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# Czechoslovakia in 1989 – A case of successful transition

Stanislav Balík/Jan Holzer/Lubomír Kopeček

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## Abstract

Für die europäischen Länder des kommunistischen Blocks bedeutete das Jahr 1989 das Ende der nicht-demokratischen Regime und den Beginn des Übergangs zur Demokratie. Der Beitrag beschreibt die Transformationsprozesse in der (ehemaligen) Tschechoslowakei vom undemokratischen Regime hin zu einem demokratischen Staat in den Jahren 1989/90. Er konzentriert sich dabei auf die Spezifik des kommunistischen Regimes, seine Endphase, den Untergang, die Transition zur Demokratie und deren Charakteristik. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt der Konsolidierung der politischen Parteien. Die Besonderheiten des tschechoslowakischen Falls werden durch eine vergleichende Einordnung sichtbar.

For the European countries of the Communist bloc the year 1989 meant the fall of the local Communist non-democratic regimes, and transition toward democracy.<sup>1</sup> Although the transition did not result everywhere in a democratic arrangement of society, in Czechoslovakia a democratic regime was instituted. As the Czechoslovak situation in the late 1980s was to a certain degree unique, it is instructive to follow the actual course of the transition, which is the subject of the following text.

## I. The theory of the end of non-democratic regimes

First of all, we should introduce the basic theoretical concepts the authors use in this article. The theory of the end of non-democratic regimes was, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, one of the more attractive topics in political sci-

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1 The paper was produced as a part of the project of the Czech Science Foundation “Czech Local Politics – Transition and Consolidation” (code GAČR 407/06/P365).

ence. One of the main questions was what causes the fall of such a regime. According to the classic theory of Alfred Stepan,<sup>2</sup> the end of non-democratic regimes may take widely varying forms, depending on whether (a) it is connected with a military conflict, or (b) it is initiated by socio-political factors. The end of the regime under the influence of socio-political factors may take two different forms: (ba) either the decisive role during the end of the regime is played by representatives of the previous regime, or (bb) transformation takes place due to the influence of opposition forces.

Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s fall into the second category (bb), particularly into the fifth of Stepan's eight models - "ending of the regime under pressure from the public". The weak spot in this manner of toppling regimes is often the inability of the opposition to create a unified and sufficiently strong negotiation group for the struggle against the regime. The result may end up being a mere change of government, not a change of the regime.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Stepan's model, the concept presented by Phillippe Schmitter and Terry L. Karl<sup>4</sup> combines two factors: the character of the actors, and the character of the strategy selected by the actors. On the basis of the combination of these two elements (actors: elites vs. masses; strategy: compromise or force), they then define four different types of regime change: a) transition by pact, i.e. agreement (effected by elites on the basis of compromise), b) forced transfer (effected by elites on the basis of force), c) transition by reform (effected by the masses on the basis of compromise), and d) revolutionary transition (effected by the masses on the basis of force).

A typical example of the fall of an old regime by pact is Spain after the end of the Franco government (in Central Europe the Hungarian model was closest). On the basis of historical experience it can be said that this is the most advantageous type for the subsequent success of democracy. The model of force was represented for example by Turkey, Ecuador, and Brazil (mainly military coups against authoritarian regimes, the goal of these putsches being democracy). Reform depends on the willingness of governing elites to make concessions to the masses, which takes the place of a solution by force (Yugoslavia, Poland, Guatemala). At this time revolution is not a frequently occurring manner of end-

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2 See Alfred Stepan, *Paths towards Redemocratization: Theoretical and Comparative Consideration*, in: Guillermo O'Donnell, Phillippe C. Schmitter, Laurence Whitehead (eds.): *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, Baltimore, Md. 1986, pp. 64-84.

3 See Blanka Řichová, *Moderní politologické teorie [Modern Political Science Theory]*, Praha 2000, pp. 242-243. This regime tactic was also seen in Czechoslovakia with Adamec's last "15+5" government. The pressure from a dissatisfied public was so strong, however, that this variant was basically dead on arrival.

4 See Terry Lynn Karl, Phillippe C. Schmitter, *Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe*, *International Social Science Journal*, No 128, May 1991, pp. 269-284.

ing a regime (Nicaragua, perhaps Romania in Central/Eastern Europe).<sup>5</sup> Like all typologies in the social science, this one suffers from the fact that social reality is usually much more diverse than limited ideal categories would suggest. Thus many of the examples fall into two or more of these categories.

Special attention is paid by political scientists not only to the classification of the old regime and the way it fell, but also to the processes of transition to democracy – to aspects and problems that may speed the development of democracy, or hinder it. Many political scientists point out that the result of transition is not necessarily democracy. By transition we generally mean “the interval between one political regime and another. It is characteristic of transitions that during their course there are no stable, defined, and generally accepted rules of the game. The actors strive not only to satisfy their own immediate interests (and the interests of those they claim to represent), but also to determine the rules of the procedures, the configuration of which determines the winners and losers of the future.”<sup>6</sup> The identification of the stages in which the entire process plays out became the main theme of transitology studies.

The result of these studies has been general agreement that transition in the direction of democracy takes place in two basic stages, liberalization and democratization, though the two may run in parallel.<sup>7</sup> Liberalization is the initial period of transition in which processes like “opening up”, “reformulation”, or “restructuring” take place. Its common feature is that areas previously controlled by authoritarian power become open to reform. Liberalization is associated with an opening up of the power structure, and internal splits associated with instability. Przeworski developed a scheme of possible results of various types of liberalization process – their result can be the status quo of dictatorship, expanded dictatorship, narrowed dictatorship, or transition. A characteristic feature of liberalization is the long-term possibility of restoration of an authoritarian regime, caused by the presence of institutions and structures left over from the old regime – the strength of which gradually weakens, but the resuscitation of which cannot be ruled out.<sup>8</sup>

Successful liberalization is followed by a second phase – democratization. Here there is a building of democratic institutions, and success in establishing democratic rules of the game. The beginning of democratization dates to the moment that new rules of the game are agreed upon between part of the old regime elite and groups that previously stood outside the spheres of power. According to Przeworski, democratization can result in three possible situations: a) survival of the authoritarian regime (the two acting sides are unable to reach a compromise); b) an authoritarian regime with certain relaxations (moderates

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5 See Vladimíra Dvořáková/Jiří Kunc, *O přechodech k demokracii* [Transitions to Democracy], Praha 1994, pp. 64–65.

6 *Ibid.* p. 77.

7 See Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992.

8 *Ibid.*

working with reformers,<sup>9</sup> but the latter retain ties to the hard liners; c) democracy with guarantees (agreement between the moderates and reformers on the institutional form of the new regime and a timetable for handing over power – a characteristic element here is the so-called “round table”).<sup>10</sup>

These briefly introduced theoretical concepts relevant to the changes and the fall of non-democratic regimes and the periodization of corresponding transitive processes demonstrate a strong tradition of transitology studies during the 1990s. It is also certain that they naturally influenced the development of new theories, oriented on the conceptualization of the further development of post-non-democratic (post-transitive) political regimes in the corresponding areas. With respect to the thematic focus of this anthology we should mention above all the concept of what is known as the “colour revolutions”.

For sure, the transition to democracy in Czechoslovakia, which is examined in this text, does not fit into the category of “colour revolutions” (at least with respect to time). However, it does not seem unreasonable to construct a hypothesis whether and to what extent the experience of transitions to democracy in Central Europe was or was not reflected in the following wave of political changes witnessed at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is in this sense that the attention focused on the Czechoslovak case (and other examples from 1989) can be very inspirational for subsequent protest movements.

## II. Character of the former regime

In the 1970s and 1980s the Czechoslovak Communist regime was one of the most rigid in the Eastern bloc. Its torpidity and unwillingness to engage in any kind of reform was comparable only to that of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). No wonder that Juan J. Linz called it a “frozen” post-totalitarian regime,<sup>11</sup> unlike the “mature” post-totalitarian regime in neighboring Hungary.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Moderates here refer to moderate representatives of the democratic opposition; reformist refers to part of the old regime elite that advocated concessions, pressure from whom began the process of liberalization.

10 Říhová, *Moderní politologické teorie*, pp. 254–255.

11 Details in Juan J. Linz/Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, Baltimore/London 1996, pp. 38–54. Linz gave the same label only to the period 1977–1989.

12 Post-totalitarian regimes, like totalitarian regimes, are systems without political pluralism. The ruling party continues to have a political monopoly, and refuses to tolerate an institutionalized political opposition. However, there exist certain manifestations of plurality in non-political, typically the economic and social spheres. For example, the regime may tolerate an “unofficial” economy; it may relax restrictions on private business, even though a centrally planned economy still plays the main role. In a “mature” post-totalitarian regime there may even form a significant “parallel” (non-official) cul-

Events were significantly affected by the fears of the Communist elite that any change might fatally disrupt the *status quo* created after August 1968. The Communists' political mandate was founded precisely on the liquidation of the "revisionist" Prague Spring, courtesy of the armies of the Warsaw Pact.

The subsequent regime of "normalization" was based on a so called silent agreement with the majority of Czech and Slovak society. In exchange for an outward display of loyalty, it allowed citizens to retreat into a more-or-less respected and undisturbed private sphere.<sup>13</sup> At the same time it promised to deliver a decent material standard of living (one of the highest in the Soviet camp) and to satisfy at least some of society's demands for consumer goods. It acquired the resources to do so by extensive development irrespective of the consequences (including technological obsolescence, careless exploitation of resources, ecological devastation, etc.).

The economy of the "normalization" regime was fundamentally the same socio-economic model created in the 1950s. The Czechoslovak Communists (as opposed to, for example, their Hungarian fellows) made no great effort at an innovative economic model. One of the key reasons was the memory of the 1960s, when similar steps were attempted by the reform Communists (the so-called Šik reforms). It was thus decreed that the enterprises must remain dependent on the decisions of the central organs. Central planning laid out how much of what item each factory would produce. Factories produced goods without worrying about whether anyone wanted to buy them.<sup>14</sup> Although the Czechoslovak economy as a result of all these factors found itself somewhere between decline and bankruptcy during the "normalization" era, no massive loans were taken out by the regime as they were in Hungary, Poland or the GDR. It managed to keep inflation and its deficit low. Thus by the end of the Communist era the Czechoslovak economy was largely stabilized, but falling ever further behind the Western world.<sup>15</sup>

As for the state of the culture and society, the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia strictly screened the flow of information and contacts with the capitalist countries, whether by jamming Czech-language radio broadcasts from abroad (Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, BBC) or by controlling individual travel by citizens. The publication sphere was also strictly controlled. The result

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ture. Marxist-Leninist ideology is still the ideological foundation of the post-totalitarian regime. Belief in it, however, is seriously weakened amongst the majority of citizens; ideology is the mere facade of the regime. Real mobilization of citizens is lacking; only ritualized mobilization remains.

- 13 A typical manifestation of this was the phenomenon of summer cottaging, seen nowhere else in Europe, as a way of spending leisure time.
- 14 See Otakar Turek, *Podíl ekonomiky na pádu komunismu v Československu* [The Role of Economics in the Fall of Communism], Praha 1995, p. 47.
- 15 See Jan Švejnar, *Úvod a celkový přehled* [Introduction and Overview]. In: Jan Švejnar et al., *Česká republika a ekonomická transformace ve střední a východní Evropě* [The Czech Republic and Economic Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe], Praha 1997, pp. 12–13.

for the country was severe isolation, with all the attendant consequences of lagging behind.

The fossilization of the Czechoslovak Communists had a significant generational context. Gustáv Husák, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CC CPCz), who had headed the party since 1969, turned 73 years old in 1986. No one on the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPCz (CC CPCz) at the time was younger than 60.<sup>16</sup> The Czechoslovak leadership was a prime example of a Soviet-bloc gerontocracy, which corresponds to Linz's idea of a "frozen" post-totalitarian regime.

At the beginning of the "normalization" era there had existed several active opposition initiatives, mostly of a socialist character. Among the most important was the Trotskyite-leaning Revolutionary Youth Movement, the key figure of which was Petr Uhl; also the Socialist Movement of Czechoslovak Communists consisting of reform Communists from the Prague Spring era (Jan Tesař, Milan Hübl, etc.), or a group of former members of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party in Brno (Petr Wurm, Jaroslav Mezník, and others). Most of these people later took part in the Charter 77 and in post-November 1989 politics. However, by using repressive measures the "normalization" regime succeeded in eliminating these initiatives.<sup>17</sup>

Charter 77 played the key role and marked the re-appearance of a meaningful anti-regime formation after an interruption of several years during the early 1970s. The Charter's founding in late 1976 represented a clear turning point in the activities aimed against the "normalization" regime. Several other subsequent opposition initiatives, such as the *Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted* or *Czech-Polish Solidarity*, remained in its shadow. It was also an important factor that within Charter 77 were people with widely varying political views, representing the many diverse reasons for resistance against the "normalization" regime. It was joined by reform Communists from the Prague Spring, including former high-ranking Secretary of the CC CPCz Zdeněk Mlynář and former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Hájek, non-Communist socialists (Rudolf Battěk), mostly-conservative Christian intellectuals (Václav Benda), and free-thinkers the most visible of which was the informal leader of the whole initiative, playwright Václav Havel.

However, the activities of Charter 77, despite their undoubted importance, did not result in a great undermining of the regime's stability. The Charter

16 See Michal Barnovský, *Vedenie KSČ a KSS – od nástupu M. Gorbačova po November 1989* [The Leadership of the CPCz and the CPS – from the rise of Gorbachev to November 1989]. In: Jan Pešek, Soňa Szomolányi, November 1989 na Slovensku [November 1989 in Slovakia], Bratislava 1999, p. 32.

17 See Milan Otáhal, *Opozice, moc, společnost 1969/1989* [Opposition, Power, Society 1969/1989], Praha 1994, pp. 11–30; Pavel Pečínka, *Pod rudou vlajkou proti KSČ* [Under the Red Flag Against the CPCz], Brno 1999, pp. 49–61 or Jiří Pernes, *Od demokratického socialismu k 1968–1972* [From Democratic Socialism to Democracy: The Non-Communist Socialist Opposition in Brno in 1968–1972], Brno 1999.

remained limited to a relatively narrow group of a few hundred people, the numbers of which did not significantly increase after the end of the 1970s. The problem of the Charter was that it was confined to almost ghetto-like conditions, which lasted almost until the end of the Communist regime. But this was not just a result of the regime's successful effort to isolate them: a role was also played by their own elitist exclusivity. Dissident Petr Pithart spoke tellingly in this regard of a sect mentality.<sup>18</sup>

The Charter did not offer a clear political alternative. It did not even explicitly regard itself as an opposition to the Communist regime, although it undoubtedly was. It defined itself as a “free, informal, and open society of people [...] united by the will to individually and collectively promote respect for civil and human rights”; rights that the Communist regime had formally accepted<sup>19</sup> as a result of the international obligations taken on under the *Helsinki Accords*, which Czechoslovakia ratified in 1976. The internal discussion<sup>20</sup> over a more political orientation for the Charter broke down over ideological differences among its members, and over the concept of non-political politics imprinted on the Charter by Havel.

Havel's was a moral argument based on “living in truth”, as opposed to “living a lie”. “Living a lie”, a basic pillar of the non-democratic regime, is based not on active support, but on passive and/or purely ritualized acceptance of the regime and its ideology.<sup>21</sup> The primarily moral foundation of the argument implied the negation of politics, which is viewed as the “technology of power and manipulation thereof [...] or as calculation, questionable practices, and intrigue”, as opposed to “morality in practice.”<sup>22</sup> This set of ideas represented a strategic element in the struggle against Communist ideology, but at the same time a highly problematic element from the standpoint of building a political system in the post-transition era. With this approach Havel *pro futuro* preferred what he called a post-democratic system, a system based on open, dynamic, and small structures, functioning as a self-organizing and autonomous principle respecting the concept of community, with the presence of leaders enjoying natural authority, “infused with enthusiasm for the concrete goal, and dissolving when it is achieved”. It would be a mistake, he said, to “base one's authority on long-empty

18 See David Selbourne, *Death of the Dark Hero. Eastern Europe 1987–1990*, London 1990, p. 74. Citation from Otáhal, *Opozice, moc, společnost 1969/1989*, p. 47.

19 Statement of Charter 77 (January 1, 1977), as printed in: *Charta 77. 1977–1989 (dokumentace)* [Charter 77. 1977–1989 (documentation)], assembled by Vilém Prečan, Praha 1990, p. 12.

20 On this see for example Milan Otáhal, *Programová orientace disentu 1969–1989 [Ideological Orientation of Dissent]*. In: Petr Blažek (ed.), *Opozice a odpor proti komunistickému režimu v Czechoslovakia*, Praha 2005, pp. 33–36.

21 See. Václav Havel, *Moc bezmocných [The Power of the Powerless]*, Praha 1990, pp. 8–19.

22 See Václav Havel, *Politika a svědomí [Politics and Conscience]*. In: *Do různých stran. Eseje a články z7 and 106.*

traditions (like traditional mass political parties).”<sup>23</sup> These concepts had their influence, in view of Havel’s position, on the actions of the *Civic Forum* in November 1989, and on all of Czech politics in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup>

### III. The regime’s final phase

A key turning point in the history of the whole Communist camp during the late 1980s was the rise of a new General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, and his policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.<sup>25</sup> Gorbachev, however, consciously declined to push his policies in the USSR’s Eastern European satellites, mainly in fear of destabilizing them. To a great degree he disappointed the hopes of the Czechoslovak anti-Communist opposition when he remained silent in the face of appeals to condemn the 1968 invasion, and showed no willingness to intervene meaningfully in local affairs. Nevertheless, his policies did affect the stability of the Czechoslovak regime. While concentrating on international negotiations with the USA and the rapidly-progressing internal destabilization in the USSR itself, he lost interest in supporting the satellite regimes of Central Europe, which produced the principle of non-interference.<sup>26</sup> The Czechoslovak Communist leadership, which drew its domestic legitimacy from the Soviet intervention in 1968, in effect lost its international protection.

In the absence of any strong Soviet pressure, the policy of “restructuring” under the “normalization” regime led to mere cosmetic changes only. At this point the CPCz leadership split into fractions competing for power, but without the presence of any strong reform wing.<sup>27</sup> At the end of 1987 CPCz General Secretary Gustáv Husák was removed from office when a majority of the

23 Havel, *Moc bezmocných*, pp. 60–62.

24 After 1989, as Czechoslovak (and later Czech) president, he was nevertheless forced to adapt some aspects of his political ideas from the dissident era to the new political reality, and to modify them.

25 This was an attempt at liberalization of the political regime, especially partial freedom of speech and reform of the economic system through [relaxing] the centrally-planned system and greater economic autonomy for business.

26 See Karel Durman, *Útěk od praporů* [Deserting the Flags], Praha 1998, pp. 316–321, 333–336.

27 Long-time premier of the federal government Lubomír Štrougal, who was regarded as a potential reformer and who tried to play the role of Gorbachev in internal party struggles, found himself isolated within the CPCz. Ladislav Adamec, a potential reformer, who became Štrougal’s successor in the job of premier in 1988, was similarly unsuccessful. See Jiří Vykoukal, Bohuslav Litera, Miroslav Tejchman, *Východ. Vznik, vývoj a rozpad sovětského bloku* [The East. The Origin, History, and Fall of the Soviet Bloc], Praha 2000, pp. 592–593.

Presidium turned against him.<sup>28</sup> The new General Secretary Milouš Jakeš was seen by many top party functionaries as a weak and transitional figure at the head of the CPCz.<sup>29</sup> Jakeš did nothing to change the methods and style of the CPCz leadership.

The late 1980s in Czechoslovakia were a time of erosion in the so-called silent agreement (see above), an erosion caused by the problems of supply in the economy, where the regime could no longer guarantee even the mere maintenance of its people's standard of living. This situation was in sharp contrast with the evident rise in living standards in Western Europe, especially in neighboring Austria and Germany. The regime was unable to satisfy the population's strong expectations for consumer goods.

Social dissatisfaction and its political dimension are documented by opinion polls taken at the time by the *Institute for Public Opinion Research*.<sup>30</sup> According to a poll taken shortly before November 1989, only 14 % of citizens saw positive aspects as being predominant in the economy, while 74 % saw faults predominating. Dissatisfaction was slightly higher in the Czech lands (76 %) than in Slovakia. The highest level of dissatisfaction was in Prague (82 %), making the capital city the "weakest link". As for politics, more than half of respondents (52 %) saw negative factors predominating, while only a quarter (26 %) saw positive factors predominating. Interestingly, among CPCz members and candidates, dissatisfaction was greater than satisfaction by a ratio of 48 : 43 %. Otherwise, even among party officials the number of those satisfied was only slightly higher than those dissatisfied (56:40 %).<sup>31</sup> Even more foreboding for the CPCz leadership was public opinion on the "leading role" of the Party. As late as 1986 in the Czech lands, 66 % of those surveyed regarded the CPCz's constitutional status giving it the "leading role" in society as "important". This dropped to 56 % by 1988, and in May 1989 only 45 %. According to another poll in spring

28 The pretext was to prohibit the functions of party general secretary and president of the republic from being filled by one person (Gustáv Husák had held both offices since 1975). Husák tried to resist at first ("I'm not a piece of shit in the road you can kick."), but finally he gave in. See Jiří Suk, "Vidím vám všem až do žaludku" ["I See Right Through You All"]; idem, *The Overthrow of Gustáv Husák in 1987. Dějiny a současnost*, no. 4, 2004, pp. 22–27.

29 The reason was not just his age (65 years), but his evidently limited abilities. See Miroslav Vaněk, *Proč přišli o moc? Pád socialismu v Československu očima protagonistů komunistického režimu* [Why did they lose power? The fall of Socialism in the eyes of the protagonists of the Communist Regime]. In: Miroslav Vaněk, *Mocní a bezmocní? Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace* [Powerful and Powerless? Political Elites and Dissent during the "Normalization" Era], Praha 2006, pp. 324–327.

30 This institution was at that time under the Federal Office of Statistics. The polls were intended for the internal use of the CC CPCz and were not published. Of course the value of this poll was limited, and influenced by conditions at the time (especially fear of giving the "wrong" answer). Even so, it has a certain descriptive value.

31 See Miroslav Vaněk, *Veřejné mínění o socialismu před listopadem 1989* [Public Opinion on Socialism before 1989], Praha 1994, pp. 44–45.

1989, more than half of CPCz members (57 %) and officials (52 %) did not have faith in the leadership of the party and the state.<sup>32</sup>

Around 1988 there was a change in the approach of the anti-regime opposition and protests. By November 1989 the number of opposition organizations had grown to several dozen, but nevertheless they had not played a key role in Czechoslovak transition. The new initiatives stepped out of the political “ghetto” and mustered the courage to change their tactics: besides the continuing emphasis on the protection of human and civil rights, there also emerged political argumentation in the strict sense of the word advocating a change in the regime.

Much more successful in terms of numbers were the petition drives. The biggest petition, signed by over a half-million people, was initiated in late 1987 by Augustin Navrátil, a Catholic layman from Moravia. The petition demanded, among other things, an end to state control over the church, separation of church and state, and restoration of the religious orders. Its extraordinary success was possible thanks to distribution through the Catholic parishes, and the direct support of Cardinal František Tomášek. The mass character of the petition reflected a change in the thinking of the Catholic Church, and its growing confidence.<sup>33</sup>

Another successful action was the *Initiative of Cultural Workers* in January 1989, which criticized the imprisonment of Václav Havel and the tough measures taken against demonstrators in the streets. Even more successful was the petition “Several Sentences” written by Charter 77 in June 1989. The text called on the regime for dialogue, and demanded that it release political prisoners and allow the creation of independent movements, unions, and associations. By November it had been signed by some 40,000 people. Both initiatives were joined by a number of prominent persons from so-called “official culture” – academic facilities, government-endorsed writers and similar institutions.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time it was also true that the growing opposition in the second half of 1989 lacked a common organizational and political platform, not to men-

32 Ibid., pp. 22–24. The crisis of faith in the CPCz leadership was illustrated by the famous speech by Jakeš to the West Bohemian party functionaries at Červený Hrádek in July 1989, which after it was leaked and broadcast on Radio Free Europe contributed to the General Secretary’s loss of authority because of his woefully primitive manner of expression. The party leadership’s sinking morale was revealed by Jakeš with his famous phrase that the party was all alone “like a lonesome fencepost, without a word of support”.

33 With respect to identification of the participants who played a key role in the formation of opposition efforts in November and December 1989, we can say that the Catholic church did participate in the processes but did not directly initiate them. See Stanislav Balík, Jiří Hanuš, *Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989* [The Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia 1945–1989], Brno 2007, p. 60.

34 More details on the activation of the “grey zone” and the petition movement can be found in Milan Otáhal, *Podíl tvůrčí inteligence na pádu komunismu* [The Role of the Creative Intelligentsia in the Fall of Communism], Brno 1999.

tion the absence of a common strategy for dealing with the regime.<sup>35</sup> The caution of part of the opposition was magnified by the fresh and painful experience from the other side of the Communist world, with the bloody military crackdown on student demonstrators by the Chinese Communists at Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

The pace of events and the changes in the social atmosphere were accelerated by factors geographically closer – the rapid disintegration of the Communist regimes in neighboring Poland and Hungary. Perhaps even more important psychologically was the sudden collapse of the Communist regime in the GDR (the regimes in Poland and Hungary had clearly been in crisis for some time). The mass flight from East Germany to West Germany affected Czechoslovakia as well, with refugees camping out at the West German embassy in Prague. The wave of refugees from East Germany was one of the important factors influencing the change in the atmosphere in society. “The exodus taking place in the middle of Prague before our very eyes had [...] the potential to influence the social-psychological situation in society. The rows of abandoned automobiles with GDR license plates along the streets of Prague were an especially vivid symbol of these events. They were evidence of an elemental force, like the remnants of some natural catastrophe. [...] They strengthened the impression that something important was changing, and something big was irrevocably disappearing”.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. The fall of the old regime and the transition to democracy

##### 1. Basic terminology of the Czechoslovak case

With respect to the basic concepts of terminating non-democracies described at the beginning of this text we can say that in the Czechoslovak case, we can identify elements of pact and reform. An important factor was the unreadiness of all of the actors and all of the strategies being considered, along with the unexpected, but absolute collapse of a forty-year-old regime. The character of the fall of the old regime was symbolized in the handover and takeover of power in an improvised manner that, except for a constitutional change in the text of the presidential oath, left everything as it was.<sup>37</sup>

35 See Jan Měchýř, *Velký převrat či snad revoluce sametová? [The Great Overthrow, or the Velvet Revolution?]*, Praha 1999, pp. 60–63; Jiří Suk, *Občanské fórum. 1. díl, Události [Civic Forum. Part 1, Events]*, Praha/Brno 1997, pp. 9–11.

36 See Oldřich Tůma, 9.00, *Praha-Libeň, horní nádraží. Exodus východních Němců přes Prahu v září 1989 [9.00, Praha-Libeň, Upper Station. The East German Exodus through Praha]*, *Soudobé dějiny*, no. 2–3, 1999, p. 163.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 127–132.

It should furthermore be noted that in Czechoslovakia both (theoretically defined) phases of transition to democracy (liberalization and democratization) overlapped almost completely. Power was taken over by moderates with the agreement of reformers, but without knowing the degree of their obligation toward the radicals, and under increasing pressure from them. Even so, there was a successful transition to democracy, the result of which was a democracy with guarantees. How did the whole process unfold?

## 2. The beginning of the transition process – forming of the Civic Forum

The actual trigger for the regime's fall was the violent repression of a student demonstration in Prague on November 17, 1989, held on the fiftieth anniversary of the death of a student, Jan Opletal, at the hands of the Nazis. The organizer of the demonstration was the regime-controlled *Socialist Union of Youth*, but independent students and activists were among the co-organizers. The critical moment came after the end of the official (legal) part of the march, when it spontaneously turned towards the center of town. On the way the crowd had grown to perhaps 50,000 people. On *Národní Avenue* it was stopped by the police. Some of the demonstrators dispersed, but some were not given a way out, and were brutally beaten.

Outraged by the attack, students declared a protest strike, which the Prague theatergoers soon joined. Accelerating and expanding the wave of protest against the police intervention was the rumor that a student had been killed. It was denied by the regime two days after November 17, but by then the psychological impact had had its effect.<sup>38</sup> On a wave of spontaneous mass protest, the *Civic Forum* (CF) was founded on the evening of November 19 in the *Činoherní Klub* in Prague; its central figure was Václav Havel. The CF was joined by previous members of the opposition initiatives, as well as people outside dissident circles.<sup>39</sup>

Almost simultaneously, a “sister” organization called *Public Against Violence* (VPN) was founded in Slovakia.<sup>40</sup> But the next few days showed that it was the CF and the events in the center that held the key. On November 20, 1989 over a hundred thousand people demonstrated on Prague's *Wenceslas Square*, many times more than had ever taken part in opposition demonstrations before. Mass demonstrations continued in Prague and other cities over the following days.

38 To this day it has not been made clear to what extent this was a provocation that went beyond its original intent. All that is certain is that the role of the alleged dead student on *Národní Avenue* was played by State Security officer Ludvík Zifčák.

39 For a description of the people behind CF, see Jiří Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce* [Labyrinth of Revolution], Praha 2003, pp. 91–92.

40 Other anti-communist organizations such as the Solidarity in Poland and the Hungarian Democratic Forum represent partly different phenomena, both in their origins and in their system roles in the fall of the corresponding regime.

They culminated in a successful two-hour general strike on November 27 that showed that the CF enjoyed the support of the public.

A whole series of questions and rumors quickly sprung up around the events of November 17, some of which will probably never be answered. Among the most talked about is the uncertainty over who gave the order for the brutal attack on the demonstrators on *Národní Avenue* (the organization of the entire police action itself was chaotic), and whether or not it was a deliberate attempt to discredit some of the Communist officials. For example a member of the first commission to later investigate the events of November 17, student Václav Bartuška, popularized the idea that it was an attempt to oust the existing leadership of the CPCz by provoking a wave of public unrest, and replace it with new, openly perestroika-oriented leaders. The Gorbachev leadership as well as the Soviet KGB were said to have given their tacit support.<sup>41</sup> None of the “conspiracy theories” bandied about has been reliably proven. In any case the harsh measures taken against the student demonstration and the immediate reaction of protest were the “mere” triggers of regime change, which would have taken place anyway, though later, and possibly with a different scenario.

### 3. Reaction of communist elites

In its founding proclamation on November 19 the CF demanded the resignation of some of the most discredited Communist officials – Gustáv Husák, Milouš Jakeš, Jan Fojtík, Karel Hoffman, Miroslav Zavadil, Alois Indra, Miroslav Štěpán, and František Kincl. The proclamation also demanded a commission be set up to investigate what happened on November 17, demanded that political prisoners be released, and called a two-hour general strike for November 27. The proclamation also declared its strategy of the dialogue, which fully reflected the Charter’s traditional approach.<sup>42</sup> The *Civic Forum* did not envision taking power.

However, there was no partner to engage in dialogue with. The leadership of the CC CPCz was neither willing nor able to go so far as to meet with the opposition. It was basically unable to react to events in any adequate manner. Appeals to calm and condemnations of the student strikes and demonstrations had no effect on an aroused public. The demoralization of the party was intensified by an unsuccessful attempt to mobilize the “party’s army”, the *People’s Militia*, i.e. armed Communists from the factories. Units were called in from the regions to Prague, where they were to help pacify the situation. Many of the militiamen, however, never went to Prague, and the whole action was called off two days later by Jakeš. The reasons for this unsuccessful attempts to mobilize the “party’s

41 See Václav Bartuška, *Polojasno* [Overcast], Praha 1990, pp. 241–248.

42 See Jiří Suk, *Občanské fórum. 2. díl, Dokumenty* [Civic Forum, Part. 2: Documents], Praha/Brno 1997, p. 1.

army” should be seen especially in the continuing decline of the members’ loyalty to their leaders, and also in the CPCz leaders’ lack of courage.

Another major blow was the revolt of the media. CPCz officials soon lost control of Czech Television, which started showing the beating of students on *Národní Avenue* over and over again, along with detailed reporting from the ongoing demonstrations.<sup>43</sup> The situation at Czech Radio was much the same. This strongly affected the course of the protests outside Prague especially.

The *National Front*, which all legal parties and organizations were required to be a part of, and which had served the CPCz as an important instrument of political control, began to fall apart. Especially uncomfortable for the Communists was the desertion of the *Czechoslovak People’s Party* (ČSL) and the *Czechoslovak Socialist Party* (ČSS). The party newspapers of both these parties (*Lidová demokracie* and *Svobodné slovo*) began reporting relatively objectively on the events on *Národní Avenue* in their Saturday editions the next day (November 18). Representatives of the CF were allowed to speak to the throngs from the balcony of the *Melantrich building* on *Wenceslas Square*, which was owned by the ČSS. Both parties were undergoing dynamic internal changes including changes in leadership, seeking paths to the CF and distancing themselves from their previous subordination to the CPCz. The *People’s Party* was especially quick on its feet. At a meeting of its Central Committee on November 27/28, the leadership was taken over by the so-called revival current, which had begun to take shape shortly before November. Josef Bartončík became chairman, and the First Secretary was Richard Sacher. In a similar attempt “to keep up with the times”, the chairman of the *Socialist Union of Youth*, Vasil Mohorita, appeared at the CF’s first demonstration on November 20 on *Wenceslas Square*, expressing support for the striking students.

An extraordinary meeting of the CC CPCz was not held until November 24, a week after the incident on *Národní Avenue*. The meeting further weakened the unity and position of the party. Milouš Jakeš and the entire Presidium of the CC CPCz resigned. But the newly elected presidium was ideologically no improvement. To make matters worse, it included a number of very unpopular figures such as Jozef Lenárt, Miroslav Štěpán, and Miroslav Zavadil. Soon they too came under pressure from both Communist Party members and public opinion. At another Central Committee meeting two days later they all resigned. The election of a new General Secretary, Karel Urbánek, had even worse consequences for the CPCz. A later historian said of him that he no political identity of his own, and that all he knew how to do was prattle.<sup>44</sup> The CPCz under Urbánek found itself on the periphery of events, and it played no further active part in the transition to democracy.

43 See Jarmila Cysařová, Čas přelomu [Breaking point. Garage CF Czechoslovak Television]: 21. November 1989 – 11. January 1990, *Soudobé dějiny*, 2–3, 1999, pp. 297–307.

44 See Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*, p. 136.

The CC CPCz meeting of November 24 was important for another reason. There the army, through Minister of Defense (and Central Committee member) M. Václavík, recommended “calling to combat readiness the army, Security (i.e. the police), the militia [...] in order that these units will be ready, in case something happens, to deal with it”. Václavík also recommended taking “measures in regard to the media” and pacifying them “either amicably or not”.<sup>45</sup> The Minister of Defense had spoken out a week earlier for the “Chinese solution” at a meeting of the federal parliament. The CPCz leadership discussed using force, but could not find the courage to do it.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the army continued to anticipate the possibility of military intervention.<sup>47</sup> One of the fundamental principles of the Communist regime – the subordination of the army to the political leadership (the CPCz) – was still functional at the moment the regime ceased to exist: in the end the army made no independent move of its own.

#### 4. The stage of negotiations between the regime and the opposition

With the CPCz leadership paralyzed, Premier Ladislav Adamec decided to step in himself. After failing at the CC CPCz meeting on November 24 to get elected as party leader, he began to meet openly with the CF. His greatest leverage was the goodwill of the CF and the fact that the movement preferred a strategy of dialogue, for which Adamec seemed to be the optimal partner.

On November 26, the day before the successful general strike, the first meeting was held between Adamec and a delegation from the CF (headed by Havel) at the Municipal House. The CF presented the demands from its founding statement. For his part, Adamec requested that the general strike be limited to a symbolic few minutes in order to limit economic losses. The CF refused, not wishing to diminish the psychological effects of the strike. The CF invited Adamec to attend the upcoming demonstration on *Letná Plain*. There, facing half a million people, Adamec repeated his demand that the strike be curtailed, and in doing so revealed his failure to comprehend the radical mood in society. The crowd responded with a mass display of disagreement.<sup>48</sup>

Even so, Adamec remained the main partner for the CF. From the point of view of what came next it seems that the CF made a mistake after the general strike by calling on the public to end its mass demonstrations, which indeed calmed the wave of protest. In doing so they gave up their instrument for exerting pressure. But the main problem was that the CF at the beginning of December 1989 still expressed no interest in governing, but merely wished to

45 See *Poslední hurá. Tajné stenografické záznamy z posledních zasedání ÚV KSČ v aha 1992*, p. 70.

46 The reasons were similar to the above mentioned unsuccessful attempt to use the “party’s army”.

47 See *Otáhal, Opozice*, p. 110.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 113; *Suk, Labyrintem revoluce*, p. 49.

oversee the government. It also insisted at all costs on maintaining legal and constitutional continuity. In practice it did succeed in setting up a parliamentary committee to investigate the events of November 17, and removing the article on the Communist Party's "leading role" in society and Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology (both were approved by the *Federal Assembly* on November 29), but it left Adamec with a free hand in putting together a new government. Adamec's threats of army intervention and a constitutional crisis played a role, as well as his (alleged) support from Gorbachev as the ideal candidate for "restructuring the system". Meanwhile, the CF doubted its own readiness to govern.

Adamec's "new" or, more accurately, reconstructed<sup>49</sup> government, was known as the 15+5 government because it contained fifteen Communists and five non-Communists (1 ČSS, 1 ČSL, and 3 non-partisans). It was presented to the public on December 3. Some of the representatives of CF were not strictly negative in their reaction. The public was of different opinion, however: as soon as the list of ministers was announced, spontaneous demonstrations began anew.<sup>50</sup>

In the face of these protests the CF rejected the government. However, it still regarded Adamec as the most acceptable figure for the office of premier, and therefore asked only for a more fundamental reconstruction of government. Nevertheless, they began to break from the strategy of external control, and consider putting some of its own people into the executive structure in the form of an "advance guard". This was seen in the composition of the government of the Czech Republic named December 5, in which Communists did not have a majority, and to which the CF delegated a number of individuals.

This approach was then taken in the negotiations over the federal government. A strong opinion was heard on this point from the economists (especially Václav Klaus) at the *Prognostic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences*, who reasoned pragmatically that by taking a place in the executive they could influence the course of events more than from a position of external "control". Adamec, who realized that his room for maneuver in the government was shrinking, resigned as Premier on December 5, complaining that "the government is not a volunteers' club."<sup>51</sup>

The meetings between a resigning Adamec and his advisors on one side, and the CF on the other, produced a new candidate for federal premier. Prior to November 1989 Marian Čalfa had held the function of minister for legislation; in

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49 From a constitutional standpoint no new government was established, there was merely a replacement of some of its members.

50 See Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*, p. 58.

51 See Vladimír Hanzel, *Zrychlený tep dějin. Autentické záznamy jednání představitelů státní moci s delegacemi hnutí Občanské fórum a Veřejnost pro násilí v ha 1991*, p. 165.

the “15+5” government he held the post of first vice-premier. On December 9 his government of “national understanding” was presented. Its main goal was to lead the country towards free elections. One day later it was sworn in by President Husák. For the first time the composition of the government reflected a will on the part of the CF to govern. The “advance guard” had become an expansion of personnel into the executive. In Čalfa’s government the CF gained a strong position in the economic ministries especially; non-Communists also occupied the post of first vice-premier, the foreign ministry, and the ministry of labor and social affairs. At first glance, the ministers’ party affiliation did not guarantee the CF predominance: there were 10 Communists, 2 ČSS, 2 ČSL, and 7 non-partisans nominated by the CF and VPN. With some of the Communists, however, party affiliation was only the residue of the past, and in fact they no longer represented the Party.<sup>52</sup>

The political naivety of the CF was clearly displayed in filling the power ministries, defense and interior, which were of cardinal importance in view of the (as yet incomplete) change in the regime. Without visible consequence the ministry of the interior was headed by a Communist, General Miroslav Vacek, previously chief of staff of the *Czechoslovak People’s Army* (Vacek remained minister even after the 1990 elections, stepping down in October 1990). The interior ministry was a much more serious problem. It was decided that until the end of December 1989 the ministry would be headed collectively by the premier and the two first vice-premiers. Later the ministry was to be headed by minister without portfolio Richard Sacher (ČSL), whom Havel preferred for the job. In practice this led to a state of interim rudderlessness at the ministry. In view of the power and repressive potential of the ministry and its subordinate departments, this was a very dangerous state of affairs. Even after Sacher took over the ministry, the situation remained unclear, and unacceptable to a large part of the public (for example, Sacher did not announce the dissolution of the “State Security”, and then only under great pressure, on February 1, 1990).

The creation of the Čalfa government was formally preceded on December 8, 1989 by a “round table” meeting initiated by the CPCz. The party’s goal was to get “back in the game” by regaining at least some kind of influence over rapidly unfolding events. Consequently, the nature of the Czechoslovak “round table” was different from the round tables in Poland and Hungary. Participating were representatives from the CF, VPN, CPCz, ČSL, ČSS, the *Party of Slovak Renewal*, and the *Freedom Party*,<sup>53</sup> the *Socialist Union of Youth*, and the *National Front*. In practice, however, the meeting had minimal influence on the shape of the Čalfa government. The selection of ministers from the CPCz was made on the recommendation of Čalfa, who brought in some of the members of Adamec’s

52 Valtr Komárek and Vladimír Dlouhý left the CPCz in December 1989, M. Čalfa in January 1990.

53 These were two small Slovak parties, which until November played a similar satellite role as the two small Czech parties.

previous cabinet. The selection was approved by the CF; the CPCz played practically no role. The communiqué of the discussions called it a meeting of the “decisive political forces”. Thus the CF implicitly acknowledged the CPCz as a relevant and legitimate political actor at a moment when the political authority of that party was plummeting.<sup>54</sup> This made it practically impossible in the future to outlaw the Communist Party, which was being seriously discussed at the time.

Before the creation of the Čalfa government Adamec had assumed that he could retain some influence on the executive through the premier. For its part, the CF regarded Čalfa as a temporary solution. Marian Čalfa showed himself to be a flexible and capable official, knowledgeable in constitutional matters as well as the less-visible structure of the political system as it existed. He immediately cut his ties to Adamec and his group, and allied himself with the CF. He gained Havel’s confidence through his behind-the-scenes maneuvers in electing Havel president, which proved successful.

## 5. Havel for president

The idea of Havel as president came to the forefront at the beginning of December, but the *Civic Forum’s Coordinating Center* was unsure how to achieve this. The serving president Gustáv Husák understood what the balance of forces was, and abdicated immediately after naming Čalfa premier. Instead, there was potential competition from Ladislav Adamec, who apparently already saw himself as a candidate for president when he resigned as premier. Another candidate especially popular in Slovakia was Alexander Dubček, who was backed by a number of Slovak institutions and organizations including the *Communist Party of Slovakia* and the presidium of the Slovak parliament. Another potential candidate was another reform Communist from the Prague Spring, Čestmír Císař, supported by the *Socialist Union of Youth*.<sup>55</sup>

Another complication was a proposal, presented by the CPCz on December 11 at the second round of “round table” meetings, to hold direct presidential elections. It was difficult for the CF to argue against it. The Federal Parliament, which elected presidents under the current constitution, had taken office in 1985, and the great majority of the representatives were Communists. There seemed to be no prospect of replacing them quickly.

On December 15, 1989, however, Premier Čalfa offered at a secret meeting with Havel in the premier’s office Čalfa to “arrange” for successful presidential

54 The course and participants in the “round table” meetings are found in Hanzel, *Zrychlený tep dějin*, pp. 295–380.

55 An improvised public opinion poll taken on December 6, 1989 in the streets of Prague showed Dubček preferred by 11 % of respondents, with Adamec, Havel, and Císař each at 1 %. Another popular figure at the time, Valtr Komárek, who did not display presidential ambitions, was preferred by nearly 8 % of respondents. See Suk, *Labyrintem revoluce*, p. 200.

elections and to eliminate Dubček. Havel accepted the offer. In a television speech a day later Havel deftly emphasized that if he were to be elected President, then Dubček must hold another high office beside him. After intense pressure Dubček (who wanted badly to be president himself) was persuaded to take the job of *Chairman of the Federal Assembly*, to which post he was elected on December 28, 1989. The next day, following major string-pulling by Marian Čalfa<sup>56</sup>, Václav Havel was “elected” President unanimously by the Federal Parliament in a public vote at Prague Castle. The act was not an election in the proper sense of the word, but more of an acclamation.

Havel’s election marked the end of the first stage of Czechoslovakia’s transition to democracy. The second, final phase ended in June 1990 with the first free elections since 1935. This interim period saw legislative and executive changes that removed the most important and most visible components of the non-democratic regime. These included removing some representatives and members of the national committees and replacing them with new ones (called the co-option strategy); a change in the state symbol, disbanding of State Security, abolishing state oversight of the churches, allowing for private education, and taking the first steps towards renewing local autonomy.

## V. A case study – consolidation of political parties

The initiatives from which the political parties grew were important in shaping the future party system. Three groups in particular are worth mentioning:<sup>57</sup> the so-called realists around Emanuel Mandler, Bohumil Doležal, and Karel Štindl who, at the time Charter 77 was first signed, criticized Havel’s conception of opposition. In 1987 they formed the *Democratic Initiative*, later renamed the *Czechoslovak Democratic Initiative*. On November 11, 1989 it declared itself a political party, and asked the Ministry of Interior to register it as such.

In October 1988 the *Movement for Civic Freedom* (HOS) was founded. Within this movement, three ideological currents began to appear: the Christian democrats represented by Václav Benda, the civic democrats led by Daniel Kroupa and Pavel Bratinka, and the social democrats headed by Rudolf Battěk.

A third group was the *Club for Socialist Restructuring – Obroda* (Renewal), formed in late 1988/early 1989. *Obroda* consisted of a number of reform Communists from the Prague Spring era. The Jakeš leadership saw it as a potentially dangerous competitor, even though *Obroda* took a relatively conciliatory attitude towards the regime, an attitude quite in line with their desire to reform,

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 224.

<sup>57</sup> More on their profile and history prior to November in Otáhal, *Opozice*, pp. 63–68; Měchýř, *Velký převrat*, pp. 50–53. Other initiatives with proto-party shapes included the Left Alternative formed around Petr Uhl in the fall of 1989.

but not destroy, the Communist regime. As was shown during the transition to democracy, the ambitious *Obroda* – like the other embryonic parties – lacked either plausible political figures or a broad membership base, and played an insignificant role in the events of November.

At the end of October and beginning of November 1989 the *Democratic Initiative*, HOS, and *Obroda* tried to come to an agreement on a joint body – the *Coordination Committee of the Czechoslovak Political Opposition*. But due to intervention by State Security and the rapid pace of events, the committee played no role in the subsequent transition to democracy.

Generally, all of these pre-November semi-party structures ended up taking temporary shelter under the wing of the *Civic Forum* when it was founded. After that their paths diverged. Nevertheless, most of these formations had limited success in establishing themselves, and most disappeared altogether during the first half of the 1990s:

- Mandler’s *Czechoslovak Democratic Initiative* became the *Liberal Democratic Party*. It merged with the *Civic Democratic Alliance* (ODA) in 1992;
- Kroupa and Bratinka founded the ODA;
- Benda founded the *Christian Democratic Party* (KDS);
- Battěk’s group tried to establish itself within the *Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party* (ČSSD), and afterward tried to strike out on its own. It disappeared from politics after the parliamentary elections in 1992, when its last project, *Democrats ‘92*, in support of preserving the Czechoslovak state, won a negligible few tenths of one percent of the vote.
- *Obroda* after the elections in June 1990 merged with the ČSSD, which most of its members joined directly in the spring of 1991.

The proto-party character of some of these pre-November initiatives represented only part of a vast kaleidoscope of opposition groups. These included the monarchist and somewhat-tongue-in-cheek *Children of Bohemia*, the pacifist *Independent Peace Association*, and the *Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee*.

It is certainly interesting that none of the organizational structures of these opposition groups survived the period of transition and subsequent consolidation. So in November 1989 the opposition began with nothing in terms of organization. The importance of the opposition initiatives for the transition, then, lay mainly in the recruiting of the future elite.

It was indicative of the Czechoslovak transition that the political parties (mainly the Czech ones) did not achieve “general recognition as the privileged instruments of political competition and cooperation, socio-political representation, and the mediation of interests.”<sup>58</sup> The reasons for this are several ones, but

58 See Petr Fiala, Maxmilián Strmiska, *Systém politických stran v letech 1989–2004* [System of Political Parties in 1989–2004]. In: Jiří Malíř, Pavel Marek et al., *Politické strany. Vývoj politických stran a hnutí v českých zemích a Československu 1861–2000* [Political Parties: Development of Political Parties and Movements in the Czech Lands and Czechoslovakia 1861–2000], Brno 2005, p. 1361.

the most important was the ambivalence of a large part of the new political elite toward the phenomenon of political parties and party membership, or toward the standard mechanisms of interest mediation as such. In the initial period prior to the 1990 elections political parties were at a disadvantage, and informal models of communication between political elites and the public were preferred; forays aimed at personalized politics and gaining political legitimacy through non-electoral methods were influential. The concept of political parties and electoral competition was seen as a “necessary evil”.<sup>59</sup>

A key structure in forming the political party system was the *Civic Forum* – originally a “revolutionary” coordinating body that as time went by turned into a hybrid combining two identities: a post-revolutionary anti-Communist, anti-totalitarian and democratically-oriented umbrella organization on the one hand; on the other a nationwide mass movement. The internal contradiction between these two identities was already apparent before the 1990 elections, but was muted for strategic reasons. The conflict came to the forefront in the fall of 1990 with the splitting of the CF into the *Civic Democratic Party* and the *Civic Movement* in early 1991. During the first three months of its existence the CF had focused its activities toward the social and political; then it began turning its energies inward. A symbolic breaking point came in late March 1990, when representatives of the regional civic fora took part for the first time in the Congress of the *Civic Forum Coordinating Center*,<sup>60</sup> which represented a step towards the functioning of the CF as a political party, instead of a narrow elitist political club of honorary character.

From its beginnings the CF had encompassed varying (often conflicting) political currents: At least fourteen discernable political parties, movements, or groups, from Trotskyite to liberal-conservative can be distinguished.<sup>61</sup> The existence of the CF was justified by its function as the guarantor of the transition to democracy, and a barrier to totalitarian reaction. But as time went by it began to limit the space for the creation and free competition of political parties as the main independent and privileged political actors.

The second most important political-party actor during the period up to the 1990 elections was the CPCz, or rather its successor, the *Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia* (KSČM). During the entire period the party was in a completely defensive position due to its growing political isolation and an agreement by the other groups to “ostracize” it. Since the elections in 1990 it has never

59 Typical in this sense was the Civic Forum’s election slogan, which neatly summed up the mood of the times: “Parties are for partisans, the Civic Forum is for everybody!”

60 See Pavel Pšejka, *Občanské fórum* [The Civic Forum]. In: Malík/Marek et al., *Politické strany*, pp. 1489–1490.

61 The Agrarian Party of the CF, the Czechoslovak Democratic Initiative, Czechoslovak Humanist Internationalist Party, Movement for Civic Freedom, Club of Involved Non-partisans, Club of Social Democrats in the OF, Christian-Social Party, Left Alternative, Masaryk Democratic Movement, Civic Democratic Alliance, Obroda, Romany Civic Initiative, Party in the Defense of Culture, Transnational Radical Party.

been part of any government coalition. The main reason for this was its unwillingness to distance itself from its past and transform itself into a party loyal to the new democratic system. A promising step in this direction was taken by the delegates at an extraordinary congress of the CPCz on December 20–21, 1989, when they adopted an action program entitled “For a Democratic Socialist Society in the ČSSR”; it declared that the CPCz would transform itself into a modern democratic party. The congress distanced itself from the Stalinist party model, condemned the deformation of Marxism, expelled several discredited members from the party (also rehabilitating all the unjustly-expelled of the past), and dissolved the *People’s Militia*. Ladislav Adamec was elected chairman, the first time the party had had a chairman since 1953. The party was the farthest it had ever been (and the farthest it ever got) from the methods of the previous forty years of government, but in the end not even the name of the party was changed. It was decided to do away with the organizational asymmetry by which there existed a Czechoslovak communist party and a Slovak communist party but no corresponding organization existed for the Czech lands. The founding congress of the *Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia* (KSČM) met on March 31, 1990. In April 1990 the Communists decided to return to the state the property it had acquired during the Communist era.<sup>62</sup>

The six months between the events of November and the June elections saw a renewal of some of the old parties, and a whole spectrum of new ones. The *Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party* was re-established from its roots in exile; the *Czechoslovak Socialist Party* and the *Czechoslovak People’s Party* cleaned house as well. The latter of these two, along with the newly-formed *Christian Democratic Party* made up of Catholic dissidents, formed an election coalition called the *Christian and Democratic Union* (KDU). Moravian patriotism was fanned by the *Movement for Autonomous Democracy – Society for Moravia and Silesia* (HSD-SMS). An ambitious *Green Party* was formed as well.

The CF won a convincing victory in the elections, gaining half of the vote; the Communists came in second with around 13 %. Two other bodies made it into parliament, the KDU and the HSD-SMS (the success of which was the election’s biggest surprise).<sup>63</sup> The 1990 elections marked the end of the transition to democracy phase, not only of the political system as a whole, but in its subsystems as well. They opened up space for the further structuring of the party system. The Czech case is remarkable because the positions staked out during the founding elections in 1990 continued to shape the party system to a significant degree over the next two decades.

62 See Petr Fiala, Miroslav Mareš, Pavel Pšeja, *Komunisté a jejich strany* [Communists and their parties]. In: Malíř/Marek et al., *Politické strany*, pp. 1413–1414.

63 For detailed election results see Fiala/Strmiska, *Systém politických stran*, p. 1363.

## VI. Evaluating the Czechoslovak transformation to democracy

Although the 1990 elections can be seen as the conclusion of the transition to democracy, key events in that process were taking place already in November and December 1989. The question naturally poses itself; what actually happened in Czechoslovakia? Although journalists called it the *Velvet Revolution*, it was no revolution. Or if it was, then only in the expanded sense expressed by the ancient historian Polybius, who defined revolution as the putting of things in their proper order. In his view tyranny was a deviant situation, which revolution returned to the state of just and properly organized society. In this sense only – in the normative sense of democracy and non-democracy – can what happened in Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1989 be considered a revolution. Nor did negotiation take place in Czechoslovakia in Huntington's sense.<sup>64</sup> An adequate category would be Linz and Stepan's concept of collapse.<sup>65</sup>

The "ancien regime" in Czechoslovakia was definitely no longer a totalitarian regime from the end of the 1950s at the latest. It fulfilled all the criteria of a post-totalitarian authoritarian regime<sup>66</sup>, falling under various sub-categories of this type during various periods. It was unique in that, unlike almost all its nearby comradesly regimes, it never experienced, because of unique historical circumstances, the phase of mature post-totalitarianism. As a result, the two phases of transition to democracy – liberalization and democratization – took place virtually simultaneously. The end of regime, which came about above all due to its own structural failure (implosion, internal collapse, breakdown) and the loss of international protection, and without a strong push from outside, was accomplished through a mixture of pacts and reforms. The result of the subsequent transformation on the basis of agreement between moderates and reformers fits the category of democracy with guarantees.

The "message" of academic transitology and consolidation to the radically-minded part of the public is that from a historical perspective the most stable and most successful from the point of view of subsequent democratic development transitions are carried out by pact or reform, definitely not by force or revolution. With nearly twenty years of hindsight we may regard various circumstances of the transition and bargaining concessions made as inadequate for the time, too compromising. Some concessions failed to take advantage of the obvious fact that the regime's will to protect itself had been seriously weakened. But then few knew whether the officials of the old regime would behave rationally, or use force as they did in China. Compromise itself, it seems, would seem to have been the necessary condition for a successful transformation.

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64 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman and London 1991, pp. 114–121.

65 Linz/Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, pp. 65–83.

66 *Ibid.* pp. 42–51.