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The End of the Communist Régime in Czechoslovakia

Before attempting a comparison and including Czechoslovak events in the broader context, I should like to recall some of the basic facts related to the collapse of the Communist régime in Czechoslovakia. In my interpretation I shall limit myself to the roughly ten key days of November, though the whole story has, of course, a broader time scale.

The immediate impetus that brought about the fall of the régime was the events in Prague, on 17 November 1989. Fifty years earlier in the autumn of 1939 the Nazis shut down all institutions of higher learning in Bohemia and Moravia, executed nine student leaders, and deported thousands of students to concentration camps. The date of those events was (by the British) declared International Students' Day. In 1989, Prague students prepared a demonstration to mark its fiftieth anniversary. The event was organized in part by students in the state-run youth organization, the Union of Socialist Youth (not its leading functionaries, but people who used the Union for various activities, often critical of the régime, including the publication of a number of student journals) and by 'independent' students closely in touch with the opposition. The demonstration was well attended. From the beginning anti-régime chanting could be heard and seen. After the official demonstration ended, a procession assembled and headed for the centre of Prague. At this point the demonstration comprised about 50 000 people, several times more than had attended earlier demonstrations. (A number of demonstrations had taken place in 1988—9, most of which comprised several thousand people, and at most slightly more than 10 000). The large number of demonstrators now, the compact nature of the crowd (the core of the demonstration was made up of students), and the clearly anti-régime slogans created an atmosphere on the evening of 17 November that the moment of change had finally arrived — 'Už je tady!', 'This is it!' or 'It's finally here!' was the most frequently chanted slogan that evening. Only several minutes from its destination (Wenceslas Square), however, the crowd was stopped by riot police, and after being kept in check for a few hours was brutally dispersed. Hundreds of demonstrators were badly beaten or detained or both.

The 17th of November was not exceptional for its police brutality; the police had similarly intervened against demonstrators in the past. What was different now was the size of the demonstration and the fact that its core comprised people other than those at previous demonstrations, people for whom this police brutality was a shock and also people from one social milieu, who were linked in many ways and therefore capable of reacting immediately. Still on the evening of the 17th of November the idea emerged among students of the art, theatre, and music schools that there should be a student strike. This took a concrete form on the 18th of November and met with broad support. A strike among theatre people was announced, and on the 24th of November a general strike was declared. On the afternoon of the 18th and throughout the 19th of November both spontaneous and organized demonstrations took place in the centre of Prague. On the evening of the 18th a report surfaced, that one of the students had allegedly died as a result of injuries suffered at the demonstration. Although this report, which eventually turned out to be false, helped to mobilize the public, its importance for subsequent events should not be over estimated — all the important decisions (for the strikes, the formulation and stating of student demands, including the demands that those responsible for the police brutality should be identified and punished, and the resignation of leading functionaries of the régime) had been taken and realized before the report had circulated.

On the evening of the 18th of November a number of theatres did, indeed, go on strike; instead of performances, sharply worded anti-régime political discussions took place in the

theatres. Beginning on Monday, the 20th of November, strikes began at all Prague universities and polytechnics (later, secondary schools joined in too). Also beginning on the 20th, demonstrations of hundreds of thousands of people took place in the centre of Prague. In the days that followed, strikes and demonstrations began in tens and then hundreds of other places throughout the country.

On the evening of the 19th of November the Civic Forum was founded in Prague, to express the public's criticism of the régime. In Slovakia on the same day a similar movement, the Public Against Violence, was established. The main force of the Civic Forum comprised the core of the long-standing opposition (Charter 77), led by Václav Havel, and with the participation of other groups — students, artists, representatives of various organizations, people from the Academy of Science (particularly its economists), and representatives of the workers. In the first hours and days after the 17th of November, the long-standing opposition found itself somewhat surprised by the rapid escalation of the crisis the régime was undergoing and by the rapid mobilization and radical demands of the public. Nevertheless, the opposition managed to react quickly to the situation, and became the leader of the force in society pushing for democracy. The increasing pressure on the régime, however, was not based only on the demonstrations taking place every afternoon in that period, nor on the now near legendary rattling of keys. At factories and offices throughout the country during the week beginning on the 20th of November, strike committees, the local Civic Fora and the Public Against Violence essentially took control. All sorts of information media — photocopiers, personal computers, camcorders and VCR players — were now at the disposal of the opposition and being used in an information war with the régime. Students organized thousands of trips out to the countryside and to factories to persuade people of the need for changes, for democracy. Various social organizations came out in support of the opposition. The basic organizations of the Czechoslovak Communist Party fell apart. The mass media (first, some daily newspapers, then radio and television) joined the opposition. Meetings seemed to be taking place non-stop. At the weekend of the 25th and 26th of November as many as perhaps a million people assembled in Prague. The general strike on the 27th of November, which only a few days earlier had seemed like wishful thinking, ended in success.

The régime was unable to react. It seems that it had initially hoped the wave of resistance would disperse by itself and that the demonstrations would cease (as they had, in fact, in January 1989, ceased during 'Palach week', when demonstrations took place for six days in the centre of Prague). In November 1989, however, the whole society was in motion. The régime was most probably considering the use of force (we know about the concentration of units of the People's Militia in Prague on the 21st and 22nd of November), but in the end abandoned the idea. A role was surely played also by the demoralization brought about with the collapse of the Communist régimes in the neighbouring countries, and by the certainty that the Czechoslovak Communist Party could not expect support from the USSR. (It is almost certain, however, that there was no pressure from the USSR on the Czechoslovak régime to avoid the use force.) When the régime lost that valuable week's time, it opted for a tactic that it had frequently used in the past; that is, publicly to place the blame for all the failings on to several functionaries, carry out personnel changes, and lay resort to a flood of rhetoric. The Party leadership resigned on the 24th of November. It was a gesture that came too late, however, and this time the tactic was ineffective. The Party itself found itself in the position of a bystander.

After the 27th of November the main talks took place between the opposition and the Government; the Party as an institution was largely excluded. These talks, however, actually represented one capitulation of the régime after another. The Constitution was substantially amended on the 29th of November, when the article about the Party's leading role was dropped from it. A Commission of Investigation was set up, as requested by the students, and an increasing number of functionaries were forced to resign. Eventually Premier Adamec, who had

from the beginning led the talks with the Civic Forum and had seemed to them an acceptable political player, handed in his resignation. On the 9th of December a new Government was formed, now without a Communist majority and with members of the Civic Forum and the People Against Violence. President Gustáv Husák was forced to resign by the 10th of December. Deputies in the federal, the Czech, and the Slovak assemblies were replaced by co-optation. Alexander Dubček was elected Leader of the Federal Assembly, and Václav Havel was elected President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic on 29 December. The student strikes could now end. The basic struggle for power in the state had been decided. The general elections that took place six months later confirmed that fact.

Describing concisely the differences or similarities offered when comparing developments in the collapse of the Communist régime in Czechoslovakia with those in neighbouring countries can appear at first sight to be a relatively simple task. The Czechoslovak case appears rather different from the Polish and also the Hungarian, whereas it is in many ways similar to the East German. For years the régime seemed to be relatively stable; it rejected any sort of reform, not to mention dialogue with the opposition; it looked upon developments in the Soviet Union with scarcely concealed mistrust; the obligatory support and consent with the new CPSU leadership tended after 1987 to be more an exercise in theatre and rhetoric than anything sincere. The actual revolution (or takeover, if you prefer) was quick and dynamic, the régime relinquishing power under pressure from the public which had suddenly awakened and mobilized itself.

I shall try here first to demonstrate that things are not quite as simple as all that, and then shall ultimately return to the aforementioned description which in essence remains valid after all.

For the twenty years prior to November 1989 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) lived under the strong influence of the experience of August 1968. The shock that followed from the CPCz having almost lost control over society and from the cost and difficulty of rectifying its error never diminished. For the post-Prague Spring leadership of the CPCz (which remained unchanged both in ideology and personnel till November 1989) the fundamental lessons of that experience were that it should not allow any sign of intra-Party disunity or disagreement, not allow any space for any independent social force, publicly not re-evaluate or criticize itself or its policies, it should remain as immobile as possible and maintain power over everything in society, at any price and if necessary even by force.

This relatively successful strategy was of course disrupted by Gorbachev. The régime of Gustáv Husák, however, was able one way or another to cope with the new Soviet leader and his policies by the tactic of praising as loudly as possible while continuing to do things in its own way. Relatively marked conflicts, however, soon emerged in the CPCz leadership as well. In the spring of 1987 a group formed round Premier Lubomír Štrougal, which employed very distinct perestroika rhetoric, and also tried to push through certain changes. Štrougal, though, was unsuccessful in a bid to replace Husák as head of the Party, and ultimately resigned as Premier. Husák was replaced by a nondescript apparatchik, Miloš Jakeš. Nevertheless, beginning in 1987, even in official spheres some things began to change in Czechoslovakia, and some issues made their way onto the agenda. A gradual but distinct liberalization began gradually to get underway. Some sort of Czechoslovak version of glasnost was endorsed, and at least in the most basic sense news reporting acquired a certain objectivity. It was surely important that viewers of Czechoslovak Television could see images of the anti-régime demonstrations in Prague, in August 1989, and, later, in East Germany in the autumn of 1989 — the propagandistic commentary accompanying the images was, compared to the force of the televised images, of little import. Beginning in 1987 a number of restrictions were lifted, making travel abroad much easier. Changes took place also in the arts and culture. At least the works of several dozen banned authors were returned to the public libraries and theatres, and some films

that had been kept under lock and key for twenty years also appeared. This trend can be clearly documented in historiography as well. Whereas in Poland modern national history (with the exception of the Katyn massacres) had in essence been interpreted "normally" since 1956, in Czechoslovakia during most of the existence of the Communist régime there were a number of taboo topics in historiography. In the mid-1980s, though, memoirs of Czechoslovak airmen in the RAF during World War II did begin to be published, as well as books on the establishment of the First Republic, creating a situation very reminiscent of the period in Czechoslovakia beginning in about 1965. What was most important, however, was that although the régime was able to maintain "order" on the streets and squares (by brutal police actions against demonstrators), it used other forms of repression (particularly judicial forms) with reluctance and only selectively. To put it somewhat simply: a crime that in the 1950s could mean a life-sentence in gaol or capital punishment, meant five years in gaol in the 1970s, and several months in gaol in 1988/9.

In 1989, the Czechoslovak régime was often called neo-Stalinist, hard-line. That was understandable for tactical reasons, but also fitting in comparison with the developments in Poland and Hungary. I think, however, one must also say that in the late 1980s the régime was worn-out (literally, both in terms of personal and of generations), and forced by internal and external factors into a situation where its operation was very similar to the golden years of the liberal 1960s just before the Prague Spring.

The leaders of the former opposition today like to say that in the autumn of 1989 the core of the opposition comprised at most a few hundred people. Undoubtedly that is how they perceived their position in 1989. I believe, however, that this is to some extent an optical illusion. The opposition was, in the last two years of its existence, much broader and more structured. Dozens of groups were operating here, and some sort of quasi-spectrum had emerged, from monarchists to radical Greens and pacifists. In the two years before the end the ability of the opposition to disseminate its own information and views had also been considerably increased. There were dozens of periodicals, some of which came out regularly, in a rather large number of copies, and displaying a high quality, not only in terms of their authors, but also of their editors and technical aspects (thanks also to the technology that had reached Czechoslovakia by way of Poland and Hungary), and a journal was being produced on video. In 1988 dozens of demonstrations took place in Prague (admittedly the number of people attending usually was not more than 10,000), various petitions were gathering an increasing number of signatures. In an unpublished, officially-conducted public opinion poll in the spring of 1989, roughly 30 to 40 per cent of the respondents stated that they knew the programme and activity of the opposition and to a certain extent sympathized with them (the higher the level of education of the respondents and the larger the population of the town where they lived, the greater the number of people who knew the programme and activity and sympathized with them). It is no surprise, then, that in the same survey about 40 per cent of those asked said that they regularly or at least frequently listened to Czech and Slovak broadcasts of the Western radio stations RFE and VOA. The frequently repeated claim that even in December 1989 few people in Czechoslovakia knew who Václav Havel was is unsupportable. In summary: the strength of the opposition before November 1989 was greater than those in it imagined or dared to test. Allow me another over-simplification: the opposition in Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1989 was roughly in the same situation as the opposition in Poland in 1980.

Society had long been genuinely sceptical about the possibility of any change. Scepticism probably played a more important role here than lack of courage or an intentionally apolitical attitude. The Czechoslovak "man in the street" long reacted to Gorbachev with words such as "Well, so what? We wanted something like that twenty years ago, and you know how it turned out.' Also in this respect, however, much changed during the last two years of the

Communist régime. An increasing number of people came to listen to the appeals being made by the opposition and reacted to them positively (one thinks, for instance, of the growing number of signatories and demonstrations.) Various factors were at work here. One of the very important ones that brought about the politicization of the Czechoslovak public (and helped to mitigate the scepticism) consisted of developments in the neighbouring countries of the East bloc. Society surely perceived the long-standing opposition that existed before November 1989 (that is to say, Václav Havel and Charter 77) as a moral authority, and therefore accepted it as such in November 1989. That is, I think, what distinguishes the situation in Czechoslovakia from the one in East Germany, where the moment crisis openly erupted no sufficiently well-known and widely respected opposition figures were available who could, with an undeniable mandate, have articulated and led the social movement. It is this fact in particular which probably gave the Czechoslovak developments such a dynamic. (That this mandate tended to be primarily moral, rather than political, was not to the detriment of the opposition; on the contrary, it the social demand was for ethics.) In other words, society was not so inert and immobile. Palatable evidence of this is that all the basic postulates with which society went into conflict with the régime after 17 November 1989 (that is, the demand for an investigation into the police brutality against demonstrators on 17 November 1989 and punishment of those responsible, the immediate resignation of leading régime functionaries, the organization of strikes in universities, polytechnics, and theatres, and the declaration of a general strike to be held on 27 November) had not originated in long-established opposition groups but among students and people involved in the arts.

The opposition, however, was able to react almost immediately and quite adequately. It filled the existing vacuum of social authority, and was able to guide events and to lead. Developments in Czechoslovakia took place at a dizzying pace. Nevertheless one can identify (at least till the moment it was clear that the régime did not intend to solve the crisis by force, that is to say from the resignation of the Jake%o politburo, on 24 November) an attempt to employ the whole repertoire of tactics that régimes in neighbouring countries had attempted to employ. This included, following the Polish example, the attempt to share in power, but mainly the attempt to reach an agreement with part of the opposition, to create, following the Hungarian example, at least the best conditions for future competition in a completely pluralist system, following the East-German model with far-reaching changes in personnel and a radical change in course to renew its influence on at least part of society. All these manoeuvres ultimately, as in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany, ended in failure. In Czechoslovakia they had at most a brief life and tended to be of an improvised nature rather than a well thought out tactic.

Hanging over the situation in Czechoslovakia was the almost magic shadow of the year 1968, which from the psychological, programmatic, and tactical points of view, held all the potential actors in a state of immobility. This shadow had to disappear and these actors and the potential of developments (which one has identified in the individual actors) had to come together in one moment. That happened on 17 November, and then everything began to move very quickly. Czechoslovak society and the opposition were able to exert a concentrated pressure on the régime. This had to do not only with the daily demonstrations in Prague, Bratislava, and hundreds of other places throughout the country, in which millions rather than hundreds of thousands participated. As early as the first week after 17 November the régime had almost completely lost the information war, and the mass media joined the opposition. In particular, the students and the people involved in the arts were able to deploy an unbelievably large and effective repertoire of means to communicate with society. In state-run institutions and enterprises strike-committees and Civic Forums were established, and actually took over the management of these institutions and enterprises. Social organizations went over to the opposition. The CPCz disintegrated, as tens of thousands of people handed in their Party cards.

The Communist régime eventually cleared the field more quickly than the opposition was able to place people into vacated functions. In December it was no longer necessary to organize mass public demonstrations. At the slightest indication the Communist leadership made concessions and ultimately capitulated.

The end of the régime in Czechoslovakia does not systemically differ from the process in other countries of the Soviet bloc. The same actors were involved, the same tactics employed, the same factors were at work. It seems to me that just as the régimes were established after World War II, so too does their disestablishment in the late 1980s represent — to put it again somewhat simply — one story in different variations. It is no surprise: after all, the subject of our interest comprises régimes built on the basis of one ideology, following the same model, with the same international connections, régimes that tried to control society in all the countries using the same instruments and ultimately producing very similar societies.

What is different, however, are the concrete circumstance, the weight, and the sequence of individual factors, as well as the dynamic of developments. If I had to summarize in a few words the collapse of the Communist régimes in central Europe, that now somewhat worn-out but nevertheless essentially pithiest of epigrams by Timothy Garton Ash would express it best: It took ten years in Poland, ten months in Hungary, ten weeks in East Germany, and ten days in Czechoslovakia.