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CZECHOSLOVAKIA: Contesting How To Pick a President

The election of a president will be the next benchmark in Czechoslovakia's movement toward democracy. 

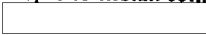
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The Civic Forum and the Communist Party have not yet agreed on how to select the president but have decided to give themselves until 24 January to hold the election. They reportedly also agreed that to be eligible a candidate must be a Czech who is not affiliated with any political party. The Communist Party spokesman, however, contends that only the extraordinary party congress set for next Wednesday has the right to determine the party's stance on the election process. The Democratic Forum of Communists, the reform wing of the party which claims 50,000 adherents, has demanded that the president be popularly elected. 

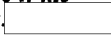
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Recent polls indicate that popular support is split among various candidates, including Civic Forum leader Vaclav Havel, Prague Spring-era leader Cestmir Cisar, reform economist Valtr Komarek, and Alexander Dubcek. One poll rates popular support for Civic Forum at 78 percent and for the Communists at only 16 percent. 

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Comment: The intense negotiations over how to elect a new president suggest that both sides realize the post's importance to democratization. The Civic Forum wants a president who will be a symbol of the break with past abuses and who will protect the fragile democratization process from possible Communist power plays. The Communist Party seeks to deny the presidency to Vaclav Havel, and hopes to install someone more agreeable to Communist influence. 

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The Communist reformers' demand for a direct presidential election, which would require a constitutional amendment, probably is a delaying tactic to gain time to regroup after next week's congress. They almost certainly expect to win a reform-oriented Central Committee and a revamped Presidium. The latest polls confirm the Communists' sagging fortunes, however, and their maneuvers to prevent a quick decision on the presidency may backfire if the public suspects that they are trying to hold on to power. 

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