The Prague Spring: Then and Now, 40 Years later

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Apparently, the view is still widely held that the Prague Spring blossomed on January 5, 1968, and met its deplorable end on August 21 of the same year when the troops of the Warsaw Pact invaded the country. But reality is different: the Prague Spring was a prolonged and highly complex process.

Early in 1968, the Czechoslovakian society awoke. The public, the media, and even the communist party itself felt an urgent desire for change and reform. Dissatisfied with things as they were, people pushed for freedom and openness. By then, the reins of power were held by a generation which had had enough of socialism in its material form as it existed in the ČSSR. Led by intellectuals, artists, and thinkers, everyone was looking for a new socialist way.

Among the party leaders, the 'Slovakian question' became a point of dispute. Having developed swiftly in social, economic, and cultural terms, the society of Slovakia was urgently calling for adequate constitutional recognition. It was against this background that Alexander Dubček, a Slovak, was elected First Party Secretary by both Czechs and Slovaks in January 1968. Although he was later surrounded by a halo, especially abroad, Mr Dubček was rather a dubious symbol: a staunch communist and faithful ally of the Kremlin, he was anything but a pioneer of democracy and independence. Still, he had charisma, and he wanted to change things. His appointment marked the conclusion of a truce among the members of the central committee of the communist party, for the anti-Novotný coalition of the time was highly averse to making internal conflicts public.

The climate in the country itself began to change when the party ordered the abolition of press censorship. It was thought that society was solidly united behind socialism, and that liberalizing the media law did not threaten the ideology of the state in any way. However, it was soon found that this was a mistake: every day now, the media broke taboos, picking up issues that had been left aside before. People in their thousands attended meetings that were transmitted by radio to the entire country. A wave of political interest swept the land, and society appeared mobilized to a high degree.

When President Novotný stepped down on March 21, he was followed in office by General Svoboda, a man respected by the people. Days later, Oldřich Černík became Prime Minister and Josef Smrkovský took office as president of the parliament. The party adopted an 'action programme' which proposed fundamental rights for citizens and propagated re forms and liberalization. But developments, in the course of which new political organizations kept

springing up, had long since taken on a life of their own. What was happening under the slogans 'renewal' and 'rebirth' was essentially nothing but the destabilization of crucial elements of the communist regime.

The socialist states were by no means unaware of the path taken by Czechoslovakia. In Moscow in particular, the idea of taking radical steps had been conceived early on. It is certain that Mr Dubček made a mistake when he did not object to placing the developments in Czechoslovakia on the agenda of the meeting of the Soviet bloc states. At the March meeting in Dresden, the chairman of the CPC explained to his allies that the situation in his country was anything but dramatic and that steps would be taken to thwart any reform attempts that were out of line. At the time, Moscow was still convinced that any intervention would be premature, wishing to avoid complications. Meanwhile, concerns about a possible invasion by the states of the Warsaw Pact was spreading, fuelled by the lesson of what had happened in Hungary in 1956. Even the party leaders were beginning to fear something that was being openly talked about in the socialist sister states. Nevertheless, the political 'spring' kept progressing in the country.

As pressure from outside increased, the position of the hardliners in the country's communist party grew stronger. When the media criticized outside interference, this threw as much oil on the flames as the publication of the *Manifesto of 2000 Words* in June, which warned against slowing down the reform process. The turning point was now reached. Recognizing that it was impossible to deflect the entire CPC leadership from its course of reform, Moscow began planning military action. When the CPC leaders declined an invitation to come to Warsaw, they gambled away their only chance of preventing the formation of a united front of states against their own country. Recognizing this, they attempted to mollify their neighbours in bilateral talks. The negotiations at Čierná and Tisou near the Czechoslovakian border revealed the rift within the CPC: the pro-Moscow camp arrayed itself behind the Soviet Union, forcing Mr Dubček to bow to its demands to a large extent. He and his found themselves cornered even further at the meeting in Bratislava, where the 'joint responsibility of the socialist countries for the defence of socialism' was emphasized on August 3: on the one hand, Moscow demanded in so many words that Prague should give up its special way. On the other hand, Mr Dubček was well aware that his own population would not stand for an abolition of the reforms.

In mid-August, Moscow decided to intervene, according a key role to the 'conspirators' within the CPC: they were to secure a majority in Parliament for a resolution officially asking the Warsaw Pact for assistance. The purpose of this was to make the intended campaign appear legitimate in the eyes of the Czechoslovakian population as well as the non-socialist countries. In addition, the Kremlin was planning for control over the Ministry of the Interior,

the media, and the national army to pass into hands that were faithful to Moscow on the very night of the invasion.

Events on August 21 took the course planned by Moscow. On the evening of the day, Czechoslovakia and its key institutions were in Soviet hands. However, the Kremlin was denied a political victory: a majority of the politbureau in Prague condemned the invasion, and masses of people protested in the streets. Radio and television stations condemned the occupation, the newspapers published special issues, and 'anti-intervention flyers' were distributed. The government, the leaders of parliament, and other national institutions sided with the victims of the raid, and even the 14th CPC party convention declared itself opposed to the military invasion.

Mr Dubček himself was brought to Moscow where, bereft of any information about what was actually happening in his country and exposed to the threats of the Kremlin, he was forced to bow to Soviet pressure. Although the 'Moscow Protocol' of August 26, which appeared tantamount to a capitulation to the Czechoslovakian reformers, did allow Mr Dubček and his followers to return to their former positions, they could be nothing more but puppets of Moscow from then on.

The Prague Spring had failed. One year later, Mr Dubček was replaced by Mr Husák. When the masses once again gathered in the streets to protest in August 1969, on the first anniversary of the invasion, they were beaten into submission by units of the Czechoslovakian police. After its consolidation, the communist regime was to last for another two long decades. In political terms, the powers-that-be based their alleged legitimacy mostly on the struggle against the 'counter-revolution'.

When the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989, it appeared as if fate were taking revenge for 1968. Mr Dubček was reinstated as president of the parliament, and other heads of the Prague Spring reemerged as well. It soon appeared, however, that any return to the moderate concepts of 1968 was illusory. Although Václav Havel's thinking was rooted in the ideals of the Prague Spring, his policies had little in common with the goals of that time. In hindsight, 1968 appears at best as a ridiculous attempt to improve communism, and at worst as a conflict within the communist camp.

The idea of reforming communism that came to the fore during the Prague Spring may be criticized with some justification. At the same time, its critics pay no heed to the power of the societal movement towards freedom and democracy, nor do they consider how serious an attempt was made to create a pluralist political spectrum which accorded to the media their proper place in the scheme of things.

By now, a radically liberal concept has emerged victorious from the struggle over how to reshape the Czech society in the post-communist era. The Prague Spring has ceased to be relevant and topical. Yet it was an essential chapter in the history of the failure of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Resorting to arms was the only salvation for a rule that had lost its vitality and legitimacy a long while ago. The events of 1968 are far behind us now, but there can be no doubt about how important they were for the development of Czechia, Europe, and even America.

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