

DISKUSSION

Die Frage nach einer angemessenen Terminologie zur Analyse der politischen Systeme und Entwicklungen in den kommunistisch regierten Staaten Osteuropas hat wiederholt in der Fachliteratur Diskussionen hervorgerufen. Der umstrittene Begriff „Totalitarismus“ kann hier als das bestbekannte Beispiel für solche Auseinandersetzungen stehen. Doch zeigten gerade die diesen umfassenden Begriff begleitenden Diskussionen, wie sehr eine jede allgemeine Bezeichnung der gegenwärtigen osteuropäischen Systeme von der analytischen Begrifflichkeit im Detail abhängig ist. Verwendet man die in Analysen der freiheitlich demokratischen Systeme üblichen Bezeichnungen einzelner Institutionen und Prozesse, etwa wenn man die „Parlamente“ der kommunistisch regierten Staaten mit „Parlamenten“ im üblichen Sinne des Wortes gleichzusetzen sucht, tritt häufig entweder eine unangemessene Verharmlosung oder aber eine realitätsfremde Denunziation der grundlegenden Unterschiede in der Wirklichkeit beider politischer Systeme auf; sucht man die kommunistischen Systeme mit einer neuen, system-immanenten Begrifflichkeit zu erfassen, begibt man sich in die Gefahr der Verwässerung universaler politischer Wertvorstellungen.

Im Bestreben, zur Fortentwicklung einer wissenschaftlich fundierten und den gegenwärtigen Ansprüchen angemessenen Terminologie für die historische, sozial- und politikwissenschaftliche Analyse der osteuropäischen Systeme beizutragen, eröffnet die Zeitschrift Bohemia eine Diskussion zu diesem Thema. Dabei sollen begründete, durchaus auch subjektive und nicht immer von der Redaktion geteilte Meinungen zur Sprache kommen.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: DISSENT AND REFORM

By Vladimir V. Kusin

The Prague Spring was a case of dissent and reform coalescing. Against the "Gorbachevian" backdrop of a Soviet reform set on becoming government policy in a manner reminiscent of Prague in 1968, the evolving relationship between dissidence and reformism in Czechoslovakia merits a close look if one is to judge similar processes throughout Eastern Europe.

Rapprochement between proponents of change inside and outside a country's establishment is important because it adds new logic to the reforms and positive orientation to the opposition. This tentative alliance is anathema to the conservative factions. It is usually pursued gingerly by the official reformers, who know that it threatens to push

their plans beyond the point at which implementation can still be safely controlled. However, it is generally welcomed by the dissidents and the radical reform faction.

Some Definitions

Reform is understood here to represent an effort on the part of important sections of the establishment to effect a transition from centralist to market-related economic control, with the parallel relaxation of political, cultural and ideological constraints, none of which is intended to change the essential parameters of one-party rule.

Reform is a spectrum in content and a sequence in time. It is varied in depth, and it unfolds gradually. It is malleable in that it can be extended or contracted, speeded up or slowed down.

Dissent is understood here to represent a continuum of attitudes and actions whereby official postulates are challenged and alternatives proposed and/or pursued. Dissent introduces strife into politics where the rulers would rather have none. Historically, dissent in communist states has been seen as an anti-system phenomenon, but account must be taken of dissension within the establishment.

A scale of anti-regime attitudes and actions has five levels, in ascending order: disaffection; protest; dissent; political opposition (in the sense of an endeavour to take over power from the incumbents by political means); and uprising. Each higher level includes manifestations pertaining to all lower levels.

Dissent expresses either partial challenge to individual policies or overall challenge to the system, or both. Dissent waxes and wanes in terms of its aims, pungency and number of proponents. Dissent can be predominantly responsive to action initiated by the government or predominantly assertive in that it offers its own agenda.

History of Reform-Dissent Interaction in Czechoslovakia

There have been seven stages of reform-dissent interaction since the communist takeover in 1948:

(1) From 1948 to 1956.

There was no reform in this period and hence no interaction. Dissent was largely systemic (integral) and defensive. The new regime prevailed over it by application of sheer force. The capacity of dissenters to articulate and diffuse their attitudes among the public was lost. Dissenters did not even consider the concept of reform generally, feeling that the only way change could be brought about was in the aftermath of an East-West confrontation.

(2) From 1956 to 1967.

The notion of reformist gradualism surfaced at the start of this period and the general public, including most of the dissidents, eventually accepted it as feasible.

Embryonic reformist views were voiced in the party prior to and during the twentieth congress of the CPSU but were rather successfully quelled by the leadership. Reformist thinking then evolved through two phases: a hesitant economic "mini-reform" in 1958 and a better thought-out attempt between 1965 and 1967 which included

market-related principles; the relaxation of coercive rule, the release of political prisoners, and rehabilitation of some victims of Stalinist terror; intellectual emancipation of scholarship, culture and the arts; and the growing recognition that Slovak national grievances would have to be met by changes in the concept of a unitary state. The first calls for political reform to accompany economic change were made towards the end of this period.

The crystallization of reformist convictions among some party members for a long time had the nature of dissent inside the establishment. To believe that the party should start reforming the system meant dissenting from this party's leadership until, gradually, the pressure for reform pervaded the decision-making agencies in the party-state continuum. The gestation of reformism as dissent within the establishment was Czechoslovakia's strong point. The leadership was giving way gradually and in a piecemeal fashion; it only became ready in 1968 for an overall reform programme after it had changed itself.

Outside the establishment the various elements of dissent took heart from intra-party developments. In addition to "integral" (that is, inimical to the system) dissidents, who largely remained skeptical but not unreceptive to the budding reformist mood and the freer climate for articulation of unorthodox views, there came into existence a large group of people who supported reform, but were either too young to count as members of the establishment or had been ousted from the establishment earlier for a variety of reasons. Even many party members who did not hold power – those outside or on the fringes of the *nomenklatura* and those active in the cultural field – sided with the reformist constituency because their commitment to intellectual values conflicted with the diehard forms of governing practised by the leadership. Above all, the psychology of the population at large was decidedly friendly to reformist change, feeding as it did on advances in cultural liberalization and the joint forces of dissent and reform.

(3) *The Prague Spring.*

When reformism gained the upper hand in the party leadership it ceased being dissent. A shift in roles occurred. In an ideal world, the Prague Spring would have been a period without dissent, its mission having been accomplished. Not so in the world of reality. Having become policy, reform spawned its own dissent both at the conservative and the radical ends of the spectrum. Moreover, in turning reformist, the CPCS became a dissenter vis-à-vis the other Communist parties in Eastern Europe.

Anti-reform dissent was born, all of it inside the communist establishment. Although in considerable dissarray because of the novelty of their predicament, and increasingly orientated towards a Soviet lifeline, the advocates of the status quo ante fostered domestic political strife and kept alive a policy alternative throughout the Prague Spring. They also succeeded in conserving a cadre base for post-reformist politics around which the less consistent reformers could later rally for the pursuance of "normalization". Dismissed by many observers as weak and inexorably dwindling, the conservative dissent in fact turned out to be successful, even though it needed outside help.

The radicals, while endorsing the reformist mainstream, dissented (to varying

degrees) from the proposed scope and speed of change. Reformist radicalism was essentially dissent within the system embracing people both in and outside the new establishment. Like the conservative dissenters, the radicals introduced strife into practical politics and into the articulation of reformist objectives.

Thanks to the large measure of acknowledgement given in the 1960s to the idea of gradualist change, there was little integral anti-system dissent in 1968. Opponents of communism largely accepted the reformist way as their own and generally sided with the radical wing of the reformist constituency. They did not, however, see the reform movement as ending with the attainment of an improved, more efficient and humane socialism, but rather as a continuous process whose logic would take it beyond the systemic boundaries.

Three tendencies were thus at play and at odds with each other, as is usual in political movements concerned with change: advocates of the old tenets of governance; proponents of controlled reforms with limited objectives inside the system; and a constituency of "radicals" who wished to develop a reformist progression towards parliamentary democracy.

In 1968, reform became established, begot its own dissent, and advanced towards its own demise at the hands of an external suzerain from which it dissented.

(4) *From April 1969 to the Summer of 1972.*

Whereas the changing of roles in the process of interaction between official policy, reform and dissent in the 1960s came about gradually, with the January 1968 watershed only confirming earlier developments, the reversal was much more abrupt. The interlude during which reformism withered as official policy lasted from the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968 to the institution of Gustáv Husák as party leader in April 1969. From then on, counter-reform was to be the leading principle of government for seventeen years, until the selfsame Husák leadership contrived to adopt "Gorbachevian" precepts in the late autumn of 1986.

In addition to the most momentous change – banishment of reform from government – three developments of note characterized the initial stage of "normalization": a disintegration of the reformist coalition of 1968; a belief that reform of the Prague Spring type was the only possible goal-orientation for newly emerging dissent; and a sharp decline of the public's readiness to participate in either government or dissent.

Under the pressure of sharply changed circumstances and of vicious intimidation, a part of the mainstream reformers of 1968 turned their coats and joined the new conservative coalition. Others, together with their more radical colleagues, were briskly removed from positions of authority. The rapid break-up of the reforming government testifies both to the overwhelming influence which the Soviet Union exercised over Czechoslovakia even after eight months of reformist rule and to the tenuous level of cohesiveness which the change-seeking constituency had been capable of attaining when it held power.

With almost half-a-million reformers shunted aside and with the public demonstrating its identification with the Prague Spring, it seemed logical for an attempt to be undertaken to constitute an oppositional group – dissent – based on Prague Spring tenets and led by excommunicated party members. The attempt faltered on the new regime's

coercive activities as much as on the refusal of the population, including many Prague Spring enthusiasts, to take part.

Reformist dissent ceased to be attractive or feasible. Most of "dissent" became simple "disaffection"; some of it latent because repression made articulation close to impossible.

(5) *From 1972 to 1976.*

During this period dissent reconstituted itself due to a small number of intellectuals (mainly writers and scholars) and redefined its parameters. Intellectual freedom rather than reform of communism on Prague Spring lines became the guiding principle of the newly emerging dissent. A means of articulation was re-established in the form of *samisdát* and open correspondence with friendly Western intellectuals.

Both reform and intellectual freedom having been removed from the establishment, they coalesced outside it. Many ex-reformers discovered the value of intellectual and spiritual continuity with the pre-communist past and the contemporary non-communist world. Dissent became less communist-oriented and more imbued with liberal democratic values. As understood in dissident circles, reform acquired a moral dimension that extended further than repair of communist defects. The role of the individual in society – vis-à-vis the state and in regard to other individuals – came into focus as a concern which many now regard as more important than adjustment of economic mechanisms. The mission of cultural and national heritage began to be seen in clearer contours, as it had often been in earlier periods which tested the Czech and Slovak nations' capacity for endurance. Ideological differences within the dissident community lost much if not all of their relevance.

(6) *From 1977 to 1985.*

The "humanization" of reform and the "liberalization" of dissent continued as Charter 77 constituted itself at the beginning of 1977 to provide a common denominator and a rallying point. Soon afterwards the spiritual void of "really existing socialism" began being challenged by a religious revival which itself had been influenced by the election of a Polish pope and by the role played by the Polish Catholic Church prior to and during the Solidarity era. A youth subculture came to embrace a growing number of people and an increasing variety of activities. A cultural renaissance among non-regime intellectuals flourished as an entire spectrum of *samisdát* publications, books and periodicals were written and disseminated. A certain measure of coalescing of views, though not a seamless merger, began to develop, particularly in the common appreciation of the adverse environment to which all the strands of dissent were exposed.

The reform faction among the dissidents continued to exist but was no longer dominant. Moreover, there was little if any reformism in the establishment with which kinship could be sought. The general psychology of the last stage of "Brezhnevism" was not encouraging in this respect. The rise and fall of Solidarity in Poland projected itself into Czechoslovakia as a reinforcement of the general sense of futility: firstly, because the Czechoslovak working class was generally seen as unable to imitate the Polish example, and secondly, because martial law demonstrated how much coercive

strength still existed in a system otherwise considered to be stagnant and fumbling. The pragmatism of a leadership faction of the Communist party (Lubomír Štrougal, Leopold Lér) at the beginning of the 1980s, which emerged as a result of economic decline rather than a reorientation of priorities on the value scale of the party, aroused interest but no sense of identification among the dissidents. Similarly, the Andropov incumbency gave rise to embryonic expectations but to no feeling of kinship. The elevation of Chernenko confirmed what had been crystallizing as a general-consensus among the dissidents, namely that reform was not the order of the day and that the thrust of dissent must lie in the direction of their self-defence and survival.

(7) *From 1986 to the Present.*

The advent of truly reformist "Gorbachevism" in 1986, following the initial stage of campaigns for discipline, against vodka and against corruption, marked an important change: the issue of reform suddenly re-emerged as a viable and immediate prospect, and dissent was rather quickly able to go from defence to positive assertion of its desiderata. The relationship between dissent and reform has acquired a meaning once again. Interaction began.

The hitherto largely united Czechoslovak establishment became divided between an efficiency-orientated reform faction and a conservative majority. The conflict was eventually absorbed (but not quite dissipated) into the context of a policy of "conservative reformism" which the leadership devised as its response to Gorbachev. The pursuance of reform by the conservatives has all the appearances of a precarious and temporary solution but, for the time being, it enjoys Moscow's approval as the policy which disturbs political tranquility least.

The importance of "reform" inside the present Czechoslovak regime lies less in actual change than in the existence of an imperative to which a response can be delayed and diluted but not avoided. It will always threaten to outgrow the restrictions imposed on its scope and pace by the present incumbents. Reform is the Prague leadership's sword of Damocles.

Unlike in 1968, there are now reforms outside Czechoslovakia – in Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union itself – which have become terms of reference that cannot be ignored. The external pressure on Czechoslovakia is reformist now, whereas it was counter-reformist in 1968. The Prague Spring itself is a part of this pressure, a legend that threatens to become reality and a criterion from history by which attitudes to the future are measured.

Dissent has begun to interact with this composite concept of reform in several ways. The movement has grown perceptibly stronger in numbers and in its capability to commune with the general public. Once again, it offers for consideration a set of desiderata which do not look fictive and accepts as feasible the notion that the established policies can gradually change. Dissent has emerged from the long non-reform period intellectually enriched. It is much less orientated towards contentment with repairs to the system and is much more cognizant of the human and national dimensions of change-seeking. It accepts the non-communist (democratic, religious) goal orientations as legitimate and indispensable components of its own existence. This maturation of dissent makes, on the one hand, interaction with reforms inside the establish-

ment more difficult while, on the other hand, it enhances the pressure for genuine change. There is also ambivalence in the attitude of Czechoslovak dissent towards Gorbachev. While the discovery of the reformist way by Moscow is generally welcomed, not least because of the change that it can perhaps bring about in Czechoslovakia, many dissidents dislike being the recipients of favours when Moscow is dispensing them.

At the same time, "Gorbachevism" has invigorated the "hard core" of Czechoslovak reform-communist dissent, those of the Prague Spring protagonists who maintained their communist convictions in the process of de-ideologization during the 1970's and early 1980s. Alexander Dubček is the prime example; in an interview with *l'Unità* in January 1988, he called for "party reconciliation" by way of readmission of those purged, and for a new party program along the lines of the Prague Spring. The idea that twenty years of non-reform can be forgotten, as if they did not exist, finds little understanding in most of the dissident community. It is also an unrealistic idea; major reversals tend to engender recrimination and retribution. Even less attractive is the notion of the reformers of yesterday embracing the self-proclaimed "reformers" of today. To raise dissent into the establishment is not that easy.

In the last instance, cross-fertilization between official reformism and dissent can only begin after genuine reform asserts itself. For the time being, dissent interacts with reform as an idea, not with a tangible reformist dedication.

Conclusion

Interaction between reform and dissent creates an auspicious situation in the sense that it endows the process of change with the much needed popular underpinning while, at the same time, lessening political strife. Czechoslovakia went through such a process in the 1960s and may be at the beginning of a similar rapprochement now. Nonetheless, the intervening twenty years have made a simple resumption of the process difficult. Prerequisites will first have to be created, virtually all of them in the establishment. Not only is there a lack of political will for genuine change among the incumbents of today, but the quality of societal management has deteriorated and popular skepticism is more rampant than during the 1960s. Much of the Czech and Slovak dissent has focussed on values that go beyond mere tinkering with the system. There is strong interest in the non-economic aspects of "Gorbachevism": democratization and intellectual freedom. Even if true perestroika were to be accepted by the establishment to the point of becoming credible policy, the willingness of the new reformist leadership to accept the democratic values which have prevailed in dissident community orientation would be doubtful. Conversely, a large part of the dissident community will continue to distrust the government and press for more than is offered.