Milan Svec

THE PRAGUE SPRING: 20 YEARS LATER

The 20th anniversary of the 1968 Soviet military intervention that cut short the promising reforms of the "Prague Spring" will be commemorated in an environment unforeseen by political observers then or even just a few years ago. Moscow is no longer the most orthodox and belligerent guardian of the hard-line interpretation of communist doctrine. The Kremlin now portrays itself as one of the most daring innovators in the communist world. Instead of behaving as an aggressive power ready to pressure other countries into compliant behavior, the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev now advertises its broad flexibility and "new thinking" in foreign policy.

Public opinion in many countries, especially in Western Europe, seems increasingly receptive to the Soviets' sophisticated advances and ready to give Gorbachev the benefit of the doubt. Ironically, in traditionally heretic Prague, Gorbachev's fresh ideas are still fiercely resisted, at least by the most orthodox faction of the party leadership.

Eastern Europe continues to be one of the most complicated factors in Moscow's calculations. The region retains a potential for unexpected upheavals, which could take place not only in presently reformist Poland or Hungary but also in conservative Czechoslovakia or the communist quasi monarchy of Romania. In fact, there are many indications that the long-standing antireformist consensus in the Czechoslovak leadership is crumbling fast.

Reversing this trend seems next to impossible. A continued multiplication of domestic problems, occurring in the midst of rapidly changing international conditions, is exposing the inability of most East European leaders to govern in the old way, as well as the refusal of their societies to be governed as before.

Milan Svec is Senior Consultant at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University. He was Deputy Chief of the Czechoslovak Embassy in Washington, 1982–1985, and was granted asylum in the United States in 1985.

Lenin used to describe such conditions as "a revolutionary situation."

Faced with these pressures for change, many in Eastern Europe's ruling circles are assuming a wait-and-see attitude, finding it safer to keep their options open for a future round of political infighting (or possible upheavals) than to chain themselves to the unpopular measures that would be necessary to cure present crises. Paralysis and uncertainty at the top thus prevail at a time when bold decisions and a firm commitment to uphold them are urgently needed.

Gorbachev is obviously aware of the challenges he faces in Czechoslovakia and in the whole region. That is why he is paying more attention to Eastern Europe than any of his predecessors except Stalin. He has turned out to be a rather innovative and imaginative manager of intra-bloc affairs, which has helped him stay on top of events thus far. But Gorbachev has not been able to devise a shockproof, long-term policy for the region. The present Soviet maneuvering, no matter how adroit, is taking place in a situation of deepening crisis, not in a post-crisis upswing. Today's relative calm may therefore be only misleading and temporary.

II

The Prague Spring was a necessary outcome of Soviet policy in Eastern Europe under Gorbachev's predecessors. If it had not appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1968 it would have erupted somewhere else at another time. The movement also signaled the end of a certain phase in the development of communism, which had either to try to reform itself, or—if reform was not attempted—to enter a period of qualitatively new and deeper crises. (And, of course, such a situation would later create the need for even more radical reforms, or bring about the withering away of the whole system.)

Following the Second World War, Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe was decreed to be the second phase in the victorious struggle of the world proletariat, and those who opposed it were declared class enemies. Czechoslovakia played a special role in this process. In free elections to the Constitutional National Assembly on May 26, 1946, the Communist Party won 38 percent of the votes and became the strongest political party in the republic. When the communists seized power in February 1948 in a bloodless coup, Soviet ideologists

described this as additional proof of the correctness of the Marxist-Leninist theory of historical determinism.

At the time, the U.S.S.R. was the only country with substantial experience in building an entirely new, communist social system. Since the "victory of the proletariat" in Eastern Europe was supposed to usher in an era in which all communist countries would share "common interests," the ideological conclusion was clear: Eastern Europe must follow Moscow's example and leadership.

This satisfied Stalin's paranoia and his imperial ambitions but later fatally harmed intra-bloc cooperation. If the management of affairs among communist countries was supposed to be so conflict-free, Moscow could afford to rely at home and in Eastern Europe on the most obedient (albeit usually the least capable) cadres to conduct this policy. Indeed, for decades the people in charge of intra-bloc relations in Moscow and Eastern Europe were usually the least competent within the party and foreign policy establishments. For years the Soviet and East European communists totally neglected developing an effective structure and mechanism for managing intra-bloc cooperation. When such structures were later built, their design was already outdated and ineffective compared to the rapidly developing system of West European integration.

Simple-minded East European conservatives relied much more on Moscow's influence in helping them remain in power than on their domestic performance. They paid more attention to following Soviet examples than to solving domestic problems. Gorbachev recently recalled the situation in these terms: "As regards our friends in the socialist countries, they usually kept quiet, even when they noticed something of concern. Frankness was frowned upon, and could be 'misunderstood,' so to speak."[1] A false sense of calm in Eastern Europe repeatedly resulted in Moscow's lack of attention—and, at times, neglect toward the region—when there were no "surprising" upheavals there.

Probably the most disastrous result of such an immature Soviet policy was the Kremlin's decision to invade Czechoslovakia. It should be clear by now to any shrewd politician in Moscow that, by totally relying on the subjective information of their loyal vassals, Soviet troops intervened in Czechoslo-

[1] Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World,* New York: Bessie/Harper & Row, 1987, pp. 162–163.

vakia to rescue the positions of a relatively narrow group of frightened antireformers, rather than to save communism. Moscow's overreaction was also caused by the fact that the dogmatists in the U.S.S.R., East Germany and Poland were at that time excessively sensitive to reformist influences from abroad, because of their reluctance to address their own growing problems in an innovative way.

The 1968 Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia was swift and effective, but the political operation was, at least initially, a disaster. Moscow explained its action at home and to the world in the TASS statement of August 21, 1968, which claimed that "party and state leaders of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic have requested the Soviet Union and other allied states to give the fraternal Czechoslovak people immediate assistance, including assistance with armed forces." To this day, however, that appeal has remained unpublished in Czechoslovakia, and the individuals who allegedly requested the invasion have never found the courage to say so publicly.

After failing for two days to install a new party and state leadership, the Soviets had to free the imprisoned Prague Spring leader, Alexander Dubček, together with some of his Politburo colleagues, and negotiate with them in Moscow. Later, under the pressure of international opinion and developments in Czechoslovakia, the Kremlin allowed the Czechoslovak leaders to return to their official positions in Prague, where they remained in power for seven months, continuing to adhere to their "Action Program" of April 1968. The Czechoslovak press was, meanwhile, operating relatively freely.

III

Initially, the Kremlin was at a loss to find an acceptable explanation for its invasion. Since the Czechoslovak Communist Party and government originally declared the invasion a denial of the basic norms of international law, and since these condemnations remained on the record, the Soviets knew it would not have been prudent to remain silent. The lack of an acceptable explanation could have been interpreted as portending aggressive intentions against the West. The objective was thus to find a putative motive which would reassure the West that it was witnessing a conflict confined to the communist world. In order to achieve that, the reasoning had to be based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, as applicable to intra-communist relations.

After making a series of inconsistent claims, Moscow finally came out with a new theory which later became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine. On September 25, 1968, *Pravda* declared:

> There is no doubt that the peoples of the socialist countries and the Communist parties have and must have freedom to determine their country's path of development. However, any decision of theirs must damage neither socialism in their own country nor the fundamental interests of the other socialist countries nor the worldwide workers' movement which is waging a struggle for socialism. This means that every Communist party is responsible not only to its own people but also to all socialist countries and to the entire Communist movement.

An attempt was made to reconcile the obvious contradiction between this statement's declaration of "freedom" for Eastern Europe and the implied limits to that freedom, through the claim that, in accordance with communist ideology, "the norms of law . . . cannot be interpreted in a narrowly formal way, outside the general context of the class struggle."

Leonid Brezhnev formally sanctioned these principles in his speech to the Congress of Polish Communists in November 1968, where he also explained:

> It goes without saying that such an action as military aid to a fraternal country to cut short the threat to the socialist order is an extraordinary enforced step; it can be sparked off only by direct actions of the enemies of socialism inside the country and beyond its boundaries, actions creating a threat to the common interests of the camp of socialism.

Paradoxically, it was mainly among the Western public that there was any acceptance of the Brezhnev Doctrine as evidence of the strong influence of communist ideology on Soviet foreign policy. In Eastern Europe and in most of the communist parties around the world, the Brezhnev Doctrine symbolized the beginning of a period when Moscow would not abide by Marxism-Leninism in any consistent way, neither in its domestic nor foreign policy, but only use it, or twist it, in an attempt to impart seemingly noble motives to its increasingly cynical actions.

Brezhnev, of course, never believed in the ideological basis of his doctrine. What he understood and pursued was power politics. The reformist Czechoslovak leaders learned this to their astonishment from him directly, in the Kremlin after the invasion. The former secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Zdeněk Mlynář, now

living in the West, has reported that words like "sovereignty" and "national independence" did not come up in Brezhnev's lecture to them at all. There was only one overriding motive in it: "During the war," Brezhnev told the Czechoslovak leaders, "our soldiers fought their way to the Elbe, and that is where our real Western borders are today."

Brezhnev openly ridiculed the resistance of the communists of the world to the intervention. "Comrade Tito and Comrade Ceaușescu will say their piece, and so will Comrade Berlinguer. Well, and what of it? You are counting on the communist movement in Western Europe, but that won't amount to anything for fifty years."[2]

It should be obvious from such remarks that, even while Brezhnev's subordinates were feverishly working to supply the ideological backbone for his doctrine, he was making it clear to the Czechoslovak reformers that it was Soviet power politics, not ideology, that they must understand. As communists, speaking to Soviet communists, the Czechoslovak reformers might have stood a chance. They could have relied on communist doctrine and resisted Soviet pressure. But as the leaders of a small nation facing an emperor in his imperial capital, they had no chance.

Ironically, it was chiefly because of their continuing belief in communism that the Czechoslovak reformers so boldly defied Moscow at times. If they had fully realized that Brezhnev was thinking in terms of naked power, they undoubtedly would have been much more cautious. They failed to understand that a new phase in Soviet policy had begun. The Kremlin was increasingly reluctant to abide by Marxism-Leninism if such fidelity demanded significant concessions. On the other hand the Soviet Union was not ready to surrender so convenient a cover for its imperial ambitions, or to open its outdated ideology to modernization.

Yet, eventually, a heavy price was paid for Brezhnev's growing imperial duplicity: the erosion of ideological and moral values among the peoples and leaders of the communist countries. Most of the leaders Gorbachev now faces in Eastern Europe have accepted Brezhnev's rules. No matter what they say, they are power-players and opportunists more than ideological communists. They think in terms of how to outmaneu-

[2] Zdeněk Mlynář, *Nightfrost in Prague,* New York: Karz Publishers, 1980, p. 241.

ver everyone else, including Gorbachev. They have forgotten—or more likely never learned—how to govern.

It took real hard-liners and leftist forces in Eastern Europe and elsewhere to applaud the Brezhnev Doctrine. They regarded it as an expression of a justifiably tough Soviet approach to the class struggle with a relentless enemy. Moscow's eager courting of Western countries shortly thereafter, however, undermined the faith of these radical forces in Moscow's "class judgment." No matter what they were saying publicly, left-wing leaders in Eastern Europe—and especially in Prague—could not really understand Moscow's aims. They regarded the greater, détente-inspired openness in communist countries as a retreat from class principles, which offered the West new opportunities for ideological subversion. To many reformers and other people in Eastern Europe, on the other hand, Soviet behavior after the proclamation of the Brezhnev Doctrine was fresh evidence of Moscow's unvarnished hypocrisy.

As a result, Moscow started feeling the heat. This was the reason behind its renewed stress on the "class" explanation of its courting of the West. As Brezhnev declared in June 1975, "détente became possible because a new correlation of forces in the world arena has been established." *Pravda*, meanwhile, claimed that "peaceful coexistence does not mean the end of the class struggle between the two social systems." On the contrary: "The struggle between the world proletariat and the bourgeoisie will continue until the final victory of Communism on a world scale."[3] The Soviets even began openly saying that it was necessary to *impose* détente on the reluctant forces of world imperialism.

As might have been expected, Moscow was unable to have it both ways. In the end, reacting to growing Western demands to make détente a two-way street, the Kremlin instead escalated East-West tensions. In a series of tough actions, the U.S.S.R. invaded Afghanistan and resorted to a policy of intimidation in order to prevent the deployment of U.S. Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in Western Europe. From the point of view of communist ideology, such an approach reinforced the belligerent interpretation of the class struggle and contradicted the substance of détente and peaceful coexistence, which have been the mainstays of Soviet policy for at least the past twenty years.

[3] F. Ryzhenko, "Peaceful Coexistence and the Class Struggle," *Pravda*, Aug. 22, 1973.

From the point of view of realistic policy, Soviet moves during the early 1980s were counterproductive miscalculations.

IV

In order to move away from such a disastrous course, General Secretary Gorbachev has had to rethink not only the Brezhnev Doctrine but also the whole of Soviet foreign policy and its relation to communist ideology. He has had to do this in an environment similar to that preceding the 1956 uprising in Hungary, the Prague Spring and the rise of Solidarity in Poland in 1980–81. All of these events took place at times when there was a heated struggle for power in the Kremlin, when Moscow had started criticizing existing problems at home and talking about needed reforms, when Moscow was intensively involved in other areas of international relations and was neglecting Eastern Europe even more than usual, when Moscow was not projecting the image of a worthy guardian of Marxist-Leninist wisdom and when conditions in at least one East European country had become unmanageable by traditional methods.

When Gorbachev came to power, not only were all of those preconditions at hand, but new disquieting factors had taken shape as well. The most visible among them were a simultaneous, radical deterioration of political and economic conditions in most of Eastern Europe, a diminishing Soviet ability and willingness to bail out the most troubled countries, and a sharp decline in the influence of communist ideology worldwide. In order to prevent the worst, Gorbachev has had to develop new political approaches quickly and move on several fronts at once.

First of all, Gorbachev needed much more room to maneuver both in his domestic and foreign policy. There was only one way he could accomplish this: he had to expose to modernization some formerly sacrosanct canons of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and corresponding political reasoning. For example, as late as in 1984, the *Soviet Military Encyclopedic Dictionary* declared that militarism was growing in the West and explained that "the struggle with militarism is one of the most important tasks of world revolution and Soviet foreign policy."[4] This conclusion corresponds to the very basis of communist doctrine, which portrays imperialism as the highest form of capi-

[4] See Paul Quinn-Judge, "Soviet Shift in World Policy," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 1987.

talism and regards it as inherently aggressive. Gorbachev's predecessors, meanwhile, regarded stability and the absence of significant change in Eastern Europe as a precondition for the effective pursuit of the two main Soviet goals in Western Europe: weakening the U.S. commitment to NATO and preventing effective European unity. Now, faced with a strong NATO and the growing unity of Western Europe—which are both, to a great extent, consequences of the inept policies of his predecessors—Gorbachev wants to create a situation in which Western Europe will be willing to weaken its ties with the United States voluntarily while broadening its economic contacts with the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe.

In order to achieve this, however, Gorbachev has needed to redefine Soviet policy in terms that would open new opportunities for him to influence Western Europe by inventive propaganda and diplomacy. The core of his new concept is the idea that the development of modern weapons makes it virtually impossible for any country to achieve security by military means alone. Instead, security must be created first of all by political means. Another factor militating in the same direction is the growing interdependence of nations, caused by the development of the world economy, the growing threat of environmental pollution, and so on.

Such a transformation of the basic principles of Soviet and communist foreign policy thinking requires that Gorbachev address some crucial ideological questions, which he formulated in a speech delivered last November 2, at the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution: "Is it possible," he asked for example, "to count on the natural logic of an integral world, in which general human values are the main priority, being able to limit the range of destructive actions of the egocentric, narrow class-based features of the capitalist system?" He specifically referred to Japan and early postwar Italy and West Germany as examples showing that, indeed, capitalism might develop in certain conditions without militarism. He also reasoned that transformations taking place in the capitalist economy have helped to reconcile its contradictions.

Such ideological adjustments have enabled Gorbachev to develop his new concept of "our common European home" or the "all-European house," which he first presented when visiting Czechoslovakia in April 1987. In his main address in Prague he declared:

We assign an overriding significance to the European course of our foreign policy. . . . We are resolutely against the division of the continent into military blocs facing each other, against the accumulation of military arsenals in Europe, against everything that is the source of the threat of war. In the spirit of the new thinking we introduced the idea of the "all-European house" . . . [which] signifies, above all, the acknowledgment of a certain integral whole, although the states in question belong to different social systems and are members of opposing military-political blocs standing against each other. This term includes both current problems and real possibilities for their solution.

Besides creating for Moscow new opportunities in Western Europe, such an approach significantly alters the East European role in Soviet foreign policy maneuvering. Instead of constantly reminding his Warsaw Pact allies that there is a firm line between what is allowed in Eastern Europe and what would be punishable, Gorbachev has adopted a much more flexible approach. He suggests, in essence, that such a line is fluid and will depend at any given moment on the current state of East-West relations, especially in Europe.

It is in this context that Gorbachev's statement about the presence of Soviet troops in Europe, made at the Polish Party Congress in June 1986, should be read. "Our troops in other countries are not on dead anchor," he said. "But the anchors should be raised simultaneously and by all." The new Soviet flexibility regarding relations between East and West Germany points in the same direction.

This policy allows Moscow to manipulate Eastern Europe with new efficiency. First of all, instead of hoping to regain greater independence *despite* Moscow, many East Europeans regard the concept of a "common European home" as a more readily available road to better times than an anti-Soviet revolt. Also, should such a policy of flexible approach fail, many in Eastern Europe would blame the West for their continuing troubles, especially if the latter had not appeared forthcoming enough. Gorbachev is thus cleverly trying to turn East Europeans into direct tools of Soviet foreign policy who will patiently await the anticipated rewards for their cooperation.

Paradoxically, the new context of Soviet European policy will likely make the continuing presence of Soviet troops less irritable to East Europeans, because for the first time they can hope that these forces really will be withdrawn someday, and that Soviet interference in East European internal affairs will gradually decline. The perspective of the "common European

home" also offers Moscow an unparalleled opportunity to escape the haunting prospect of having Eastern Europe as a permanent burden on the Soviet economy.

Gorbachev originally tried hard to improve economic cooperation among communist countries. But, as Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze declared last summer: "A period of time that is both not great and yet not small has already passed since the incorporation of the new forms. And the results? One can speak only of the most modest of positive changes so far." The situation has not become any better since. It is in this connection that Shevardnadze spelled out a serious warning: "It is in no way necessary to proceed from the fact that relations with friends must be of a loss-producing nature."[5]

Burdened with increasingly uncompetitive products, East Europeans will be hard-pressed to improve their economies and are likely to redouble their efforts to induce Western Europe to provide them with modern technology. The rapidly deteriorating state of the East European economies, however, poses sharp practical limitations on the development of their ties with Western Europe, and they are thus not likely to proceed beyond the point that would make Moscow nervous. The new context and modernized ideological backbone of Gorbachev's foreign policy is thus designed to allow East Europeans much greater room to maneuver, but also to force them to assume greater responsibility for their own economic health.[6]

In order to make full use of this new policy without endangering Soviet interests or provoking unpleasant surprises, Gorbachev pays close attention to developments in Eastern Europe. He meets often with East European leaders, putting pressure on them to install competent people to handle relations with the Soviet Union—officials capable of managing complex agendas, who, for their part, now find that this area offers them much more opportunity for influence and rapid promotion than it did in the past. Gorbachev has also elevated foreign policy cooperation with his allies to a new level and has chosen much better qualified people to administer this aspect of Soviet foreign policy.

This differs significantly from prior practice. During my

[5] *Vestnik Ministerstva Inostrannykh Del SSSR,* Sept. 10, 1987, pp. 3–6.

[6] For more on this subject see Milan Svec, "Removing Gorbachev's Edge," *Foreign Policy,* Winter 1987–88, pp. 148–166.

tenure as deputy chief of mission at the Czechoslovak embassy in Washington (1982–85), I usually learned much more about developments in U.S.-Soviet relations from my American contacts than from the top Soviet diplomats. Also, at that time, the Soviets in Washington reacted angrily to my opinion that NATO was not likely to have to pay as high a political price as the Soviets had predicted for its deployment of U.S. Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in Western Europe, and to my suggestion that Moscow should try to prevent the deployments by offering new concessions in arms control negotiations. I got the impression that Moscow did not want to hear *any* dissenting views, either from its allies or from its Washington embassy.

Moscow was even angrier when, later, the Hungarian and East German leaderships publicly resisted Soviet pressures to sever certain contacts with the West after the shortsighted Soviet walkout from the Geneva talks in 1983 (about which the East Europeans had not been consulted). Servitude, not wise counsel, was what Moscow desired most of all during that period. And, indeed, people in Eastern Europe to whom this mode of behavior came naturally immediately recognized their opportunity. Contrary to the views prevailing in the West, it was not Moscow that asked the Czechoslovak hard-liners to criticize the Hungarian and East German resistance to Soviet pressures. Certain conservatives in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took it upon themselves to publicly remind their East European colleagues that Soviet leadership should be followed no matter what. Little did they realize that just a few years later they would be the ones defending the right of each communist party to an independent course, because of their fright at the possible impact of Soviet reforms on Czechoslovakia.

The last thing Gorbachev desires is a repetition of such an embarrassing situation. He has taken it upon himself, therefore, to tie East European leaders to his policy by consulting them frequently. This will make it much more difficult for his allies to try to abandon his bandwagon if some of his moves fail later on. The new approach to Soviet-European relations, ideological affairs and the management of intra-bloc relations has eliminated a number of pressures that might otherwise have already provoked situations that would have tested Gorbachev's core attitude toward the Brezhnev Doctrine. From this point of view, Gorbachev's foreign policy reforms have been successful in Eastern Europe, at least temporarily.

V

Compared to his successful handling of overall Soviet foreign policy and the East European role in it, Gorbachev's approach to internal developments in communist countries remains beset by contradictions. It is the weakest point in his "new thinking."

Gorbachev's present approach to Eastern Europe runs in two directions: he wants to have the area under stable communist and Soviet control; at the same time, he would like to transform it from a liability into an economic and political asset for the Soviets. He has yet to figure out how to meld these two contradictory elements into a coherent policy.

For years, orthodox and change-resistant leaders in Eastern Europe have either been the Kremlin's loyal allies, or have exercised rigid domestic controls, or both. Most would do anything for Moscow except embark on bold reforms. If left unreformed, however, East European economies could deteriorate to a critical degree and become an unbearable burden on the Soviet economy. Abler and more creative leaders in Eastern Europe would likely produce better results, but they would also undoubtedly distance themselves more from Moscow.

Gorbachev often calls for greater cooperation among communist countries. This would be easier to achieve with like-minded leaders. And yet, a mixture of more flexible leaders, conservatives and autocrats in Eastern Europe has some distinct advantages for the Soviets. Disparate East European leaders, often sharply at odds with each other, are unlikely to react in a unified way to resist Moscow's increasing demands that they improve the quality of their exports to the Soviet Union. Their disunity enables Gorbachev to manipulate them to his advantage.

The Soviet leader would like to win the East European peoples to his side and also have them pressure their governments to perform better. He is very cautious about this, however, so that he will not be held accountable in Moscow if things get out of hand.[7] By adopting a behind-the-scenes policy of tipping the balance in communist countries' domestic fights instead of imposing its will, Moscow can gain several advantages. It will not be directly blamed for the failures of any

[7] See Milan Svec, "Gorbachev's 'Both-Ways Approach' to Eastern Europe," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 27, 1987.

leader or the problems he has created, it will not have to provide resources to bail its man out of difficulties, and the losers in political infighting will not automatically turn against Moscow but will hope instead to win Soviet favor the next time. But this temporizing policy will not solve the growing problems in Eastern Europe.

This dual approach was clearly displayed during Gorbachev's visit to Czechoslovakia in April 1987. Reform-minded Czechoslovaks openly hoped that he would push for a change of the conservative political line in Prague during his visit. A prominent Czech emigré journal in Paris, *Svědectví*, meanwhile, reported how a group of formerly prominent Czechoslovak communists, expelled from the party after 1968, had addressed a letter to Gorbachev offering him their services.[8] They incorrectly expected that he was about to purge the leadership installed in Prague by Brezhnev.

But Gorbachev would have none of this. His was a balancing act. He made it clear that, unlike his predecessors, he recognizes the existence of significant differences among communist states. On April 11, 1987, he was quoted by the Czechoslovak Communist Party daily *Rudé Právo* as saying: "We are far from asking anybody to copy us. Every socialist country has its own specific features." On the other hand, he added, "we do not hide our conviction that the process of reconstruction undertaken in the Soviet Union corresponds to the essence of socialism." Because the visit created so many expectations among the Czechoslovak people as well as pressures on Prague conservatives, Gorbachev felt it necessary to balance this by a warning to the impatient reformists: "There are different kinds of opportunists who have their own interpretation of the aims of the process of restructuring, and who only wish to take advantage of it."

Although Gorbachev refused while in Czechoslovakia to comment directly on his views about the Soviet military intervention that cut short the Prague Spring (claiming after his visit that the assessment of the 1968 events is primarily a matter "for the Czechoslovak comrades themselves"), he and other Soviet observers have made pertinent comments elsewhere—which, by the way, often seem contradictory. On the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Gorbachev criticized the "arrogance of belief in one's omniscience" which is akin to

[8] *Svědectví*, Vol. XXI, no. 81, 1987, pp. 10–12.

"fear of one's ability to master new problems." Somewhat earlier, on October 31, 1987, the correspondents of the Soviet press agency *Novosti* wrote in *Rudé Právo*: "As far as the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine is concerned, it is only a legend thought up and cultivated in the West." On the other hand, after decades of Soviet duplicity, East Europeans take care not to overlook some more ominous statements made by Gorbachev. "To threaten the socialist system, to try to undermine it from the outside and wrench a country away from the socialist community," Gorbachev declared at the Polish Party Congress in June 1986, "means to encroach not only on the will of the people, but also on the entire postwar arrangement, and, in the last analysis, on peace." Gorbachev's words on November 2, 1987, were also reminiscent of the Brezhnev Doctrine, when he declared that what is decisive in cooperation among communist countries is "what ensures a combination of mutual interest and those of socialism as a whole."

The joint declaration issued during Gorbachev's visit to Yugoslavia last March said that the two countries "have no pretensions of imposing their concepts of social development on anyone" and that they prohibit "any threat and use of force and interference in the internal affairs of other states under any pretext whatsoever."[9] But even this document stopped short of repudiating the Brezhnev Doctrine, and was reportedly adopted only after the Soviets first unsuccessfully tried to include in it a clause saying that the two countries were mutually responsible for socialism.

VI

Faced with Soviet maneuvering and a continuing wait-and-see attitude on the part of the people in their countries, reformers in Eastern Europe have started a debate about how Gorbachev's *perestroika* (restructuring) relates to the Prague Spring reforms. The greater the similarity between the two, the bolder the argument that could be made for new radical reforms in Eastern Europe.

Comparing the Prague Spring with Gorbachev's reforms also became a very effective tool of pressure on the conservatives in Czechoslovakia. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* published on January 16, 1988, Czechoslovak

[9] *The Washington Post*, March 19, 1988.

Communist Party International Affairs Director Michal Štefaňak admitted as much. "It does not mean much to us," Štefaňak was quoted as saying, "that people in the West still say that restructuring and Czechoslovakia's reforms in 1968 are the same. The fact is that people in the East, within the socialist community, were beginning to say it. That was intolerable."

Yet even the hard-liner Štefaňak admitted, in the same interview, that restructuring aims at the same results that the Czechoslovak Communist Party sought to achieve in 1967–68. Former high-level Czechoslovak officials who lost their jobs after the invasion also agree with such a conclusion. They have pointed out that the two basic tasks set by the Czechoslovak reform policy in 1968—to ensure the intensive growth of the economy and to democratize the system—were now on Gorbachev's agenda in the U.S.S.R.[10] Dubček, quoted on January 10, 1988, in the Italian Communist Party newspaper *L'Unita*, even saw similarities between the Prague Spring and Soviet reforms, and he concluded that if the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had had in 1968 the leadership it has now, "the armed intervention in Czechoslovakia by the five armies would have been unthinkable."

Increasingly nervous Czechoslovak conservatives have demanded that Moscow publicly address this issue and silence burgeoning speculation within the communist countries. Last December, Czechoslovak leader Gustáv Husák—unable or unwilling to embark on radical reforms himself—arranged a surprising transition of power in the Communist Party to his chosen successor, Miloš Jakeš. By taking the initiative into his own hands at a decisive time, and by retaining for himself the positions of president of the republic and ruling Politburo member, Husák made it extremely difficult for Jakeš to abruptly dissociate himself from his predecessor and blame him for growing domestic problems—the usual practice in communist countries. The longer Jakeš postpones radical reforms, the more likely it is that it will be he who will pay the price for past mistakes.

Contrary to the prevailing view, however, Jakeš is not as inflexible an ideologue as his prominent role in the party purges after 1968 might suggest. He has always been a loyal apparatchik, following whatever party line prevailed at any given time.

[10] See *Avanti!* (Rome), Jan. 3–4, 1988.

But I always found Jakeš more willing to listen to expert advice than any other member of the ruling group. He is likely to gradually adopt the Soviet reformist path. On the question of the Prague Spring, however, Jakeš continues to resist revisionism. In January 1988 Jakeš was able to declare after a discussion with Gorbachev in Moscow that, since both sides agreed in their interpretations of 1968, "we do not need to change anything."

Yet the debate continues. The comparison of *perestroika* with the Prague Spring is a necessary precondition for developing a suitable program of reform in Eastern Europe. Such an approach, however, must address not only the similarities but also substantial differences between the two.

The editor of the Soviet journal *Ogonyok*, Vitali Korotich, has noted, for example, that whereas Gorbachev is at the head of the current reforms and controls the process, Dubček lost control: "pressure from below ran him over."[11] There seems, indeed, a rare similarity of views on Dubček among people of different political backgrounds. The philosopher and prominent publicist of the Prague Spring, Ivan Svitak, now living in the United States, wrote in 1979 that Dubček "failed to grasp what was going on either prior to or after the occupation and so became the ideal liquidator of his own work."[12] This conclusion is consonant with the recent remarks made by a reborn reformer, Czechoslovak Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal: "I am personally convinced that it was a fundamental error to put Dubček at the head in January 1968. He was a weak man for that kind of period."[13] Zdeněk Mlynář, recalling the tenor of Politburo meetings under Dubček, has written:

> Clearly, meetings of the party leadership more resembled a debating society or, in contrast, the editorial board meeting of some magazine than an important state function. . . . In a number of situations, when all the possible circumstances bearing on a decision were known . . . and it was only up to him to decide, Dubček would put the decision off still further.[14]

Gorbachev's personality is obviously much different; he is the one who exercises the predominant influence.

[11] *Neue Kronen-Zeitung* (Vienna), Jan. 15, 1988.

[12] "Prague Spring Revisited," in *Czechoslovakia: The Heritage of Ages Past*, eds. Hans Brisch and Ivan Volgyes. Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1979, p. 160.

[13] See "Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Background Report 12: Czechoslovakia," Feb. 4, 1988.

[14] Mlynář, *op. cit.* p. 123.

No less important than the personalities of the reformist leaders is the substance of their programs and the course of actual developments in their countries. The question of how the communist party in each country regards its role and that of the press in the political process is crucial in this regard.

The 1968 Action Program of the Czechoslovak communists assumed a fundamentally new position toward the party's role in society. It stated that "the Party cannot enforce its authority . . . this must be won again and again by the Party's activity. . . . Communists must over and over again strive for the voluntary support of the majority of the people for the Party line." The Action Program came out strongly against the practice of "appointing party members to functions without regard to the principle that leading representatives of institutions of the whole society are chosen by the society itself."[15]

Czechoslovak reformers also spoke about the necessity to provide for "a division of power" and a "system of mutual supervision." They also criticized the "undue concentration of duties" in the existing Ministry of the Interior and wanted to build a new legal system in which court proceedings would be independent of political factors. Finally, they allowed the press to operate freely.

However, neither the government nor the public found it easy to define their new mutual relationship. As Mlynář has since pointed out, "a mechanism had been introduced capable of forcing change on the system. And it was not a party or state mechanism consisting of a democratic process within the structures of power but rather it was a kind of public lobby backed by a free press and the free expression of opinions outside the power structure." This development had a profound influence on attitudes in the Politburo. For example, during the Prague Spring, on an occasion when the Politburo member Josef Smrkovský failed to support an unpopular resolution despite previous promises to do so, he explained to a colleague: "Just look at the popularity charts in the news today. I have made it to the fifth place already."[16]

Gorbachev's approach to these critical problems, as well as to present Soviet reality, is substantially different. First of all,

[15] See "The Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia" in *Czechoslovakia's Blueprint for Freedom*, ed. Paul Ello. Washington: Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, 1968, pp. 88–179.

[16] Mlynář, *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103, 257.

for him the word "democracy" has a quite different meaning than it had for the Prague reformers or has for citizens of democratic societies. *Perestroika*, as he admits, "is not a spontaneous, but governed process . . . The *perestroika* drive started on the Communist Party's initiative and the party leads it." Likewise, "the press should unite and mobilize people rather than disunite them" and, obviously, unite them behind the party line. *Glasnost* can be tolerated as the party's tool but not beyond this point. Instead of thinking about how to improve and modernize the outdated communist system by introducing into it objective guarantees like the division of power and a system of checks and balances, Gorbachev regards *glasnost* as an "effective form of public control over the activities of all government bodies, without exception, and a powerful lever in correcting shortcomings."[17] But he does not explain how *glasnost* can control the ultimate power of the ruling party in a one-party system in which that party has the last word in every sphere of life.

Nor does Gorbachev suggest the abolition of centralism. He calls instead for a "new concept of centralism" which would "correctly balance" the two sides of democratic centralism, whatever that may mean.

Even this brief comparison of Gorbachev's reforms with those of the Prague Spring suggests that Gorbachev is much more firmly in charge of events in the U.S.S.R. now than Dubček was in Czechoslovakia in 1968. But it also reveals that the Czechoslovak reformers were boldly addressing the very core of existing problems and wanted to create an efficient mechanism for running a modern state. True, the party would have had to fight for the leading position in the society. But the reformers firmly believed that they would succeed in such competition. They wanted to subordinate the personal interests of individual leaders and their political fates to the supreme common interest—the survival and progress of the system.

Gorbachev is much more cautious and seeks most of the time to have it both ways: democracy, but controlled and centralized; a free press, but one that serves the interests of the party as a unifying and mobilizing force. One is justified in being skeptical about whether such policies are bold enough to cure the deep-rooted problems of the Soviet system and create a modern governmental mechanism.

[17] Gorbachev, *op. cit.*, pp. 55, 75–76, 79.

VII

Conditions in Czechoslovakia and in most of the rest of Eastern Europe have changed dramatically since 1968. Today's would-be reformers are much less confident of the success of their plans because the economies that must be reformed have deteriorated significantly. Moreover, there are no examples of successful reforms in any East European country. Bold attempts in this direction in Yugoslavia, Hungary and even Poland have hardly been success stories. Meanwhile, the people's alienation from their communist governments is stronger than before.

Any realistic reforms will mean—at least initially—harder work and less economic security for most people. Many younger people brought up in the communist system have no experience with private enterprise and know equally little about true professionalism on the job. Because the communists bear the responsibility for the economic crises caused by their mismanagement, they are ill positioned to impose sacrifices on the people without offering them something significant in return. Meanwhile, the growing technological gap between the communist countries and Western societies makes it even more difficult for the communists to stand in the way of democracy and a free market.

It is clear by now that any meaningful reforms would weaken the power of the communist parties in Eastern Europe. Communist leaders must take two essential but unpleasant steps in order to implement reforms. First, they will have to allow a broader representation of domestic forces in the government, which is the only way to garner enough popular support to implement tough reformist plans. Second, they will have to introduce measures of strict accountability and self-financing into the economy and not allow the center to alter arbitrarily the prices of market-produced goods. In the first case, the communists would be required to surrender some power immediately. In the second case the objective rules of the economy would gradually award power and influence to able professionals instead of favored party apparatchiks.

Communist governments are obviously reluctant to embark on the road of radical reform now. They are trying to manage their growing problems by careful maneuvering instead. As a result, however, the reforms being attempted still fall well short of meeting the accelerating economic crises, and therefore cannot prevent further deterioration.

Some of the more daring communist reformers know that if left unreformed, their countries will sooner or later reach a stage where the depth of their crises and their distance behind the West will make it virtually impossible for the communists to maintain a claim to legitimate power, or the right to initiate reforms at such a late date. But they also understand that they must win the fight for the reforms within the party leadership first, before trying to unite the people behind a reform program.

All these factors create a situation in Eastern Europe significantly different from that prevailing during the Prague Spring. In 1968 it was the Soviet, East German and Polish leaders who lost their nerve when confronted with the course of developments in Czechoslovakia, long before the majority of Czechoslovak communists had become alarmed, even assuming they would have become so. Now it is a Soviet leader who is suggesting that much greater tolerance be shown toward diverse developments in Eastern Europe. This fact, together with the absence of a reliable medicine for the crumbling economies of Eastern Europe, and the continued close scrutiny of their increasingly impatient and anticommunist societies, makes the cautious communist leaders of Eastern Europe unlikely candidates for defying Moscow.

This leaves the Kremlin with ample room for shrewd maneuvering and a much greater spectrum of options. But—and this is the greatest shortcoming of the Soviet and East European communists' policies in Eastern Europe—the current official philosophy of reform contains no solution to the core problem: the withering away of the old system of governance is already well in train. There is no foreseeable way to make the smooth transition to a better system, leaving Eastern Europe in a quite unpredictable situation.