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Romania's attitude towards the "Prague Spring"

At the beginning of 1968, the Czechoslovak communist leadership, headed by the party's first secretary, Alexander Dubček, initiated a programme of reforms aiming at liberalising and renewing society within a communist regime or, in other words, building 'socialism with a human face.' The evolution of events from January to August 1968 revealed the tendency of groups from the Czechoslovak society to push the liberalisation process even further, a fact that generated increased concern in Moscow related to the risk of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia being overthrown. The Soviet Union openly manifested its discontent towards events in Prague and, under the pretext of defending the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia, during the night of 20 August 1968, invaded Czechoslovakia in order to end the 'Prague Spring' as the Czechoslovakian liberalisation process was called. Ordered by Moscow, the invasion was an operation put into practice by the Warsaw Treaty troops with the USSR joined by East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia by allies from the Warsaw Treaty was a surprise for Romania's communist leadership, the more so as Ceaușescu had visited Prague only a few days before and regarded the reformist process as a necessary means of repairing some of the mistakes of the past and not as a way of questioning socialism. As a result of events in Czechoslovakia, Romania's party and state leadership convened during the morning of 21 August in several sessions during which they decided to immediately and publicly denounce the military intervention in Czechoslovakia. At the same time they demanded the immediate retreat of occupation troops and sought assurances that the Czechoslovakian people would be left to solve its internal problems by itself.



A huge meeting was organised during the same day in Bucharest, during which Nicolae Ceaușescu called the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troops of the five socialist countries 'a great mistake and a serious danger for peace in Europe, for the fate of socialism in the world.' He stated that 'no reason can be accepted' for socialist countries to violate the freedom and independence of another country. At the same time, he insisted that Romania would oppose any external aggression and to this end re-established armed patriotic guards.

As a defender of each people's right to build its socialist path, Ceaușescu was afraid that Romania could become the next target of the USSR, especially in the context in which the Bucharest leadership had irritated Moscow several times by rejecting initiatives within COMECON, by its being open to the West

and by taking foreign policy decisions different from those of the communist bloc (including the recognition of West Germany and maintaining diplomatic relations with Israel during the Six-Day War). Ceaușescu's concern was not unjustified, as intelligence services reported troop movements on the territories of the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria, close to the border with Romania.

To consolidate the public positions taken by the Bucharest leadership, on 22 August the Great National Assembly was convened, which was the supreme forum of state leadership; the Assembly adopted a Declaration including the basic principles of Romania's foreign policy. Reiterating the right of each people to decide its fate, but also Romania's resolve to oppose by armed means any foreign aggression, the Declaration also included some remarks meant to alleviate tensions in Romania's relations with other countries from the communist bloc, especially the USSR. Thus, it declared that Romania 'was fully loyal to its political and military alliances and fulfilled its duties as a Warsaw Treaty member state, attaching a great importance to collaboration within COMECON, wishing to develop friendship relations with the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, fighting for strengthening European peace and security.'

In parallel with the attempt at preventing an invasion of Romania, the Bucharest communist leadership also acted on the international level to try to determine what external assistance it might receive in the event of a foreign intervention. With the exception of communist China, which openly expressed its support for Romania and added that the 'Chinese people stands beside the Romanian people,' the Bucharest communist leadership did not receive any other encouraging signals. The meeting between Ceaușescu and the Yugoslav leader Tito, in Vrsac, did not result in obtaining any promise of support from Yugoslavia. However, as a result of the good diplomatic relations between Romania and the United States, the State Department and President Lyndon B. Johnson sent clear public messages to the Soviet Union urging moderation in the latter's actions in Eastern Europe and advising it 'not to unleash the dogs of war,' but to choose talks instead of the battlefield for solving problems and warned that Americans knew how to fight and die defending freedom.

The position expressed by Romania on 21 August 1968 in condemning Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia was a great act of courage, as Romania did not have any guarantee that it would be spared an invasion on its turn. This attitude brought additional legitimacy to the regime led by Nicolae Ceaușescu, both at home and abroad. The political capital accumulated by Ceaușescu was eroded though during following decades as the Stalinist features of the regime became increasingly visible.

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