The reception of perestroika among Czech dissidents

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In this paper I will deal with the reactions of Czech dissidents to the reforms, widely known as perestroika\(^1\), that were launched in the Soviet Union by Michail Gorbachev in the late 1980-ies. In the beginning these reforms were limited to economics, but as they became more radical and started to have far-reaching political implications, they gave rise to a debate among Czech dissidents on such questions as: how does perestroika relate to the Prague Spring, is a democratic reform of Soviet-type socialism really possible, and what are the consequences of the new course in the Soviet Union for Czechoslovakia.

In this debate, two opposed positions can be distinguished, and I will try to show that these are informed by different concepts of politics and different strategies of legitimation. I will do so in two steps. First I will discuss the so-called reform communist dissidents, who formed an influential group in the Czech opposition and were very enthusiastic about the reforms in the Soviet Union. Then I will pay attention to several dissidents who did not belong to the reform communist fraction and were much more reserved towards perestroika.

**The Reform Communists**

The reform communist dissidents consisted mostly of former high ranking members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, who had played leading roles in the Prague Spring, but were expelled from the party after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.\(^2\) They were a loosely organized group that was committed to defending the legacy of the Prague Spring. In their minds, the secret of the Prague Spring had been a successful mix of economic reforms, which had revived the economy by introducing elements of the market, and democratic reforms, which had generated popular support for the communist party. They regarded the suppression of the Prague Spring as a tragic mistake that had ended a short-lived revival of socialism.

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\(^1\) I use the term perestroika here in a very general manner. It covers the whole complex of economic and political reforms that was enacted by Gorbachev since his appointment in 1985.

\(^2\) To this group belong people like Jirí Hájek, Luboš Kohout, Vladimír Kadlec and Zdenek Jicínský, but also several exiles such as Zdenek Hejzlar, Zdenek Mlynár and Jirí Pelikan, who edited the magazine *Listy*, which was an important forum for reform communists both in exile and those remaining in Czechoslovakia.
From the moment Gorbachev was appointed Secretary-General, the reform communists had high expectations of him. Initially, this hope had little to do with Gorbachev’s actual policies, which were relatively moderate in the beginning, but more with the fact that Gorbachev openly criticized the reign of Brezhnev as a period of stagnation. Later on, when Gorbachev announced radical political reforms, the reform communists grew increasingly confident that in the Soviet Union a reform process was under way that resembled the basic principles of the Prague Spring.

By linking ‘perestroika’ to the Prague Spring, the reform communist dissidents acquired a very effective rhetorical weapon against the Czechoslovak regime, which was extremely vulnerable to any positive reinterpretation of the Prague Spring. The leadership of the communist party consisted almost entirely of people who had been actively involved in the purges and the repressive measures that had followed the invasion. Since then, their main claim to legitimacy was that the Prague Spring had been a counterrevolutionary, right-wing conspiracy, with the return of capitalism and parliamentary democracy as its goals. Although this claim was believed by virtually no one, it was impossible for the leadership to compromise on it. Any reevaluation of the Prague Spring, and of the following repression, would inevitably have made its position untenable.

This weak spot was exploited mercilessly by the reform communist dissidents. They urged Gorbachev in open letters and petitions to admit that the invasion of August 1968 had been a mistake. To their great disappointment however, Gorbachev did not say a word on the Prague Spring when he came to visit Czechoslovakia in April 1987. Nevertheless, they continued pointing out the programmatic similarities between perestroika and the reforms they had enacted themselves in 1968. This identification of the Prague Spring with perestroika became complete when Alexander Dubcek, by many still seen as the tragic hero of the Prague Spring, broke his silence of almost 20 years and declared his support for the reforms in the Soviet Union.
Legitimation through national tradition

Now what does the reception of perestroika tell about the ways in which the reform communists tried to claim legitimacy? I think one can distinguish two separate strategies.

Firstly, there is a strong stress on national history. Although the reform communists were very supportive of the reforms in the Soviet Union, they doubted whether a program of democratization could succeed in a country which had so little experience with democracy. They thought the chances of revitalizing the bureaucratic, rigid type of socialism that had become typical for the Soviet bloc, were much better in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia, they claimed, was unique in Eastern Europe for its combination of long democratic and socialist traditions. Before the Second World War, it had been a parliamentary democracy with a strong, independent left-wing movement.

The reform communist dissidents therefore thought that the historical conditions in Czechoslovakia were very favorable for the development of a democratic type of socialism. However, this special Czechoslovak way to socialism, free of external influences, was cut short twice: in 1948, when the communist coup led to the adoption of the Soviet model of socialism, and in 1968, when the invasion ended a short-lived effort to revive this national, democratic way to socialism.

This interpretation of history allowed the reform communists to attribute the excesses and the stagnation that had occurred under socialism to the intervention of outside forces. In other words, all these aberrations supposedly were not inherent to socialism itself, but only to the perverted Soviet version, which had suppressed the more humane and dynamic Czechoslovak variant. So one could say the reform communists tried to legitimate the rehabilitation of the Prague Spring by presenting it as a return to national traditions, which had been betrayed by the current leadership.

Enlightened paternalism

A second strategy of legitimation was based upon an implicit discourse of realism, which the reform communist dissidents employed in order to give their plans an air of rationality and of inevitability. This argument of ‘realism’ was directed in the first place against the Czechoslovak leadership, which was blamed for the stagnation of the economy and the demoralization of Czechoslovak

society. The reform communists accused the leadership of immaturity, since it had willfully ignored and neglected the problems that the Prague Spring had been trying to address. This denial of reality had made things only worse.

In this situation, the reform communists argued, the only realistic way out was to follow the lead of Gorbachev and enact radical reforms and democratization. These concepts however remained very vague and were often conflated. For instance, it remained unclear whether the reform communists wanted any significant changes in the political system. Most of them seemed to have a rather instrumental idea of democracy. They wanted to restrict democratization to the economic sphere, meaning that workers should get more influence and should be allowed to experiment with self-management. In this way, the reform communists hoped to generate the popular consent that was needed for the economic reforms to succeed. So ‘democratization’ was sometimes not much more than a “means to attain economic goals”.

The rhetoric of realism was invoked not only to rationalize the need for reforms, but also to ward off demands which were thought too radical. For instance, when other dissidents called for the abolishment of the constitutionally guaranteed leading role of the communist party, the reform communists rejected this not on principle, but by arguing that this was an unrealistic demand, given the current balance of power. It was even said to be a dangerous demand, because it could give conservative forces a pretext to crack down on the dissidents, just as had happened in August 1968. Instead of voicing utopian desires, the reform communists thought it better to look for ‘constructive forces’ in the communist leadership and find ways of cooperation.

Underlying such opinions is a mindset that might be called ‘enlightened paternalism’. ‘Enlightened’ because the necessity of generating consent is recognized, ‘paternalistic’ because at the end of the day, despite all the talk of democratization, most reform communist dissidents felt that the communist party, once it had been thoroughly renewed, should retain a leading role in society. They did feel that, instead of taking its privileged position for granted, the party should ‘earn’ its leading role by listening better to the people. One can therefore say that for the reform communists, democratization did not involve a

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13 During the Prague Spring this confusion had also been typical for the reform communists. George Schöpflin, Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1992 (Oxford and Cambridge MA 1993) 129-130.
change of system, but merely a change of behavior. The desirability of socialism itself was never seriously questioned, but assumed to be self-evident.

**Skepticism**

I now come to speak of the dissidents who did not belong to the reform communist group. Their reactions to perestroika were much more subdued. Still, most of them appreciated the change in political style that had been brought about by Gorbachev. They found it refreshing that he did not speak in ideological phrases and admired his striving for more openness in public affairs. They also welcomed the prospect that Gorbachev might allow the states of Eastern Europe more autonomy.

But there were also serious doubts. Some didn’t trust the motives of Gorbachev and suspected that he wasn’t interested in democratizing socialism, but was using reform as a way to strengthen the Soviet empire. Others felt that the flaws of socialism were irreparable and that any attempt to reform it was doomed to fail.

In addition to this skepticism, there was also anger at the reform communists for trying to use perestroika for their own rehabilitation. This critique was based upon a radically different interpretation of Czechoslovak history, especially of the Prague Spring. In stressing the influence of external forces on the postwar history of Czechoslovakia, the reform communists were said to brush aside all too lightly their own role in the Stalinist purges of the fifties. They were also reproached for keeping silent the fateful part some of them had played in the repression of the Prague Spring, prior to their own expulsion from the party.

These accusations were supplemented by sharp criticism of the politics of the reform communist dissidents. Their basic mistake, it was said, was their reliance on change from above. Since the reform communists were deluded by illusions of recapturing their lost power, they were unable to see that socialism had wound up in a blind alley of history and was hopelessly incapable of reforming itself.

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Therefore, the right approach in this situation was to work for change from below, through initiating independent, civil activities, such as the Charter 77.\textsuperscript{25}

Closely connected to this argument was a discourse of individual responsibility, which stressed that people should take their lives into their own hands. According to this view, the inability of the reform communists to face their own history was just one symptom of a much broader abdication of responsibility, which had been caused by the invasion of August 1968. This violent ending of a popular regime had demoralized Czechoslovak society, whose people had become overwhelmed by a feeling of powerlessness.\textsuperscript{26}

Probably the best known exponent of this line of reasoning is Václav Havel. Havel regarded the enormous attention for Gorbachev somewhat suspiciously. In his articles he displays a conspicuous, somewhat provocative lack of interest in perestroika.\textsuperscript{27} He had little understanding for the warm welcome Gorbachev received from the public during his visit to Czechoslovakia. Havel thought this was yet another example of the helplessness and apathy that had become so typical for Czechoslovak society.\textsuperscript{28} He argued that instead of putting all one’s hopes in politicians like Gorbachev, people should try to change their daily lives, for instance by refusing to conform to ideological rituals any longer. In this way, the gap between official ideology and everyday life would grow larger and larger, and eventually real change would become inevitable.\textsuperscript{29} For this strategy, Havel stated, programs like perestroika were irrelevant.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Civil society}

When one tries to analyze the thinking of Havel, and of those dissidents who shared his basic positions, in terms of legitimacy, it becomes clear that they did not have a spelled-out vision of an alternative order. Unlike the reform communist dissidents, they justified their dissent with appeals to moral values, and not with political blueprints.

\textsuperscript{25} Uhl, “Srpnové trauma”, 11-12. The idea of building parallel structures was widespread among Czech dissidents. The first to formulate it was the catholic intellectual Václav Benda. Václav Benda, “Paralelní polis”, \textit{Informace o Chartě 77} 1 (1978) nr. 9, 4p.
\textsuperscript{26} Milan Šimecka, “O verejném mínění”, \textit{Listy} 15 (1985) nr. 1, 7-8.
In addition, one could say these dissidents had a distrust of power so fundamental, that it called into question any form of authority. This can be illustrated with some remarks Havel made about the events following the invasion of August 1968. Immediately after the invasion, the Czechoslovak political leaders were kidnapped and brought to the Soviet Union, where they had to stay for several days. Meanwhile, in Czechoslovakia, massive, spontaneous protests against the foreign armies had broken out, which ended only after the political leadership had returned. Since then, this short period of peaceful resistance is remembered widely as a glorious moment of national unity. This event prompted Havel to say that the abduction of the Czechoslovak leadership had actually been a blessing. For he believed the nation-wide protests to have been an authentic, spontaneous expression of civil society, which could only have occurred in the absence of the restraining influence of the government.  

This vision of a nation that experiences its finest hour because its government is temporarily removed, is exemplary of the strong anti-authoritarian trait in the thinking of dissidents like Havel. The closest they came to formulating an alternative order, was their plea for some form of grass-roots democracy, which they thought the best possible safeguard against utopian projects like socialism. So these dissidents did not share a positive vision of an alternative society for which they tried to claim legitimacy, but instead they favored constitutional guarantees that would curb the power of the state.

**Conclusion**

I am coming to my conclusion. Czech dissidents reacted to perestroika in conflicting ways. For the reform communist dissidents, perestroika provided an opportunity to further undermine the Czechoslovak leadership. It also strengthened them in their belief that a democratic renewal of socialism was possible. Their way of backing up this claim to legitimacy was to couch their project in terms of realism and to present it as being highly compatible with national traditions. Although they implicitly appealed to popular legitimation, they hesitated to submit socialism to a democratic test.

The dissidents who did not belong to the reform communist fraction, regarded perestroika as an unwelcome distraction from what they thought was the real task: setting up independent, small-scale activities that would lead to the revival of civil society. They stressed that people should initiate change themselves, instead of waiting for reform from above.

Both positions were determined to a large extent by different interpretations of the Prague Spring. For the reform communists, the reforms of the Prague Spring

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were still relevant, and they hoped perestroika would revive them. The other dissidents however remembered 1968 as a bitter disillusion, and were not interested in similar experiments. So, in conclusion, one could say that the reception of perestroika among Czech dissidents was no more than an episode in a long-running debate on the legacy of the Prague Spring.