

## THE PROCESS OF COMING TO TERMS WITH THE COMMUNIST PAST IN SLOVAK POLITICAL THINKING

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The change of the regime in Czechoslovakia late in 1989 aroused a wave of evaluations and interpretations not only of the past events and processes, but also of the very nature of Czechoslovak Socialist. The value criterion his judge become the political aspects of freedom, democracy and the rule of law which found reflection in the legislation. Diction the Act 125/1996 coll. on immorality and illegality of the communist system reflects the world of Slovak right anticommunism: the former regime was illegal, amoral and reprehensible. In the next stage of alignment with the past, the values of criterion became increasingly ideological aspects. The period rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is interpreted as the "totality". The basis of ideological perception of the communist government has become the theory of totalitarianism. The "era of non-freedom" is existence of communism and nazism.

**Key words:** communist system, alignment with the past, democracy, freedom, anticommunism.

**Proces suočavanja s komunističkom prošlošću u slovačkoj političkoj misli.** Promjena režima u Čehoslovačkoj koncem 1989. potakla je val prevrednovanja i tumačenja ne samo minulih zbivanja i procesa već i zbiljske naravi čehoslovačkog socijalizma. Vrijednosni kriterij tih prosudbi zasnivao se na političkim aspektima slobode, demokracije i vladavine prava koji se iskazuju u pravu. Izriječ Akta 125/1996. o nemoralnosti i ilegalnosti komunističkog poretka odražava svijest rigidnoga slovačkog antikomunizma: prijašnji je režim bio ilegalan, amoralan i dostojan je pokude. U sljedećoj fazi suočavanja s prošlošću vrijednosni je kriterij u rastućoj mjeri zadobio ideološke aspekte. Razdoblje vladavine KPČ tumačilo se kao „totalitarno“. Temelj ideološke percepcije komunističke vladavine bila je teorija totalitarizma. „Era neslobode“ odnosi se na komunizam i nacizam.

**Ključne riječi:** komunistički sustav, suočavanje s prošlošću, demokracija, sloboda, antikomunizam.

### INTRODUCTION

The change of the regime in Czechoslovakia late in 1989 aroused a wave of evaluations and interpretations not only of the past events and processes, but also of the very nature of Czechoslovak socialism. This reflection continued on several levels. The first, immediate one was represented by the vehicles of political change, a new elite composed of the former dissidents and reformist Communists dismissed from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; this

group was joined by part of the Communists from the ruling-class nomenklatura positions. The programme objective of this elite - to change the existing social system - epitomised fundamental evaluation of the more than forty-year Communist rule: demands to abolish the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia implied the one-party dictatorship of the Communists, calls for free elections showed a lack of political pluralism, demands for the

establishment of a legal state indicated the absence of politically independent legal environment, calls for freedom to the curbing of the citizen's rights. Thus, the value criteria for examining the previous regime were not social or economic aspects but rather political aspects of freedom, democracy and lawful state. They found their immediate reflection in legislation. Act No 480/1991 Coll. of the Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic adopted on November 13, 1991 (the so-called Hubálek Act) described the existence of the previous regime as a "period of lack of freedom". Clause 1 of the Act states that in „1948-1989, the Communist regime violated human rights and its own laws.“ This first anti-Communist piece of

### **THE IDEOLOGICAL PERCEPTION OF THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT**

The fact that former nomen-klatura Communists became part of the new elite, of the new ruling power, that they insinuated themselves into almost all political parties, had caused a curious situation: those same people who had represented undemocratic regime today passed for democrats, those who had hampered freedom and curbed human rights now secured and promoted them. Naturally, a question arose who had represented the past evil; who was responsible for it; who the new regime should defend itself against to prevent the turnover and relapse of the Communist practices. The new elite of the former dissidents, reformist and nomen-klatura Communists gave an unambiguous answer: the culprit is the former State Security and the former Communist Party machinery. This pronouncement was enacted into law. It found its reflection in two successful legislative initiatives. One consisted in lustration screening, the other in

legislation, which entered into force on the day of its proclamation, was signed by former dissident Václav Havel (then President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic) by virtue of his constitutional powers, by the former reformist Communist Alexander Dubček (then Speaker of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly) and the former nomenklatura Communist Marián Čalfa (then Czechoslovak Prime Minister). Consequently, adherence to the Communist Party, to Marxism, to the principles and values emphasised by the previous system, was increasingly considered inappropriate, indecent and immoral, or was even seen as downright infringement and jeopardy of the principles of the newly fought freedom and democracy.

declassifying materials of the former State Security.

As early as October 1991, the so-called Lustration Act (No. 451/1991 Coll.) was adopted that defined requirements for the performance of major public duties in a way that would prevent massive infiltration of former staff members and agents of the State Security, high party officials and other persons into state and other public legal institutions. The law on declassification of the former State Security files was adopted only after the dissolution of the common Czechoslovak state (1996 in the Czech Republic, 2002 in Slovakia).

The establishment of the independent Slovak Republic (1993) and gradual shaping of its political scene (we have in mind the prevailing, non-Communist, part of the Slovak political spectrum) brought a gradual divergence of views and evaluations of the previous regime. Nationalists from the ruling parties began to ignore the Lustration Act, which ceased to be applied and in 1996 lost

its validity. They pointed to the necessity of a more pragmatic perception of the question of employing the former state security members in security bodies of the new state, playing up their professionalism and expertise; moreover, there still was considerable influence of the former party officials with political ambitions to occupy the leading positions in the state. Nationalists were criticised for such views by the right-wing opposition, which demanded codification of the issue of settling account with the past in the same form as was the case with the Czech Republic, i.e., prolongation of the validity of the Lustration Act, adoption of the Act on declassification of the former State Security files and of a piece of legislation pointing to the unlawful nature of the previous regime. The right wingers were partly satisfied with the fact that, based on the Czech model, a law was adopted in 1996 on the immorality and unlawfulness of the Communist regime (No 125/1996 Col.) The enunciation of this declarative piece of legislation reflected the world of Slovak right-wing anti-Communism: the previous regime was illegal, immoral and deplorable. At this stage of dealing with the past, ideological aspects increasingly became the main evaluation criterion of the previous regime.

The period of the Communist rule is described as „totalitarianism“. This name, which is to express undemocratic or anti-democratic essence of the previous regime, has become a household term throughout the country due to politicians and their biased media. In such interpretation little room was left for a differentiated view of the past, of „Communism“ as a developmental phenomenon, which changed its nature in time and space, a phenomenon which fell into an array of groupings, directions and currents [7: 12].

On the contrary, this interpretation has substantially contributed to the emergence of bipolar, black-or-white vision

representing the evil (previous regime) and the good (current regime), totalitarianism and democracy. This situation has been succinctly described by Peter Weiss, a left-wing intellectual and former Chairman of the post-Communist Party of Democratic Left. In his view, refusal of „Communist“ regimes in political upheavals and transformations at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s brought new ideological stereotyping and a simplified description of reality in terms of the „realm of good“ and the „realm of evil“: coming to terms with the past, which also included experience with different kinds of repression and restriction of individual freedom, and overcoming the old-regime political practices have also brought (only seemingly paradoxically) relapses of policy based on the „image of the enemy“, one of the essential features of neo-Stalinism [ 9: 69]. Jiří Dienstbier, one of the most prominent dissidents, labelled these relapses of political practices of the previous regime, which were to serve as a tool of dealing with the past and of the creation of guarantees that the old regime cannot be restored, as „right-wing bolshevism“ [9: 69].

As a rule, right-wing anti-Communism recognises two basic approaches to the previous system: its own approach, which is one that is correct by its very nature, and the other one, which refuses to adapt to the former, i.e. the wrong one, which is bad and needs to be criticised and rejected. Representatives of right-wing anti-Communism describe themselves as those who promote freedom and democracy because they push forth the so-called de-Communisation of society while labelling the others as „the old structures“, „hooded“ Communists and Socialists, who - overtly or covertly - hinder the process of freedom and democracy, allegedly representing a post-totalitarian residual that jeopardizes the new regime.

The so-called old structures are accused of the defence of the previous

regime by believing it to be a system like any other, with its flaws and inconsistencies, by a conviction that structural violence is an inherent part of every hierarchical system, that its modifications differ from each other merely by a different context and methods of legitimisation, that there is no such regime where violence is virtually absent and out of question and where human and civil rights cannot be violated.

Part of the approach of the so-called „old structures“ allegedly is an understanding of Socialist conceptual view or Marxism as inherently domestic, belonging to Slovak tradition. This, therefore, is not an imported creation but a phenomenon (movement) that has organically grown in Slovak environment as part of domestic cultural and social tradition. The old structures were thus unable to come to terms with the past, unable to confront its true picture while this „reality“ was still present, others because they did not want it at all, still others because they did not condemn this picture even then and do not condemn it now (some did not do so even in the 1950s while others allegedly identified with it with renewed enthusiasm in the 1960s, others agreed with it during the normalisation period and still others after the problematic transition in the 1990s) [1: 381-382].

For the purpose of analysis of possible overhang or remnants of the „totalitarian“ regime into the post-November period, right-wing anti-Communism makes us pose a question: who perceives this potential overhang or continuous elements from the Communist period in social life into the 1990s and even into the present as a problem?

The mere fact of being a member of the Communist Party or bodies of state power is interpreted as an unambiguous generator of evil and harmful character traits, political intentions and behaviour patterns that are dangerous for the new

system. It therefore proclaims that it is necessary to deal with the „Communist“ past openly and critically, to open archives, to make available as much material as possible, for society can advance only through an understanding and critical reevaluation of the past, through its ruthless critical revision. It quotes George Santayana, American philosopher and writer, who has said that those who cannot remember their own past are condemned to repeat it. Strict implementation of this approach has resulted in categorical denunciation of „Communism“ as a fallacious social model, a utopian social-political experiment that had not led anywhere and that resulted in terror, violence and ubiquitous fear, and in phenomena that affected the entire society, all social strata and groups. Socialism, Communism and Marxism are understood as elements totally alien to traditional Slovak environment, as something enforced, implanted from the outside. Its understanding of the past tends to be based mostly on a conservative interpretation of Slovak history, which emphasises religious values and traditions, or more recently non-Communist or even anti-Communist stages of this history as authentic to Slovak environment [1: 379].

A point of departure for ideological understanding of the Communist rule was the totalitarianism theory originally formulated by Hannah Arendt and Carl J. Friedrich in the USA of the 1950s. Since the mid-1960s however it has been declared obsolete in Western Europe or even considered as a weapon of the Cold War. Yet, after 1989 in a changed international political setting it has been given a fresh breath to fulfill its political purpose: to define and classify the totalitarianism of the expired regimes of the Socialist East Europe. The essential logic of this theory inevitably led to the deepening of negative evaluation and perception of the previous regime. In addition to attributes such as „immoral“,

„unlawful“ and „despicable“ the word „totalitarian“ acquired a new epithet – „criminal“. The historical period between 1948 and 1949 should be viewed as an era during which political crimes were committed, which was marked by permanent repression typical of the regime whose birth and nature has been documented by methods of historiography. This perspective is rooted in the so-called historical-genetic model of the totalitarianism theory formulated by Ernst Nolte, a controversial German historian. During the course of the late 1990s, an idea of conceptual closeness of Nazism and Communist regime began to assert itself on its basis in the circles of Slovak right-wing anti-Communists. While on the level of political science fascism and Communism are viewed as regimes where totalitarian rule over society is exerted by one party, as such where there is no political or ideological pluralism, where freedom of an individual is not secured, on the level of historiography, both regimes are perceived as oppressive, and crime is their inherent feature. In either case, it is impossible to separate the analysis of “Communism” from its alter ego – fascism, particularly from its worst version, which it acquired in German Nazism.

According to Ján Langoš, a prominent Slovak right-wing politician, there was virtually no difference between the Nazi and the Communist regime in their effects on defenseless civilians. Although he found some difference between their ideologies, he believed that both despised human beings, both were murderous, both divided society into castes, both fabricated their own enemy. This means that the ideology of National Socialism of the Nazi Third Reich created its own enemy in the same way as did “Communist” ideology of the Soviet Union within its own ranks. By existing longer, the “Communist” regime had a chance of doing more “harm to the lives and souls of national societies” [4: 51].

The conclusions of totalitarian theory influenced two legislative initiatives, which eventually took the form of a valid law of the Slovak Republic. One of these acts was an Act on Accessibility to documents about the activity of the state Security Service in 1939-1989 and on the establishment of the Institute of National Memory (Ústav pamäti národa) and the amendment of selected laws (No 553/2002 Coll.), in short - National Memory Act; the other was the Anti-Communist Resistance Act No. 219/2006 Coll.

The National Memory Act declassified materials of the former State Security and repeatedly condemned the Communist regime by making it tantamount to Nazism (‘fascism and Communism both give rise to a period of lack of freedom’).

The law was a result of the personal initiative of Ján Langoš who was known for his radical right-wing attitude. This politician with technical education had for some time been Chairman of the Democratic Party and had won the support of 1-3% of the Slovak population. The Democratic Party constituted an elitist club of right-wing liberals. Absence of their popularity in the broader circles of the general public was to some extent compensated for by their media presentation. As early as 1993, anti-Communist Langoš set up a civic foundation “Documentation Centre of the Crimes of Communism (Centrum dokumentácie zločinov komunizmu). However it never started to work. Thus, before the right-wing government came to power in the autumn of 1998, there had been no institution in Slovakia whose task was to document „crimes of Communism“ and to declassify its secret documents. The Institute of National Memory, a public legal institution established on the basis of the aforementioned law in Bratislava in 2002, was meant to be a breakthrough. According to emotional words of Ján Langoš, the Institute of National Memory is „ready to

fulfill new, demanding tasks aimed at the renewal of social memory of the period of lack of freedom in our national history and for the promotion and protection of freedom in our country“ [11:5]. Langoš constantly pointed to insufficient financial and personal backing of this „significant public service.“ The Institute’s public service, which was to contribute substantially to the transition of the state and society from an authoritarian, totalitarian state to free society and a lawful democratic state, was, according to Langoš, a major reason for maximum political, financial and material support of the institute from the Slovak government. Thus, the institute’s leadership identified its activity with the struggle for freedom and democracy. This is also testified by the fact that the Institute shot a documentary at its own expense on the establishment and work of the institute under the title „The Road to Democracy“.

An anti-Communism resistance act publicised the names of the victims of political trials, repressions and purges, of these who expressed their criticism or stood in opposition to the system, and defined these activities as anti-Communist resistance. According to this law, the history of anti-Communist resistance began immediately after the Red Army troops entered the territory of today’s Slovakia, in October 1944, i.e., at the time of the antifascist Slovak National Uprising, in which Communists struggled against the German and domestic fascism. The act then indirectly implies that representatives of the anti-Communist resistance also included domestic clerical fascist regime, which collaborated with the Nazi Germany (!)

On January 31, 2006, the author of the draft proposal, then Vice Chairman of the ruling Slovak Democratic and Christian Union Ivan Šimko, spoke on the floor of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on behalf of freedom as of „great God’s gift“. He himself was well familiar with the

initiatives of the pro-regime activists. He described them as follows: “They organized Christian clubs, sang in choirs in churches, fulfilled their duties of clergymen despite the ban from the state, met with the dissidents from other countries of the Soviet empire, organized the broadcast of the free radio in August 1968, signed Charter 77, or at least refused to sign the Anti-Charter. They refused to take part in the May 1 demonstrations or elect candidates of the National Front, defended those who were prosecuted or even helped them, organized petitions for religious rights, separation of church from state, organized or took part in a peaceful prayer meeting in Hviezdoslav Square, which however, did not end peacefully” [8:4]. According to Šimko, these people “... fought against evil. This was true resistance” [8:4].

After all, emotional anti-Communism of Ján Langoš also had religious background with categorical distinction between good and evil, angel and devil. This was clearly demonstrated by his address on the floor of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic delivered in November 2004 during the conference entitled „Ideas on which the Czech Republic stands“. He stated: „In the early 1970s, as a young Catholic, I paraphrased this question and asked myself: What did the Almighty want to tell us, Christians, when he allowed these horrors to happen, horrors during which even the best of us, bishops and priests, began to publicly support criminal, atheistic and materialist regime, which brought the death and lack of freedom to millions of people... When after 15 years following the fall of the Communist regime we are facing the fact that the best of us who stood up against the evil are described as victims of Communism and are indemnified by pitiful sums - and this is the main public theme of our attitude to our best, to the heroes, then we must, heedful of the ideas that we had once abandoned, declare publicly – and this

must be done by the state – that many of us stood up against evil even despite the loss of their lives, of their freedom, of their children, despite the fact that the regime had frustrated the talents of their young ones, that it forced hundreds of thousands of people to leave their homes, robbed them of their property and prevented them from engaging in religious and public activities“ [5:5].

Despite legislative condemnation of the previous regime, establishment of the Institute of National Memory and prevailing anti-Communist propaganda in the media, political, legal and intellectual circles provide a picture of mostly „mild“ and peaceful settlement with the „totalitarian“ past and insufficient overcoming of the „totalitarian“ era and its consequences. Explanations are sought in the concept of the so-called „Tender“ or „Velvet“ Revolution, which was supposed to bring greater tolerance towards adherents of the „totalitarian“ regime and more room for the revluation of their attitudes. Some find an explanation in the fact that disintegration of political regimes of the majority of the former Socialist countries took place peacefully, by „disintegration from the inside“, which was to strengthen a tendency

towards some forbearing loyalty towards the past. They exemplify the absence of major political and legal consequences for the ruling Communists by the fate of the former Czechoslovakia and German Democratic Republic, where the „Communist“ regime was to disintegrate at once, but also by an „evolutionary“ transition from a „totalitarian“ system to a system of „democratic lawful state“ in Poland and Hungary. The difference in explanations, however, does not explicate the essential fact that the new Slovak regime did not adopt any relevant measures against Communists. What is significant here is public discredit mostly of collaborators, but not members of the State Security, particularly of the practice of criminal prosecution and conviction of individuals for the so-called crimes of Communism. While anti-Communist activists in accord with organizations of the former political prisoners call for international investigation of these crimes and for bringing the culprits to international court like the one in Nuremberg, individuals prosecuted for „crimes of Communism“ have not been convicted at all.

## CONCLUSION

Indoctrination of the Slovak population by political and ideological anti-Communism is not unambiguous or persuasive. This is largely indicated by public opinion polls on the pre-November period organized by the Institute of Political Science SAS jointly with the Media Research Department of the Slovak Radio in 2003 and 2005. Research findings have shown that citizens of Slovakia judge their own standard of living to be declining and believe they were best off before 1989; and they equally view the social situation of the

majority of population, national economy, education, school system and culture. In their eyes, the period after 1989 presents not only decline but the worst situation ever [6: 42-46].

The intellectual and political elite of the time with anti-Communist orientation, with a certain degree of disrespect toward the opinion of the masses finds the explanation of positive evaluation of certain aspects of life of the previous society by Slovak general population in „sabotaging“ the process of dealing with the past by the

so-called „old structures“. What is typical here is Ján Langoš's response published in the SME daily on November 14, 2005 on the occasion of examination of the findings of the representative opinion polls conducted for the above daily by the MVK agency. At that time, Langoš stated that the findings of the opinion polls, according to which only a fifth of the population of Slovakia stated that after 1989 their lives had changed for the better (the opposite was stated by 42% of the questioned sample, 12% were unresolved and 25.8% did not express themselves unambiguously) indicated that there was a thick line drawn under the previous regime. Post-November politics was not supposed to depict the „Communist“ regime in true colours; it even paid no attention to the latter [12]. In this way, Langoš flamboyantly ignored life experience of the common people, the fact that their views on the life after 1989 are influenced by social and economic tendencies.

In this context it is necessary to point out that in the section of the questionnaire reflecting on the left-wing forces during the November events, a large proportion of the population wanted some form of socialism (a third route between socialism and capitalism), which is to confirm that people in a way continued to believe in the ideas of socialism (in a socially fair and caring

society, in the right to work, in fundamental equality between people). The fact is that representatives of the new ruling power did not mention explicitly the word „capitalism“. Their rhetoric was based on the concepts of freedom and democracy, free elections and lawful state. Even the leading representative of the Czech right-wing anti-Communism Pavel Žáček admitted that prior to 1989, virtually everyone had only wished to dismantle the normalisation form of socialism which came into being after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, with the aim of building a „better“ or „more democratic“ socialism [10:121].

The need to come to terms with the specific period of history emerges in the times of fundamental political, social and governmental changes. „Evil“ as a political dogma, which is outside the realm of critical thought, became the dominant criterion of understanding and evaluation of communism past after November 1989. The radical attitude rejecting the previous society en bloc thus denies the worthiness of individual aspects of its life and negates the need for differential analysis. The previous system, labeled as „Communist“ regime or „Communism“, thus keeps being perceived mostly indiscriminately, with minimum emphasis on its functional differentiation.

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