

The Road to Socialism: A Primary Source Analysis of the Czechoslovakia Perspective

In this essay, I will be exploring the war of ideas that transpired in Czechoslovakia— in the name of Socialism—between the Socialist Commonwealth of Nations and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. I aim to show that while both entities were focused on the progressive nature of Socialism and towards the implementation of the building blocks of a Socialist state, they diverted in terms of the extent of liberalization that should be afforded to its citizen.

For the purpose of this essay, I will be concentrating on the Czechoslovak perspective and the mission of Dubček to incorporate democratic principles in the reform. Therefore, I will be analysing the Action Program of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Central Committee for my primary source. In order to accomplish this task, I will firstly, contextualize the primary resource by providing a brief history of the state of Czechoslovakia under the leadership of Antonín Novotný. Secondly, I will present a case for the reform in the Action Program. Thirdly, I will analyse the primary source by elaborating upon the major elements which the reform set about to modify. Finally, I will conclude the essay.

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Action Program chronicles the reformatory laws stipulated by the country's First Secretary Alexander Dubček's vision for a democratic Socialist State. Essentially, he sought to restore the humanistic elements of Socialism that were trodden down, buried and lost under the leadership of Novotný. Antonín Novotný's leadership was characterized by totalitarianism, a rigid cultural policy, political entrenchment, insubordination and corruption. He served as President, First Secretary, Supreme Commander of the Army and Chairman of the Central Committee of the National Front of the Czechoslovakia Socialist Republic.¹ His retention of power and dominance in Czechoslovakia was undoubtedly in the interest of the Soviets whose premise was to secure the interests of the commonwealth of Socialist nations. By having a pro-Soviet leader, they could ensure that all defences against Western powers—that is the imperialism of the United States and West Germany— would not be able to infiltrate and destabilize the commonwealth of nations.

An iron hedge cultural policy that was heavily concentrated on censorship, kept Czechoslovakia in bondage, and oppressed and suppressed all aspects of the nation. There was no freedom of expression, no freedom of the press, no freedom of assembly and no freedom of movement. All channels of the media, writers and other intellectuals, as well as ordinary citizens were refrained from publishing content that was deemed as Anti-Soviet and Anti-Socialist. The regulation of censorship was made possible through the political entrenchment of Novotný's regime which enforced a lack of autonomy by the State. The delegated authority of the State to influence social and economic change was merged with the governing party.² Not only did this result in insubordination, but it also contributed to the aristocracy of government leaders, corruption and embezzlement. These gross misuses of power created an environment for change, new policies and liberalization.

The new hope came in the form of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Action Program which was the overarching vision by the country's newly installed First Secretary, Alexander Dubček.

¹ Antonín Benčík and others, *Prague Spring 1968* (Budapest: Central European Press, 2006), p. 83.

² Paul Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom: his original documents leading to the invasion of Czechoslovakia* (London: Kimber, 1969), p. 132.

Novotný's incompetency to lead Czechoslovakia through its tumultuous season caused him to be removed from his post and boosted the favour of the country's new leader. Dubček envisioned a nation that was based upon diplomacy, democracy and basic human rights. Through the Action Program, he purposed to alleviate the burdens of the average citizen and answer the voices of desperation amidst the cruel cultural policy that overshadowed the land. Furthermore, the program aimed to secure a national identity that was based on unity and political pluralism. Guided by the Action program, the Party would now be able to redeem the mistakes of the previous leadership, disperse its monopolistic power, improve the foreign and economic policies and rebuild the living conditions of the wailing society. It was the hope of Dubček that these efforts would strengthen the faith of the people in the leadership of the Communist Party and the Socialist system.

The Action Program came into effect on the 10th April 1968. To the people of Czechoslovakia, it was the hope for change which they desired. However, to the Pro-Soviets, it was a threat to the future of communism, the doctrine of Marxist-Leninism and the leadership of the Czechoslovakia Communist Party. Within the duration of his tenure, Dubček was criticized for diverting from the policies which had been a part of the orthodox Soviet model of leadership. For Brezhnev and the other allies of the Soviet Union, they found it difficult to understand what Dubček referred to as the 'liberalization of society'. The main reasons for this are that Brezhnev felt as though democracy was already afforded to the people under the current model and that liberalization would threaten the Socialist state that they had been building for twenty years.³

Authors Phillip Windsor and Adam Roberts acknowledged this point of view because they state that 'within the framework of national roads to Socialism, [the Action Program] threatened to go further than anyone envisaged'. My criticism of their commentary emerges in the latter part of the statement, which places the disappointment upon democracy. 'That threat was created when Czechoslovakia adopted a programme of democratization instead of stopping short of liberalization'.⁴ Brezhnev understood what democracy meant and was not against it. However, his reservation was based on the precept that liberalization resulted in the removal of censorship. Prior to this, the Communist Party heavily monitored press releases, but now under Dubček, it was allowing an outright criticism of Communism. To the Socialist States, the reform stood as an action plan for counterrevolution. Thus, Brezhnev saw liberalization as a threat to the progress and stability of Socialism. By alleviating censorship, he believed that the departments of the media outlets were a flock without guidance that ultimately controlled the decision-making unit of Czechoslovakia.⁵ Furthermore, hard line Communist leaders were slowly transitioning into reformists, such as President Ludvík Svoboda. And members of the Communist Party were replaced by those who upheld Dubček's vision for Czechoslovakia. This transition appeared as betrayal to the progress of traditional Socialism.

Conversely to this, Dubček understood that in order for Czechoslovakia to progress as a Socialist State, it needed to be able to differentiate between 'legitimate dissent and subversion' and to divert from 'forceable regression'.⁶ Dubček imagined a new perspective of what Czechoslovak Socialism could be. It is through his leadership that the Communist political system learned of its endearing

³ Benčík and others, *Prague Spring 1968*, p. 65.

⁴ Phillip Windsor and Adam Roberts, *Czechoslovakia 1968: Reform, Repression and Resistance* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969) p. 21

⁵ Benčík and others, *Prague Spring 1968*, p. 66.

⁶ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 119.

ability for self-regeneration⁷. He understood that it if introduced the current pressures upon society, then it also had the capacity to create the change necessary to counteract it. Paul Ello argues this, but he considers it as a disillusionment on the part of Dubček and I agree with this to some extent. Essentially, Dubček set about to merge the radical demands of democracy and the orthodox practices of the Socialism⁸. Whether or not this would have been possible is a subject for debate.

In the Action Program, Dubček and the Central Committee highlighted the areas that they wanted to isolate and improve in the furtherance of Socialism. For the purposes of this analysis, I will be looking at the new culture that Dubček was attempting to create, youth and the economic and foreign policies for the purposes of trade. The uniform themes set forth in the Action Program are regulated towards freedom, equality, unity and growth. Due to Dubček's application of the principle of revisionism on the Soviet system, these themes form commonalities between Socialism and Democracy that would have otherwise not been evident.

At the forefront of the Action Program, is the notion of egalitarianism. For the Central Committee, democracy would not be possible without an overhaul of the old traditions— the sectarian style system that promoted a class-based society. He sought to alleviate the practice and in its in place present a new format for society— equality for all persons. The program states that 'the harmfulness of egalitarianism lies in the living standard. The harmfulness of egalitarianism lies in the fact that it puts careless workers, idlers, and irresponsible people to an advantage compared to dedicated and diligent workers, the unqualified compared with the qualified, the technical and expertly backward people as compared to the talented and those with initiative.'⁹ For the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, it was of paramount importance to remove all traces of economic inequalities and disparities that stemmed from the improper use of egalitarianism. This is summed up perfectly in the book 'Voices of 1968', which states that 'the Action Program was not aimed at radically overthrowing the existing system, but [rather] to force those in power to live up to their stated vision of creating a truly egalitarian society.'¹⁰

The first step of all of this had to begin with the removal of censorship so that the average citizen would be able to speak up about their varying issues and injustices. The Action Program promoted the freedom of all people as a part of the development of the human resource so that they would be better able to contribute to the economy. Zdeněk Strmiska in his essay, '*The Prague Spring as a Social Movement*', justifies this position by stating that, 'a democratizing policy does not allow for the systematic suppression of all differences of opinion and interest'. He further comments that, 'In our view, one of the benefits due to the Prague Spring is the promotion of a certain awareness of social life, an awareness which many socialists have lacked in the past.'¹¹ This was important, in my opinion, for the development of the youth and culture.

Dubček's Action Program pledged to 'restore contact with the young people all throughout Czechoslovakia' and create possibilities for the development of their 'social and cultural life'. The cultural dimension of Czechoslovakia was considered by the Central Committee as one which

⁷ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 121.

⁸ Windsor and Roberts, *Czechoslovakia 1968*, p. 22

⁹ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 142.

¹⁰ Salar Mohandesi and others, *Voices of 1968: Documents from the North* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), p. 288.

¹¹ Zdeněk Strmiska, 'The Prague Spring as a Social Movement', in *Czechoslovakia: crossroads and crises 1918-1988* (New York: St. Mary's Press, 1989), pp. 253- 267 (pp. 255-261)

contained the potential to create a 'dynamic and harmonious Socialist society'.¹² Vital to this were the cohesive nature of the Czech and Slovak societies, the development of arts and culture as well as spirituality. Unlike the previous regime who used political entrenchment to subvert the manifestation of distinct identities, the new model put forth by Dubček sought to foster an environment where both youth and cultural identities could flourish.

Moreover, the Action Program condemned the use of 'administrative and bureaucratic methods of implementing cultural policy' and 'disassociated' itself from such. It suggested that creativity within the scope of culture should never be subjected to censorship. The Central Committee's open recognition of the shortcomings of the Party and its monopolistic concentration of power was done to rebuild an understanding by the citizens of its commitment to freeing society in order to produce the intellectual property that was engineered within their personalities. The Soviet model often rejected diversity, viewing it as a threat to the welfare of the Socialist economy, but the Action Program welcomed it and even rejected the 'narrowed understanding of the social and human function of culture and art, overestimation of their ideological and political role and underestimation of their basic general and cultural aesthetic task in the transformation of man and his world'.¹³

The Czechoslovakian story has polished history with the blueprint of what a democratized Socialist country would be. Its transformative policies not only reengineered the power of the people and their culture, but also that of the economy. The underdeveloped industries and underprivileged members of society were granted special attention during the reform program. Following the years of an established and set principle of a planned economy, Czechoslovakia was dry, stagnant and unfruitful in its productivity. The Socialist economy that was left from Novotný's regime boasted that the Soviet model was the best and that maintenance of trade relations within the Socialist Commonwealth would generate enough income to sustain the growing nation. This, however, was incorrect and the refusal of the Novotný's regime to implement new strategies concentrated on growth, expansion and retention of finance plunged the economy into a burden of inflation. This in turn contributed to the poor standard of living within the general populous.

Additionally, the rate of production and inability to adapt to the changes of demand and supply of the market preserved the inconsistencies of the economic system. The Action Program relegated the use of protectionism which it viewed as the contributory factor to the backwardness of the economy and an endearing difficulty in the establishment of the new one.¹⁴ Entrenched in it were the rigid working conditions of the masses, an inability to defend human rights and of enterprises to operate independent of the state and the diversification of the market. Furthermore, the State had limited power in the Soviet Model to expand the social wealth of the entire society. Decision-making was limited only to the party and the interest of different modalities such as the consumers, enterprises and employees was not of immediate focus.

Under the Action Program, Dubček proposed a way to correct the crumbling economy by ensuring the 'independence of the enterprises and enterprise grouping and their relative independence from state bodies, a full and real implementation of the right of the consumer to determine his consumption and his style of life, the right of free choice of working activity, the right and real possibility of different groups of the working people and different social groups to formulate and

¹² Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 201.

¹³ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 202.

¹⁴ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 171

defend their economic interests in shaping the economic policy'.¹⁵ The Action Program established a precedent for the regime to follow. It was aimed at decentralizing planning and the free price setting of the consumer goods. In an essay by Jiří Kosta, this was summed up in the motto 'no more central management than is absolutely necessary, as much decentralization as is necessary'.¹⁶ Though egalitarianism stood in the way, Kosta argues that the 'skeleton' style of economic planning allowed Dubček to find ways in which he would deal with the complex problems that would burden a growing economy. This style however was unwelcomed under the orthodox practice of socialism.

The road to reform proved to not be linear as the program set forth the possibility of expanding trade. Subject to criticism, was Dubček's vision to expand its trade relations— with the hope of widening influence and the market— and the reassessment of trade unions. Through the economic reform Dubček reassessed the present conditions and strictly outlined that the reform would ensure that 'the development of [the] international economic relations will continue to be based on economic cooperation with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, particularly those aligned in the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance'. In light of this, the Communist Party also thought it necessary to advance their current relations since the prosperity of the reform severely depended on the competitiveness of their products. The diversion from the Soviet ideology of the economy is hinged upon the decision to 'actively support the development of economic relations with all other countries in the world, which show interest in them on the basis of equality, mutual advantages and without discrimination'.¹⁷

While the Action Program carefully outlined its position towards the fight for imperialism, the condition of opening trade to a wider market emphasised to the leaders of the Socialist Commonwealth that the strength of their economies would be diminished and their goods and services unable to compete on the new market. Kosta too identifies this as a political determinant that contributed to the failure of the reform.

On the other hand, the reform meant that Dubček would be required to place the country in a position of favourability on the market and protect its interest. Legally, the authority of the State was delegated to the Party. This resulted in the blended interests of both Party and State and a system of disfunction that mismanaged the working class and proved unable to defend human rights and social interests. By revitalizing the purpose and usefulness of the trade unions, the Central Committee would be able to protect its workers and open access to the global market.

Alleviating the excessive force of Soviet control, Dubček's modernized version of Czechoslovakia consisted of a linkage between the economic policy and foreign agreements for the sole purpose of reaping the benefits of trade. While collaboration with the socialist commonwealth was deemed as a necessity, the prospects of international linkages for the enhancement of the Czechoslovak economy appealed to the Central Committee. Traditional Sovietism clung to the discarding of any sort of involvement outside of its sphere of influence. However, the new model was focused on maintaining 'peace, security and confidence in its economic, cultural, scientific and technological fields'¹⁸ and

¹⁵ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, p. 172.

¹⁶ Jiří Kosta, 'The Czechoslovak Economic Reform of the 1960s', in *Czechoslovakia: crossroads and crises 1918-1988* (New York: St. Mary's Press, 1989) p. 238.

¹⁷ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, pp. 182-183.

¹⁸ Ello, *Dubček's blueprint for freedom*, pp. 207-208.

consequently, opened the 'door' of opportunity for building a relationship with other European States. This decision is what proved to be fatal for the Czechoslovak nation since to the Pro-Soviets it endangered the common interest of world socialism and would serve as a template for the other fragile nations to subscribe to.¹⁹ Additionally, it was believed that through the reform, Czechoslovakia would abandon its allegiance the Warsaw Pact allies.

In summary, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Action Program was not merely an advisory guide to the Socialist democracy, but rather a template by which they were to abide in order to secure a definitive position in the pursual of Communism. Not nearly a legalistic program of totalitarian control, the Action Program set forth to do what the Soviet model could not achieve and what 'negotiations' with Brezhnev hoped to override. The construction of the democratization of Socialism presented itself as a conflict to die-hard Communist, but a blessing to those who were now able to thrive, succeed and flourish under the socialist system. While the redesign and revision of the Marxist-Leninist theory was subject to criticism, the choice of Dubček to pursue it nonetheless re-emerged the popularity and love of Socialism and fostered a unity within the people of Czechoslovakia. Had he succeeded, then who knows what the nation would have been able to achieve.

¹⁹ Mark Kramer, 'The Kremlin, The Prague Spring, and the Brezhnev Doctrine' in *Promises of 1968: Crisis, Illusion and Utopia*, ed. Vladmir, Tismaneanu (New York: Central European Press, 2011), p. 320.

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How soon is then? Thatcher, Reagan and the legacies of the 1980s

Assignment #2: Essay

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