

Czech Republic

Period of democratic transition: 1989–1990

Pro-democracy civic movement: present

The Czech Republic is a part of the former Czechoslovakia created in 1918 following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Soviet troops helped establish the Communist People's Party of Czechoslovakia in 1948. In 1968, Soviet tanks crushed the so-called Prague Spring, a period of halting political liberalization.

Despite relatively “quiet” times during the 1970s and 1980s, the group Charter 77 formed a loose alliance of citizens calling for the protection of civil and human rights in 1977. The impact of dissent and opposition activity through underground newspapers and rock music is hard to determine, but November 1989 saw the emergence of massive nonviolent civic protests involving hundreds of thousands of participants in the urban center. Charter 77 united with other groups to form the Civic Forum, led by dissident playwright Vaclav Havel, and rapidly gained followers. The protests involved as many as a million people opposed to one-party Communist rule and calling for liberalization and democracy. The upsurge of protests, called the “Velvet Revolution,” culminated in a nationwide general strike on November 28, 1989, which led to the announcement by Communist authorities that they would end their monopoly on power. By the end of 1989, roundtable talks conducted under constant civic pressure paved the way for parliamentary elections in June 1990 that were won by parties representing the democratic civic forces. Havel was elected president of the then Czechoslovak Federation by a vote of the Federal Assembly. In 1992, a new constitution was adopted, and new, competitive democratic legislative elections for the Czech Chamber of Deputies were held. In 1993, the state dissolved peacefully into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, and Havel became president of the new Czech Republic.

Since the Velvet Revolution, the Czech Republic has enjoyed free and fair elections and has worked hard to gain a consolidated democracy.