



CASE STUDY

July 2024



**Prague Spring
Velvet Revolution**

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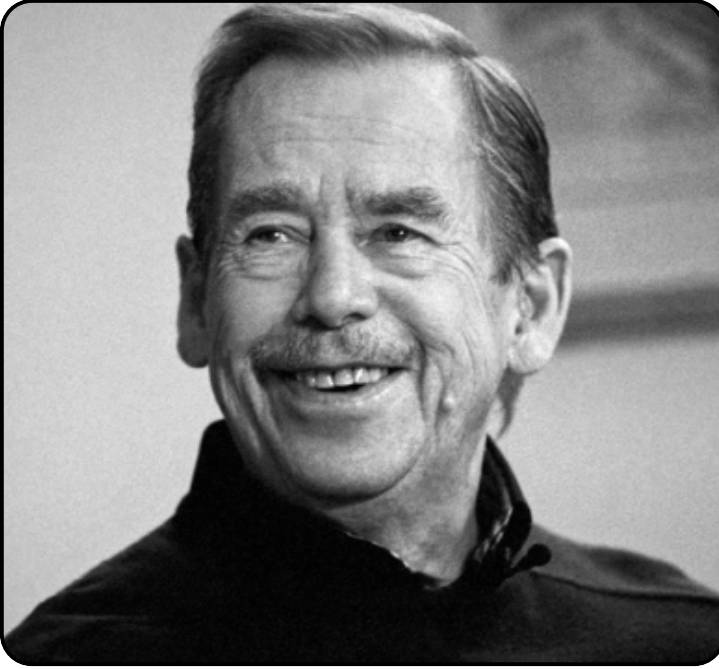
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- ① *"You do not become a "dissident" just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society."*

Vaclav Havel
The Power of the Powerless

Václav Havel, a playwright who emerged as a symbol of the Velvet Revolution, played a key role in Czechoslovakia's transition to democracy. As the initiator of Charter 77, a landmark document in the opposition to the Communist regime, Havel was repeatedly imprisoned for his beliefs. His steadfast commitment to nonviolence and freedom of expression, along with his dedication to civic engagement, established him as an inspirational leader of the revolution, ultimately leading to his appointment as President following the peaceful overthrow of the Communist regime.

① Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Poweless*, 1978, translated in english by Paul Wilson

I. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe witnessed significant political upheals. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, an 'Iron Curtain' fell across Europe, separating the Atlanticist countries from those under the Soviet influence. The countries of Western Europe developed while those of the South managed to find their way towards democracy. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe remained frozen in the Soviet shadow. The USSR endeavoured to suppress every of their democratic impulse. These included the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, which were both complementary and quite distinct, providing us with several lessons.

While one was the result of an internal upheaval which, initially, did not particularly concern the USSR, the other was the result of a multitude of factors, both internal and external. In 1968, 10 years after the establishment of a socialist republic, a new man took up the post of First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party with a new policy guideline, 'socialism with a human face'. After 8 months in power and many liberal reforms, Alexander Dubček saw the tanks of the Red Army enter Prague and put an end to the Prague Spring. It would be more than 20 years before the Soviet stranglehold on Czechoslovakia was once again broken. In November 1989, in the wake of major social upheavals, the single party renounced the rule of power. This opened the way to democracy for the two key figures in the so-called Velvet Revolution: Vaclav Havel and Alexander Dubček.

These events, initiated by ordinary citizens with the support of a progressive intelligentsia, and carried out with peaceful determination, proved that it is possible to overthrow authoritarian regimes without bloodshed.



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Velvet revolution Sametova revoluce

II. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF PARGUE SPRING

A - CZECHOSLOVAKIA UNDER SOVIET INFLUENCE

Communism's bloody beginnings

A single party, the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), was set up following the Prague Coup and the overthrow of the fragile Third Republic in 1948. Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia quickly became evident in Moscow's refusal let Czechoslovakia join the Marshall Plan.



Klement Gottwald

During the 1950s, Klement Gottwald, then General Secretary of the Communist Party, supported purge policies similar to those observed in the Soviet Union under the era of Joseph Stalin. These purges culminated in 1952 with the Prague Trial, when Rudolf Slansky, Gottwald's main opponent, was sentenced to death. The aim of this purge was to show Stalin the

extent of Gottwald's influence. He ousted many of the KSČ's top cadres, thereby consolidating his power.

Towards a discreet easing

After Gottwald's death in 1953, Antonín Novotný became head of the KSČ, where he remained until 1968. Against the backdrop of Stalin's demise, he was able to undertake a moderate process of destalinization by rehabilitating victims of the 1952 Prague trial. In the same vein, he undertook economic reforms to moderately liberalise the ailing Czechoslovak economy (stagnant industrial production, backwardness in the agricultural sector). However, he did not really change the foundations of the political system. He maintained the single party system and the repression of opponents.

Despite his efforts to distance himself from the Gottwald era, Novotný was still perceived as a figure of the Stalinist old guard. The KSČ's actions were even regularly considered as harsher than the policies of Soviet leaders (first Khrushchev and then Brezhnev).

Aspirations for reform grew increasingly urgent as the intelligentsia and younger generations of the KSČ called for more liberal policies and less dependence on Soviet influence.

² Takeover of Czechoslovakia in February 1948 by the Czechoslovak Communist Party, supported by the USSR.

³ For more information, see Ruth Zylberman's documentary 'The Trial - Prague 1952'.

This ultimately led to the Prague Spring in 1968, a movement that symbolised Czechoslovakia's desire to move away from Soviet orthodoxy and seek a more independent and democratic path.

B - "SOCIALISM WITH A HUMAN FACE"

Prague Spring

Alexander Dubček's period in power, known as the Prague Spring, marked a significant turning point in the history of Czechoslovakia.



Alexander Dubček

He became General Secretary of the KSČ in 1968 after internal divisions within the party forced Novotný out. Despite the latter's appeal for help to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, Dubček was supported by Brezhnev, who noted the strong opposition around Novotný within the party.

Dubček embarked on a policy dubbed 'socialism with a human face'. The reforms he undertook aimed to relax the Communist Party's control over society and introduce fundamental freedoms. He promoted freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of movement. It democratised political life and encouraged the decentralisation of the economy. He initiated the drafting of a Constitution establishing the equality of the Czech and Slovak states within a federal republic. While maintaining the fundamental principles of socialism, he attempted to open up the country in favour of democracy. This era of liberalisation, although short-lived, raised high hopes among the Czechoslovak population, who aspired to greater freedom.

Soviet response

Dubček's liberal policies soon irritated the Soviet leaders, who warned him on several occasions. An agreement was reached at the beginning of August 1968 in which Dubček reaffirmed his loyalty to the Soviet leaders and his allegiance to the Warsaw Pact. At the time, Dubček thought that military intervention in Czechoslovakia was impossible. However, on the night of 20 to 21 August 1968, Operation Danube led to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armed forces of five of the Warsaw Pact powers. The invasion met with no military resistance. However, large numbers of citizens took part in major demonstrations. Radio played a key role in organising these demonstrations, continuing to broadcast freely information about the invasion.

^④ USSR, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and the German Democratic Republic.

It also led to a significant wave of migration, with the immediate emigration of 70,000 Czechs.

Indignation

Abroad, the West was unanimously outraged, but reactions took different forms. The United States was concerned about the military nature of the operation. Countries in the Russian sphere of influence half-heartedly denounced the operation. Other countries (France, for example), which were trying to ease their relations with the USSR, were sober in their criticism. Above all, the symbolic significance of this intervention and the consequences it would have in the Czechoslovak context were not sufficiently emphasised.

Even within the Soviet bloc, certain states such as Romania, although within the Russian sphere of influence, condemned this intervention. In Czechoslovakia, the popular reaction was massive. At the same time, Dubček, who enjoyed great influence, called on the population not to take up arms. French archaeologist Jean-Paul Demoule described the mobilisation as follows:

«I went through villages, there were tanks everywhere (...) and the whole population was talking and not insulting, but shouting at the tankers, if I dare say so. It wasn't an atmosphere of terror. The debates were obviously extremely stormy. I once met Russian soldiers who said: 'But we've come to rescue you, we've been told that there are 40,000 American and West German soldiers disguised as tourists'.

⁵ This was the case in Finland, where the population revolted while the government remained neutral.

They were very surprised to be so badly received when they thought they had come to deliver.”

⁶

Faced with the widespread popular movement and fearing that tensions would escalate, the USSR was forced to wait until April 1969 before sacking Alexander Dubček. Gustav Husak was then installed in his post, and embarked on a policy of renewing ties with the Soviet leaders.

C - “REPRESSION WITH A HUMAN FACE”

The so-called ‘normalisation’ policy led to a purge within the KSČ with the ousting of 320,000 members. The media were strictly censored. Many dissidents, intellectuals, students, and other political opponents were arrested, imprisoned, or forced into exile. Although this purge was marked by violent acts of repression (use of a tank against a crowd), it was less bloody than that undertaken during the Gottwald era.

In an article for *Le Monde* in 1979, the journalist Bernard Féron cynically described it as ‘repression with a human face’, with the particularity of effectively refraining democratic impulses.

The Slovakian philosopher Milan Šimečka develops the analysis that « *civilised violence has reduced to nothing any audacity of thought, any desire for criticism and any determination to defend a re-known truth* ».

As a result, until 1976, there was no significant challenge to normalisation or power.

⁶ Jean-Paul Demoule on Radio Prague internationale, ‘Interview’, 20/02/2019, translated from french to english

The first major breakthrough came in 1976 when a large number of leading figures from the Czech-Slovak intelligentsia signed Charter 77, which initially held 242 signatories. Although this charter remained mainly confined to intellectual circles, unlike Solidarnosc in Poland, it served as a crucial tool with great symbolic force for the opposition.

Receiving significant international support, Charter 77 was soon transformed into a semi-official body of opposition to the KSČ, through which intellectuals, via newsletters, conveyed their opinions on the ruling power.



Vaclav Havel and protesters commemorate the struggle for Freedom and Democracy at Prague memorial during 1989 Velvet Revolution.

III. DYNAMICS AND TRIGGERS OF THE VELVET REVOLUTION

A - THE DOMINO EFFECT OF PEACEFUL REVOLUTIONS

The Weakening of the Soviet Union

The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 cannot be understood without taking into account the context of the peaceful revolutions that preceded and influenced it. Although a number of authoritarian regimes in southern Europe democratised, this does not seem to have had any impact on the regimes under the Soviet umbrella.

The real trigger seems to lie in the weakening and military withdrawal of the USSR (February 1989) from Afghanistan. This sent a strong message to the countries under the Soviet umbrella. 1989 was also marked by a series of major political upheavals across Eastern Europe, notably in Poland, Hungary and East Germany, where popular movements succeeded in overthrowing the existing communist regimes. These events had a domino effect, strengthening the hope and determination of Czechoslovakians to follow the same path to democracy.

In Poland, the Solidarnosc movement, led by Lech Wałęsa, played a crucial role in securing political reforms through peaceful negotiations with the government. This victory demonstrated that change could be achieved not through violence, but through the ballot box. In Hungary, the Communist reformers bowed to pressure from the

opposition and sent a symbolic message by opening the borders with Austria, allowing hundreds of East Germans to flee to the West. This event, also known as the 'pan-European picnic', greatly weakened the East German regime.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution

East Germany witnessed massive demonstrations, notably the Leipzig protests, which culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. This symbolic event marked a decisive turning point, showing that the Iron Curtain could be lifted. In Czechoslovakia, it was this event, in particular, that sparked off popular movements. On 17 November 1989, the violent repression of a student demonstration in Prague triggered a series of increasingly large demonstrations, culminating in the resignation of the government on 28 November 1989. This series of events would later be known as the 'Velvet Revolution'.

B - CIVIL SOCIETY: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PROTAGONISM

Upstream work by civil society

The popular movements of 1989, especially those of November, led to the overthrow of the current government in Czechoslovakia.

These demonstrations were spearheaded by charismatic figures such as the playwright Vaclav Havel, a pioneer of Charter 77, who eventually led the revolution to its conclusion. During the 1980s, civil society gradually became more organised and influential, paving the way for democratic change. The erosion of confidence in the communist regime, combined with the emergence of new leaders and the activation of dissident networks, enabled civil society to become a key player in the transition to democracy.

The 1980s saw a proliferation of clandestine activities and solidarity networks that strengthened the cohesion of civil society. Discussion groups, 'samizdat' (self-published) publications and cultural events created a space for resistance and the exchange of ideas, outside the strict control of the state. These initiatives kept the flame of protest alive and prepared the ground for wider mobilisation.

A velvet transition

During the Velvet Revolution, civil society rapidly organised itself, forming coalitions and alliances to coordinate protest actions. The Civic Forum, founded by Václav Havel and other dissident leaders, played a central role in channelling people's aspirations and negotiating with the government.

On 10 December, Gustav Husak enthroned the new coalition that would take over the interim government. It illustrates an unprecedented diversity in the political landscape, bringing together

figures from a wide range of backgrounds. Although this Velvet Revolution was supported by the people, it was facilitated by the commitment of the intelligentsia, which was well established during the transition. This ensured a peaceful interim without the need for a purge.

C - THE POWER OF PACIFISM: NONVIOLENCE AS A WEAPON

The originality of the Velvet Revolution lays in its pacifism. Although peaceful demonstrations were suppressed for a long time, this did not discourage the activists who continued these non-violent protests. Pacifism also made it possible to develop a key factor: strengthening the moral legitimacy of the movement. At the same time, pacifism helped to moderate repression by the communist authorities, who were not afraid of a sudden revival.

Nonviolence did not only attracted massive support from the population, it also won the sympathy of international opinion. The world's media covered the peaceful demonstrations in Czechoslovakia, creating international pressure on the Communist regime to reform. In addition, nonviolence prevented the government from justifying harsh military repression, as any violent action against peaceful demonstrators would have been widely condemned.

The counter-example, in Prague is striking: on 17 November 1989, during a student demonstration in Prague, the police violently repressed the participants, injuring many demonstrators. The violence backfired, sparking a wave of indignation and solidarity across the country.

The leaders of the movement, notably Václav Havel and the Civic Forum, called for peaceful action and discipline among the demonstrators. Above all, this nonviolent approach led to a smoother political transition.

D – REPRESSION FEEDS REVOLUTION

The key to the democratic impetus of the Velvet Revolution thus lies in the context of peaceful revolutions, but also in that of renewed repression in Czechoslovakia. 'Repression with a human face' had until then prevented genuine popular indignation that could lead to a revolution.

However, this revolution is part of a broader theoretical framework concerning repression. Repression fosters and reinforces revolutionary and protest feelings, a thesis supported by many authors. By exposing the brutality of an authoritarian regime,

repression generates greater support, to all opponents. The example of Charter 77 illustrates this dynamic and its international support contributed to its survival.

Mass surveillance, censorship and the arrest of intellectuals have, in fact, strengthened the motivation of some and strengthened the convictions of others.

One notable example is Václav Havel, who, after several periods in prison, became the leader of the revolution under the banner of the 'Civic Forum'. The figure of and need for a leader behind whom the 'powerless' can rally is also the subject of his manifesto *The Power of the Powerless*.

A relevant parallel can be drawn between the work of Charter 77 at the time and that of the opposition media today. Both can promote original and free opinions, serving as tools for stimulating thought and fostering a critical spirit.



Night demonstration, November 1989, Prague

IV. CONCLUSION

1.

Firstly, it is important to understand the impact of factors external to Czechoslovakia. Their impact significant, indicating that timing can sometimes be crucial. On the one hand, the international context acted as a barometer of opportunities for the Czech people during the Velvet Revolution, which was part of a more global context of revolts against the Communist republics. Who knows whether this revolution would have happened without the galvanising effect that the symbolism of the fall of the Berlin Wall had on the Czechoslovak people? On the other hand, the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact authorised the repression of the Prague Spring without any Czechoslovak military opposition. This last point is important because it raises the following question: what would have happened if the repression of the Prague Spring had been met with Czechoslovak military resistance? What would have happened if Dubček had not decided to avoid bloodshed?

2.

Secondly, the role of the people is a factor that must be considered. The smooth upheaval of the Prague Spring was not initiated by the people but directly by the KSČ. However, during the latter's repression, the people's role in the resistance was paramount, prompting the Soviet leadership to wait eight months to replace Dubček for fear of a large-scale

uprising. In 1989, during the Velvet Revolution, the democratic impulse emerged directly from the people and succeeded. This suggests the decisive role of a popular initiative.

3.

Thirdly, in a distinct category, separate from people and power, the intelligentsia of the communist republics plays a key role, as seen in the Velvet Revolution. In Czechoslovakia, they played a key role in the Velvet Revolution. It was not very involved in the Prague Spring, which may suggest that it played a decisive role in the success of the second revolution. Organised on a long-term basis through Charter 77, the Czech intelligentsia developed and prepared the overthrow over the long term, ensuring that when the time came, the transition to democracy would be smooth.

4.

Fourthly, Charter 77 acted as an unofficial media outlet disseminating dissident opinions. This role in intellectual circles underlines the power of opposition media. The example of free radio during the Prague Spring reinforces this point. Today, the new information media are a crucial tool for disseminating information, such as radio w in the Prague Spring and Charter 77 in the Velvet Revolution.

5.

Finally, from an institutional point of view, the Prague Spring seemed to start under better auspices, being initiated by an internal party ballot. This augured little institutional instability, but Soviet interference put paid to this liberal impulse. The Velvet Revolution overthrew the ruling party. However, with the support of a well-informed intelligentsia and reformist communists, the transition to democracy went smoothly, which was not always the case in other countries. Subsequently, the two countries that emerged from the dissolution of Czechoslovakia retained a relatively high degree of pluralism. This was greater than in Hungary and Poland, which may explain their 'illiberal' drift.

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