

30 YEARS OF COMMUNISM: A STUDY IN DISILLUSION

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The Postwar Situation

Although most people involved did not realize it at the time, a great disappointment was in store for those who had expected that, after the defeat of Germany, the over-all conditions and climate of the First Republic (1918—1938) would be restored in Czechoslovakia. For while nominally a victorious state, the country became part of the Soviet sphere of influence.

Compared with neighbors sharing this geopolitical state of affairs, those politically active in Czechoslovakia appear to have been very ill-prepared for such a state of affairs. In contrast, for instance, to the Poles and Hungarians, many Czechs and Slovaks harbored pro-Russian or pan-Slavist feelings, generated by traditional national mythology and assisted by the circumstance that, before 1945, the Czechs and Slovaks had never been Russia's direct neighbors. The earlier warnings against Russian autocracy from such prominent thinkers as Karel Havlíček and Thomas Masaryk were forgotten in the exhilarating times of liberation from Hitler-German domination and the re-establishment of Czechoslovakia. Even the fact that the USSR had actually annexed by force the easternmost tip of Czechoslovakia (Ruthenia, known as the Subcarpathian Russia before the war) was not held against the liberators in Prague. The presence of Soviet soldiers, in particular of Marshal Malinovsky's army in Slovakia and southern Moravia, did have a sobering effect, but even their behavior failed to penetrate national consciousness. All that was forgotten soon after Soviet troops withdrew from Czechoslovakia toward the end of 1945.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia which, before the Second World War, had managed to attract about 10 per cent of the electorate, increased its vote to 38 per cent in the 1946 elections. Inevitably, many of its new members were opportunists, seeking privilege and sensing from where the postwar winds were blowing. Many others, however, particularly those who were then in their 20s, sincerely believed that communism was a short cut to a better, more equitable way of life. Furthermore, the communist cause was aided by a very unstable situation, particularly in Bohemia and Moravia, exacerbated by the mass expulsion of citizens of German origin, and the divisions and weakness of the democratic political parties and cultural groups.

At least two major factors played a role in facilitating the easy leftist takeover of late February 1948. The first was the objectively existing revolutionary situation, in particular in Bohemia and Moravia. Apart from presidential decrees, the

establishment of national committees on regional, district and local levels, many of them controlled by communists and arbitrary bureaucratic decisions such as confiscations of properties side by side with legal „nationalizations,“ it was mainly the expulsion of Germans which created a vacuum filled largely by elements believing in communist promises of redistribution of land, elements which were keen to achieve or support an over-all revolutionary restructuring of society. More than three million Czechoslovak citizens of German ethnic origin were expelled or could not return to their native land; their places were initially taken over largely by uprooted or migrant elements keen to achieve fast economic success. The rule of law could hardly be reinstated in this social upsurge.

The other, equally important element was the inefficiency of the non-communist political and cultural leadership which was not up to the exacting post-war situation. As if stunned by the sudden Soviet proximity, the majority of prominent politicians, writers and journalists, who belonged to the non-communist parties or who were of a democratic-humanitarian political allegiance, failed to oppose the communists on basic political principles, effectively and persuasively. Moreover, their own support of actions such as the confiscatory nationalizations, the haphazard establishment of the national committees, the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, „people's democratic legislation,“ et. al., helped to bring about the very revolutionary situation from which the communists were bound to profit. Instead of organizing their own adherents and voters — after all they represented more than 60 per cent of the adult Czechoslovak population — they trusted old and ailing President Edvard Beneš, mistakenly hoping that, in the moment of crisis, he would save them by his own constitutional power and popular prestige.

Thus, when the moment of truth came in the week preceding 25 February 1948 the communist party, aided by its newly established People's Militia, was able to take over the state and all its institutions without a shot being fired. In communist literature the February 1948 *coup* became the model for a „peaceful transition to socialism“ achieved by the application of „pressure from above and below“. The army — under the command of Minister of Defense General Ludvík Svoboda — remained neutral; the political, economic, cultural, and propaganda institutions of power were taken over by communists, the non-communist parties by sympathizers and prominent anticommunists were forced to flee the country or face arrest. For the young communists it seemed as though a bright future was about to dawn.

The post-1948 Purges: „Enemies“ Outside and Inside the Party

The seemingly auspicious constellation for a Czechoslovak road to socialism, as promised by party leader Klement Gottwald, did not last for long, however. Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform with its accompanying witch hunt against „Titoism“, the Soviet decision to support the Arabs rather than Israel in the Middle East and the anti-Zionism, which went with it, Stalin's increasing persecution of imaginary enemies and, finally, the beginning of the Korean war

drastically changed the status within the Soviet-dominated socialist camp. The seeds of mistrust of one's fellows, sown in the Soviet Union, found fertile ground in Czechoslovakia.

From 1949 onwards, the nationalization of the means of production and distribution and the collectivization of land and farms was applauded at every stage, by many who had not yet been affected. Services and small repair shops suffered the same fate as factories and larger enterprises had earlier. This wholesale application of the Marxist concept of equality, however, went hand in hand with a tremendous inequality in the distribution of power — immense power, albeit insecure, in the hands of a few as against a loss of self-determination on the part of the overwhelming majority. Such a regime could remain effective only by means of repression.

The first to suffer after February 1948 were those active anticommunists who had remained in the country, ranging from the jailed and later sentenced Minister of Justice, Prokop Drtina, down to thousands of students throughout the country who were expelled from their university departments. On the economic level, large enterprises and businesses had been nationalized in 1945 by presidential decree. After the *coup* factories with more than 50 employees were nationalized without delay. Mediumsized business and service companies were then expropriated, a process accompanied by massive and sustained propaganda from the communist-controlled mass media. Finally, small retail shops and servicing outfits, and medium- and small-scale farms were also nationalized. Old social structures were forcibly disrupted, old patterns of life and habits overturned, and what emerged was a totalitarian state.

The scale of the purges, imprisonment, and executions during the Stalinist era (1949—1953) in Czechoslovakia is not usually realized in the West. According to information which became available during the Prague Spring, some 120 000 to 130 000 people were imprisoned, sentenced, arbitrarily detained, or sent to labor camps — the most notorious being the now abandoned uranium mines near Joachimsthal (Jachymov) in western Bohemia — at the fiat of their respective national committees. The extent of police repression then can be put into perspective only if one realizes that, for varying periods of time, fully 1 per cent of the total Czechoslovak population was in prison or interned in forced labor camps. As a result of sentences by state courts 178 citizens were executed for political reasons, a figure which does not include the undisclosed sentences handed down at secret trials, and, according to conservative estimates, a further 8 000 people who died in prisons or labor camps.

The overwhelming majority of those persecuted after the communist takeover and in the early 1950s were of democratic or anticommunist persuasion: active supporters of the former non-communist parties of the National Front, members of the upper and middle classes, „kulaks“ who opposed the collectivization of their properties, former soldiers and airmen who had served with Western or even with Eastern forces, and, generally speaking, any individual deemed „guilty“ of having departed in any way from the new social norm. Yet the Stalinist leaders of the Czechoslovak and Soviet parties were not content with persecuting

real or assumed opponents. Too many things were going wrong, and the party and the country had to be presented with scapegoats of a higher order; it had to be molded into something which even Stalin would accept from a loyal ally on the Soviet Union's western border.

It did not take long, therefore, before the communist party also began to seek the enemy within its own ranks. Right from the beginning, those communists were suspect who had had links with the West, for instance, those who had spent World War II in Western countries or armies, former members of the Spanish International Brigades, people of Jewish origin, in effect anyone who might be presumed to have internationalist, „cosmopolitan“ leanings, or not to be enthusiastic about submitting himself totally and unconditionally to Soviet domination.

As for the so-called Slánský trial, this began with the arrest of several prominent suspects as early as 1949, the best known of whom was the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Eugen Loebel. It had developed into the arrest of an entire „antistate conspiratorial center“ by 1950—1951, culminating symbolically in the trial of 14 prominent Communists headed by the former Secretary-General of the CPCS, Rudolf Slánský, in November 1952 and the execution of 11 of them on 3 December 1952. It dragged on into 1954, ending a year after the almost simultaneous deaths of Stalin and Gottwald. It would be a mistake to believe that key politicians like Slánský, Clementis, Reicin, Frank, Šváb, Geminder, or Loebel were the only victims. The purge affected a number of regional and district communist officials, primarily those of Jewish origin, and spread far into the ranks of the „cosmopolitan“ communist intelligentsia, many of whom were sentenced to life or long terms of imprisonment, to be prematurely released between 1955 and 1960 and subsequently rehabilitated.

The Slánský trial and the related court proceedings are a classic example of the old dictum „divide and rule“. With remarkable consistency the top party leadership succeeded in presenting to the party rank and file and to the whole nation culprits, accused of the sins of Titoism, Zionism, pro-Western espionage, etc., in a manner which made many people of good will believe, for a time, that these conspirators were indeed responsible for the various ills of the country. A continuous stream of centrally directed propaganda systematically revived old prejudices, such as those against Jews, „capitalist“ origins, or German ethnic backgrounds, and turned them against the accused, promising that the millennium would be at hand once this so-called web of conspiracy had been eliminated. Incidentally, several of those who participated more or less actively in the mass hysteria of the early 1950s later sought atonement in active engagement in the Prague Spring.

From Vacillation to Reform

Stalin's and Gottwald's deaths were followed by an understandable period of hesitation. At first, under the party leadership of Antonín Novotný, some major trials were held as scheduled, though the repression began to let up (for instance, Gustav Husák was sentenced to life imprisonment in April 1954, to be released in 1960). It was apparent that Novotný, a skilled party machine politician, felt

unsure as to the direction Soviet policies were going to take. This, to be sure, was by no means peculiar to Czechoslovakia: there was widespread uncertainty throughout Eastern Europe during the early post-Stalin phase about Soviet intentions. Such hopeful developments in the USSR as the various „New Course“ concessions and the „thaw“ provided no real clue. They were more a response to the abuses of the Stalin era than an indication of any fundamental rethinking as to how Eastern Europe should be ruled. No further developments were likely so long as divisions within the Soviet leadership precluded the emergence of a leader of unchallenged stature.

During these years one could sense behind the scenes in Czechoslovakia the first stirrings of pressure for the reversal of the verdicts of some of the more outrageous trials, tentative attempts to increase the hitherto severely restricted freedom of expression, and the beginnings of thoughts about the advisability of economic reform. But the first watershed came with the 20th CPSU Congress of February 1956, which gave an impetus to the reformers. Khrushchev's speech denouncing Stalin in particular could not be ignored by those communists whose consciences were troubled or who at least felt uneasy about the years of the great purge. Simultaneously, people who were not party members began to see the first rays of hope.

As on other occasions throughout Czech history, writers were the first to seize this opportunity. Accepting with enthusiasm their role as the „conscience of the nation,“ they used the platform of the Second Czechoslovak Writers' Congress (in April 1956) to make public criticism of the sorry state of the nation, unheard of until then under the communist regime. They were promptly followed by the Prague students who used the occasion of the „Majales“ celebrations in May for a demonstration amounting to a forceful plea for freedom. Sensing the imminent danger, the party leadership convened an all-state conference in June 1956 designed to normalize the situation. Novotný clamped down in time and managed to keep the country under control at the time of the Hungarian revolution and the Polish events in the autumn of 1956.

The reformers were not yet sufficiently organized to be able to act at the crucial moment: in particular they lacked any firm foothold within the upper reaches of the party hierarchy and could not therefore move as a co-ordinated force. Novotný's success in keeping Czechoslovakia — the critical link between Poland and Hungary — quiet in late 1956 might well have been the initial basis for his long-lasting friendship with Khrushchev. On the other hand, a feeling may well have taken root at this time among the intelligentsia that, in spite of temporary failure, it would be possible to achieve something once the dead weight of Stalinism pure and proper had passed away.

It is hardly surprising that, in the years that followed, Novotný was disinclined to allow any major public reversal of the trials — not to mention any denunciation of the past on the lines of Khrushchev's secret speech. He retreated step by step, whether over rehabilitations, criticism of the „personality cult,“ economic reform or any loosening of the reins of power, but only to the extent he was forced to by pressure and by the Soviet example. From the point of view of the

stability of the system he must have instinctively felt, rather than intellectually grasped, that any withdrawal would tend to invite further pressure and might well be seen as a sign of weakness.

Difficulties and pressures began to build up in the early 1960s; 1961 and 1962 were years of economic stagnation, even judged from official figures. In a speech to the Central Committee which was at first kept secret Novotný was forced to admit this unexpected stagnation in a socialist country and to announce a cut in foreign aid to less developed countries. Ota Šik and his team were advocating something approaching a socialist market economy, the creative intelligentsia was growing restless, the people were tired of the years of repression and restriction and longed for more freedom. Most importantly, some of those feelings began to be shared by increasing circles within the upper party hierarchy.

The thaw, to assume such momentous consequences five years later, began in 1963. By then, the hard core of the party leadership was no longer able to prevent or sabotage reforms of substance. Formal rehabilitations were finally announced, economic experts were given permission to draft an economic reform program for the approval of the party leadership, censorship, especially of literary journals, relaxed noticeably, and tens of thousands (later hundreds of thousands) of people were allowed to travel to the West. This last factor was to prove of immeasurable importance: the younger generation in particular, submerged by anti-Western and anticapitalist propaganda for years, was now able to see for itself, to compare the advantages and disadvantages granted their citizens by open societies with those of their own closed system.

The cultural thaw, accepted willy-nilly by the vacillating party hierarchy, taught people to think and pinpointed the unnecessary restrictions and shortcomings in Czechoslovak society. The leaders in this field were the two literary weeklies, *Literární Noviny* in Prague, and *Kulturný Život* in Bratislava. While the first fought a running battle with the authorities, the latter's outspokenness was, in fact, protected by Alexander Dubček, who had become Slovak first party secretary in April 1963. The cumulative effect of these and related reforms, and the popular feelings generated by them, finally led to the historic change in the party leadership in early January 1968 and to the phenomenon known in the West as the Prague Spring.

The Crucial Year: Active Forces and Options

It is hardly necessary to describe or even to define the events and experiences of the exhilarating year 1968, initiated by the replacement of Antonín Novotný by Alexander Dubček as Czechoslovak party leader. Instead, it might be more useful to try to distinguish some of the more important forces active in the process and outline the options with which the Czechoslovak leadership was confronted.

To start with the leadership: at the party level, liberalization was inconsistent throughout the Prague Spring. To give an example: at the very same CPČS Central Committee session of 3—5 January 1968 which elected Dubček party leader

and restricted Novotný (provisionally) to his office as President of the Republic, four politicians were added to the party Presidium. Symptomatically enough, they consisted of two genuine progressives, Josef Spáček and Josef Borůvka, and two adaptable conservatives, Jan Piller and Emil Rigo. The same pattern was followed throughout the eight months of the Prague Spring. Thus, on 4 April 1968, the essentially conservative former Editor-in-Chief of *Rudé Právo* Oldřich Švestka was elected — despite the protests of reformers — a member of the party Presidium; even more importantly, possibly as a concession to the Soviets, Viliam Šalgovič, a notorious police official, was appointed Deputy Minister of the Interior with responsibility for state security on 6 June 1968, a promotion which proved disastrous before and in the days immediately following the invasion.

These personnel policies were by no means haphazard or the result of chance or misjudgment. They reflected the composition of the top party organs, the Presidium, and Secretariat, where a strong conservative minority, nervous about the impending changes, sought to brake the urge for reform. Though in a minority at the very top, they were supported by important regional and district CP cadres, mostly appointed under Novotný if not earlier under Gottwald, who were understandably worried that the impending 14th party congress scheduled, after protracted intraparty disputes, for 9 September 1968 would sweep them out of their privileged positions. Thus, although most Czechoslovaks tended to judge the party by the agreeable and progressive images of Alexander Dubček, Josef Smrkovský or František Kriegel, the far from resolved state of affairs within the upper- and medium-level party hierarchy by no means justified popular optimism.

This exhilarating state of affairs during which, for the first time in Czechoslovak history, a great majority of the Czechoslovak people supported — if not identified with — the communist party leader was, of course, not only a product of Dubček's attractive personality. Popular trust and optimism were nourished mainly by two other factors. First, the Czechoslovak media, led by the radio and television and the more intellectual journals like *Reporter*, *Literární Noviny*, and *Kulturný Život*, played a distinctly progressive role. The demise of effective censorship in March (legalized in June) gave an invaluable opportunity to journalists and writers to express, for the first time in 20 (if not 30) years, their genuine views on domestic affairs. And they used this opportunity freely and to good effect, unconsciously creating the illusion, however, that further progress and democratization were a one-way street, that nothing and nobody could stop further responsible progress. (The term „responsible“ is used advisedly, since even the most progressive reformers — those communist journalists and writers who actually thought like social democrats — were aware of the *external* limitations of the Czechoslovak situation, did not contemplate a fundamental revision of Czechoslovakia's foreign policy, and did not question the country's membership in Comecon and the Warsaw Pact.) Sensing increasing freedom in the air, the public did not realize that it was witnessing only part of the story, namely the progressive, reformist efforts. It was not able to perceive that, at the same time, Dubček was exposed to strong conservative or reactionary pressures from within the party apparatus, and increasingly so also from the socialist camp.

The second misconception is of a similar nature. In those buoyant months the possibility of Soviet armed intervention does not seem to have penetrated to the level of serious public awareness. If some individuals working in the media did contemplate it, they would not speak of it publicly. And though many — reformists in high party or government positions included — must inwardly have been concerned about this danger, the wave of mass enthusiasm led most to turn a blind eye to it. Everyone behaved as if he believed that Czechoslovak internal affairs, be it the incipient political and economic reforms or what came close to the freedom of public expression and information, were the exclusive domain of the Czechoslovak authorities. At least in this respect the Czechs and Slovaks maneuvered themselves into judging the Soviet Union by its proclaimed Marxist-Leninist ideology and not as an imperialist power afraid of potential infection from within the socialist camp; they took verbal assurances at their face value and did not try to see them as a convenient tactical mask. More importantly, this basic error was shared by the Czechoslovak party and governmental leaders. The utter surprise, dismay and disillusion of Dubček and his colleagues in the hours following the invasion are sufficient testimony.

It is now widely agreed that, in essence, the Czechoslovak reformers in 1968 had the choice of two courses of action other than the one they actually took. One possibility would have been to apply the brakes to the reforms. Their party action program published in April 1968 would have to be more moderate, their plans for economic reform including workers' co-determination more subdued, censorship of the mass media should not have been abolished, even though it could have been handled somewhat more intelligently and occasionally less restrictively than under Novotný. Alternatively they should have convened the 14th CPCS Congress swiftly, for May or June 1968, to change the top cadres and „legalize“ the reform before the Soviets had time to decide upon and organize armed intervention.

The first course might have been successful to the extent that the party progressives and the population at large would have had to be satisfied with something approaching the present Hungarian model. Since, after years of the privations of Stalinism, this was hardly conceivable by way of national selfdiscipline, such a decision would have actually meant rule by someone slightly more liberal but also more consistent than Novotný. It would have meant accepting a very slow, inconspicuous, uninspiring reform of a rigid, closed society, in other words, a more intelligent and more purposeful Antonín Novotný.

The other option would have probably required a more energetic and ruthless party leader than Alexander Dubček. It would have involved the speedy elimination of dogmatic pro-Soviet elements in the top hierarchy, the election of a new Central Committee by a promptly convoked congress, and subsequent elimination of the dogmatists from key party offices in the regions and districts. All this would probably have been feasible on the wave of national elation in the spring or early summer of 1968. It would also have meant, however, making it clear to *any* potential aggressor that Czechoslovakia was resolved to defend its territorial integrity. It would have to have been based on the assumption that, if confron-

ted with the likelihood of an armed conflict in the heart of Europe and on the West German border, the Soviet Union would desist from an armed attack and resort to other means of pressure. It would, no doubt, have been a policy involving considerable risks, but which might have been worth the effort. Was the invasion worthwhile for the Soviet leadership? In the short term it did quell a highly dangerous potential source of disruptive ideological contagion in Eastern Europe.

On the longer-term political side, however, the invasion harmed the Soviet Union considerably, not least among Western communist parties. The concept of Eurocommunism is ideologically partly based on the ideas and experiences of the Prague Spring. And, nearly 10 years after the invasion, Western communist opposition to this action not only seems to be undiminished, but appears to have become regarded as a Soviet sin not to be forgotten and to be corrected in the programs of some Western communist parties.

On balance, the invasion would seem to have been of advantage to the Soviet Union only if seen from the point of view of longer term military strategy, whatever that is worth nowadays, and shorter term ideological security, or through the prism of Stalinism according to the dictum „socialism is where the Soviet Army stands“. Judged by other criteria, the balance must remain negative. The more so since the Soviet leadership did not seem to realize at the time that, first, strong economic pressure might have sufficed to turn the events, and secondly, it could be argued that the Prague Spring might have run into trouble of its own accord owing to a substantive conflict of interests which would have become inevitable in due course: stated in the simplest terms, regardless of party affiliation, those believing in the leading role of the party would have clashed with groups advocating pluralism and genuine democratization. The Soviet Union may well have been unduly hasty after all.

Stagnation After Re-Sovietization. What Now?

The almost ten years of so-called normalization under CPČS Secretary-General Gustav Husák have been singularly unproductive and dull. A „Biafra of the Spirit“ on the intellectual and creative side, the country has been kept going economically at its accustomed level partly by habit, partly thanks to the fact that, before the invasion, Czechoslovakia had had a strongly positive balance of payments with Comecon countries and, in addition, appears to have been the recipient of a sizable Soviet credit extended partly in Western currencies. Thus, the apathetic and newly repressed population plodded on in relatively good economic conditions. This general state of affairs has occasionally obscured the fact that, given the outdated technological level of many factories, the overcentralized bureaucratic structure, and the inevitably worsening terms of trade, and the departure or eviction from the party (often with loss of job) of about 500 000 members, with thousands of qualified directors and managers dismissed for political reasons, the apparent normality of economic life and society in general could be no more than temporary and deceptive.

In some areas of life recent years have even been somewhat reminiscent of the

early 1950s. This was the case, for instance, with culture — with the significant difference that, a quarter of a century ago, the party had at its disposal a number of talented writers and artists, whose places nowadays are largely occupied by mediocrities. This was also true in the sphere of agitprop, where the ghost of Stalinism keeps on reappearing, no matter how discredited it had become (incidentally, this is why so many people now again merely glance through the headlines and devote themselves principally to the sports page). In other sectors, for instance in economic policies and controls, the regime returned more or less to the prereform period, as if oblivious of the fact that substantial structural reforms would have to be implemented, modernization of the means of production given a stronger impetus, and greater incentives given to the working population. This return to the Novotný-ite economic policies of the late 1950s or early 1960s is now beginning to exact its price: the drastically increasing costs of Soviet raw materials, oil in particular, and the inability of Czechoslovakia to compete successfully on Western markets with its industrial products are beginning to threaten living standards.

Not even the one real achievement of the reform period to survive the fateful year of 1968 — federalization of the Republic — can change the over-all bleak picture. The historic importance (and future potential) of federalization should certainly not be underestimated, but the integrationist and recentralizing policy imposed on state and party spheres since the early 1970s has left it at present with rather more relevance as a juridical theory than substance in everyday practice.

As a result of all these developments, in which most Czechoslovaks played a passive rather than an active role, the majority are nowadays politically apathetic. They are concerned with the material side of life as defined by the not too opulent limits of Soviet-type socialism. To a considerable extent, this somewhat materialistic outlook is a result not only of their disadvantageous geographical position, but also of the lack of principled and decisive action on the part of their ruling elites at crucial times. The people — with minor but significant exceptions — have been relegated to the role of passive witnesses or victims of decisions taken elsewhere and developments occurring without their active participation.

It is not surprising that, under these circumstances, the politically aware and active sections of the population are divided. Although on the face of it the human rights movement Charter 77 can be seen as an over-all concept unifying the forces of political opposition, in fact views on the most effective means of political action are known to differ. There are some who would like to demonstrate to the world that the spirit of opposition to the stultifying regime of Gustav Husák is not dead, that individuals who can be regarded as genuine representatives of the people are prepared to take considerable risks for the ideal of establishing a humanitarian, democratic regime. There are others operating under the Charter banner, however, who favor a strictly legalistic and cautious approach (Charter spokesman Jiří Hájek, for example). There are also those political opponents outside the Charter movement (predominantly ex-communists) for whom the Prague Spring remains a model of political organization, as well as those who,

after pertinent experience, reject anything smacking of communism. Differences of approach among writers are also very considerable. Some writers always were or became wholehearted and unhesitating collaborators with the regime (e. g., Jan Kozák or Donát Šajner). Others, like Ladislav Fuks or Bohumil Hrabal, occupy uneasy positions in between, some of them using their membership of the Writers' Union to try and help those who have been banned. Finally, there are prominent writers and dramatists, such as Václav Havel, Pavel Kohout, and Ludvík Vaculík, who have adopted a strictly moral stance and refuse to co-operate with the current regime altogether, while the authorities have done and are doing their best to expel them from the socialist community.

The differences are, of course, much narrower among those bearing political responsibility. They are hamstrung by the country's geopolitical position, by Soviet suspicions aroused by the Prague Spring, and by Czechoslovakia's democratic and pro-Western political traditions; they are hampered by their own past political convolutions, by the opportunism they exhibited in various situations, by their own previous appointments within the party and in leading economic positions which they would now like to retract but cannot. There are, for instance, the many hundreds of directors and deputy directors of enterprises and state organizations who, despite lacking the necessary qualifications, were elevated in the purge of the early 1970s; no doubt some sections of the party leadership would prefer to exchange them for those more able and qualified men who were ousted for political reasons. It would be difficult to do so, however, since the new cadres appointed out of political expediency would, in the case of dismissal, have to be given posts of equal standing which are just not available. Thus, the Czechoslovak leadership's room for maneuver is narrow.

After the August 1968 invasion and the April 1969 takeover by Husák there were hopes within Czechoslovakia and among Western experts that, after an interregnum of a few years and the calming of passions, Czechoslovakia would be able to follow the Hungarian example, that the totalitarian regime could be replaced by a milder authoritarian variant which would recognize the desires and needs of present-day society. Gustav Husák and his team have failed to achieve this. Instead of aiming in that direction they have taken decisions, made appointments, and controlled society in such a way that any genuine liberalization has been made increasingly difficult.

In so doing they were, of course, in tune with the mood of the Brezhnev era, which has hardly been conducive to such hopes. There are few who would doubt Husák's ability or deny him certain personal qualities such as courage. But over the last decade his essential political conservatism has interacted unhappily with his undoubted political ambition. He was never a real reformer and, in nearly ten years, blocked not only by the suspicious Soviet gerontocracy but no less effectively by his own colleagues in the party Presidium and Secretariat, Husák has offered little more than political immobilism. How strong his resolve is to continue indefinitely in increasingly frustrating circumstances as both party leader and President of the Republic is hard to tell, but he is 65, reputedly not very healthy, and has just suffered the shock of losing his wife in a tragic accident.

He was, moreover, reportedly openly attacked before the last CC plenum. A rather disparate faction is allegedly forming itself in an attempt to get him replaced as party secretary-general, leaving him with the office of President of the Republic. Up to now Husák has managed to repel this attack, getting rid of his most vociferous critic, the south Bohemian leading party secretary Jaroslav Hejna, by sending him as ambassador to Sofia. However, more powerful politicians, younger than himself, are waiting in the wings. In the first place it may well be Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal who would feel able and fit enough for the post; but this is hardly less true of Alois Indra, Antonín Kapek, or even Vasil Bíl'ak, all of whom may well be dissatisfied with Husák's increasingly ineffectual performance.

The prospects for Husák's successor, whoever he may be, could be brighter than for Husák. Given the basically opportunistic traits of the current party leadership, even a pro-Soviet fundamentalist might be in a better position to achieve some alleviation, should he wish to do so, than Husák himself: at least he would not be blocked to near impotence by „leftists“ in the party Presidium and Secretariat. Be that as it may, it must be remembered that, at least partly as a result of Czechoslovakia's particular convolutions and mismanagement in recent history, the room for maneuver is likely to remain rather restricted in the near future.