**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS

The Politics of Eastern Europe

**HOW SIGNIFICANT WAS ALEXANDER DUBCEK**

**IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFORMIST COMMUNISM?**

By:

Jonas Daniliauskas

Tutor:

T.P. McNeill

March 17, 1995

**The Introduction.**

The aim of this essay is to answer the question: “How significant was Alexander Dubcek in the development of reformist communism?” This question raises the other questions. Was Dubcek the inspirer of all the reforms which took place in Czechoslovakia in 1967-1969? How much did he himself influence all the reformist processes? How much he had achieved in implementing his ideas?

Dubcek became famous only in 1967. Before that he was almost unknown in the international politics. He was known only in the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CPCS), where he had almost no influence on the major decisions (until 1967, of course). His promotion after the returning from the Moscow where he was studying for three years in the advanced Party school attached to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), was quite rapid. In 1960 he was elected to the Secretariat of the CPCS; in 1962 to the Presidium of the CPCS; in 1963 he became the First Secretary of the Slovak Communist Party; finally, on January 5, 1968 he replaced Antonin Novotny as the First Secretary of the CPCS. He was the youngest leader of ruling Communist Party (after Fidel Castro), and the first Slovak in such a high position. Though he stayed in this post relatively short - until April 17, 1969, when he was replaced by Gustav Husak, his name became known world-wide.

**Why did the reforms begin?**

The Czechoslovak crisis deepened in 1967, and showed itself in four spheres:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Slovakia;

2. The economy;

3. The legal system;

4. Party and ideology.

Since the 1962 the Czechoslovak economy suddenly began to show signs of a critical decline. That happened inevitably, because in the Stalin years the expansion of heavy industry was pushed at the expense of development of all other productive sectors of the economy. The result of this was growing inefficiency of production, failure to modernise production technology, a decline in the quality of exports, a loss of markets, and a drop in the effectiveness of foreign trade.[[2]](#footnote-2) In August 1962 the Third-Five-Year Plan had to be abandoned before completion.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this situation the Slovaks began to act. Many of them realised that specific Slovak interests might best be served by destalinization and even liberalisation.[[4]](#footnote-4) The problem also was the rehabilitation of the victims of the purge trials of 1949-1954. Novotny himself and other leading members of his regime had personally participated in the preparation and conduct of the purge trials. So, the rehabilitation was perceived as the direct threat to the security and the survival of the regime.[[5]](#footnote-5) All these factors only decreased the level of CPCS’s legitimacy.

**The Development of Reforms.**

The startpoint of the reforms was the session of the Central Committee of the CPCS on October 30-31, 1967. Dubcek raised an objection against Novotny and produced statistics suggesting that Slovakia was being continuously cheated in economic matters.[[6]](#footnote-6) This speech inspired discussion what was the unprecedented thing in the Central Committee.

The next session of the Central Committee started on December 19. Josef Smrkovsky proposed the separation of the posts of President and First Secretary: “It is unsatisfactory that an excessive number of duties should be piled upon one pair of shoulders.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In both sessions the three issues were at stake. First, the implementation of the economic reforms, secondly, freedom of expression and, finally, effective autonomy for Slovakia.

Finally, at the Central Committee Plenum on January 5, 1968, Novotny was replaced at the post of the First Secretary by Dubcek. Also four new Presidium members were elected to strengthen Dubcek’s position - J.Spacek, J.Boruvka, E.Rigo, and J.Piller.

So, the Prague Spring started at the top levels of the CPCS. But soon, as we would see, the Party will loose its ability to control the developments. At the same time, the hot political debate started in the press, on radio and television. The main issues were the Communist Party, democracy, the autonomy of Slovakia, the collapsing economy, and the problem of justice and legality.[[8]](#footnote-8) On February 14, the first public political discussion took place in Prague.

The next changes in the leadership were Novotny’s resignation from the Presidency on March 22 and General Ludvik Svoboda’s election on this post on March 30, Oldrich Ciernik’s appointment on the post of Prime Minister and the formation of the new cabinet on April 8, the election of the new Presidium of the CPCS, and the election of Josef Smrkovsky on the post of the Chairman of the National Assembly.

On April 9, the CPCS announced its ‘Action Programme’, officially known as ‘Czechoslovakia’s Road to Socialism’, as a basis for reforming communism in the country. In this document the CPCS promised: (1) new guarantees of freedom of speech, press, assembly and religious observance; (2) electoral laws to provide a broader choice of candidates, greater freedom for the four non-communist parties within the National Front; (3) upgrading of the parliament and the government with regard to the power of the CPCS apparatus; (4) broad economic reforms to give enterprises greater independence, to achieve a convertible currency, to revive a limited amount of private enterprise and to increase trade with Western countries; (5) an independent judiciary; (6) federal status for Slovakia on an independent basis and a new constitution to be drafted by the end of 1969.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Central Committee also pledged a “full and just rehabilitation of all persons” who had been unjustly persecuted during 1949 -1954.

But this programme promised less than the people actually wanted. The ‘Action Programme’ remained outside the mainstream of the powerful social process which had been set in motion in January.[[10]](#footnote-10) The people expected more reforms, more freedom. But Dubcek and other reformats tried to be more moderate, to find the way for the gradual reforms. The Presidium of the CPCS prohibited the renovation of the Social Democratic Party and the Ministry of Interior announced that the formation of political parties would be considered illegal. But at the same time this Ministry sanctioned the activity of the Club of Engaged Non-Party Members (KAN), and recognised the legal statute of another big club - K-231.

Gradually the reformats found themselves in the position which will become vital for them all. They found themselves between two different forces. One force was the majority of the Czech and the Slovak nations who wanted more radical changes. The other force was represented by the Stalinists, by Moscow, and by the leadership of the other countries of the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (WTO).

One of the major reforms was the law of June 26, which abolished prepublication censorship. On the next day the famous manifesto, entitled ‘2,000 Words to Workers, Farmers, Scientists, Artists and Everyone’ appeared in *Literarni listy*. The manifesto gave assurances of complete support of Dubcek’s regime, “if necessary, even with arms.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The leaders of the SU, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and East Germany viewed the reforms taking place in Czechoslovakia as the threat for all the Communist Bloc. The first clearly expressed concern was so-called Warsaw Letter. It was sent on July 15, 1968, and addressed to the Central Committee of the CPCS. It proved the clear evidence of the WTO leaders’ lack of confidence in the leadership of the CPCS, and contained critical references to Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy.[[12]](#footnote-12)There was expressed warning that the Czechoslovak reform policy was ‘completely unacceptable’.[[13]](#footnote-13)The Presidium of the CPCS Central Committee on July 18 rejected as unfounded the accusations made in the Warsaw Letter and affirmed that the country’s new policies were aimed at strengthening socialism.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The clear signs of crisis in relations between Prague and Moscow appeared. On July 19 Moscow issued a summons to the CPCS Presidium, demanding that it meet July 22 or 23 with the Soviet Politburo in Moscow, Kiev or Lvov to discuss internal Czechoslovak developments. 9 full members of the CPSU Politburo and the entire CPCS Presidium met on July 29 in the Slovak village Cierna-nad-Tisou. Dubcek and the other reformats regarded the outcome of the Cierna talks as a ‘Czechoslovak victory’. It had brought the annulment of the Warsaw Letter; the departure of Soviet troops was guaranteed, and the country’s sovereignty had been defended.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The fact that the agreement was regarded as the ‘victory’ shows that Dubcek and the other reformers were really driven by naïveté and idealism and hoped that they could create the socialism with the ‘human face’ without the interference from the Moscow side. They really underestimated their own significance to the Soviets. Moscow regarded the reformats developments in the Czechoslovakia as the real threat for the future of the all Communist Bloc. A common view that the danger of a Czechoslovak desertion from the socialist camp and a revision of foreign policy by the Dubcek leadership hastened the Soviet decision to occupy the country militarily.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**The Invasion.**

On August 16 the CPSU Politburo stated that “the CPCS was loosing its leading role in the country.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This showed that the Soviet’s patience reached the end.

“When Moscow’s nerve breaks, Soviet tanks usually start rolling.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Armed forces of the SU, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria invaded Czechoslovakia in a swift military action during the night of August 20-21. Dubcek and other Czech and Slovak leaders were arrested in the name of the “revolutionary government of the workers and peasants.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The main force of the initial invading units consisted of an estimated 200,000 troops. The number of invaders continued to increase during the following week and ultimately reached an estimated 650,000.[[20]](#footnote-20)Most of the members of the CPCS Presidium were shocked by the invasion. This proves again that they did not understand how serious the situation was before the invasion. From the Moscow’s point of view the invasion was inevitable, because the further development of the socialism with the ‘human face’ would lead only to deeper escalation of tensions between the Czechoslovakia and the other WTO countries, and probably, to an escape of the country from the Communist Bloc.

But the reformats did not give up. On August 21, the CPCS Central Committee declared the statement that the invasion was taking place “without the knowledge” of the Czechoslovak leaders, and that they regarded this act “as contrary not only to the fundamental principles of relations between Socialist states but also as contrary to the principles of international law.”[[21]](#footnote-21)Although there was no organised resistance to the overwhelming occupation forces, Czechoslovak citizens, spearheaded by students, resorted to a wide variety of means to hamper the invaders, and several general strikes took place.[[22]](#footnote-22)

On August 23, President Svoboda flew to Moscow. His journey represented an effort to find a way out of a situation: he was, in effect, trying to help the Soviets find a solution for the Czechoslovak crisis based on mutual political compromise.[[23]](#footnote-23)On August 26 the Moscow agreement was concluded. The major outcomes were: (1) Dubcek was to carry on as the First Secretary; (2) the invasion forces were to be gradually withdrawn; (3) censorship was to be reintroduced; (4) the CPCS was to strengthen its leading position in the state.[[24]](#footnote-24)One may assume that certain personnel changes were also assumed in Moscow, since resignations followed in due course. These changes included the removal of Dr. Kriegel from the CPCS Presidium and the chairmanship of the National Front; of Ota Sik as Deputy Premier; Josef Pavel as Minister of Interior; Jiri Hajek as Foreign Minister; Zdenek Heizar as Director of Czechoslovak Radio; Jiri Pelikan as Director of Czehoslovak Television.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The invasion led to the formulation of so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, first formulated in a *Pravda* commentary on September 26, which amounts to denying in principle the sovereignty of any “socialist” country accessible to the SU. It asserts the region-wide right to intervention.[[26]](#footnote-26)

For both rulers and ruled, the invasion of Czechoslovakia proved once again that the Soviets would use force to prevent developments they defined as contrary to their vital interests. The line they drew in 1968 to define their vital interests was the Leninist hegemony of the local Communist Party.[[27]](#footnote-27)

But the Soviets did not achieved what they wanted at once. What happened was that the invasion failed to achieve its primary purpose, which clearly was to produce a counterregime *a la Kadar*.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**The Situation After the Invasion.**

The Dubcek leadership made great efforts after the invasion to satisfy the Soviets while trying not to compromise itself in the eyes of the population.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Probably the major reform after the invasion was the creation of the Slovak Socialist Republic. On October 28, the National Assembly approved a constitutional bill transforming the hitherto unitary state into a federation of two national republics. On January 1, 1969, the Slovak Socialist Republic came into being.

Another crisis emerged in January 1969. On January 7, the new measures were taken designed to keep the press and the other media more strictly under control. In some cases, pre-publication censorship was reintroduced.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The event which finally decided the fate of Dubcek is known as the ‘ice-hockey game affair.’ On March 28, the Czechoslovak ice-hockey team won over the SU team in World Ice Hockey Championship Competition. The same evening anti-Soviet demonstrations occurred throughout Czechoslovakia. *Aeroflot* office was destroyed in Prague. On April 11 Gustav Husak declared that it was ‘high time’ to take radical steps to introduce order.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Finally, on April 17 at the plenary session of the Central Committee Dubcek was replaced by Gustav Husak (before that - the First Secretary of the Slovak Communist Party).

At the same session the CPCS Presidium with its twenty-one members and the Executive Committee with its eight members were replaced by an eleven members Presidium of which Dubcek (but no longer Smrkovsky) was still member. A few days later he was ‘elected’ Chairman of the Federal Assembly with Smrkovsky as his deputy.

On January 28, 1970, the Central Committee plenum ‘accepted the resignation’ of Dubcek from the Central Committee. And finally, on June 25, 1970 at the session of the Central Committee he was expelled from the CPCS. This was the end of his political career. But only until the end of the Communism regime in 1989. At the end of December 1989 he was elected Chairman of the Czech parliament.

**Conclusion: Was the Reformist Communism Ever Possible?**

The primary goal of Dubcek’s reforms was the creation of the socialism with a ‘human face’. Broadly speaking, the Czechoslovak reformers sought an adjustment of the standard Soviet model of socialism to the realities of what they considered an advanced industrialised socialist country enjoying a tradition of democracy and humanitarianism.[[32]](#footnote-32)The stated opinions of the reformers could be summed as follows: (1) the CPCS should no longer maintain a monopoly of power and decision making; (2) it should rather prove its goals through equal competition by permitting a clash of ideas and interests; (3) the abandonment of this monopoly would in effect mean a sharing of power and permit criticism, opposition, and even control on the CPCS’s own exercise of power.[[33]](#footnote-33)Of course, Dubcek was against the creation of the opposition parties, but he was for the pluralism inside the National Front. The essence of his reform conception was not the possibility of pluralism in the accepted sense but, rather, the obligation upon the CPCS to prove that its program was the only valid one for socialism.[[34]](#footnote-34)

It was very naive to consider that Moscow will remain indifferent to such developments. Gradually the Soviets understood that the reformers are not controlling the reforms, and this led to the invasion. The Soviet interests were threatened almost exclusively by developments *inside* the Czechoslovakia. In other words, precisely by that ‘human face’ which Dubcek wanted to give Czechoslovak socialism.[[35]](#footnote-35)

There was one thing which Dubcek considered to be not important, but in fact, this led to the end of the reforms. He underestimated the impact of his own reforms upon Moscow. The Soviet reaction to the reforms was quite logical and inevitable. The Communist power elite would never have accepted conditions which would make the free play of political forces possible. It would never given up the power.[[36]](#footnote-36)

So, was Dubcek significant in developing the reformist communism? In the short term - yes, but in the long term the practical meaning of his reforms was nil. All the things he reformed were returned back. The only positive impact (in the long term) of the reforms was the psychological impact of the attempt to improve the improvable thing. Communism can not be reformed. The only way to change it is to overthrow it completely. There is no way in the middle. The reformist communism is simply an utopia.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Ames, K., ‘Reform and Reaction’, in *Problems of Communism,* 1968, Vol. 17, No. 6, pp.38-49

2. Devlin, K., ‘The New Crisis in European Communism’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1968, Vol. 17, No. 6, pp.57-68

3. Golan, G., ‘The Road to Reform’, in *Problems of Communism,* 1971, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp.11-21

4. Golan, G., ‘Innovations in the Model of the Socialism: Political Reforms in Czechoslovakia, 1968’, in Shapiro, J.P. and Potichnyj, P.J. (eds.), *Change and Adaptation in Soviet and East European Politics* (New York, Washington, London: Praeger Publishers, 1976), pp.77-94

5. Lowenthal, R., ‘The Sparrow in the Cage’, in *Problems of Communism,* 1968, Vol. 17, No. 6, pp.2-28

6. Mastny, V., (ed.), *Czechoslovakia: Crisis in World Communism* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972)

7. Provaznik, J., ‘The Politics of Retrenchment’, in *Problems of Communism,* 1969, Vol. 18, No. 4-5, pp.2-16

8. Sik, O., ‘The Economic Impact of Stalinism’, in *Problems of Communism,* 1971, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp.1-10

9. Simons, Th.W., *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World,* (2nd. ed., London: Macmillan, 1993)

10. Svitak, I., *The Czechoslovak Experiment: 1968-1969* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971)

11. Tigrid, P., *Why Dubcek Fell* (London: Macdonald, 1971)

12. White, St., Batt, J. and Lewis, P.J. (eds.), *Developments in East European Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1993)

1. Tigrid, P., *Why Dubcek Fell* (London: Macdonald, 1971), p.17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sik, O., ‘The Economic Impact of Stalinism’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1971, Vol. 20, No. 3, p.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Golan, G., ‘The Road to Reform’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1971, Vol. 20, No. 3, p.12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p.11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tigrid, P., op.cit., p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p.43 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mastny, V., (ed.), *Czechoslovakia: Crisis in World Communism* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), p.21 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tigrid, P., op.cit., p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ames, K., ‘Reform and Reaction’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1968, Vol. 17, No. 6, p.48 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tigrid, P. op.cit., p.57 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mastny, V., op.cit., p.37 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p.40 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tigrid, P., op.cit., p.89 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p.53 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p.69 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p.53 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Svitak, I., *The Czechoslovak Experiment 1968-1969* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), p.109 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mastny, V., op.cit., p.69 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p.71 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p.76 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Provaznik, J., ‘The Politics of Retrenchment’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1969, Vol. 18, No. 4-5, p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Svitak, I., op.cit., p.109 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Provaznik, J., op.cit., p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Lowenthal, R., ‘The Sparrow in the Cage’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1968, Vol. 17, No. 6, p.24 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Simons, Th.W., *Eastern Europe in the Postwar World* (2nd. ed., London: Macmillan, 1993), p.124 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Devlin, K., ‘The New Crisis in European Communism’, in *Problems of Communism*, 1968, Vol.17, No. 6, p.61 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Tigrid, P., op.cit., p.138 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p.153 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p.164 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Golan, G., ‘Inovations in the Model of Socialism: Political Reforms in Czechoslovakia, 1968’, in Shapiro, J.P. and Potichnyj, P.J. (eds.), *Change and Adaptation in Soviet and East European Politics* (New York, Washington, London: Praeger Publishers, 1976), p.78 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p.81 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p.87 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Tigrid, P., op.cit., p.66 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., p.98 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)