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Civil Society and the Velvet Revolution: Mobilizing for Democracy in Czechoslovakia

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COSMOS WP 2012/4

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This paper has been sponsored by the ERC Advanced Grant for the project Mobilizing for democracy.

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EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
COSMOS CENTRE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES
“MOBILIZING FOR DEMOCRACY:
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY” PROJECT
EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL (ERC) GRANT



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Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.

Civil Society and the Velvet Revolution: Mobilizing for Democracy in Czechoslovakia

Daniel P. Ritter

Cosmos Working Paper 2012/4

Abstract: In the late 1980s Czechoslovakia was considered one of the most repressive countries in Eastern Europe and a staunch Soviet ally. In the aftermath of the “Prague Spring” of 1968, repressed with Soviet help, the regime managed to remove virtually all expressions of dissent. Yet in the fall of 1989 civil society forces inspired a popular uprising that put an end to Czechoslovakian authoritarianism and ushered in the transition to democracy. How could a “Velvet Revolution” from below take place in such a repressive context? What role did civil society actors play in the transition? And what structural and international factors help us solve this puzzle? These are some of the questions this working paper seeks to answer.

Key words: Democratization; Transition; Czechoslovakia; Civil society; 1989

“How can one be against human rights nowadays? It’s the same as to be against motherhood.”

Giorgi Arbatov, director of the official Institute for the Study of the United States and Canada and close advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev. (Arbatov and Oltmans 1983:144).

In the late 1980s Czechoslovakia was considered one of the more repressive countries in Eastern Europe and a staunch Soviet ally. In the aftermath of the 1968 “Prague Spring”, repressed with Soviet help, the regime managed to remove virtually all expressions of dissent. Yet in the fall of 1989 civil society forces inspired a popular uprising that put an end to Czechoslovakian authoritarianism and ushered in a transition to democracy. How could a “Velvet Revolution” from below take place in such a repressive context? What role did civil society actors play in the transition? And what structural and international factors help us solve this puzzle? These are some of the questions this working

paper seeks to answer.

Periodization

The question of periodization is, as always, a difficult one, both in theoretical and methodological terms. Three potential starting points may be identified for the democratization process, resulting in one long-term, one medium-term, and one short-term periodization. Addressed in chronological order, the first possible starting point is the 1968 Prague Spring. If one adopts this starting point the 1989 Velvet Revolution definitely assumes more of a “top-down” character. On April 5, 1968, the planning committee of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party adopted Dubček’s “Action Program” which

called for the abolition of censorship, the systematic use of opinion polls in the decision making process, the inclusion of a multiplicity of groups and organisations in the administration of the state, open debate with representatives of ‘bourgeois ideology’, the right to travel abroad, further rehabilitation of the unjustly persecuted, the replacement of incompetent officials, changes to the electoral system, devolution of power in the party, the introduction of a socialist market economy and greater autonomy for Slovakia in the form of a new federal arrangement. In short, it offered the prospect of socialism with a human face. (Shepherd 2000: 27)

Given the timing (the height of the Cold War) and location (a totalitarian communist country) of the Action Program, it is no exaggeration to call this an elite attempt at democratization. Evidently this is how Moscow interpreted the Czechoslovakian developments, as shortly after the announcement of the Action Program Warsaw Pact troops entered and occupied the country. Non-violent resistance to the invasion followed and the reformist communist leaders, including Dubček himself, were soon purged from the party. While ultimately unsuccessful, it is impossible to deny the impact the Prague Spring had on the Velvet Revolution, as it revealed the true nature of Czechoslovakia’s relationship with the USSR and the undemocratic character of the Prague leadership.

The proposed mid-term starting point of the democratization process can be placed during the mid-1970s, around the time of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1977 creation (or at least the “coming out”) of Charter 77. If one desires to take a bottom-up approach to the democratization process, this is the natural starting point as it represents the renaissance of opposition activities in Czechoslovakia. It could be argued that the activists of this period were part of certain elites – Havel and his colleagues were not blue-collar workers but rather more or less public intellectuals – yet I would personally be inclined to see this as the most important period in the process. Coupled with the emergence of Gorbachev as the new leader of the USSR in the mid-1980s, the Helsinki Final

Act represents the major political opportunity structure for the opposition. Consequently I will return to the mid-1970s in my discussions of structural conditions and political opportunities.

Finally, if one wants to take an extreme bottom-up approach, then a very short-term periodization may be suitable. The protests that occurred in the second half of 1988 and in 1989 were largely spontaneous and not necessarily organized by Charter 77 activists. Religious groups and students were the driving forces of these protests, and students in particular played the most important role in the November 17 demonstration that sparked the Velvet Revolution. The danger of taking the mid- to late-1980s as the beginning of the democratization process lies in the fact that such an explanation is necessarily ahistorical, and, in my opinion, incorrect.

My recommendation would be to emphasize the role played by civil society in all three of the stages I have identified and thereby show how democratization occurs through cycles of protests, each of which may look different but nonetheless contributes to a coherent oppositional narrative. It seems quite plausible that the 1968 non-violent resistance to the Warsaw Pact invasion helped establish a culture of peaceful opposition in Czech and Slovak minds that came in handy in 1989. Similarly, the human rights pressure exerted by Charter 77 in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s contributed to the weakening of the regime and the possibility of exploiting Gorbachev's twin policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. In short, a historicized periodization dating back to 1968 that emphasizes the transforming events of that year, the mid-1970s, and the mid-1980s appears a sound path to take.

As for the end point of the democratization process, a few options are available here too. The first would be the conclusion of the roundtable discussions on December 9 1989, which resulted in the creation of a "Government of National Understanding" that contained communists and oppositionists alike. President Husák swore in this government on the 10th and then resigned. One could add the ascendance of Václav Havel to the presidency on December 29th to this end point (Glenn 2001: 188; Urban 1990: 122). Another option would be to use the fact that

on January 30, 1990, the Federal Assembly was joined by 120 new deputies; only 8 were Communists. Out of the 350 members of the assembly, 152 were now nonparty members; there were 138 Communists, 18 Socialists, 18 People's Party members, 5 Slovak Freedom Party members, 4 (Slovak) Democratic Party members, 3 Social Democrats, 6 members from four small parties, and 6 vacant seats. The Communists had become, after forty-two years, a minority party again. The Federal Assembly was to remain basically unchanged until the June 1990 elections. (Caldá 1996: 1164-5)

The fact that the communists were now in the minority suggests that a transition to democracy had occurred. Finally, one could use either the June 1990 elections or the “velvet divorce” of 1993 to mark the firm establishment of democracy in both the Czech and Slovak republics (Innes 2001; Stokes 1993: 180-1).

Structural Conditions

In order to understand the structural conditions that set the stage for democratization in Czechoslovakia it is useful to consider the country’s history since the beginning of communist rule following World War II. Unlike most of the other countries that were to become Soviet satellites, Czechoslovakia was a wealthy country with a high standard of living (Shepherd 2000: 24). As Urban (1990) explains,

the Czechoslovak experience under Communism was bitter for several reasons. A highly industrialised country, like Czechoslovakia, with a relatively developed economic infrastructure, was much more sensitive to the extreme unsuitability of the centralized Communist planning system than were the other East European countries managed by Communist governments after the war. There was also a lot more to squander. In comparison with its neighbours, the economy was not damaged by war. (103)

Thanks to its relative wealth, Czechoslovak politicians could “buy” support from the people for the greater part of the communist era by providing decent living standards. However, by the late 1980s “the structural weaknesses of the Czechoslovak economy had become both unavoidable and unmanageable” and this fact, accompanied by a “growing public awareness of economic stagnation... gave additional fuel to the opposition” (Judt 1992: 96-7). The days in which the government could pacify discontent through subsidies were coming to an end.

While economic dissatisfaction undoubtedly played an important role in increasing opposition to the government, the Velvet Revolution was also fought for political reasons. The absence of basic civil and political liberties, including freedoms of expression, association, and religion, as well as the widespread inability to choose one’s profession (Falk 2003: 89), was perhaps an even greater source of discontent than the country’s economic shortcomings. However, the Czechoslovak civil rights situation was not uncommon in comparison to many other authoritarian countries both prior and after 1989, so why does this dimension play a large role in the Czechoslovak transition to democracy? To answer that question we must move from the domestic to the international level and revisit one of the points mentioned in the previous section, namely the 1975 Helsinki Agreements.

Stokes (1993) has emphasized the importance of this monumental treaty, part of the détente between the East and West, for the development of viable opposition movements behind the Iron Curtain:

These agreements concluded a two-year series of negotiations concerning peace and security in Europe that had become possible in the early 1970s, when West Germany changed its long-standing policy of hostility toward East Germany. Ever since the creation of two Germanies after World War II the Soviet Union had advocated an international conference to regularize the status of East Germany and to confirm the western border of Poland, but under Konrad Adenauer West Germany had refused to deal with East Germany at all. As soon as a new West German chancellor, Willy Brandt, announced a policy of reconciliation with East Germany in 1969 (*Ostpolitik*), the Soviet Union renewed its calls for such a conference. Formal negotiations began in 1973, and in the summer of 1975 representatives of thirty-five countries, including all of those in Eastern Europe except Albania, signed the Final Act in Helsinki. (23-4)

Critics of the agreement argued that the Final Act represented a Soviet victory over the West. However, in exchange for gaining recognition of its conceptualization of East Germany, the Communist Bloc reluctantly committed itself to a framework for human rights. “The so-called ‘Basket Three’ of the agreements committed all signatories to respect ‘civil, economic, social, cultural, and other rights and freedoms, all of which derive from the inherent dignity of the human person’” (Stokes 1993: 24). To use my own theoretical framework (Ritter 2012), the Helsinki Final Act, ratified by the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly on November 11, 1975 and coming into force on March 23 the following year, began to ensnare the government in its very own iron cage of liberalism (ICL), as activists “began to see the Final Act not as a ratification of the status quo, as the Communist regimes were portraying it, but as a promising and unprecedented opportunity to challenge the repressiveness of those regimes” (Thomas 1999: 209). As I will show in the next section, the Helsinki accords combined with Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika to create a tremendous political opportunity (an ICL if there ever was one) that helped set the Velvet Revolution on its path to success.

It is important to note that a key reason the Helsinki Final Act became so problematic for the Czechoslovak government, similarly to East Germany but unlike Romania, was the fact that Czechoslovakia was so closely connected to Moscow due to its history of Soviet support and intervention. Heimann (2009) has nicely captured this dynamic as she explains that

the one Communist leadership in the world that could not afford to retreat even an inch from the official line as officially broadcast from Moscow in the summer of 1968 was, of course, the Czechoslovak one. The Husák leadership had justified its rise to power on two ideological pillars: the need to oppose reforms of the kind proposed during the Prague Spring; and moves towards an

ever-closer ‘friendship’ (political, economic and diplomatic ties) with the Soviet Union. But just as Khrushchev had created problems for the *KSČ* and *KSS* leaderships in the mid-1950s with his denunciations of Stalin, twenty years later the Soviet Union again pulled the rug out from under the Czechoslovak Communist leadership. This time, pressure came in the form of the US-Soviet policy shift known as *détente*, which required the Soviet Union to make at least some concessions to improve its human-rights record in exchange for slowing down the nuclear-arms race. (282)

Having initially benefitted (especially after 1968) from strong Soviet support in its efforts to restore order after the Prague Spring, the government’s close relationship with Moscow now began to become a problem. After all, how could the “undoubtedly ... most consistently Stalinist and repressive [government] in Europe” (Judt 1992: 108)¹ combine its inclination towards widespread, albeit largely non-violent repression, with a stated commitment to human rights? The answer is that in the long run it could not, and this contradiction, I would argue, is what ultimately brought the government down.

It seems the group of intellectuals who eventually created Charter 77 shared this evaluation. Recognizing the potential for mobilization inherent in Czechoslovakia’s signature of the Final Act, an anonymous opposition report expressed new hope in the face of the recent developments:

If we disregard our subjective feelings and views... we must admit that the results of the European security conference, although no more than a beginning, are still promising. Even the few new things that the West succeeded in incorporating into the document could represent a step forward, provided they will be complied with. (Kusin 1978: 293)

These intellectuals thus realized that their task would be to make sure that the terms of the Final act were indeed “complied with.” Furthermore, after seeing a copy of the bulletin of Laws and Ordinances that contained Ordinance 120 (the provision that incorporated the Final Act into Czechoslovakian law), they “felt enough disgust with the regime to wish to challenge some of its hypocrisies openly... The result was the formation, in the first week of 1977, of a would-be human-rights watchdog and pressure group calling itself ‘Charter 77’” (Heimann 2009: 284).

Contingent Political Opportunities

The Helsinki Final Act not only represents one of the most important structural conditions under which the democratization process began; it is also one of the

¹ Judt (1992) qualifies this statement by adding that he is “leaving aside the special case of Romania in the later years of the megalomaniacal Nicolae Ceaușescu” (108)

first political opportunities that presented itself to the emerging opposition. As one commentator notes, “a small group of intellectuals living in Prague... believed that they had finally found a chink in the regime’s armour” (Heimann 2009: 284), as “they simply demanded that regimes follow their own laws on human rights, which of course was the last thing regimes intent on retaining social control were willing to do... This process, more than any single political, economic, or military event, is what doomed the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe” (Stokes 1993: 23). The “intellectuals” Heimann refers to were the founders of Charter 77, and I will return to that organization in my discussion of civil society.

The Helsinki Accords did indeed provide the opposition with its first political opportunity to challenge the regime, but until the mid-1980s Charter 77 and other similar organizations made minimal progress on the path to democratization. It was not until Mikhail Gorbachev became the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 that the human rights framework the opposition had tried to employ for the past 8 years began to show signs of effectiveness.

While Gorbachev had established himself as a reformer from the early days of his rule, the announcement of the twin policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in 1988 is what really provided the opposition movement with its crucial political opportunity. Arguing that the Soviet Union was in desperate need of economic revival, Gorbachev launched his program of *perestroika* (restructuring), designed to introduce some free market elements in the socialist economic system. It should be noted that Gorbachev’s intention was not to dismantle the planned economy system, but simply to resuscitate it. Shortly after the introduction of his economic reforms, Gorbachev announced the complementary political reform of *glasnost* (openness), which would guarantee the protection of some of the civil and human rights the Soviet people had previously had to do without (Long 2005; Saxonberg 2001).

While Gorbachev’s reforms had far reaching consequences in the USSR and in some of the other Soviet satellites,

the effects of [his] experiments in *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, together with his increasingly hands-off approach to the rest of the Warsaw Pact countries, did not really begin to make themselves felt in Czechoslovakia – as opposed to Poland or Hungary – until 1987 or even 1988, and then only patchily... By 1988, there had been some cadre changes, a loosening of the limits of what it was permissible to publish or say in public and, most dramatically, an end to the jamming of foreign broadcasts. (Heimann 2009: 295)

However, in January 1989, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia finally recognized that it had no choice but to follow Moscow’s lead and implement economic and political reforms of its own. It did so through the launch of its

own take on restructuring, *přestavba*. This adjustment was accompanied by a handful of democratization measures that mainly entailed the decentralization of economic decision-making. The regime also announced that it would provide the nation with a new constitution that went as far as omitting any reference to the “leading role” of the party or its communist ideology (Heimann 2009: 295).

Gorbachev’s reforms did not only influence the decisions of Czechoslovakian politicians by forcing them in the direction of democratization and economic reform. As Saxonberg (2001) explains, “conservative leaders became afraid, while reformists became optimistic. Hopes and expectations of change rose among the populace as well” (137). These feelings of imminent change was further reinforced when Gorbachev allowed somewhat free elections to take place in Poland, elections that resulted in a non-communist victory, and his decision to not interfere when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. As a consequence “Czechs and Slovaks realized he would not support a violent solution in their country either” (Saxonberg 2001: 137), which most probably contributed to the large turnouts at the mass demonstrations that came to symbolize the Velvet Revolution.

The combination of the Helsinki Final Act and Gorbachev’s compatible reforms allowed the opposition movement in Eastern Europe to put pressure on the government without risking a 1968 scenario. After all, “how could Gorbachev support democratization at home if it were dangerous abroad? Gorbachev would have had to retreat from glasnost, and thus economic reform at home as well” (Saxonberg 2001: 136). Because the Soviet premier was at this point far from popular among the more conservative members of his party, he had no choice but to stick to his guns even as the Soviet empire began to collapse. Abandoning his reform program would have alienated those within the party who supported him, leaving him politically isolated. In short, Gorbachev had gone “all-in” and pro-democracy activists throughout the Communist Bloc recognized this fact. As Skilling (1991) reports,

in the latter part of the 1980s, after the launching of Gorbachev’s programme of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, there was an explosion of independent initiatives and informal activity in the USSR, which soon spread to Poland and Hungary, in more limited scope to the GDR and Czechoslovakia and in even lesser degree to Romania and Bulgaria. (11)

With his reform program Gorbachev had opened a political Pandora’s box he was unable to close.

Although Gorbachev and his reforms unequivocally represent the most important political opportunity of the Czechoslovak democratization movement, three other POSs are worth mentioning. First, the government’s decision to prosecute members of the rock band The Plastic People of the Universe in 1976

on charges of “organized disturbance of the peace” has been identified as the event that caused Havel and others to write Charter 77. The obvious discord between the charges and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act into law in the same year as the trial apparently constituted a moral outrage too severe for the intellectuals to contain. Second, and as mentioned in passing above, the reform movements that took place elsewhere in the region, first in Poland and Hungary and later in East Germany, certainly had an effect on Czechoslovakian activists and citizens in general. If these governments could fall, why couldn't theirs? Finally, the November 17th student demonstration that triggered the revolution benefitted from false rumors that a student had been killed by security forces. Although not true, and despite the fact that the government eventually located the “dead” student and paraded him before the TV cameras, the process had taken too long and already led to radicalization of the movement.

Elites

The issue of elites in Czechoslovakia is a fairly straightforward affair: only one elite group truly matters, namely the political elite. As seen above, Czechoslovakia was, at least since 1968, one of the most Stalinist and repressive regimes in Eastern Europe. Because socialism reigned supreme, there really were no economic elites to speak of. As for a potential military elite, “Czechoslovakia shared with other East European regimes the characteristic features of civil-military relations common to all state-socialist regimes” (Ekiert 1996: 149). Furthermore, the Soviet Union maintained strong links with the country's military, which helps explain why the armed forces remained neutral during the demonstrations that threatened to end the dominance of the Communist Party. Because of the relative lack of economic and military elites, the discussion here will focus on the political elite, that is, the upper echelons of the Communist Party.

Unlike some other authoritarian governments, including communist ones in Eastern Europe, the Czechoslovakian communist party did not experience important internal divisions in the period leading up to the Velvet Revolution. The main reason for this appears to be the failed attempts at liberalization from above by Dubček and other reformists in the 1960s. Their attempt to introduce the Action Program resulted in their eventual purging and dismissal from the party. For whatever reason, no new generation of party reformers emerged in the following 20 years. In fact, the reform communists of 1989 were the same reform communists of 1968, headed by Dubček himself, who became chairman of the National Assembly after the fall of communism. Because the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had not imprisoned or executed “misguided” party members and leaders, these purged and formerly influential communists were able to form *Obroda*, “a natural network of former communists purged after 1968” in the early months of 1989. The late founding date of the organization

suggests that this “counter-elite” cannot really be considered a political force until very late in the democratization process, even though the Communist Party met with *Obroda* to “discuss the development of reconstruction and perestroika in Czechoslovakia” (Glenn 2001: 136-7).

Given its character as one of the most repressive and entrenched regimes in Eastern Europe, the Czechoslovakian leadership did relatively little to defend their position once the Velvet Revolution began with the November 17th demonstrations. Interestingly enough, the government never lost control of any of its security forces, including the military, the People’s Militia, the regular police force, or the feared secret police. In fact,

the available evidence suggests that [the police and military] remained active in the early days of the revolution, halting a student demonstration from continuing toward Prague Castle on November 20 and infiltrating the striking theaters. According to a subsequent investigation into the activities of the Czechoslovak People’s Army, tanks and soldiers were deployed to Prague and a security measure entitled Intervention was prepared by the minister of national defense; the Ministry, however, awaited orders from the Central Committee, which opted for a ‘political’ rather than a military solution to the problem. (Glenn 2001: 133)

Realizing that Moscow would not support a “Tiananmen Square solution,” and discovering that “a branch of the People’s Militia proclaimed that it would ‘not take steps’ against ‘working people’ or ‘working youth, including the student community’, but instead work ‘to build socialism in common and work towards perestroika’” (Heimann 2009: 303), the government seems to have recognized that the battle was lost early on. Compelling evidence that no member of the political elite wanted to take responsibility for repression of the movement is presented by Saxonberg, who shows that although security forces had been mobilized no orders were issued to employ them (2001: 338). That the regime decided to not put up a fight early on is also suggested by the fact that the party, following the initial demonstrations on November 17th concluded that

“the Party must not be frightened of the truth, even if it is sometimes hard and unpleasant – it is absolutely necessary to tell the truth in the press, radio and television,” and equally “necessary” to “publicize the video recordings of the police intervention of November 17 and, after the state prosecutor’s investigation, to publish its results in the mass media.” (Heimann 2009: 303-4)

While difficult to prove, it seems reasonable to conclude that the government’s decision to refrain from outright repression can be traced to Moscow’s open declaration that it would not interfere in the internal politics of its satellites.

It should also be mentioned briefly that other political parties existed:

“The Socialist Party, the People’s Party, the (Slovak) Democratic Party, and the (Slovak) Party of Freedom had continued an embryonic and enslaved existence under the old regime, nominally independent but under Communist control via the so-called National Front” (Judt 1992: 102). While these parties regained their independence after the revolution, their position before its occurrence was too weak for its members to qualify as elite. Finally, the cultural elite, could potentially have been a group worth considering under the heading of elites. However, the most influential members of this group had forfeited their position as an elite through their opposition to the state and the imprisonments and banishments that often followed as a logical consequence of this,. Instead they became the leaders of the embryonic civil society.

Civil Society

In contrast to Hungary and Poland, Czechoslovakia’s civil society developed late. There are several reasons for this. First, the Prague Spring, which I have identified as the beginning of the democratization process, was not the product of civil society organizing, but rather a top-down initiative from party leaders. As a consequence, civil society had not experienced any boost during the protest activities against the Soviet invasion and did not therefore emerge as a force to be reckoned with in its aftermath (Ekiert 1996: 123-4). However, a few political organizations, such as the Club of Non-Party Engagés (KAN) and K-231, “an organization of former political prisoners,” did rise from the ashes of the Prague Spring, and although these groups did not constitute a vibrant civil society, KAN in particular represented “a nascent and broad-based social movement, and an important political example for a later movement of much greater importance and impact: Civic Forum. Not unsurprisingly, Vaclav Havel was a member” (Falk 2003: 76-7).

As the Czechoslovakian regime hardened in the years after 1968 following party purges, civil society remained embryonic. Nonetheless, the seeds of civil society can be found in small groups and movements that focused on human rights and civil freedom, on peace and opposition to nuclear weapons or military service, in favor of independently organized education and for samizdat publication, for the support of the poor, for free trade unions, for religious freedom, and for women’s rights. These groups usually labeled themselves as “non-political” but represented the “closest approximation to, or surrogate for, political life” (Skilling 1991: 8-9). As Skilling (1991) explains, even after the creation of Charter 77 in 1977, “civic activities were relatively few and limited in scope but nonetheless, in spite of repression, persisted for more than ten years” (10). The dissidence that did exist followed the path of “anti-politics” and was carried out by intellectuals, including writers and literary critics (Shepherd 2000: 31). These intellectuals were to become leaders on the path to democracy.

The Democratization Movement

One of the most important and famous civil rights organizations from the period of Czechoslovakia's democratization process is Charter 77. This organization, headed by intellectuals such as Václav Havel, Jan Patočka, Jiří Němec, Zdeněk Mlynář, Pavel Kohout, Petr Uhl, Jiří Hájek, and Ludvík Vaculík, decided in the aftermath of the trial against the rock band the Plastic People of the Universe (PPU) that something had to be done (Long 2005: 12). As Saxonberg (2001) vividly explains, the trial against PPU, and the accompanying disregard for human rights that the government had committed itself to just months before, caused such moral outrage among the intellectuals that they "abandoned their political ideology and embarked on a struggle to defend human rights. The Helsinki Accords on human rights, which the Communist-led regimes had signed, encouraged the dissidents to demand their regimes' compliance" (153). Among the intellectuals involved in Charter 77, Havel, Patočka, and Hájek would serve as the organization's spokespeople and "represent the Charter *vis-à-vis* the authorities and the public at home and abroad" (Kusin 1978: 308).

Shepherd (2000) describes the Charter as a "mainly Czech organization, grouping former communists, anti-communists and non-political intellectuals." As already noted, "its main aim was to get Czechoslovakia to adhere to its obligations under the 1975 Helsinki Final Act" (31). This strategy of holding the government accountable for its political commitments and obligations represents the true genius of Charter 77. Although initially an extension of Havel's and other group members' moral persuasion that individuals had a duty to "live in truth," the emphasis on human rights was to eventually become a strategic goldmine when Gorbachev announced his own inclination to these values (Eyal 2003: 73).

Charter 77 took its name from its founding document. The human rights based declaration was initially signed by 240 intellectuals and released on January 1, 1977. Kusin (1978) describes the Charter as "a combination of a statement, a petition and a declaration of intent. More specifically, the Charter

comprehensively details the litany of violations of both Helsinki and the UN covenants. Freedom of expression is described as illusory, given that "tens of thousands of our citizens" are prevented from work in their professions because their views differ from those officially sanctioned and "countless young people" are prevented from attending university because of their own views or those of their parents. The document criticizes the "centralized control of all the communications media and publishing and cultural institutions," the lack of freedom of religion, freedom of association, and the curtailment of civil liberties. Existing legal norms were condemned for their lawlessness, arbitrariness, and disrespect of civil rights. (Falk 2003: 89)

Rather shrewdly, Charter 77 sought to avoid political persecution by explicitly defining itself as a non-political entity composed of people with different political, religious/cultural, and professional outlooks. “Its authors and signatories wanted to remain within the bounds of the law,” and therefore went as far as to identify the organization’s mission “as helping the Czechoslovak government implement its own laws: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1975 Final Act of the Helsinki Covenant on Human Rights” (Tucker 2000: 124). Furthermore, “from the beginning, Charter 77 was a ‘virtual’ organization – no rules, permanent bodies, formal membership, fund-raising capacity, or legal existence. Anyone who embraced its ideas or participated in its work was essentially a member” (Falk 2003: 89).

Perhaps surprisingly given its fame in the aftermath of the democratization of the country, the Charter never achieved a large membership. Because of perpetual government harassment, only a small number of committed activists were willing to risk prosecution and lengthy prison terms, including Havel and some of the other leaders. Consequently the Charter was made up of “a few thousand people at the fringes, a few hundred near the center, a few dozen real leaders” (Stokes 1993: 149). This assessment of the Charter’s membership is echoed by Shepherd (2000) who refers to the organization’s struggle as “a lonely one.”

By the mid-1980s the dissidents may have numbered only around a thousand or so in a country of over 15 million... But their significance was enormous. They testified to the refusal of the spirit of freedom and truth to lie down in the face of overwhelming odds. Their very existence was an indictment of the corrupt elite which ran the country and it pricked the consciences [*sic*] of the population at large. (33)

In addition to its important domestic role of showing that opposition to the regime was in fact a personal choice and an available option, the Charter played an important international part in Eastern Europe’s transition to democracy. Its declaration was published by Western European media outlets and eventually reached activists in other communist countries. Furthermore, the Charter actively engaged in dialogue with other dissidents, including members of Poland’s KOR and Solidarity (Chilton 1995: 199; Falk 2003: 91). Charterists also reached out to peace activists in the West and made appeals to international organizations, particularly those connected to the UN (Falk 2003: 91). I will discuss some of the specific protest activities employed by the Charter in the last section of the report (Protest).

While Charter 77 was the most important civil society organization operating in the decade leading up to the Velvet Revolution, it was its offspring - the Civic Forum (CF) - that brought the democratization process to its conclusion. Unlike its predecessor, CF could not boast a long organizational

legacy from before the revolution – it was in fact created as late as two days *after* the November 17th demonstration that marked the beginning of the revolution. However, as it was led by the same individuals who had been in charge of Charter 77, CF adopted the same organizational structure and strategy as that organization: there were no formal leaders, anyone who felt moved to join the Forum was automatically a member, and the CF was explicitly non-political. The CF almost instantaneously became the umbrella organization of the opposition as “Charter 77 and VONS immediately declare themselves a part of Civic Forum, but so did just about every recently created independent civic initiative” (Heimann 2009).

Perhaps in an effort to appear as far from a political party as possible, CF organized itself in an extremely horizontal fashion. Glenn has aptly described the structure of the organization:

There was a three-tiered structure to the coordinating center: the crisis crew, composed of Václav Havel, Jiří Křižan, and Saša Vondra, which met every morning at 8:00 A.M. and made basic decisions that were discussed with the action group of approximately twenty people; later these decisions would be presented to the plenum of around 150 people, which was the final opportunity for discussion before the daily press conference. In explicit contrast to the hierarchical structure of the Communist Party and consistent with the civil society collective action frame, Civic Forum defined its structure as decentralized and local... It was to have no hierarchy whatsoever but rather to be “a horizontal network, with all local Civic Forums joined to one coordinating center.” (Glenn 2001: 181)

Together with the students, driving the revolution on the ground, CF became the most important entity of the revolution. When the time came to negotiate the transition to democracy, Havel and the Civic Forum emerged as the natural voices of the country. I will return to the protest strategies utilized by the Forum in the last section of the report.

Charter 77 and Civic Forum were the two most important organizations for democracy in the transition period, but other organizations also existed. I will now briefly address those groups. VONS [Výbor na Obranu Nespravedlivě Stíhaných] (The Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted) emerged as an alternative organization alongside the Charter, sharing many of its members. Established on April 27, 1978, VONS was modeled on the Polish KOR with the objective of aiding victims of state prosecution by attending trials, collecting evidence, providing legal advice, and assisting the families of political prisoners (Falk 2003: 92).

On the same day that CF was created (November 18, 1989), its Slovakian counterpart also came into existence. Like CF, Public Against Violence (VPN) was composed of a coalition of artists and writers. VPN did not play an enormous role in the revolution, but it did organize protests in Bratislava and

participated in the roundtable discussions alongside CF. Perhaps its most important role was to contribute to the sense of national unity between Czechs and Slovaks, since the CF was heavily dominated by Czechs. (Glenn 2001: 141; Judt 1992: 98-100). Another organization that played a small but important role in the democratization process was MOST (meaning “bridge”). Formed as late as August 1989 by the journalist Michal Horáček and the musician Michal Kocáb, MOST sought to act as a link between the government and the opposition by trying to initiate dialogue between the two sides (Glenn 2001: 169). While less than completely successful in its aims in the months leading up to the revolution (Calda 1996: 136), MOST “had at least established contacts which made it easier to bring about negotiations between Adamec and Havel, once the revolution began. For in MOST Adamec and Krejčí found people whom they could trust more than the villainized Charterists” (Saxonberg 2001: 322-3). Other democratization organizations included Democratic Initiative (DI, created in 1987) and the Movement for Civil Liberties (which published its manifesto in October 1988). Both of these organizations differed from the Charter and CF in that they were explicitly political (Glenn 2001: 139; Stokes 1993: 153). While the Movement for Civil Liberties appears to have played a limited role, DI made at least one significant contribution before uniting under the CF umbrella in the early days of the revolution.

A petition under the title “Just a Few Sentences” (echoes of the 1968 document “Two Thousand Words”) gathered over forty-thousand signatories in support of its demand for democratization and, on September 15 [1989], twenty-two of its original and more prominent signatories (Vaclav Havel among them) sent a letter to Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec requesting talks between government and opposition on the reform and liberalization of Czechoslovak politics. (Judt 1992: 97)

The democratization movements helped set the stage for the revolution and the transition, but it was the students of Czechoslovakia who drove the movement for change.

Student movements

Like most countries, Czechoslovakia boasted a tradition of student activism. For example, the date chosen for the initial demonstration of the revolution, November 17th, was the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of a student at the hands of the Nazis (Urban 1990: 116; Stokes 1993: 155). In the mid-1960s the frequency of student mobilization increased drastically in response both to domestic problems and to reflect the effects of developments in Western Europe.² It therefore comes as no surprise that students were central to the

² Falk (2000: 28) has noted the “striking similarity” between student opposition in Eastern and Western Europe in the 1960s and documented extensive student activism in this period.

resistance effort in 1968 when both the official communist youth organization and the Union of University Students became foci for mobilization. Not only did the students mobilize on campuses and in the streets, they also challenged the Warsaw Pact invasion symbolically by publishing their own Action Program based on the values of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Shepherd 2000: 28).

While I am saving the chronology of events of the revolution for the last section of this report, a few words may be said about the development of student activism in the late 1980s. There were no independent student unions present in the country until the summer of 1989 when “student activists throughout Prague started an independent student organization, STUHA, with the goal of establishing a self-governing organ for the students” (Saxonberg 2001: 329). Until then, students had been organized through the state sanctioned Socialist Union of Youth (SSM). The leader of this organization, Vlasil Mohorita, came to play a significant role in the organization of the November 17th demonstration. While not necessarily in favor of democratization, he had expressed himself favorably toward a Czechoslovakian version of the twin policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, which “created a political opening, by giving more autonomy to the local SSM organizations. Students did not hesitate to take advantage of this” (Saxonberg 2001: 323-4). In addition SSM joined with independent students in organizing the demonstrations commemorating the student victim of 1939, which explains why the demonstration was approved by the regime.

As I will show in the next section, students played perhaps *the* central role in the Velvet Revolution. As Saxonberg (2001) poetically asserts, “although the known dissidents had become more daring and radical during the past year, their children at the universities outdid them in boldness. These young adults eventually became the catalysts of the revolution” (328). Nonetheless, students only began to organize in the last year of the communist era. Again, Saxonberg’s (2001) research is informative:

Students at some faculties of the Charles University began printing independent journals under the protection of the SSM. During 1989 student activity increased in other areas as well. At the pedagogical faculty in early 1989, over 400 students signed a petition to prevent the expulsion of 7 students for participation in the Palach demonstration... Around this time, activists created a group called “Student Forum” to organize discussions among the students. And when the faculty committee interrogated the student activist Semín on November 13, over 100 students came to the meeting to support him by singing and blowing bubbles. In the spring of 1989, 32 students at the Prague Economic University signed a petition which was sent to the Ministry of Education, demanding the abolishment of mandatory courses in the indoctrination subjects such as “scientific Marxism” and “the history of the Czechoslovak workers”

movement.” In the summer of 1989, student activists throughout Prague started an independent student organization, STUHA, with the goal of establishing a self-governing organ for the students. This organization planned the November 17 demonstration which sparked off the “velvet revolution.” (Saxonberg 2001: 328-9)

Labor Movement

Somewhat surprisingly for a communist country (or perhaps not), workers were relatively absent from the events leading up to the revolution. Although Kusin (1978: 310) reports that one third of the first 800 people to sign the Charter in the 1970s were workers, this social group is largely absent from most accounts of civil society in Czechoslovakia. This is perhaps not altogether surprising, as no independent trade union existed in the country. Consequently, workers could only organize through the regime and the party, which naturally made opposition to these entities unlikely. The passivity of the workers can also be explained, as noted above, by the tacit agreement established between the Party and the workers: we will provide a reasonable standard of living and you will not cause any trouble.

The political stance of the nation’s workers was not clear until November 27th when the announced two-hour general strike was set to begin, and “students and intellectuals were nervous (and in some cases pessimistic) as to the degree of support they would get from the industrial working class” (Judt 1992: 101). However, the workers did not disappoint the revolutionaries as “hundreds of little Civic Forums in the factories managed to mobilize huge support for the general strike. It was at this point that the credibility of the ‘Workers’ State’ collapsed and the confidence of the revolutionary leadership found firm ground” (Judt 1992: 101). While largely absent from the civil society activities of the decade preceding the revolution, workers thus came to play an important role in the velvet revolution, as their abandonment of the regime represented the proverbial final nail in the coffin (Shepherd 2000: 37). Saxonberg notes, however, that the workers “were not organized around their own interests” and that they therefore “quickly lost influence once the populace demobilized and a group of intellectuals and professional experts took control of the ‘technicalities’ of socio-economic transformation” (Saxonberg 2001: 390-1).

Religious movements

The role of the Catholic Church (the only organized religious activism worthy of the name) is somewhat difficult to assess. While Judt (1992) claims that “though not as much as in Poland of course, the dissident Catholic community played an important role in Charter 77 throughout the 1980s, as well as in the November revolution itself” (111), Saxonberg (2001) argues that “the Catholic Church was extremely passive before 1988,” although he admits that “some

individual priests became dissidents” (221). In reality, it seems the Catholic Church did engage in some anti-government activities, especially in Slovenia, but that these were mainly focused on issues of religious freedom rather than the promotion of democracy.

The Church had a difficult relationship with the dissidents, as it sought to balance its somewhat fragile position with its core values. Cardinal František Tomášek, the archbishop of Prague, was pressured by the authorities to sign a declaration condemning Charter 77 shortly after its publication. He eventually did so and “was then allowed to take up his position as archbishop” (Heimann 2009: 288). The government probably felt it had the religious authorities under control. “In the 1980s, however, when the regime increased its pressure on the church in response to the dual threats it felt emanating from Poland and from a revived papacy under John Paul II, a backlash developed among Catholics” (Stokes 1993: 152). As a consequence, the Church, and Tomášek personally, became more willing to stand up to the government over time.

It was the ceremony to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the death of St Methodius, which was held at Velehrad in Moravia on 7 July 1985, which first brought Catholic anti-regime feeling out into the open. In the presence not only of observant Catholics but also of a papal representative and Cardinal František Tomášek, a local Communist official was booed and whistled down when he tried to avoid any explicitly Christian vocabulary by introducing the ceremony as the “peace festival of Velehrad...” The faithful shouted “We want religious Freedom! We want the Holy Father! Long Live the Church!” If only for a moment, “the secret church came aboveground” in front of “some 150,000 people.” (Heimann 2009: 293)

Religious activism continued to increase in the second half of the 1980s, particularly in Slovakia. In late 1987, Moravian Catholics circulated a petition calling for greater religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Depending on the scholar, this petition garnered between 300,000 and 600,000 signatures within six months after Cardinal Tomášek pleaded with Catholics to sign the petition, arguing that it was un-Christian to display fear and cowardice. The “unintended consequence of Catholic activism was one of the few instances of a broad civil society developing among the Czechs and Slovaks” (Stokes 1993: 152). Nonetheless, Innes reports that nationalistic disagreements remained between Czechs and Slovaks as “Slovak religious protest was persistently disregarded as ‘dissent’ by the Czechs” (Innes 2001: 37). This is particularly noteworthy as Czech dissidents “were content to view religious protest in Poland as both anti-Communist and pro-democratic” (Innes 2001: 37). While religious activism took place and mobilized large numbers of people, it seems clear that the Church played a relatively small role in the transition to democracy. On the other hand it did not stand in the way of the opposition either.

Ethnic Movement/s

Hungarian minorities began to mobilize in the late 1970s, and like Charter 77 focused on their lack of human rights as a minority. In 1978, they formed the Committee for the Legal Defense of the Hungarian Minority and in 1983 their leader, Miklós Duray, affixed his signature to Charter 77. The organization was not mainly political, focusing instead on the importance of Hungarian education in schools. It is worth noting, as Falk does, that “in a smart strategic move at coalition building, Charter 77 protested discrimination against the Hungarians, and presented a proposal on national minorities to the Vienna CSCE conference” (Falk 2003: 96). Besides the Hungarian movement, the most interesting ethnic/national aspect of the Czechoslovak democratization process is that the Slovaks remained fairly uninterested in joining the opposition until 1989. Most opposition activity until that point came from Czech dissidents.

New social movements/s

Slovakia hosted an ecological movement that managed to locate itself in the grey zone between allowed and forbidden organizing by focusing on the country’s horrendous environmental situation. The movement gained strength “thanks to” the Chernobyl disaster. (Heimann 2009: 294-5)

Protest

It makes some sense to return to the chronological division of the democratization process into three stages (1968, mid-1970s, and mid- to late-1980s) that I outlined in the periodization discussion above when seeking to understand the protest strategies of the opposition. The non-violent mass tactics used to resist the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968 returned in the late 1980s after being suppressed for two decades. In the twenty-year period in between 1968 and 1989, and especially since the establishment of Charter 77, the opposition had been forced to rely on less confrontational protest tactics, and it is here that my account begins.

“Charter 77,” Falk (2009) explains, “was predominantly an organization of writers and intellectuals, and thus its forte and principal activity was its endless publication of documents – declarations, open letters, and communiqués” (Falk 2003: 91). In addition to publishing statements designed to pressure the regime into respecting human rights and other democratic values, Charter 77 engaged in concrete activities to lend credibility to its claims that the regime was indeed not respecting the laws of the country. As Kusin asserts,

this was mainly achieved through the pursuance of one of the aims the Charter

set itself at the start, namely ‘to document grievances and suggest remedies.’ The Charter has issued statements on individual and collective infringements of rights and freedoms, supported by documentary evidence. These are the so-called *Documents* of the Charter, which appeared in a numbered sequence. (Kusin 1978: 321)

Similar “non-direct” types of protest accompanied Charter 77’s documentation of human rights abuses. As in Poland, unofficial seminars were organized where renowned scholars, including major names from outside Eastern Europe, gave lectures on topics considered too controversial to be discussed at the universities (Falk 2003). Related to this development was the emergence of a “parallel industry of alternative presses” that published literary and musical works that had been banned by the state (Falk 2003: 94). Unlike the situation in East Germany, this *samizdat* (self-publication) culture flourished in Czechoslovakia and enjoyed widespread circulation among the dissidents (Saxonberg 2001: 222).

In the pre-Gorbachev days of unrestrained government repression, these types of protest activity, albeit not “safe” by any stretch of the imagination, did allow activists to challenge the state in an indirect and less confrontational manner. However, more confrontational activities began to emerge in the late 1980s as developments in the Soviet Union and neighboring Eastern European countries signaled that the rules of the game might be changing. Corresponding to the most immediate phase of the transition to democracy, the period surrounding Gorbachev’s ascent to power witnessed the return of pre-1969 forms of protest – demonstrations and strikes. I have already addressed some of the non-political activities of the Catholic Church, and to these we must add an increasing number of similar demonstrations by secular activists, demonstrations that over time became increasingly political. While I cannot document every mass protest that occurred in Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s, what follows is a chronology of some of the most important demonstrations of the period.

That the return of the “demonstration culture” began with apolitical protests is suggested by the fact that the religious protests of the mid-1980s were followed by secular ones with non-political overtones. For example, on December 8, 1985, one thousand activists gathered in Prague to commemorate the fifth anniversary of John Lennon’s murder. While participants in this small demonstration eventually began to call for “freedom and peace” as they marched across the Charles Bridge on their way to Prague’s impressive castle, they were content to focus their demands on the end of the deployment of nuclear warheads in Europe and “left peacefully at around 9:00 p.m.” (Falk 2003: 97-8).

August 21, 1988, witnessed “the largest independent demonstration since

1969” as about 10,000 people took to the streets to mark the twentieth anniversary of the 1968 invasion (Falk 2003:98). The security forces appear to have been taken by surprise by this demonstration and did not immediately intervene. A possible explanation for this was the opposition’s shrewd decision to stage the protest on the anniversary of the invasion, thus making government action more difficult to justify. In contrast, the StB (secret police) violently and quickly repressed a “similar demonstration” the following month (Falk 2003: 98; Urban 1990). This strategy of staging protests on important anniversaries continued throughout the democratization period and can be thought of as a “free protest space.” For scholars of non-violent action this is not an unknown phenomenon. These types of protests are often referred to as “dilemma actions” – protesting on a date or in a manner that has an historical or cultural meaning that not even the state can question can make repression costly and difficult, thus allowing activists the space needed to stage their protests.

On January 15, 1989, 5,000 activists took advantage of the 20th anniversary of Jan Palach’s public suicide in protest against the Soviet invasion. On January 16, 1969, Palach had set himself ablaze in central Prague, dying three days later as a result of his self-inflicted injuries. Since then, Palach had been seen as a martyr and a symbol of Czechoslovakian independence (Urban 1990: 114). The protestors had planned their demonstration for the day before the anniversary in order to “highlight the differences between the pretensions of the government, which on this day was signing a new accord on human rights at the Vienna meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), and the realities of its repression” (Stokes 1993: 154). When protesters attempted to lay flowers at the site of Palach’s sacrifice the police attacked and arrested nearly one hundred of them, including Havel. Over the next week, smaller demonstrations that resulted in more arrests and violent crackdowns by the regime occurred (Stokes 1993; Urban 1990).

On June 29, four authors (including Havel) announced that 11,500 people had signed their petition entitled *A Few Sentences* (a reference to a similar Prague Spring document). Eventually, some 30,000 individuals, including people from every walk of life, signed this document that demanded “the release of political prisoners, the ending of persecution of independent initiatives, the freeing of the media and all cultural activity, respect for religious rights, the public presentation of all projects on the environment, and free discussion of the events of the 1950s, the Prague Spring and Warsaw pact invasion, and the period of normalization” (Skilling 1991: 20; Stokes 1993: 155). This return to the earlier tactic of non-confrontational engagement with the state was however only temporary. On August 21st, on the 21st anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion and only one day after the announcement of the establishment of a Solidarity-led government in Poland, 3,000 people protested in Wenceslas Square resulting in 400 arrests. Continuing the tradition of exploiting important dates, another rally took place in the same square on

October 28 to commemorate the 1918 founding of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, naturally a difficult target for the state to repress. This time 10,000 people participated (Humphrey 1990).

As noted several times in this report, the Velvet Revolution began on November 17 when a protest march grew out of an officially authorized student ceremony in Prague to honor the death of a Czech student at the hands of the Nazis fifty years earlier. Once again, activists took advantage of an historical event as the communist government “could not very well cancel this traditional anti-Nazi ceremony” (Stokes 1993: 155). Fifty thousand people, including many students, gathered in Prague for the ceremony and subsequently, possibly encouraged by agents provocateurs, began to march toward the city center. Soon they encountered riot police and fighting broke out. Judt (1992) suggests that “the police were almost certainly operating under orders to overreact, though it remains unclear just who so instructed them, and why” (98). In the resulting chaos a rumor arose the following day that a student, Martin Šmíd, had been killed by the security forces. While arrests and injuries had accompanied virtually every previous demonstration over the past few years, a dead demonstrator was a novelty and more than the outraged Czechoslovaks could take. Thus the November 17 protest represents the most important date of the revolution and certainly qualifies as an eventful protest in the sense that it transformed the mindsets not only of those participating in the demonstration, but in effect the entire nation.

The demonstration and the rumored death stirred the nation into action. As mentioned above, the weekend saw the birth of Civic Forum and its Slovak counterpart Public Against Violence. In addition, on November 18th,

much of the Czech theater community gathered at the Realistic Theater in Prague, where one of the demonstrators from the theater academy read the students’ proclamation calling for a general strike on November 27. The same afternoon, the coordinating committee of Prague students was formed, composed of two representatives of each faculty... That evening, members of the theater community at the Realistic Theater prepared a proclamation declaring themselves to be on strike and in support of the student demands, including the general strike.” (Glenn 2001: 132-3)

Although Civic Forum became the national mouthpiece of the revolution, its organizational locus was to be found within Czechoslovakia’s theaters and its student population. Together, they organized protests on a near daily basis beginning on Monday, November 20.

While the theater strike was important in the sense that it set a “strike agenda” for the nation in anticipation of the general strike scheduled for November 27th, the network of theaters fulfilled additional roles during the revolution. Given the theater’s central place in Czech culture and in its history

of contentious politics, this is not perhaps surprising. For example, “in the nineteenth century, when the area that would become Czechoslovakia remained under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, theater was widely understood as a tool for awakening national consciousness, since Czech could be spoken in the theaters while German was the official public language” (Glenn 2001: 147). Similarly, “after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, theaters acted as public spaces for political expression because they had a degree of institutional autonomy lacking in factories and churches and a theatrical language that enabled them to express opinions in a manner difficult for the state to control” (Glenn 2001: 148). The Velvet Revolution benefitted from this cultural heritage, as theaters once again became centers for anti-state activity.

Over time, the Czechoslovak state had built a dense network of theaters. Now, these government institutions would be used against their former masters. The days following the November 17th demonstration witnessed “the transformation of the theaters into local branches of the movement” (Glenn 2001: 143). The “theater branches” of the Civic Forum were important because, unlike “those founded in factories, research institutes, or schools, ... they did not represent one group of society but rather, like their parent body, a forum in which members of all groups of society met regularly” (Glenn 2001: 147). Put succinctly, the theater provided the revolution not only with free spaces, but also with neutral spaces in which no societal group appeared to be jostling for position.

Finally, the theater network served a strictly organizational function as the center of the revolutionary movement and its communication activities. Following the student demonstration that triggered the revolution, students and actors worked together as they traveled outside of the capital to inform people in other cities of the events in Prague. This dissemination effort was a crucial component of the revolutionaries’ strategy to decentralize their movement, and “the Theater Institute in Prague served as the information and documentation center of the Czech theater community for these trips” (Glenn 2001: 151). While one should not overstate the importance of the theater network for the outcome of the Velvet Revolution, it seems beyond doubt that the revolution would have looked very different without it. As Glenn concludes

By the morning of November 26 the Theater Institute in Prague recorded branches of Civic Forum in fourteen theaters in Prague and in eighteen cities outside of Prague, including the capitals of the six regions of the Czech Republic. Slovak theaters, with which the Czech theater community had excellent contacts, followed quickly. This provided an important network of communication throughout the country, located in places that would be familiar to all citizens (who might not, for example, know where the university or a particular factory room would be) and would be heated (which was important, since it was, after all, November). In the packed theaters at night, people from all parts of society came to listen or to present information about the situation

and to discuss the course of events. (Glenn 2001: 154)

Against the backdrop of university and theater strikes, and in anticipation of the November 27th two-hour general strike, demonstrators calling for a new government rallied throughout the country on a daily basis. For example, in Prague's central Wenceslas Square 200,000 rallied on the 20th, 500,000 each on the 25th and 26th, and 200,000 as the general strike came into effect on the 27th (Humphrey 1990). Having committed itself to refrain from the use of violence following the "death" of Šmíd on the 17th, the state was no longer able to frighten the population into submission. The massive demonstrations clearly signaled to both sides that power now resided with the opposition, and in particular with Civic Forum and Havel. Roundtable discussions were now the logical next step, occurring against a background of potential new and devastating strikes that were only a Havel phone call away. On December 10th, only twenty-three days after the first demonstration of the revolution, a majority non-communist government was sworn into office.

Two aspects of the Velvet Revolution are worth highlighting more specifically. First, the revolution was non-violent. As Glenn explains,

Civic Forum sought to heighten the sense of moral outrage by emphasizing the non- violence of the demonstrating students (in contrast to an unruly demonstration by professional agitators)... Central to the civil society framing strategy is the identity of its adherents as a united citizenry endowed with human rights whose will the movements claimed to represent against the state... *The agency component of the civil society framing strategy was defined as peaceful participation in the general strike and negotiations with the state, at which Civic Forum would pressure the state to make the necessary changes [emphasis added]...* The emphasis on nonviolence and peaceful methods filled the public statements of Civic Forum, which announced in its daily news service, "[L]et us refuse any form of terror and violence. Our weapons are love and nonviolence." (Glenn 2001: 143-5)

By employing non-violent resistance the opposition offered the regime a way out of the conflict. It seems likely that the regime was willing to accept this option in the context of earlier regime change in Poland, Hungary, and East Germany. The second aspect worth mentioning, and one that is closely related to the first, is the fact that the opposition refrained from humiliating the regime. Content to make demands "notable for their modesty" (Glenn 2001: 146), it seems plausible that Civic Forum and other organizations facilitated the regime's decision to negotiate. As Glenn concludes, "despite the fall of the Leninist regimes in neighboring countries, the [opposition] did not call for fundamental changes in the system, but almost a reformist spirit calling for the redress of human rights abuses" (Glenn 2001: 146).

Conclusion

This report has sought to highlight the role of civil society and its protest activities in the course of Czechoslovakia's path to democratization. Perhaps the most important finding is that civil society actors played a limited, albeit prolonged and effective role in the decades leading up to the revolution. Having put the human rights issue on the table in the aftermath of the Helsinki Agreement, civil society activists were able to capitalize on the additional political opportunities represented by Gorbachev's reform program and episodes of regime change in other Eastern European countries in the late 1980s. In short, Charter 77 helped create the structural context in which a non-violent revolution swept aside a well-entrenched authoritarian regime relatively easily. As in Iran in 1979, where the persistent efforts of human rights activists in the preceding decade and a half created a favorable structural context for a non-violent revolution, Charter 77 contributed to the creation of an iron cage of liberalism in Czechoslovakia. By bringing the world's attention to bear on the human rights agenda the government had committed itself to through the Helsinki Final Act, the activists eventually made the state's situation nigh on impossible. Holding the regime accountable for protecting the values Moscow (i.e. Gorbachev) now advocated, and using non-violent tactics to do so made it impossible for the regime to reply in an effective manner. This suggests that scholars may be well advised to examine episodes of democratization from below in a historicized fashion that considers the causes of such episodes as the result of long-term developments. Furthermore, the findings of this report suggest that political opportunity structures need not be completely "structural." Instead, activists, like the members of Charter 77, can help bring such opportunities about through their ongoing efforts to highlight contradictions and inconsistencies in the natures of the states they are struggling against.

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