

The Action Program of the Czechoslovak Communist Party

April 1968

PART I – POLITICS

"We want to embark on building
a new model of socialist society
which is profoundly democratic
and conforms to Czechoslovak
conditions."

An examination of the Action Program might well start with the first chapter heading: "The Road of Czechoslovakia Toward Socialism," For this title conveys the spirit of selfconfidence and pride with which the leadership views its own attempts to create a novel type of democratic Communism. The phrase is not used for the first time. It was introduced into the current political vocabulary a month after Novotny's resignation by Josef Smrkovsky, recently elected to the CPCS Presidium and one of the most progressive figures of the Dubcek regime.

At that time, when all reformers were searching for ways to articulate their undertaking, he spoke of a "Czechoslovak road to socialism" in order to stress that a unique experiment in democratization would have an impact not only at home but beyond the nation's borders as well. It would supply those personal liberties which the citizen had long been deprived of and would influence, by force of example, the Communist movement throughout the world. In this way, Smrkovsky was also recalling the national Communist period in Czechoslovak Party history, Gottwald's pre-1948 idea of Czechoslovakia as the bridge between East and West--the model of political collaboration between "bourgeois" and "proletarian" parties.

The Action Program claims for itself the purpose of setting forth a completely revised political system, without which none of the outstanding economic or social problems can be satisfactorily resolved. It moreover claims doctrinal continuity, not so much with the 13th Party Congress of 1966, but rather with the more distant post-war Republic which the Party believes to be its past and future democratic tradition. As a representation of the past, this is doubtless idealized, but this historical experience has some practical importance in defining

the way the Party envisages the functioning of such institutions as the National Front, the government and parliament, and the legal guarantees for civil liberties.

The picture of a revised political system which the Action Program paints is indeed ambitious. And though clearly the work of many hands committed in varying degrees to democratization, in hardly any respect does it compromise the reforms which the last three months of discussion have led one to believe would be incorporated into the program. Nevertheless, the Action Program should not be treated as definitive (as it is not intended to be), because a highly critical press has already subjected, and will continue to subject it to intense scrutiny. One should view it as a basis for discussion, or, as intellectuals have said, as a minimal program.

The Citizen and the State

Because the shape of the new political system is treated at such length and in such great detail, perhaps the best way to illuminate the various interrelationships is to start from the aspect of personal and civil rights. This approach will illustrate the checks and balances which the Action Program envisages to sustain these rights and will permit some judgments about the inherent difficulties which the program may encounter in the course of realization.

By far the most far-reaching portions deal with the legislative guarantees which the Central Committee has recommended for adoption by the National Assembly. That is, the libertarian principles of the constitution will receive legal definition enforceable through the judiciary.

The law will safeguard the citizen's freedom of expression and the right to hold minority views. He will be entitled to express his views, although he remain in a minority, and the state will be duty bound to provide complete information, except as stipulated by law. On the basis of neither religion, political outlook nor nationality will the citizen's civil or property rights be restricted in any administrative way. His right of personal movement in seeking alternative employment or residence abroad will also be guaranteed, although certain categories of highlytrained labor will be restricted in movement abroad to prevent a "brain drain."

The state and public security apparatus will be legally prevented from interfering in the citizen's personal beliefs or privacy. State and public security will be divided institutionally and subjected to control by the parliament, with state security strictly responsible for foreign espionage and public security responsible for public order. The citizen will be subjected only to the courts which will handle investigations independently of the office of the state

prosecutor or the police. The Action Program adopts as principle that there should not be too much concentration of power over the individual in any link of the state or Party apparatus.

The freedom to disseminate information, in creative or scientific form, will be ensured by a new Press Law, which will eliminate preliminary censorship and will precisely define state and military secrets.

The freedom of association will also receive legal guarantee, and the organization of interest groups of any sort will be placed on a voluntary basis. On the basis of occupation, age, qualification, sex, or nationality, individuals will have the right to associate into groups to lobby for the acceptance of their specific goals. In the factory, the trade unions will protect the workers' interests, and the laborer will also receive a voice in management through the establishment of an enterprise council, including representatives of the trade unions and management. The farmer will be represented by an all-state agricultural organization. The changing interests of the younger generation will be represented by numerous organizations which the Action Program only recommends be eventually unified into some kind of federated structure. The national identity and culture of the Hungarian, Polish, Ukrainian, and German minorities will be protected by their own organizations and by the law.

In all Slovak provincial affairs, the Slovak National Council will be the supreme governmental and legislative body. The Action Program provides that a federal system will be fully operative by the 14th Party Congress, but the Slovak side of the federation will be organized as soon as possible. This means that the plan, budget and economic means will be placed at the disposal of the council within a short time. A Board of Commissioners will be reestablished, to carry out the executive functions of the council, to which authority over local national committees will also be transferred. The exercise of police power in Slovakia will be in the hands of Slovak organizations, exercising "full authority," the Action Program states.

If the civil or political rights of an individual were violated in the past, he will be entitled to full rehabilitation. The Action Program contains no definition of the acts of "revolutionary justice" which the state does not undertake to rectify; this will probably continue to elude precise formulation when parliament comes to deal with it and may lead to discriminatory application of the rehabilitation process. However, the program does provide for indemnification if the bureaucracy violates personal or property rights in the future. This might suggest the establishment of some sort of administrative court.

Minority Rights and the Party's Role

Thus, IN PRINCIPLE, the rights and duties of the individual as a citizen and the responsibilities of the state to the citizen before the law are clear. Moreover, the program provides considerable latitude for the association of individuals into interest groupings, acting informally as pressure organizations to influence state or Party decisions. (The specific legislation guaranteeing these rights will, of course, have to be judged on its own merits.)

The theoretical difficulties and unclarities in the Action Program arise when the citizen is treated as a political entity, rather than as a citizen, strictly speaking. The formal manner in which the individual can exercise his guaranteed right of free speech and minority opinion in decision-making councils comes into conflict with an imprecise definition of the Party's role. The Action Program makes it quite clear that political authority will be de-centralized at every state level and that the Party will withdraw from positions of direct administrative control over the economy and society, Groups will be independently free form their own goals and elect their own leaders. The Party will retain the commanding political heights.

However, the Party member is duty bound in the organization in which he works, (e.g., the trade unions), to act as a guiding voice of the Party, He is both a representative of the Party, whose allegiance rests with the Party, and a representative of the interests of his more immediate group, owing (with the Party's consent) allegiance to the group. Conflicting loyalties, and the resulting breakdown of Party discipline, was one of the important causes of Novotny's fall. And though it may be easier to satisfy important special interests with more benevolent policies, the inherent problem of dual allegiances remains potentially a devious factor, especially in the prevailing atmosphere of selfconfidence .

This problem is perhaps made more difficult by the CPCS's view of internal Party democracy. In theory, the Party member is guaranteed his viewpoint, even should he remain in a minority. wever, he is not permitted to organize like-minded individuals into a minority FACTION; he may keep his view, but, in action, he must submit to the majority will, In practice, of course, factions will form, as they already have, but if factionalism is not doctrinally acknowledged, the danger remains that some member may be accused of deviant behavior. Without some mechanism for internal divisions, Party democracy will continue to depend, to a significant degree, on the benevolence of the leadership.

Similarly, the political behavior of the non-Communist citizen comes into conflict with the Party's leading role. The other parties of the National Front have, to a large extent, been freed of the restrictions which made them puppets of the CPCS, The numerus clausus on membership has been lifted and the non-Communist parties are expected to play a more active role in cooperation with the CPCS, within the framework of the National Front, but the Action

Program states that conflicts among the parties of the National Front should be settled in an agreeable manner. No more than this is said, Agreement is naturally always possible as long as the CPCS controls the commanding heights, but the point of democratization is the creation of a flexible political mechanism. The threat or use of force is, in principle, excluded, The question is what will restrain the ambitions of non-Communists.

This problem will remain even if, for example, all parties agree on the economic principles of Communism, Let us say that no party advocates the re-privatization of property, but each has different views on social security questions. If the ideas of a non-Communist party are more attractive to the population--as reflected in the ballot or in public opinion surveys--what will preserve the Party as CHIEF DEFENDER of the working man's interests? In the last analysis, force cannot ensure legitimacy.

For Communist and non-Communist alike, these questions of the nature of the political mechanism revolve around the issue of the minority rights of political groups and their formal participation in decision-making. It is interesting that the Action Program is strongest in those areas (civil rights and interest groups) to which theoretical study has been devoted over the last several years. It is weakest in that area in which, for political reasons, study was forbidden in the Novotny years--the role of the Party. It is hard to estimate the magnitude of the practical difficulties which an imprecise definition of the Party's role will present in the near future. The dynamics of the democratization process have emerged from within the CPCS, On all sides, there has been great restraint and responsible behavior in the last several months. Moreover, the Action Program is an enormous contribution in outlining institutionalized divisions of power and personal guarantees within a Communist system. Whether the pragmatism of Czechs and Slovaks can provide the oil to make the mechanism work remains to be seen. But, in any case, the Action Program is not the last word.

PART II - ECONOMICS

"The more profound cause for the
perseverance of the obsolete forms
of managing the economy lay with
the deformities of the political
system,"

That a decentralized system of economic management and market relations is incompatible with a hierarchical and bureaucratic political system has been one of the abiding beliefs of the Czechoslovak revisionist intellectuals. It has been a principle which has long united the efforts of technocrats and artists in the pursuit of a democratized political model, and it was one of the chief rallying cries of the Novotny opposition. The prior claim of political reform, stated as long ago as the 13th Party Congress in 1966 by Ota Sik, is one of the most important theoretical contributions of the Action Program.

The obvious necessity to replace outmoded political forms with ones better suited to economic operations has another side to it. Since January 5, politics has replaced economics on the reform agenda. This reversal of priorities was obvious and unavoidable during the period just after Novotny's resignation, when the new leadership was struggling to consolidate its authority. It is less clear why economics continues to take a back seat in the Action Program, where the longer-range objectives of the regime are presumably set forth. This is to say that some of the economic POLICY issues to which Novotny could supply no answers (e.g., price and labor policy) remain unresolved in the new program.

Economic Policy and Economic Mechanism

These continuing problems facing the new leadership have already been anticipated to a large extent. The full text of the Action Program confirms that the decision-makers have decided not to permit economic reform to affect the living standards of the population. Before discussing the policy issues, however, it is necessary to describe briefly the changes in the enterprise sector.

The Action Program promises that the "network of protectionism" which shielded the enterprise from the leverage of the market will be removed. The subsidies, redistributed through the branch managements, flowing from profitable to unprofitable enterprises will be reduced and eventually abolished, as will the support provided from central coffers. In the future, the enterprise will be exposed to the competition of the national and international markets.

The wholesale price system will be brought into close proximity to world market prices, and in order further to enhance the ties between domestic industry and foreign enterprises, the Czechoslovak enterprise will choose the foreign trade organization which can provide the best opportunities. Though it appears that the foreign trade monopolies will, for the time being, be maintained in some form (Foreign Trade Minister Vales recently spoke to this effect), the

program provides that the enterprise will eventually have the right to conduct independent commercial transactions on foreign markets.

The branch managements, which exercise administrative control over industry in the various manufacturing and service sectors, will be abolished in their present form. The enterprise will become relatively independent of the state apparatus, and any enterprise groupings (which, in the future, will be formed on a voluntary basis) will no longer possess the status of state administrative bodies. They will possess no authority either to decree production programs to the enterprises or to redistribute profits.

Though, at points, touching economic policy, such innovations as these are more strictly attributes of the economic mechanism, and as such, represent important improvements, But the regime has committed itself to a continuing rise in real wages (2.5 to 3.0 per cent), to which the goal of economic reform will be conditioned.

For example, the avowed objective of opening up the domestic market to foreign competition "must be carried out," the Action Program states, "to an extent which does not accumulate too many social problems and does not jeopardize the rise in the living standards." Thus, it is not foreseen that the inflow of foreign goods will produce a situation in which a significant volume of domestic labor is thrown out of work. In similar fashion, the projected second stage of price reform will not create an inflationary situation on the retail market. The principle, valid in Novotny's day, that retail price increases will be matched by price reductions, persists. This suggests that subsidies in some form will probably have to be maintained longer than the economists believe desirable.

As with Novotny, the reluctance even to mention the possibility of factory closures or labor transfers in the Action Program reveals a desire not to offend important domestic political interests. But if forced restructuring of industry is being advocated by any economists, it is in private. The economists themselves have been less than frank because no suggestions of this sort have appeared in print in the past several months. The appointment of Strougal as chairman of the Economic Council might indicate that, behind the scenes, Sik was urging the adoption of a more radical reform policy. Kolder and Cernik, the Presidium members most directly responsible for the economy, are known to oppose a decline in living standards as the price of reform. Sik certainly has influential critics in the Party, and passing him by for Strougal seems meant to maintain the internal political balance in the leadership between progressives and moderates.

Presumably, the restructuring of the economy is expected to take place through the beneficial effects of the market mechanism in uncovering domestic reserves, or through the

help of a foreign loan to tide the economy over during a difficult period. Whether such a policy is realistic or just wishful thinking should become apparent by the end of 1968.

PART III - FOREIGN AFFAIRS

"On our country's soil, we want to set into motion new, penetrating forces which will make possible a much more effective confrontation of the social systems and concepts of the world, and which will permit us more fully to implement the advantages of socialism."

The association of Czechoslovakia with that community of interest known as the "iron triangle" depended on one thing alone the orthodox foreign policy outlook of former First Secretary Novotny. The intransigent attitudes with which Poland and East Germany believe they must confront all attempts at detente on the borders of East and West Europe have never had any basis in Czechoslovakia's foreign economic and political interests, outside of Novotny's ideological inclinations. These inclinations were, of course, real enough while Novotny remained, but they have evaporated with remarkable speed since his departure.

Opposition to West Germany, the keystone of the northern tier of Warsaw Pact nations, rested, in Czechoslovakia's case, on the FRG's unwillingness to regard the Munich Agreement as null and void *initio*. This remains the one outstanding political issue in bi-lateral Czechoslovak-West German relations. In the past, this was usually coupled with the larger questions of Berlin's status and *Alleinvertretungsrecht*, in deference to the policy of the Warsaw Pact. But important as the Munich Agreement is to both "West German and Czechoslovak opinion, it could not be an article of faith, concession on which would appear to be a compromise of political morality. The lack of West German recognition that the Munich Agreement never had the force of international law could not be credibly portrayed as a threat to the existence of the nation, to the Czechoslovak *raison d'Etat*, in Gomulka's phrase. Moreover, popular anti-West German sentiment could not be mobilized among Czechs and Slovaks to the same degree as among Poles in order to create national support for the government's foreign policy. What anti-Germanism exists in Czechoslovakia, as reaction to

Hager's speech suggests, could as easily become resentment against East Germany as against the FRG.

"A European Policy"

Though foreign policy considerations were not central to the movement which brought Novotny down, the new leadership has come to feel that democratization provides alternative policy courses in foreign, as well as domestic, affairs. The Action Program expresses the ideal that the unique experiment in democratic Communism can somehow become the show window of Eastern Europe, a model for the CP's of Western Europe, one which will establish a political alternative to the "bourgeois" parliamentary system.

Whether or not there is serious expectation that Czechoslovakia can influence the Communist Parties of Europe by the force of example, the idea might produce some practical consequences in the CSSR's relations with West European governments. In the first place, a foreign policy which places special emphasis on European politics suggests that the CPCS will not, as it has in the past, subordinate its national interests to the requirements of the international movement. Such national interests would tend to persuade the new regime to play a more active role in European detente, which means the pursuit of a more normal relationship with West Germany. Better relations with the rest of Western Europe, France in particular, would not have as their objective (sought in the past) the isolation and discrediting of the FRG. In this process, there need be no challenge to the Soviet sphere of influence, merely the exploitation of the room for political maneuver which is available to Czechoslovakia.

The new regime has attempted to reassure the Soviet Union on every possible occasion that the foundations of its foreign policy, alliance with the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, are not endangered by either internal relaxation or external flexibility. The former is firmly in the hands of the Party; there will be no movement away from the communization of the economy. It is also argued that the latter would be in the interests of the Soviet Union, by enhancing the impact of Czechoslovakia in international councils and strengthening the prestige of the Communist system. On the German issue, the CSSR has given assurances, repeated in the Action Program, that its policy remains one of recognizing two Germanies. Improved relations, it is said, with West Germany, on this bedrock, can only aid East Germany's quest for recognition.

The Action Program states:

We shall consistently proceed from the existence of two German states and from the fact that the GDR, as the first socialist state on German soil, constitutes an important peace factor in Europe, as well as from the need to support the realistic forces in the German Federal Republic, and at the same time to oppose the neo-Nazi and revanchist trends in that country.

Representatives of the leadership have also stated recently that to deny the Grand Coalition some signs of success in its Ostpolitik would play into the hands of extremist opinion in West Germany. Thus, in the Czechoslovak view, the existing differences with the FRG can eventually be settled with good will on both sides.

"A Central European Policy"

Though, on the surface, one cannot point to any tangible rapprochement between the CSSR and the FRG, and though the establishment of diplomatic relations is probably still some way off, both countries have attempted to create an atmosphere of better understanding. The past several months have witnessed a marked drop in Czechoslovak anti-West German propaganda. The exchanges of high-level visitors have been numerous, and the West German press has carried their cautious, but optimistic, reports of the possibility of improved relations.

The important question is, however, how far Czechoslovak-West German relations can develop, for the terms of reference of Czechoslovak policy (albeit less restrictive) do foresee certain limits, which the leadership is at pains to justify in terms of geography and recent history, as well as ideological preference. The Action Program also contains no hint about the longer-range goals of Czechoslovak foreign policy. It provides for more active participation in the United Nations and greater cooperation with the smaller countries of Western Europe. But even if one views optimistically the prospect of CSSR-FRG diplomatic relations, what lies beyond?

Dubcek, in his speech on the 20th anniversary of February 1948, spoke of a special emphasis on Central European relations, within the broader framework of a European policy. The Action Program omitted this reference. Was Dubcek obliquely referring to Poland and East Germany, or, as seems more likely, was he perhaps looking southward, toward cooperation with the riparian countries of the Danube?

In the past, the Czechoslovak government paid little attention to Hungarian initiatives toward the development of co-operation on this Danubian basis. Perhaps, Czechoslovakia is

becoming more sympathetic to an alternative which would be a natural area for her diplomatic and economic activity. Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia have, like Czechoslovakia, some stake in the reduction of East-West tensions, which regional cooperation could encourage. In this connection, it is worth noting that, in international Party relations, the CSSR has emerged as defender Yugoslavia's rightful participation in Communist forums.

The prospect of a more independent foreign policy, which the Czechoslovak leadership has set forth, has been worked out in only the most general terms, partly in order to give the least offense to the other Warsaw Pact countries and partly in order to preserve the available options. Because there is no domestic lobby of any importance pressing for rapid change in foreign policy, one can expect the regime to weigh the issues carefully before taking any decisions.

Yet, this having been said, Czechoslovakia's economic interests represent an important stimulus toward improving relations with Western Europe. The Action Program contains a statement to the effect that the CSSR cannot effectively participate in Comecon trade unless its industry produces high quality goods, implying that new technology and equipment must be sought outside of Comecon. Dubcek, at Dresden, apparently made a strong case for the necessity of modernizing the Czechoslovak economy, even at the price of modifying some long-term economic commitments with Comecon partners. This is an argument which the Soviet Union finds difficult to ignore and which might reconcile Moscow (though not Pankow and Warsaw) to the Czechoslovak socialist road in foreign affairs.

Original Source: *Rude Pravo*, 10 April 1968.

Our Source: Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<http://www.osaarchivum.org/files/holdings/300/8/3/text/18-2-173.shtml>

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