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The Beginnings of Reform Rule

The advent of a reform regime in Czechoslovakia was the result of many years of struggle, disappointments, setbacks, and half-fulfilled hopes. It had its roots in a movement which began, in fact, in the mid-1950s with the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956. It was then that many Czech and Slovak Communists, like so many of their colleagues elsewhere in the Communist world, began to question some of the methods if not the dubious achievements of their years in power. Some began to examine the idea of reform; intellectuals and students went so far as to demand it.[1] Yet these first signs of reform-mindedness in Czechoslovakia were of significance only insofar as they were the first seeds of a plant which was a long time in coming to fruition. The regime in fact succeeded in stifling these first efforts, thereby warding off reform for six years more; Czechoslovakia remained the 'model satellite' until 1963.

Background

It was perhaps strange that the one country in Eastern Europe with a democratic-humanitarian tradition of several hundred years, the one society which had known a genuine western-style democracy in this century and a pre-war legal Communist Party which itself was 'notorious' in Communist circles for its evolutionary–parliamentary bias, should be one of the most stubborn in throwing off the Stalinist practices condemned even in Russia by 1956. Yet there were a number of circumstances which combined to militate against de-Stalinization in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s. Among these was the rule of the *apparatchiks*, that is those people such as Party first secretary Antonín Novotný, who had risen to power during the massive purges in the 1949–54 period. It was through loyal and unquestioning obedience to the old methods that these people had survived and risen; they then continued to use these methods once in power. Given the purges and the atmosphere generated by them, more imaginative or progressive men than those of the *apparat* had little hope of gaining power or even influence. Moreover, this new leadership was

[1] At the 1956 Writers Union Congress and the students' 1956 Majales Festival.

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dependent upon the old methods because of the basic instability of the regime. The leadership had been so involved in the past excesses of the Party that it probably could not survive (and therefore did not dare permit) genuine liberalization. Novotný himself, as well as most of the others in his regime, had been too directly involved in the preparation and perpetration of the purge trials – including the trials of the Slovak 'nationalists' which took place after the deaths of Stalin, Gottwald, and Beria – to risk a genuine review and rehabilitation which were part of 'de-Stalinization.'[1]

Another factor which helped the regime forestall liberalization was the relative economic stability of Czechoslovakia. After the economic problems of 1953 and certain concessions (although quickly rescinded), the standard of living in Czechoslovakia had risen at a relatively satisfactory rate. The economic successes of these years were later proven to be only partial and deceptive insofar as genuine progress within the framework of a viable economy was concerned, but at the time the regime could point to certain successes. This in fact led it triumphantly to declare the ascension to socialism in 1960 and the adoption of a socialist Constitution. Moreover, the average citizen experienced a certain improvement in his standard of living, especially in relation to the rest of Eastern Europe. In fact, Czechoslovakia had long been better off than its Eastern European allies, having emerged from World War Two with its highly developed industrial economy almost unscathed. Together with this relatively good economic position during the ensuing years, there was, however, also a dependence upon the Soviet Union for natural resources and, to a certain degree, as a market for Czechoslovak products.

Another factor which played a role, albeit a negative one, in the avoidance of liberalization in the 1950s was Czechoslovakia's geopolitical position and tradition. Of this the most significant element was, perhaps, the feeling of friendship (or at least good-natured tolerance) for the Russians. While these feelings should not be exaggerated, they did account for the *absence* of a strong anti-Russian tradition which might have acted as a stimulant for liberalization, as in the case of Poland and Hungary in 1956. Moreover, there was also the Czech tradition of passive rather than active resistance – the 'sit it out' attitude which characterized much of the period under Habsburg rule, for example. Still another factor which facilitated the regime's efforts to forestall liberalization was the serious minority problem in Czechoslovakia. The Czech–Slovak conflict often diverted and thereby dissipated what might have been a unified opposition within the Party.

[1] For a history of Novotný's positions on this subject, see 173–4

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None of these factors was conclusive or static. Given different circumstances or a change in one or another of these factors, some obstacles disappeared or turned into stimulants rather than deterrents for reform. Thus by the end of 1962 the situation was quite different and the factors militating *for* liberalization were much stronger or had replaced those which earlier constituted obstacles. For example, the economy was in a nearly critical situation by 1962, and in August of that year the Third Five-Year Plan had to be scrapped half-way through. The failure of the plan, the continued deterioration of the economy, and the inability for these reasons to promulgate more than *ad hoc* one-year plans all pointed to the need for reform.

In addition, the chronic weakness of the regime was aggravated by a power struggle – albeit between two conservatives – which impaired the unity of the *apparat*. This struggle, between Novotný and his Interior Minister Barák, did not render the alternative of de-Stalinization any more attractive or 'safe' in the eyes of Novotný, but it did weaken his ability to withstand pressures for change.[1] Despite Novotný's victory over Barák, the Party was seriously split over the action against the slightly more popular, yet conservative, competitor for power.[2] At the same time, more progressive Party people were agitated by Novotný's efforts to stage a show-trial, not only of Barák, but also of several liberals accused of creating a 'pro-Titoist group,'[3] and this at a time when many countries of Eastern Europe had renounced such methods and permitted rehabilitations.

A third factor operating in the direction of de-Stalinization came from Moscow. The Twenty-Second Congress of the CPSU, with its opening of the second wave of de-Stalinization, led to pressures on various Parties in Eastern Europe, including the Czechoslovak Party, finally to begin to take steps towards de-Stalinization. These pressures were also connected with Soviet concern over the Czechoslovak economic situation and the

[1] This affair remains unclear, but apparently Barák (who also had a hand in the trials) gathered materials on Novotný's role in the trials (which he had confiscated while chairing a committee of investigation of the trials) for possible use in a power struggle. It was later suggested that Novotný commandeered these materials, for they were later found to be missing altogether. See Jiří Pelikán, *The Czechoslovak Political Trials* (London, 1971), 218–19; *Reportér*, 5 June 1968. For suggestions of Soviet involvement see William Griffith, *Albania and the Sino-Soviet Dispute* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 74 and Victor Velen, 'Czech Stalinists Die Hard,' *Foreign Affairs*, 43:1 (1964), 321–2.

[2] According to Novotný's own admission: *Usnesní a dokumenty ústředního výboru KSČ: od celostátní konference KSČ 1960 do XII sjezdu KSČ*, II (Praha, 1963), 244–5.

[3] Pelikán, *Political Trials*, 28–9, 217–18.

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possible failure of the latter to fulfill its obligations to the bloc. Moscow's past willingness to tolerate continued Stalinism in Prague may have been tempered by the increasing awareness that Czechoslovakia might no longer be able to 'return' the favor through its usual economic performance. Moscow may well have argued that the de-Stalinization demanded by the Twenty-Second CPSU Congress could provide the tools necessary to restore the Czechoslovak economy to good working order.

With the accumulation of pressures and objective factors, in 1962, many Slovaks saw that their specifically Slovak interests might be served by de-Stalinization or even by liberalization – and that the circumstances were now fortuitous for pressures in this direction together with like-minded Czechs. For the Slovaks the most immediate demand was the revision of past verdicts against the Slovak Communist Party leadership; thus the Slovaks' greatest interest in de-Stalinization lay in a review of the trials and rehabilitation of the former Slovak leaders, including Gustav Husák and Laco Novomeský, as well as Vladimír Clementis (posthumously).

It was this 'confluence' of factors: economic crisis, political instability, pressures from Moscow, and Slovak exploitation of the situation, which brought Novotný, reluctantly, to abandon some of his habitual caution and agree to a very limited de-Stalinization. Thus in August of 1962 he appointed a committee to review the trials, and at the December 1962 twelfth Party congress he announced both this decision and that of the Party to explore economic reforms. The overall conservative tone of the congress, however, was probably the result of efforts by Novotný to minimize the significance of these decisions and, perhaps, an indication that he was still thinking in terms of merely symbolic de-Stalinization. A decision to de-Stalinize for Novotný and indeed for most of the Party's leadership was akin to the opening of a Pandora's box. It could – and did – lead to a questioning not only of the specific contributions these people had made to the preparation of the trials, but a questioning of the practices and ideas of the whole 'Stalinist' period, practices and ideas which were still in use.

The first stage[1]

By taking these basic decisions in 1962, the Party did indeed open the floodgates to demands and criticism which led ultimately to a revolu-

[1] The following is a brief summary of a period which was of utmost importance in the development of reform; further details may be found in subsequent chapters and the

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tionary reform program. Starting with demands for renunciation of the Stalinist malpractices responsible for the trials, intellectuals, mainly Slovaks, subjected every sphere of Czechoslovak society to severe criticism, in the name of anti-dogmatism. Everything from the economic system and the social services, to the misrepresentations of T. G. Masaryk and Kafka in Communist histories, and the lack of contact with the West, came under fire.[1] Demands for change were made concerning almost every aspect of the prevailing model of socialism, including the dictatorship of the Party and the all-pervasive nature of political–class considerations.

Most of these complaints and demands came from Party members writing in a controlled press – particularly in the specialized organs of the intellectuals such as the Czechoslovak Writers Union weekly *Literární noviny*, the Slovak Writers Union weekly *Kultúrny život*, the Committee for Socialist Culture weekly *Kulturní tvorba*, and the writers' monthlies *Plamen* and *Host do domu*.[2] The many congresses of 1963, particularly of the Czechoslovak Writers Union, the Slovak Writers Union, and the Slovak Journalists Union provided ample platforms for these demands, subsequently carried by the unions' organs. Moreover, this criticism often appeared even in the Party press, such as the theoretical monthly *Nová mysl* (particularly during the liberal editorship of Čestmír Císař) and the Slovak Party daily, *Pravda*.[3] Thus de-Stalinization was a Party affair, a movement for reform from within, spearheaded by Party intellectuals; and as this drive gained momentum, one change led to another. For example, in response to pressures from the liberals, Novotný agreed to certain personnel changes: the old Stalinist, Karol Bacílek, who had played an active role in the purges of the Slovaks, was replaced as Slovak Party first secretary in April 1963 by the moderate-liberal Alexander Dubček.[4]

author's *The Czechoslovak Reform Movement: Communism in Crisis 1962–1968* (Cambridge, 1971).

[1] The following intellectuals were among those linked with this phenomenon: Eduard Goldstücker, Karel Kosík, Zora Jesenská, Ladislav Mňačko, Karol Rosenbaum, Radoslav Selucký, Jiří Šotola, Pavol Števček, Ladislav Szántó.

[2] *Kulturní tvorba* was taken over by the Party in August 1964 because of these articles.

[3] Even the Party daily, *Rudé právo*, carried an occasional critical sally, for example its editorial on 20 August 1963.

[4] The term 'liberal' is applied more or less arbitrarily to indicate views or persons favoring a liberalization or democratization of the system (as distinct from Liberalism); it is employed throughout interchangeably with the term 'reformer' or 'reformist' as well as the term 'progressive' which is used in Czechoslovakia.

Along with Bacílek, Pavol David and Bruno Köhler were also demoted. Novotný opposed Dubček's appointment, favoring Michal Chudík instead. (*Kulturní tvorba*, 11 April 1968.)

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Dubček in turn accorded the Slovak press and Party press a large degree of freedom, evoking public censure from Novotný in June 1963.[1] This liberal press-policy had led to the publication on 3 June 1963 of the speech delivered by journalist–professor (and former *Pravda* editor), Miroslav Hysko, to the Slovak Journalists' congress in May 1963. In this speech Premier Viliam Široký came under sharp attack for his role in the purges of Slovak Communists. Široký did not survive this attack, sanctioned as it was by its publication in the official Slovak Party organ. Three months later he and his government were forced to resign and he was replaced by another Slovak, Jozef Lenárt, who was then more acceptable to both Slovaks and liberals.

This was but one manifestation of the increasing momentum of the reform drive. Novotný himself was pressured not only to rehabilitate past victims (whose return to at least semi-public life in turn prompted still further demands) and to purge some of those responsible for past injustices, but also to agree to genuine reforms which would guarantee that such miscarriages of justice would not recur. That he felt threatened by this review of the past and still more threatened by the demands for reform was evidenced, however, by such things as his reluctance to fully rehabilitate the Slovak Communists (by thoroughly invalidating the charges of 'bourgeois nationalism' put against them) or his defense of his own past in the form of references to his own near-arrest in the 1950s.[2] By December 1963 he was so embattled that it seemed he was about to be toppled by the liberals. At this time Khrushchev sent Leonid Brezhnev to Prague in the interest of securing political stability, a precondition, as it were, for restoring the formerly dynamic economy. Brezhnev apparently saved the faltering dogmatist, possibly by arranging a compromise. Novotný stayed in office, but apparently on condition that he accede to some of the liberals' demands, permit de-Stalinization, and institute reforms aimed particularly at revitalizing the economy.[3] The nature of the compromise became apparent over the following two years as reforms were introduced in one sphere after another of Czechoslovak society.

The Stalinist-type command-economy was one of the institutions which warranted reform, according to liberal economists. They argued that while this system had, perhaps, been suitable to the first stage of 'extensive'

[1] *Rudé právo*, 13 June 1963 (speech at Košice, which Bratislava television refused to telecast at the last moment).
[2] *Der Stern*, 10 October 1963.
[3] The first sign was the December 1963 central committee decision finally invalidating the changes of Slovak 'bourgeois nationalism.' (*Rudé právo*, 29 January 1964.)

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economic development, it was no longer effective and, in fact, was counterproductive in a socialist economy with a broad industrial base.[1] The economists argued that the Czechoslovak socialist economy had entered a second stage in which concentration should be shifted from an 'extensive' to an 'intensive' system, i.e. to improved productivity, efficiency, and quality. They argued that the highly centralized, administratively determined, quantitative system had stifled initiative, led to a decline in both productivity and standards, produced unfulfilled demand ('suppressed inflation,' as some called it), created foreign trade imbalances, waste, and a lack of progress. The 'cult of the plan,' with its concern for gross output instead of economic values, reliance upon directives rather than economic instruments, politicization of the economy (e.g. the cadre system), Party interference in and control over all aspects of the economy, and political rather than economic criteria in foreign trade and investment, had together sapped the strength of the Czechoslovak economy.[2]

More basic was the realization that the whole concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its counterpart, the Leninist concept of the Party (at least as implemented by Stalinists), might also be unsuitable bases for the pre-Communist but socialist society. Czechoslovak theoreticians asserted that socialist society, too, was composed of various 'strata' or groups, although not classes in the Marxist sense of the term since all had the same relation to the means of production in a socialist society. These groups not only existed but often brought with them conflicting interests. It was even suggested that these conflicting interests might be the very motor of progress in this type of society. The dictatorship of the proletariat was not, therefore, the suitable form of government for such a society, for there was hardly the need for a dictatorship of one class over the others when in fact classes had been eliminated. The rationale for a dictatorship having disappeared, a new form of government had to be found; given the various strata of society, this would have to be a form which provided room for and vehicles of expression for all interests – conflicting or not. In other words, this form should be democratic. The Soviet answer to this dilemma, the all-peoples' state introduced by Khrushchev in 1961, failed in the opinion (implicit rather than expressed) of the Czech

[1] Ota Šik, 'Problems of the New System of Planned Management,' *Nová mysl*, XVIII: 10 (1964), 1165–80; Šik, 'A contribution to the Analysis of Czechoslovak Economic Development,' *Politická ekonomie*, XI:1 (1963), 1–33. Löbl argued that the command-economy had never been more than a Stalinist distortion of Marxism (*Kultúrny život*, 28 September; 5, 12 October 1963).

[2] Economic discussions were held in almost every economic and literary–political journal, by Selucký, Löbl, Kosta, Goldmann, Korda, Plachý, Kožušník and others.

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and Slovak theoreticians because of its neglect of conflicting interests. Khrushchev's formula, with its retention of the ubiquitous and dominating role of the Party, allowed merely for *different* interests susceptible of harmonization. Thus the political structure and institutions provided by the all-peoples' state could not provide the missing provisions and guarantees for the genuine expression of conflicting interests.[1]

Rejection of the governmental form of dictatorship of the proletariat posed a still more serious problem, ignored by the Soviet 'solution:' what should be the role of the Party? The Leninist concept of the leading role of the Party as the vanguard and embodiment of the proletariat, was designed, like the dictatorship of the proletariat (and in a sense the command-economy), for the revolutionary stage of development. It was a concept suited for the seizure of power and elimination of the opposition; it, too, lost its rationale once socialist society was established. Even the monolithic nature of the Leninist Party was outmoded: the differences in socialist society manifested themselves within the Party itself, conflicting with each other within the framework and ideals of the Party. Socialist society, then, demanded a new conception of the role of the Party as well as a new conception of the Party itself.

The reforms, those enacted and those under consideration, were the outcome of practical needs and ideological considerations. But they were influenced by another factor which had more to do with the tradition of the Czech nation than with Marxism as such. The Czechoslovak reformers, anxious lest the Polish experience be repeated in Czechoslovakia, were not interested in a sudden burst of liberalization measures which could be withdrawn just as suddenly as they had been introduced. They preferred a slow, meticulous formulation of legal revisions with the idea of institutionalizing the changes and altering the very structure and fiber of society. This plodding, undramatic, but thorough undertaking promised to make of the Czechoslovak reforms a more lasting and potentially significant endeavor than their predecessors elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

Early reform

The economic reforms were to place the economy on a market-determined, profit basis as distinct from the former plan-directed, volume-

[1] These ideas were raised mainly by theoreticians such as Zdeněk Mlynář, Michal Lakatoš, Michal Suchý, Ondrej Kopčok, Juraj Suchý, Vladimír Blažek, Július Strinka, and Miroslav Kusý.

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oriented system.[1] Enterprises were to be independent, not only from directives and quotas but also from state support. They were to be dependent upon their gross income to cover their expenses, including wages. In this way the enterprise would be forced to gear production, in structure, costs and assortment, to the demands of the market, for only from its profits would it cover its costs. Unsuccessful enterprises were to close. This dependence of an enterprise on its own means was intended to provide an incentive for workers, as well as for increased productivity and technological advance, since wages were to be paid out of the gross income. A bonus system would also be introduced for special contributions to the increased income of the enterprise. Investments were to be financed partially by the plant's own resources and partially with the help of credits from the state bank. These credits were to be awarded on the basis of the economic effectiveness of the project and the ability of the enterprise to repay, with more or less fixed interest rates.

Wages were to be differentiated according to the workers' tasks and merit, instead of the former system of wage-equalization. While the level of wages was to depend on the success or failure of the plant, prices were to be flexible, depending upon the market. The market must be competitive, with foreign as well as domestic goods vying for the consumer's attention. Although the goal was free prices, a transitional three-category system would be used in which prices would be either fixed, flexible within limits, or entirely free.

The roles of the state, the central authorities, and the plan were to be clearly delineated and limited to guidance. Neither the government nor the Party was to interfere in plant operations or in the basic planning of the enterprise. The enterprise was to be free to choose its own suppliers and to determine its own yearly operational plan. The state was to limit itself to long-term plans designed principally to predict trends in supply, demand, costs and resources, so as to provide overall long-range coordination for the economy as a whole. This long-range plan was to be worked out on the basis of suggestions from various agencies of the government and the enterprises, in accordance with scientific methods of market research. The state was also to establish minimum wages, price categories, and levies, and make certain key investments.

Organizationally, the production base (industry and construction) was to be divided into associations and trusts (some one hundred in all) which

[1] The 'Principles' of the reform were published in *Rudé právo*, 17 October 1964, accepted by the Party in January 1965, introduced experimentally in part in 1965–6, to be fully implemented from January 1967.

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would form the central management for groups of enterprises within their jurisdiction (organized vertically in terms of total complex production process, or horizontally, in trusts, uniting enterprises of the same sector of production). The association (or trust) would provide general coordination for its subordinate enterprises, through information guidelines and research and development for the scientific–technological progress of the association as a whole; it would be responsible for the delivery of supplies to other sectors of the economy. The association would be run by a directorate consisting of the enterprise managers and special advisers (for marketing, production, and the like) and headed by a director elected from among the enterprise managers. The enterprise was to maintain its autonomy within the association and be responsible for its own finances and operations. To cope with the increased authority and responsibility given to plant managers under the new system, qualifications and standards for such personnel were to be raised. In addition to political maturity, plant managers were expected to have technical knowledge, initiative, and a 'business sense.'[1]

The key to the whole system was the rule of the market mechanism. Economic values and instruments (prices, levies, credits) were to replace administrative direction and arbitrary indices. A free competitive market, responsive to the world market, would direct the enterprise towards greater labor productivity, technological progress, and satisfaction of demand. These criteria were to be applied to every enterprise in Czechoslovakia, not only to industry, internal and external trade, and services, but to the social and cultural spheres as well, although details were to be worked out with regard to state subsidies and guarantees for certain 'non-productive' sectors.

Economic reforms were to be accompanied by reforms in the social and cultural spheres. A new labor code introduced such innovations as mobility of labor, abolition of the work book, elimination of the cadre system, worker access to personal files, protection by contracts, rights to take grievances to court, and other practices which served to give the worker greater freedom, protection and rights vis-à-vis the enterprise.[2] Trade unions were to undergo reforms designed to make them representative of the workers' interests in factories (and in government decisions) rather than agencies of the Party. In fact this was the purpose behind all the reforms proposed for mass organizations, including the youth organization (ČSM) and women's groups. These organizations, originally designed as

[1] A management training institute was set up in 1965.
[2] *Sbírka zákonů*, No. 65/1965.

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