslovakian authors have seen the events happen from close by and often speak from personal knowledge. The research method used by these authors was a survey, which is interesting since these surveys have been conducted in the period directly after the Velvet Revolution. It was more logical to use this data, as it would be more accurate than when a survey would have been conducted now, because the Velvet Revolution happened 25 years ago and people might have different views now than they would have then.

While there was a lot of information about the events surrounding the Velvet Revolution and how the democracy was re-established, there was a lack of information on the actual political participation of the citizens. At times it was difficult to filter all the information because a lot of material could be found about politics and voting but there was little information about citizens participation in politics. Sometimes search words in Czech or Slovak were used in an attempt to access more sources, such as the Czech statistical database which contained the election results.

Using search words in Czech and Slovak, some English articles were also found, that did not show up in results from English search words.

Validity and reliability are important for the credibility of the research. Validity means that findings are true and certain (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). True means that findings are backed up with references. When reading the articles attention was paid to references. Reliability is connected to the consistency of the research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). If other researchers replicate the study, they have to find the same findings. Reliability is important for the objectivity. Because multiple articles are used, the reliability can be accounted for.



### **3 Literature review/ theoretical framework**

The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a step-by-step explanation of the developments towards the Velvet Revolution, a description of the Velvet Revolution itself and the rebuilding of the state towards a democracy until the velvet divorce, the break-up of Czechoslovakia into two separate states. After this closer look at the highlights of the most important events that happened in the period 1988-1992, a definition will be given for the term 'political participation'.

#### **3.1 The Velvet Revolution**

At the end of the 80s of the twentieth century, a revolutionary wind blew through Eastern Europe. In many countries that were part of the Soviet Union revolutionary movements were established that brought an end to the Communist regimes. The Communist regime of Czechoslovakia fell in November 1989 after the Velvet Revolution, after being in power since 1948. This revolution in 1989 was nicknamed the Velvet Revolution because it went without much bloodshed. Although many were injured by the police intervention, the revolution is considered fairly peaceful. The opposition movements Civic Forum (OF) in the Czech Republic and Public Against Violence (VPN) in Slovakia played a crucial role in the Velvet Revolution and took, once the Communist regime had fallen down, the lead in the opening of the political and economic transition process (Foubert, 2007). In order to understand how the Velvet Revolution came about, one would have to look at the history that led up to that moment. The next section will highlight the events leading to the revolution.

##### **3.1.1 Before the Velvet Revolution**

On 5 January 1968 the Czechoslovakian government started a process of reforming communism, this period is referred to as the Prague Spring. The Communist Party (CPC) action Program, led by Alexander Dubček, was set up to guarantee a full range of human rights by reform. This included the abolition of censorship and allowing civic initiatives that were beyond the control of the party. While Czechoslovakia thrived under these developments, the Soviet Union did not like it. . On 21 August 1968 soviet tanks drove into the streets of Prague, starting the Warsaw Pact invasion, starting the 'normalisation' process. The Czechoslovak government did not have a say in anything anymore. The Soviet government reinstated the control over the media and

abandoned all reforms. Party members were privileged, but for non-party members there was a strict ceiling on job opportunities.

As stated by Wheaton & Kavan (1992) 'the system was maintained by the continuous threat of actual application of punishment for nonconformist behaviour.' (p.6). People that openly questioned the system would suffer the consequences, which would go as far as depriving their children from education. This did not mean that the regime went completely unchallenged for twenty years. There were still movements that were politically active, even with the harassment of the Communist regime. While publicly the citizens would act as if they engaged formally in the system, in practice the regime was not accepted at all. Or, as Wheaton & Kavan (1992) put it: 'The punitive economic and social sanctions, very often associated with loss of suitable employment, visited on those driven from the party could not fail to stir up bitter, if private, resentment that was added to the incipient apathy.' (p.7). Ultimately, the Velvet Revolution would be the 'working out of the public's reaction to the normalized regime in changed national conditions' (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992, p.18).

In 1972 the first trials were held against the opponents of the regime. In 1976 a rock band called The Plastic People of the Universe was arrested and sentenced to prison. This event provided a spark for the dissidents, who had been laying low for so many years. Charter 77, an informal civic initiative was formed, named after the petition with which they came up after the arrest. Its members would play a key role later in the revolution (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992). The supporters of the dissident movement Charter 77 fought for respecting human rights and the freedom of the Czechoslovak citizens that should have been guaranteed by the Constitution and by the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975 by the Czechoslovak Communist government (Tůma, 2009). However, since the normalization process after the Prague Spring, freedom was something the Czechoslovak citizens had been deprived of, as well as human rights. With all the social and economic sanctions, it was very difficult for dissidents to lead a normal life. Even more so because they were constantly watched and spied on by the Communist regime. Wheaton & Kavan (1992) state that 'The issue of human rights enabled Charter 77 to form a broad coalition including reform Communists, social democrats, liberals, and conservative Catholics who, though quite disparate politically, all agreed on this question and on the need for an ethical basis to politics.' (p.12). Although the support for Charter '77 was initially limited, its importance should not be underestimated. After all, they fulfilled an important social function: they gathered information about the human rights violations by the Czechoslovak government and formed a point of contact for those who were dissatisfied with the policy pursued by the Communist government (Foubert, 2007).

In January 1977 a petition was started by Charter 77 to call out the regime on their violation of human rights, 243 people signed this document carrying the same name, charter 77.

The people that signed the document represented various political viewpoints, religions and professions. According to Wheaton & Kavan (1992) 'A dangerous precedent was created when people visibly demonstrated that it was no longer necessary to abide by the requirements of public loyalty.' (p.24) The Communist Party (CPC) was not pleased, but as Tůma (2009) describes 'With regard to the international public, it was not feasible to stage a mass arrest campaign and imprison people who called for the regime to observe the commitments it had only recently made at Helsinki's international conference.' (p.578). Instead, the people that had signed the petition were intimidated and hindered in every way, from losing their jobs, to cutting their telephone lines or confiscating their driver's licenses. The Communist regime also started a media campaign to discredit Charter 77 (Tůma, 2009). Nevertheless, the dissidents won popularity and their ideas had a growing impact on the rest of the Czechoslovak intelligentsia and the population in general. One of the key members of Charter '77 was future president Václav Havel, who had been banned from working as a playwright since 1969, and who would later play a key role in the Velvet Revolution and the rebuilding of the country (Foubert, 2007). Havel, who was not allowed to study under the Communist regime, began his career as a stagehand at Divadlo ABC. He then studied Drama on his own and became a well-known playwright. His ideas and his part in the 1968 Prague Spring made him a dissident and revolutionary (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013; Theater 61 Press, n.d.).

In December 1987 Husak resigned as general secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC). He was succeeded by the even more repressive Miloš Jakeš, who was responsible for the purges that took place after the Prague Spring. Miloš Jakeš was openly against the rehabilitation of reformist Communists who were associated even more in the reforms of 1968, and would repeatedly order the violent repression of public protests (Foubert, 2007; Tůma, 2009). The frequent violent repression by the Communist government, however, failed to silence the growing protests among the Czechoslovak population. As stated by Wheaton & Kavan (1992) 'despite the police brutality, the number of demonstrations increased from mid-1988, indicating that the policy of repression had not proved an effective deterrent.' (p.25).

In 1988 street demonstrations were 'a common expression of the growing level of public discontent' in Czechoslovakia (Tůma, 2009, p.582). In August 1988 there were several demonstrations on Prague's Wenceslas Square, where thousands of dissidents insistently asked for political reform. In October 1988 on the 70th anniversary of the Czechoslovak state there was a mass demonstration with the same demand for political reform (Foubert, 2007). At that point a wide range of independent initiatives and organisations were active. The Independent Peace Initiative and Czech Children organised the first major demonstration in Prague, on 21 August 1988, which was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw pact invasion. In other protests Charter 77 joined as well. In 1989 more protests followed and tens of thousands of people signed petitions to change the situation. The opposition swiftly gained power and influence.

According to Holy (1996) the leading dissidents were not at all confident about overthrowing the Communist system and up until the actual revolution they remained very sceptical (p.138). On 21 August 1989 Václav Havel tried to convince the public to keep from protesting (Tůma, 2009). It was expected that Human Rights Day, 10 December, would be an opportunity for mass demonstrations. Holy (1996) even describes how 'A few days before the events of November 1989, Vaclav Havel said that he expected political changes in Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1990 and that the changes would not be connected with public demonstration.' (p. 139) However, against everyone's expectations, the demonstrations came much sooner (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992).

### **3.1.2 The start of the Velvet Revolution**

On 9 November 1989 the Berlin wall fell, an event that caused a stirring in Czechoslovakia as well. On 17 November a number of people demonstrated peacefully against the Communist regime. This was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of student Jan Opletal, who was shot during an anti-German demonstration on this day in 1939. Between 2000 and 4000 students were expected to gather at the Institute of Pathology in Prague. By four o'clock in the afternoon around 15000 people assembled and were determined to march to Wenceslas Square and the statue of St. Václav. On their way more and more people joined until eventually around 50000 people marched together (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992). On this day, students were brutally beaten by the police. The students called for an indefinite strike in which they were joined by actors and musicians. All people joined except, ten percent of the people who from strike to maintain services, and twenty percent who refrained from strike because they were afraid of reprisals (Holy, 1996).

All demonstrations started at Wenceslas Square, where everyone would assemble near the St. Václav statue and from there they would try to march to the Old Town Square, that had a monument for Jan Hus. Finally, the demonstrators would try to get to Hradčany Castle, for which they would have to cross the river. Not one demonstration made it to the castle. Displaying nationalist symbols was something the demonstrators emphasized very heavily. While the police were called 'fascists' and 'gestapo' and, perhaps one of the biggest insults, being accused of not being Czech, the demonstrators called out 'Masaryk', 'Dubček' and 'freedom'. Freedom was the most important demand in the pre-November demonstrations. There were no calls for a change of government or change of the political system. As Holy (1996) remarks, 'in brief, what the demonstrators demanded was that freedom which is the basic attribute of a person and a condition of one's humanity' (p.53). By 17 November the demands were more political.

On 18 November the Občanské Fórum (OF; Citizens Forum) was formed and was described as an organisation that was 'not a political party, but an organisation devoted to uniting

all members of society as a preliminary to an open discussion on the future of Czechoslovakia and as a prelude to dialogue with the CPC and the government' (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992, p. 56). One of the founding members of the OF was Václav Havel. In Bratislava a parallel group to OF had formed, by the name of *Verejnost' proti násiliu* (VPN; Public Against Violence). One of the most notable members of this group was Alexander Dubček. Like Havel, Dubček had a role in the reforms of the 1968 Prague Spring. From 1970 on he was expelled from the Communist party and continued to live a quiet life until the Velvet Revolution (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).

From 20 November on every afternoon demonstrators would gather at Wenceslas Square. At the same time all universities and secondary schools went on strike. During the strike national pop singer Marta Kubišová sang "Modlitba pro Martu" and the Czechoslovak national anthem from a balcony on Wenceslas Square. Marta Kubišová recorded the song "Modlitba pro Martu" during the Prague Spring, a song that could be perceived as rebellious and stressed the Czech pride and the longing for peace in their beloved country. Marta Kubišová had been silent for twenty years for fear of the Communist regime, but because her song portrayed the feelings of the people during the Velvet Revolution, she was asked to sing it again. The fragment is shown in the documentary 'The Lost World of Communism - Part 2 – Czechoslovakia' (Molloy & Hetherington, 2009).

Holy (1996) finds that the Velvet Revolution was very different to what happened in other countries after the Berlin wall fell and the Communist regime started to crumble. He states that 'perhaps the most significant feature of the Velvet Revolution was that it was initiated by students, actors and other intellectuals, followed by the masses' (p.2). Another great difference from other countries was that the revolution was without bloodshed, from which the name Velvet Revolution derives. Holy (1996) goes on by saying 'what gave the Velvet Revolution its impetus was the general feeling that state repression had become unbearable. People's perception of themselves as a cultured and well-educated nation played a significant role in fostering this general feeling.' (p.144). In fact, the people had just had enough of the Communist regime and it was only a matter of time before they would take action. Similarly, in their analysis of the events surrounding the Velvet Revolution, Wheaton and Kavan (1992) describe how the fall of communism was something that happened gradually, starting from the Prague Spring and developing over the years into the revolution. Wheaton and Kavan (1992) describe how the old regime and the Communist party had clearly been rejected. In fact, the Communist party had already given up before they were actually defeated. They did not do much to fight the revolution.

### **3.1.3 The wake of the Velvet Revolution**

Pittaway (2007) states ‘ the spread of insurgency to the factories, the collapse of party control of the media and the unwillingness and inability of the party to resort to military force, provoked the resignation of the party leadership at the end of the week’(p.30). So, because the soviet union did nothing to stop the revolution, on 27 November the Communists surrendered to the pressure of the public and started conversation with the opposition. This shows that the collapse of the regime went relatively smooth, the real challenge came in forming a new government and rebuilding the country. Because they needed time to create political platforms and to form organisational structures, OF and VPN were reluctant at first to join the government. Adamec, the Communist politician who was assigned to form a new government, took advantage of the situation. On 3 December 1989 a new cabinet was formed, in which the Communists still had a majority. As a result there were new demonstrations. The formation of the cabinet was then changed to consist of nine Communists and 11 non-Communists, but while seven OF members joined this new government, the VPN was unrepresented. On 10 December the Communist president Gustáv Husák resigned. Václav Havel was the OF and VPN candidate for presidential office. The Communists pushed for direct elections, expecting Adamec to win. Havel, a Czech, was rejected by the Slovakian political parties and organisations in favour of Dubček, who was in fact Slovakian. Prime minister Čalfa agreed with Havel to take steps to persuade the majority in the Federal Assembly (FA) to elect Havel for President of the Republic. However, the tension between the Czech and Slovak candidates had to be eliminated in order to avoid a crisis (Suk, 2009). Therefore an agreement was made, on 28 December Alexander Dubček was elected chairman of the Federal Assembly and on 29 December Václav Havel was elected president of the Republic (Wheaton & Kavan, 1992). After the election ceremony had taken place, the students finally ended their strike. In June 1990 the first free elections in years were held and resulted in a coalition of OF and Christian Democrats.

#### **3.1.4 Division of the Czech and Slovak Republics (The velvet divorce)**

Eventually, Czechoslovakia would split up into respectively the Czech and Slovak Republics, due to irreconcilable differences between the two states. In the years before the division into two separate states the two countries had different values and orientations between the citizens of the Czech and Slovak republics (Wolchik,1995). ‘While the primary issues in Czech politics were economic reform and coming to term with forty year of communism, in Slovakia it was undoubtedly the question of future constitutional arrangements that was uppermost.’, Zák (1995) describes ‘The basic difference was one of self-identification, which was a key factor in the development of the conflict.’ (p. 246) A constant element of the tension between Czechs and Slovaks has been the tendency of Czech politicians to identify their own Czech interests with the

Czechoslovak interests, as argued by Adamec (2012), 'While the Czech political elite perceived the common state from the beginning as a fulfilment of an old Czech dream referring to the independent Czech kingdom from the 9th to the 17th century, the Slovak political representation viewed it rationally as a better shelter in the given historical conditions for the development of Slovak nationhood.'. The actions of Slovak politicians were strongly influenced by the Slovakian historical demand for equality of the two republics within the federation. The state of Slovakia demanded an entirely different approach to gain political success, because the issues the Czech and Slovak societies encountered were so entirely different from each other (Zák, 1995).

While popular opinion in both the Czech and Slovak republics was against the break-up into two different states (Wolchik, 1995), already in June 1990 the first steps were taken to limit the jurisdiction of the federal level and to strengthen the republics politically. Another decisive step towards the division of the country was taken in January 1991 for repeal of the usual financial redistribution mechanisms between two entities. The state's status quo, however, was not initially touched because the Prime Ministers of the two parts of the country, Pithart and Černogurský, wanted to avoid an escalation (Schevarado, 2009). A decision was made with the elections of July 1992, from which political parties *Občanská demokratická strana* (ODS; Civic Democratic Party) and *Ľudová strana – Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko* (HZDS; *People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia*) emerged as the winners in the two entities. Wolchik (1995) argues that the situation had come to a point where the break-up of the state was at least a possible outcome, even if it were not desirable. Or as Zák (1995) describes it; 'maintaining the country in this situation would apparently have been a difficult task even for much more experienced political representatives than those that the Velvet Revolution had lifted in to leading posts.' (p.262). The new presidents Mečiar and Klaus were quick to agree, they agreed to split up the state on January 1, 1993. The last Prime Minister of the CSFR, Jan Stránský, who took position after the July elections had to manage only the end of the common state (Schevarado, 2009).

## **3.2 Political participation**

### **3.2.1 Definition**

Political participation can be defined as the actions of citizens towards influencing or supporting government and politics. There are various definitions available of what includes political participation. For instance, Verba et al. (1995) describe it as follows: "By political participation we refer simply to activity that has the intent or effect of influencing

government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies." (p. 38).

Political participation can be divided into two types: conventional and unconventional (Barnes, Kaase et al, 1979). Conventional participation is the routine behaviour that is expected of a good citizen e.g. voting, while unconventional participation is behaviour that is considered inappropriate e.g. demonstrations (Barnes, Kaase et al, 1979). More specifically, Barnes, Kaase et al. (1979) define conventional participation as political involvement that is "directly or indirectly related to the electoral process", such as voting or party membership, while unconventional participation would be "behaviour that does not correspond to the norms of law and custom that regulate political participation under a particular regime" (p.84). Protest and rejection were labelled 'unconventional' by Barnes, Kaase et al. (1979), because in the 1970s this was inappropriate behaviour, whereas nowadays these kind of actions would be more accepted by society.

Citizens in a democracy participate politically for multiple reasons. They might participate because they feel very strongly about something and want to make a difference. Other reasons can be that they feel responsible to participate in the democratic system or that they just enjoy to be politically engaged. Sometimes people choose to not participate at all, this so-called non-participation signifies a number of attitudes: it might be that people feel satisfied with the current situation and therefore do not feel the need to participate, or people feel they do not know enough of politics or simply do not care. Some might feel that the government would not listen to them regardless if they participate or not. Another reason is simply the freedom to not participate, a right which all people in a democracy can exercise (Political Participation, n.d.).

### **3.2.2 Types of political participation**

There are various types of political participation, however those authors that studied political participation do not agree with one another on what to include in political participation. Although 'political participation' is the most commonly used term, some authors also refer to it as political activism. Barnes, Kaase et al. (1979) use both terms as synonyms, therefore the conclusion can be drawn that political action and political participation are basically the same.

The most obvious form of political participation is voting. Čmejrek (2007) argues that although voter turnout is only one aspect of citizens political participation it is the most important interactive political act. Furthermore, Čmejrek thinks that voter turnout is a basic indicator of citizens' political participation. Čmejrek (2007) states that besides voter turnout, citizens' activity on a local level are also very important aspects of political participation. Čmejrek (2007) concludes that a 'downward trend', starting in the early 1990s, has been the case for voter turnout in the Czech Republic in both parliamentary elections and elections on a local level. However, Lijphart



and Putnam (as quoted in Čmejrek, 2007) state that ‘Citizens’ participation in the political process represents one of the key issues of representative democracy. Modern systems of representative democracy face the decrease in voter turnout and low interest of citizens to assume responsibility within the political process.’ (p.21) Čmejrek does not seem to give an explanation for the downward trend in political participation.

Voting is also an activity mentioned by Letki (2004), along with three other measures. The other measures she mentions are; the frequency of discussing politics, partisanship and party membership. She does not include protesting because “activities such as voting, discussing politics or membership in various groups and parties deserve to be called “civic” as they are oriented towards “shared benefits” rather than self-interest. Letki (2004) based her findings on a study that was done in 1990 in ten post-Communist countries. One important aspect she mentions is the ‘post-honeymoon effect’ with which she explains the decline in voter turnout after the first free elections. In this article, Letki finds that membership in associations is linked to political participation, although it depends on the type of association. Another finding is that interpersonal trust is linked to political activity to some extent. In her conclusion, Letki (2004) claims that ‘the major factors causing low levels of political engagement are believed to be part of the Communist heritage: low levels of social capital (interpersonal trust and membership in voluntary associations) and anti-democratic norms and attitudes learned through participation in the non-democratic system.’ (p.24). To conclude, there is a range of different types of political participation, but some types of political participation might be more relevant than others for this dissertation, like voting, protesting or discussion of politics. In the next section the patterns of political participation will be explained.

### **3.2.3 Patterns of political participation**

The Communist legacy appears to play a large role in the rebuilding of politics in any post-Communist country. Wolchik (1995) argues that the citizens were reluctant to join political parties, for which the cause partially would be the forced mobilization of the Communist era. In fact, in 1991 public opinion polls there was an increase of people that claimed to have no attachments to any political party. The wide range of new political parties is also to blame for the attitudes of people towards these political parties. People were rather sceptical towards these political parties that came and went and formed new alliances in the first years after the Velvet Revolution. Wolchik (1995) finds that ‘the fluidity of the party system and the low levels of party identification in both the Czech lands and Slovakia mean that citizens do not have the benefit of identification with a particular political party, which is used in more established democracies to simplify political decision-making and mediate political conflict.’ (p.227). The conclusion that can be drawn from

this chapter is that the above mentioned problems as well as an uncertain future and a decline in the standard of living contributed to a dissatisfaction among the people that would eventually lead to the split up of Czechoslovakia.

Rose (1995) describes the great uncertainty among politicians and voters as to what they stood for and the amount of support they had. New parties were not very stable and tended to change often. Voters would not have a feeling of being represented properly and had a distrust in parties, which was a result of the Communist regime. The voting pattern directly after the fall of communism would involve strategic voting, 'to turn the rascals out' (Rose, 1995, p.550). This means that the people did not want a specific candidate to win the election, so they would vote for other candidates. Rose (1995) states that 'a distrustful and demobilized post-Communist electorate is likely to see government as alien, something that cannot expect to influence or identify with' (p. 557). The most important message in this article is that people did not necessarily feel they had more influence in the political process, it was rather a sense of having more freedom. Rose (1995) concludes with stating that 'the creation of a participative democracy requires filling the 'missing middle' with *trustworthy* parties. Until this is done, then instead of being committed partisans individuals will cherish their new-found freedom from the intrusive demands of a party-state.' (p.561). Right after the Velvet Revolution there was a lack of representation for left-wing parties. Most of the newly formed parties identified themselves as right-wing parties.

David Ost (1993) has a similar point of view as he examines the role of 'organization of interests' in both Communist and post-Communist society in present-day politics. Ost claims there was a clear unwillingness among the people to think in terms of interest. According to him 'Everyone favored "the market" (i.e. not communism), but no social groups seemed to organize, politically or economically, the way market-based interests organize.' (Ost, 1993, p.454) Furthermore, Ost (1993) states that in the period after the fall of communism the organisation of civil society has been 'surprisingly weak', with the state maintaining its strong position (p. 453). He argues that the weak civil society in the post-Communist era can be explained by the specific structuring of state-society relations in the Communist period. He attributes this to the fact that social groups simply did not have a clear sense of what was in their interest after the fall of Communism. Ost (1993) believes interest to be '*the* fundamental category of democratization' (p.457). During the Communist regime, Ost (1993) explains, the entire economy was nationalised and classes were abolished, therefore, when the regime was taken away, there was no class that could represent its own interests as the general interest. In this article, Ost (1993) also states that people thought a new market economy was the answer to all their problems. In conclusion, the rebuilding of politics in Czechoslovakia proved to be difficult, as there was great uncertainty and scepticism about the longevity of the new political parties, as well as a weak civil society. Now

that the concept of political participation has been established, in the last section of this chapter the role of political participation in the Velvet Revolution will be explained.

### **3.3 Political participation and the Velvet Revolution**

In 1989 "democracy" was one of the most popular words of the Czechoslovak public. The term was not associated with certain formal procedure or a clearly defined attitude, but with general requirements such as the human rights and fundamental freedoms. During the Velvet Revolution the political participation was at a high because so many people participated in the protests. However, throughout the years before the split up of Czechoslovakia this participation slowly but surely decreased. The citizens of Czechoslovakia practiced democracy with the first free parliamentary elections after more than 40 years on 8 and 9 June 1990. According to Suk, the elections had a turnout of 90% which is extremely high.

Wolchik (2010) finds that very few independent groups were active in Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution. In the late 1980s there were only approximately 30 independent groups and after the Velvet Revolution there were only groups that had ties to interwar groups, new parties or international organisations. Wolchik (2010) states that people would prefer being part of an NGO rather than being a member of a political organisation. Wolchik (2010) finds that the political attitudes of the people differ from the political attitudes in non post-Communist countries. Furthermore, she finds that the levels of interest are the same, the levels of trust are lower and the level of efficacy are also lower in comparison to other EU countries. In this book Wolchik draws the conclusion that the levels of party identification remained low and that many continue to hold parties and party leaders in low regard, paired with a complete lack of trust in the political parties. Wolchik states that the trends reflect those in the Communist era, people refused to become members of any party.

Mason (1995) states that 'in part, this reluctance to identify with political parties was due to the weak structure and development of party systems throughout the region'(p.397). Mason finds that past personal experience of political injustice and the lack of effective party organisation among others were determinants of political participation. Mason has based his analysis on the data of a public opinion survey on social, economic and political injustice that was implemented in both established democracies and post-Communist countries in 1991. Although Mason emphasizes on the 'level and sources of support for the market-oriented reforms in east central Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the relationships between these attitudes and the populations' political orientations and participation', for this dissertation, the most important finding from this research is that although a vast majority in all post-Communist countries voted in the early elections, most

of them were not otherwise politically active. Masons explanation for this is that the 'vast majority of the populations in post-Communist states were more concerned with economic issues and economic injustice than with politics'.

## **4. Findings**

As described by Mason (1995): 'In East Germany, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of people participated in demonstrations that brought down the Communist government and voter turnout was high in the first competitive elections in each of these countries. But on closer examination, it is clear that political activity in East-European countries remained limited, even during the revolutionary ferment.'(p.396). In this chapter the causes of low political participation will be determined. The most important causes are: the Communist legacy, lack of trust in political institutions, disillusionment and a weak civil society. It appears that the first cause, Communist legacy, is the most significant cause, of which the other causes are all a direct effect. This concept will be further explained in the rest of this chapter.

### **4.1 Measures of political participation**

Political participation can be classified in different ways. Letki (2003) speaks of four measures of political activism: the frequency of discussing politics, partisanship, voting in parliamentary elections and party membership. She chooses to exclude protesting from her research because it is an unconventional form of political participation, whereas the four measures she does research qualify as conventional political participation. Cooper (2008) does include protesting, along with voting, campaign activity, contacting officials and communal activity. When examining the period of the Velvet Revolution or directly after, it is very important to include protesting, because this was the major form of political activity.

Another important form is voting, as voter turnout was extremely high in the first free elections. Discussing politics, as mentioned by both Letki (2003) and Barnes&Kaase (1979) is also something the average citizen would engage in, and therefore an important aspect to include when researching political participation. Communal activity (membership in voluntary associations) is interesting because of the role of civil society in political participation, as will be explained later. Lastly, party membership, though important, is a rather difficult one, because of the Communist past and the role of party membership during the Communist regime.

During the Velvet Revolution, protesting was the main form of political participation, there were strikes and demonstrations until the people got what they wanted and the Communist regime was overthrown. Mason (1995) executed a survey, using the classification from Barnes&Kaase et

al. (1979) for protesting: petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, occupations, rent strikes, blockades, unofficial strikes. The people that participated in the survey were asked in which of these activities they had been involved. The findings of this particular question in the survey can be found in table 1. Although this survey was executed in 1995, it does represent the activeness of people in unconventional political participation in the wake of the Velvet Revolution. It does not say anything about a decline in political participation during the years after the Velvet Revolution. The table does show that in all post-Communist countries, except East-Germany, the majority of the people does not engage in any protest activities, thus it can be concluded that this type of political participation was indeed low.

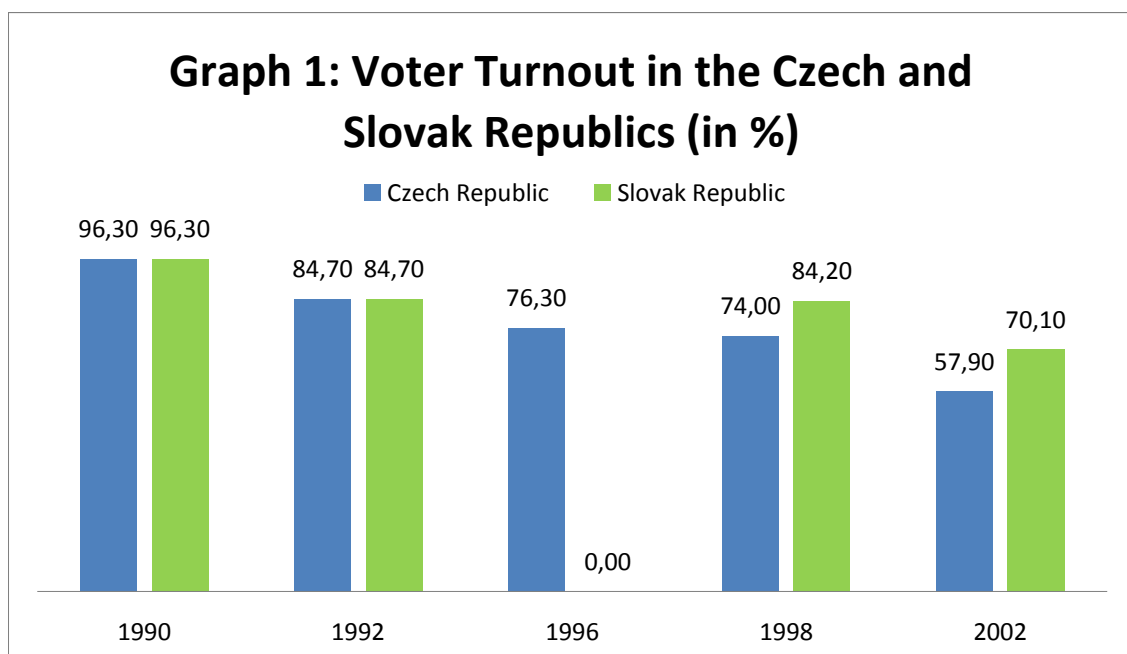
**Table 1: Political action by country**  
(% in each country reporting protest activities)

| Country                           | Number of protest activities |     |      | N    |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-----|------|------|
|                                   | none                         | 1-3 | 4-10 |      |
| Eastern Germany                   | 17                           | 66  | 17   | 1019 |
| Czechoslovakia                    | 34                           | 49  | 17   | 1181 |
| Bulgaria                          | 48                           | 43  | 9    | 1405 |
| Slovenia                          | 66                           | 29  | 5    | 1375 |
| Russia                            | 67                           | 29  | 4    | 1734 |
| Estonia                           | 69                           | 28  | 3    | 1000 |
| Poland                            | 72                           | 23  | 5    | 1542 |
| Hungary                           | 84                           | 15  | 1    | 1000 |
| Average for Post-Communist states | 57                           | 35  | 8    |      |
| Western Germany                   | 31                           | 52  | 18   | 1837 |
| Holland                           | 28                           | 55  | 17   | 1783 |
| United Kingdom                    | 21                           | 64  | 15   | 1319 |
| United States                     | 10                           | 55  | 35   | 1414 |
| Japan                             | 40                           | 53  | 7    | 777  |
| Average for capitalist states     | 26                           | 56  | 18   |      |

Questions: Have you ever done any of these things over an issue that was important to you: signed a petition; joined a boycott, attended a protest demonstration or rally; attended a public meeting; joined in an unofficial (wildcat) strike; blocked traffic; written to a newspaper; written to your member of the national/federal legislature; refused to pay rent, rates or taxes; occupied a building or property in protest.

(Mason, 1995)

The voter turnout, as mentioned before, was extremely high in the years directly after the Velvet Revolution. In graph 1 an overview can be found of the voter turnout from 1990 to 2002 for both the Czech and Slovak Republics. In the years 1990 and 1992 Czechoslovakia was still one state, therefore the data are the same for both countries. For Slovakia there are no data for 1996, because no national elections were held in that year. The voter turnout for the years 1990 and 1992 were respectively 96,3 per cent and 84,7 per cent. These numbers are the most important for this dissertation, but the following years show that the decline in voter turnout continues throughout the years. While the data for both years already show a slight decrease in voter turnout, it becomes more clear when put in perspective with the following years. In the Czech Republic the decline is larger than in Slovakia, as it shows a faster decrease in voter turnout.



Source: Eurostat, 2015

Letki (2003) carried out a survey in 1993 and used this data in her research of political participation. The results of this survey can be found in Table 2. About half of the respondents in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia reported political discussion as something they would engage in frequently. About a quarter of the respondents said to support a political party and respectively 64,7 per cent for the Czech Republic and 61,1 per cent for the Slovak Republic said to know which party they would vote for in upcoming parliamentary elections. Even though some of the data is from the years after the split-up into two different countries, it is still close enough to be significant for this dissertation. Overall, the data that was provided shows that the political participation in Czechoslovakia was indeed quite low compared to other post-Communist countries, and also in

comparison to capitalist countries. Next, the causes of this low political participation will be examined.

| <b>Table 2: Levels of Political Participation in East-Central Europe, 1993-94 (Letki, 2003)</b>                               |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |
|---|------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
|   | political<br>discussion (a.) | partisanship (b.) | parliamentary election |                 | political<br>parties<br>e.) |
|   |                              |                   | voters (c.)            | non-voters (d.) |                             |
| <b>Belarus</b>  | 2,73                         | 10,5              | 17,1                   | 38              | 1,8                         |
| <b>Bulgaria</b>   | 2,24                         | 45,1              | 60,1                   | 23,8            | 7,6                         |
| <b>Czech Republic</b>   | 2,56                         | 27,2              | 64,7                   | 8,7             | 5,6                         |
| <b>Estonia</b>  | 2,34                         | 17,2              | 53,9                   | 13,8            | 0,7                         |
| <b>Hungary</b>  | 2,3                          | 39,8              | 59,8                   | 14,2            | 1,6                         |
| <b>Poland</b>   | 1,4                          | 22,5              | 65                     | 25,7            | 1,6                         |
| <b>Romania</b>  | 1,53                         | 42,7              | 68,3                   | 14,4            | 3,2                         |
| <b>Russia</b>   | 2,43                         | 13,3              | 22,8                   | 44              | 1,1                         |
| <b>Slovak Republic</b>  | 2,9                          | 26,7              | 61,1                   | 17,2            | 4,8                         |
| <b>Ukraine</b>  | 2,22                         | 14,6              | 23                     | 32,8            | 0,6                         |
| a. average levels of reported political discussion (from 0 to 6)  |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |
| b. Percentage of political party supporters   |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |
| c. percentage of respondents declaring they know what party they would vote for in the prospective parliamentary election     |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |
| d. percentage of respondents declaring they know what party they would not vote for in the prospective parliamentary election |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |
| e. percentage of political party members  |                              |                   |                        |                 |                             |

## 4.2 Causes of decrease in political participation

### 4.2.1 Communist Legacy

Letki (2004) believes that Communist party membership was a good predictor of political participation, because there might be reluctance to engage in political participation. During the Communist era any political participation was an illusion, nobody really had a say in anything. Party membership was used as a determinant for privileges. People that were a Communist party member were rewarded with for example high job positions, the ability to study etc. Dissidents on the other hand, were deprived of everything, intellectuals were placed in heavy labour jobs or were prevented from working at all. The Communist ideology ‘guided all the political, economic and social activity’ (Marsh, 2012). As a result, many citizens were involved in pre 1989 politics, mostly by means of Communist membership (Letki, 2004). It can be concluded that Communism had a negative effect on how citizens viewed political parties, there was a sense of distrust, which will be discussed in the next section.



#### **4.2.2 Lack of trust in political institutions**

In the years after the Velvet Revolution the people of Czechoslovakia continued to hold parties and party leaders in low regard and the levels of party identification also remained low (Wolchik, 2010). Several reasons explain this reluctance to identify with the political parties. According to Mason (1995) it was due to the weak structure and development of party systems that people were sceptical towards political parties. He states that much of the population did not engage in any political participation and influence because of this lack of effective party organisations. Rose (1995) states that voters will often opt to 'vote the rascals out' when they are given the choice between more or less distrusted parties. He goes on to say that 'people who were negatively integrated into a party-state are likely to have low trust in party politics, lack a positive party identification but be quite ready to identify a party they would never vote for, and have no or shallow preferences at election time'(p.550).

According to Suk (2009), in the wake of the Velvet Revolution politicians gained popularity and trust through symbols. He mentions three post-November myths that existed that politicians would tell their potential voters to gain popularity. The first was the slogan of having to tighten their belts, people needed to live in modesty to increase living standards. The second myth was the promise to return to Europe, to pick up the threads of Czechoslovakia's prewar success. And lastly they promised that the Velvet Revolution opened doors to national and state autonomy. He speaks of sacrifices that Czechoslovakian people had to make. He says that Czechoslovakia had to adapt to significant changes in all areas of life, such as transforming the economy, privatising state-owned property and establish new media. Suk (2009) continues to say 'coupled with the declining standard of living and uncertainty about the future, the situation resulted in increasing levels of popular discontent and dissatisfaction with existing political institutions and political leaders'(p.597). Because of this dissatisfaction, people became demotivated to engage in political participation. To conclude, it seems that political parties engaged in behaviour, such as making promises they cannot keep and taking measures that were not popular, that caused the citizens to distrust them.

#### **4.2.3 Disillusionment**

In 1990 there was a sense of satisfaction amongst the Czechoslovak population. They were surprised that they had won the revolution in a speedy and orderly manner and with a notable absence of violence (Suk, 2009). There was this euphoria, when they went through the Velvet Revolution, full of hope that there would be changes. It was widely celebrated on the streets. However, the jubilation of the Velvet Revolution quickly began to sour. 'The assumption was that

the end of dictatorship constituted the beginning of democracy – and full scale democracy at that’, as McIntosh & Mac Iver (1992, p.376) put it. This, however, was not how it turned out to be. With the ever changing political parties and the promises that were not kept, Czechoslovakia still had a long way to go before they would have this desired democracy.

McIntosh & Mac Iver (1992) speak of a public disillusionment due to unrealistic expectations of an easy transition to democracy and economic prosperity. As stated by McIntosh and Mac Iver (1992) ‘In the political sphere, the public almost certainly expected “democracy” to quickly replace “communism”.’(p.376). Soon after the 1989 changes, the majority of the population expressed satisfaction and progress towards democracy. However, this declined over the years and made way for public disillusionment. McIntosh and Mac Iver (1992) state that instead of the promised democracy, the public had to deal with political turmoil and economic uncertainty. In conclusion, it seems that citizens were initially satisfied with the outcome of the Velvet Revolution, but soon discovered there was still work to be done, which caused the disillusionment.

#### **4.2.4 Weak civil society**

According to the World Health Organisation (2015) civil society ‘includes all organizations that occupy the 'social space' between the family and the state, excluding political parties and firms’. According to Letki (2003) participation in civil society is an important part of political participation, with activities such as: volunteering, attending events associated with good causes, joining an interest group or civic organisation. In contrast to Poland or Hungary, the civil society in Czechoslovakia developed late. Civil society did not play any role in the Prague Spring, because this was more organised by party leaders. Nevertheless, there were small ‘non-political’ groups or movements that were focussing on for instance human rights and freedom (Ritter, 2012). The most notable group was of course Charter 77. Still, according to Wolchik (2010) there were very few independent groups active in Czechoslovakia before 1989, due to heavy repression. These sort of movements ‘helped set the stage for the revolution and the transition, but it was the students of Czechoslovakia, who drove the movement for change’ (Ritter, 2012, p.19).

In the events leading up to the revolution there was relatively little action from the workers, or a labour movement. They only started playing a role in the revolution, when they went on strike to show their support of the protesting during the Velvet Revolution. Another aspect of civil society is the church. The church was also rather passive before 1988, apart from some activities that were mainly focussed on religious freedom, rather than democracy. Regarding ethnic movements, there were some Hungarian minorities active, but their main focus was the importance of Hungarian education in schools (Ritter, 2012). In the late 1980s there were approximately 30

independent groups active. These groups, especially after the Velvet Revolution, had ties to interwar groups, new parties or international organisations (Wolchik, 2010). To conclude, it seems that Letki is accurate in thinking that the civil society is important for political participation, because active participation in civil society will bring the citizens closer to participation in politics through activities such as volunteering or attending events that are for the common good. Furthermore, the interest groups Wolchik speaks about had ties to political parties, so people that joined these groups were indirectly involved in political participation.

To conclude, the evidence as found in the data shows that there was indeed a low political participation in the years after the Velvet Revolution. The causes for this low political participation are: the Communist legacy, the lack of trust in political institution, the disillusionment of the Czechoslovakian citizens after promises were not kept and lastly the weak civil society that did not really play a role in the revolution or directly afterwards.

## 5. Conclusion

The Velvet Revolution is an important milestone in the history of Czechoslovakia. The people wanted freedom and went out to get it. The political participation in Czechoslovakia peaked, but then dropped, only to remain low. The main question that needs to be answered is: 'What are the causes for the low political participation in Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Velvet Revolution?'. In order to answer this question, several sub questions were formulated. The answer to these questions will be given here.

How does the Communist legacy influence the relationship between people and politics? During the Communist regime people had to be a party member in order to get privileges. On the other hand, the citizens had no influence in politics and were even punished for voicing their opinions, leaving them sceptical of any form of political participation. This attitude also affected the public opinion about political institutions. And therefore the political disillusionment, distrust in political institutions among citizens and the weakness of civil society in post-Communist countries can be accredited to the Communist legacy. The Communist legacy cast a large shadow over political participation.

How does the distrust in formal organisations affect the political participation? The history with the Communist regime resulted in a lack of trust in politicians, also because of the political turmoil and instability of newly established political parties. The politicians tried very hard to get the country back on track. In doing so they made all kinds of promises to the citizens, which ultimately seemed hard to keep. When people feel like they cannot trust the government and they cannot influence anything they will become apathetic and not engage in political participation anymore.

Why was the upsurge in participation during the Velvet Revolution followed by such rapid decrease in interest in politics? After the Velvet Revolution democracy seemed to be the greatest challenge. The newly established political parties often did not have a background in politics, because they derived from action groups (such as Charter 77, OF, VPN). The politicians were very ambitious in rebuilding the country, but their dreams were too big and they could not make it happen. The unrest in politics along with economic measures did not sit well with the people. This ultimately led to a decrease in political participation.

How can we explain the patterns of political participation in the years before the 1992 split up of Czechoslovakia? The patterns of political participation can be explained by the attitude of the citizens of Czechoslovakia toward the government. When they wanted change, a revolution was started, along with a tsunami of political participation. After that the citizens became content with

the situation. But when the euphoria of the victory had past and the citizens realised that changes would be slow, if they would even happen, political participation dropped because of disillusionment and a sense of apathy.

In conclusion, the low political participation after the Velvet Revolution can be explained by several causes. It can be concluded that the low political participation was a result of the Communist legacy, distrust in political institutions, public disillusionment and a weak civil society.

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