



27.06.1967

Beginning of the Prague Spring and renewal process (1960-1968)

In May 1956, leaders of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia announced that the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had concluded, but there were no real changes. After workers' riots in June in Poland and the subsequent revolution in Hungary in the autumn, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia conducted screenings of party and state members, and undertook to supervise the cultural and ideological area. After Zápotocký died in 1957, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Antonín Novotný, was elected president of the republic, i.e. the supreme party and state offices were incorporated into one office – one “state-party” rule was formally confirmed.



Developments towards the centralisation and concentration of totalitarian power was also confirmed by the passing of the new socialist Constitution. It was passed by the National Assembly on 11 July 1960 together with the adoption of a new country name – the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic – and new national coat of arms. Hence the new state administrative organization was created, and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was split into 10 regions and 108 districts.



At the turn of the 1950s-60s, the economy faced serious difficulties thanks to the strict centralistic and directive system: heavy industry was over-producing, foreign trade was oriented towards CMEAS countries, and collectivised agriculture stagnated. In economic theory, the upper hand was gained by supporters of reform based on market mechanisms and good relations, who aimed to converge socialistic planning with market principles. Such proponents were led by director of the Economic Institute and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Ota Šik, who won the support of several Communist Party of Czechoslovakia functionaries including A. Novotný for this reform plan. The proposed economic reform was based on reducing the importance of socialistic planning for future developments, the expansion of companies' autonomy, market pressure, and changing the assessment of production from plan fulfilment to actually achieved economic results. Under these circumstances the communistic regime reached the stage of economic liberalization accompanied by ideological and political easing. Amnesty was granted to some political prisoners after 1960, but few were rehabilitated including Husák and other Slovak 'bourgeois nationalists'. Rehabilitations were legally supported only in 1968, but before being implemented the Soviets arrived on 21

August 1968 and ended the process.

The principal struggle between democratization and true democracy took place in culture. The young generation of artists demanded creative freedom and refused the party art controlled by the communist party – ways were sought to restore contacts with Western culture. The international Franz Kafka conference of literary theoreticians and philosophers on May 1963 was more of political nature and importance than literary.

A new wave of Czechoslovak film demanded a right to be shown, with its representatives (M. Forman, I. Passer, J. Němec, J. Menzel and others) winning many international prizes. Numerous small avant-garde plays appeared with original dramaturgy (Semafor, Divadlo Na zábradlí, Rokoko, Večerní Brno theatres) and artistically strong satirical staging by contemporary writers (M. Uhde, V. Havel, J. Topol). Original Czech songs increased in popularity (duo J. Suchý, J. Šlitr), and mainly writers, literary critics and cultural figures began to be politically engaged. New magazines (Mladý svět, My 64), literary revue (Tvář), and new free texts by talented authors (M. Kundera, I. Klíma, L. Vaculík, J. Škvorecký, B. Hrabal, A. Lustig) appeared. The key clash of writers and the communist power was at the 4th Congress of Writers' Association in June 1967. Open criticism of political conditions was voiced at the congress mainly by M. Kundera, V. Havel, P. Kohout and L. Vaculík. Such writers confirmed their role as the “nation's conscience”. They reflected what had already boiled over in society, but the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia deprived them expression in the Literární Noviny newspaper.

The totalitarian regime fell into discord, inhabitants called for plurality and independent development, churches became active, and demands to correct social system shortcomings arose.

In January 1968 demands for the resignation of Novotný, economic reform, and improved social conditions were strengthening in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia itself, but everything remained under the control of the Communist Party and its central committee. The central committee elected reform-supporter Alexander Dubček as first secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Demands for the federation that was established on 27 October 1968 arose in Slovakia, and remained the only permanent result of the ‘Prague Spring’ renewal process.



Jan Čapek, PhD



References: