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CZECHOSLOVAK PARTY'S PROBLEMS ON EVE OF 13TH CONGRESS

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CZECHOSLOVAK PARTY'S PROBLEMS ON EVE OF 13TH CONGRESS

The Czechoslovak Communist Party, with its 13th congress opening on 31 May, is permeated, even at the highest levels, with doubt and pessimism over its ability to solve the many problems confronting it. It has been just this developing sense of desperation --originally precipitated by a combination of near economic collapse, political instability, and pressure from party as well as nonparty intellectuals--that has brought the regime to accede over the past few years to demands for liberal reforms of almost every aspect of Czechoslovak political, economic, cultural, and social life. De-Stalinization was reluctantly ordered in 1962 by the 12th party congress, and the liberals are hoping to safeguard their gains by institutionalizing the changes.

Progress has been obstructed, however, by conservative elements within the party to the point where the effectiveness of the reforms is threatened. The major dilemma facing the party leadership is the patent need to implement them and the legitimate claim of the conservatives that the party's control and dominance would be jeopardized by total implementation. Although most of the issues have been thrashed out in stormy precongress discussions, opposing forces are likely to continue the struggle at the congress and afterward, when the regime attempts to implement "agreed" reforms.

The Economy

Perhaps the most difficult and critical problem, one which will occupy a large place on the congress agenda, is the need to stimulate economic growth. The economic reform program initiated in January, with its provisions for some decentralization of the economy, is unlikely to prove effective.

To succeed, the reform program depends heavily on nonintervention of state and party bureaucrats. However, these officials retain their power to intervene in the economy and probably would not hesitate to use it. The leadership is thus caught between the risks of postponing fundamental economic changes and of attempting the fundamental political changes that would be needed to implement the economic changes. As the reform program shows, the risks of interfering with the political status quo seem greater and more real to the Czech leadership, notwithstanding the serious economic difficulties of recent years.

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Opposition to reform, moreover, emanates not only from the entrenched bureaucrat but also from the party rank and file who are naturally suspicious of any change and who may even fear for their jobs.

The most immediate source of party conflict, centering on the 1966-70 plan is the disagreement over investment policy, foreign trade, and feasible growth rates. The plan calls for a rate of economic growth double that achieved between 1961 and 1965 and for shortening the work week to 42 hours for some workers. Last month's party central committee meeting announced plans to raise the annual average increase in national income from 4.1 to 4.4 percent--a target higher than that projected a year ago. Important party officials, however, reportedly feel that investment and manpower resources cannot support even a lower target.

The congress will probably speak in favor of structural changes in the economy but will fail to push the necessary action. In particular the congress will not move to concentrate resources in the long neglected consumer industries, as the liberal economists would have them do. Perhaps the only real economic reform to come out of the congress will be to shift responsibility for financing municipal and consumer services to local organs of government. These would then have to levy new taxes or raise prices to maintain and improve these services.

In the long run sweeping changes in the Czechoslovak economy are possible, even likely, and the concern of the party and the state bureaucrats for their future is quite real. The leadership is also uneasy and anxious to prevent mounting frustration and to avoid an even more serious economic crisis in the future. It is not yet willing, however, or able to permit the sweeping readjustments and shake-up necessary to a real decentralization of economic decision making.

Local Government

Along with the limited economic decentralization that is envisaged, the regime has initiated equally important structural and fiscal changes to strengthen the local organs of government, the National Committees. As with the economic reforms, the central government and the party hope to retain most of their powers, but local government authorities have been given broader responsibilities and some potential for independent action by being ordered to become financially self-sufficient. It is still too early to tell if this strengthening of the National Committees will in fact provide for greater independence.

Some parallel exists in the regime's move two years ago to the National Assembly by giving that body a small degree of power. Since then, bills have actually been debated and even returned to committee for changes. Nevertheless, last year the

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controversial police bill was promulgated as law in its original form after the National Assembly had voted significant changes in it.

The Party

The key issue in these economic and political reforms is the role the party is to play and how it can maintain its authority and discipline while encouraging the movement toward greater initiative. The once all-powerful secretary of the party unit in the factories and enterprises, for example, is not likely to comply willingly with the central committee's order that the party unit restrict its role to political guidance and leave business questions to the enterprise manager and his technicians.

The party itself--according to a proposed change of statutes to be presented to the congress --must introduce some democratic practices. The central committee henceforth must seek concurrence from the local party unit concerned if it wants to expel a party member. This reform may have been prompted, at least in part, by the case two years ago of a noted party philosopher expelled from his job at the Institute of Philosophy and from the party for his liberal views; the party unit at the institute strongly and officially protested his expulsion--to no avail.

Sticky Social Reforms

As a result of its long, hard look at Czechoslovak society, the regime has agreed to initiate reforms of mass organizations, military and teacher training, the health system, the penal system, the defense establishment, and the legal system--under a bill which has been debated for the past year. Two more controversial issues have been left for the congress to deal with: educational reform and the problem of youth.

A reform of higher education was proposed early in 1965, but it met with strong opposition from party conservatives and reportedly has been left for the congress to decide. In April, however, the National Assembly received and approved a law on advanced schools as liberal as the original, if not more so. This law and the larger education reform of which it is a part, provide for a return to a number of pre-1948 educational ideas and forms. Much disputed but finally accepted were provisions for faculty election of the rectors of the universities and student participation in university policy planning bodies.

The dilemma facing the party on this issue has been the need for reform--evident in the failure of the Soviet educational model, which Czechoslovakia copied, to maintain the once-exemplary quality of higher education in Czechoslovakia--and the political threat posed by an independent intelligensia--evident in the influence exercised by university professors in the drive for de-Stalinization. The party is

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also reluctant to loosen control over the universities because of increasing student political action.

Student unrest and demands have underscored the need for a new look at the mass youth organization, CSM, particularly in view of the sharp rise in juvenile delinquency. The regime has recognized its failure to win over the youth in the schools and in the factories, but efforts toward at least an organizational solution--the first type of solution the party usually seeks--have generated disputes involving party leader Novotny himself. The two most dangerous proposals to date, from Novotny's point of view, are a division of CSM into one organization for students and another for young workers, or, the remodeling of CSM into a political unit free to suggest, criticize, and otherwise act as a political party. Neither of these proposals will receive a hearing at the congress, but as the issue remains unsettled, some sparks of the dispute are likely to flare up there.

Czech-Slovak Animosity

Traditional animosity between the Czechs and Slovaks still plagues the Communist regime. Although relations between the two peoples are not now at their lowest point, they are far from good either on the popular or the party level. Ever mindful of the problem, which tends to take on significant proportions at times of public discontent or party conflicts, the regime has tried to placate Slovak nationalism by strengthening the Slovak National Council (the highest governmental organ in Slovakia) and by bringing Slovaks into the inner councils of state and party on such questions as budget and planning. However real or unreal this attempt to strengthen Slovak responsibilities and authority, the Slovaks themselves continue to seek greater autonomy in the form of a federated republic. Prague is not sympathetic to such proposals, but the resurgence of strong Slovak nationalism reportedly has forced the regime to resort to "administrative" or power tactics even to impress its will upon the subordinate Slovak party.

Apparently some territorial administrative reorganization has been under discussion, albeit none that would give Slovakia greater autonomy. Heated debates reportedly accompanied a proposal to revert to the pre-1948 division of the country into Moravia, Bohemia, and Slovakia, in order to cope more effectively with economic reorganization. This proposal reportedly is opposed by Novotny and may be a thorn in his side if not at the congress, perhaps after.

Culture and Ideology

The intellectuals--writers, poets, journalists, economists, film makers--have led the drive

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for de-Stalinization and liberalization in Czechoslovakia since the 1962 party congress. The regime has made repeated efforts ranging from exhortation to outright suppression to curb public pronouncements by the intellectuals, many of whom are party members. For the most part, these efforts have not been successful and the congress has been given as a primary task the consideration of ideological and cultural policy.

To date, every attempt of the party to define and maintain limits of criticism has been circumvented; as one vehicle for criticism has been suppressed or brought under control another has taken up the cry. In the areas of culture and ideology, therefore, the party's pronouncements, such as the theses for the congress, tend to be much stronger or conservative than would appear consistent with the liberalization which is actually in progress. Liberalism or revisionism is still officially condemned as strongly as dogmatism, but such condemnation is partially to reassure Communists at home and abroad who fear things have gone or may go too far too fast in Czechoslovakia. The cultural policy adopted by the congress is likely to follow this pattern, but, in fact, the party is merely trying to contain what has become uncontainable. The only effective alternative now is one which the party is unwilling, perhaps unable, to use: a return to Stalinist repression of criticism.

There has been a great deal of talk in Czechoslovakia about a return to Stalinism by the congress, generated mainly by the tightening of controls in Moscow and by the Soviets' own reassessment of Stalin before their 23rd party congress in March. Novotny reportedly told Leonid Brezhnev that if the Soviet party rehabilitated Stalin it was questionable that he could bring the Czechoslovak party to follow. It did not come to that and there is little likelihood that Prague will turn to this extreme alternative. Harsh words, perhaps some administrative and fiscal measures, as well as personnel changes within the party's ideology offices may occur at the congress, but whatever their immediate effect, nothing short of total suppression of the writers' and journalists' unions and their publications will long halt the bold and outspoken drive of the intellectuals.

In the realm of ideology, the line the party would have the intellectuals propound has changed over the past years. In theory, Czechoslovakia by now was to have concluded the "building of a mature socialist society" and the "laying of the foundations for a transition to Communism"; this congress should have been ready to declare the opening of the period of the "transition to Communism" as the Soviets did at their 22nd congress in 1961.

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As late as mid-1965 the Czechs were still hinting at doing just this, and they explained many of the liberalization measures as foundations for the imminent "all-peoples state" or classless society. As the leaders finally accepted what was obvious, however, the party began to make it clear that Czechoslovak society--and mainly the economy--had not developed as hoped or even as "planned."

In the most recent pronouncement on the subject, Novotny said that Czechoslovakia was completing the building of a socialist state--a conservative declaration which would appear to put the Czechs behind even the stage of laying the foundations for a transition to Communism.

Leadership

The party leadership cannot be characterized as a liberal group, genuinely interested in democratization. Over the past few years there have been strong attempts at the highest levels of the party to obstruct many of the planned reforms. Novotny himself, in initiating the reforms, has risked losing his traditional source of support--the medium-level party bureaucrats, the conservative plant managers, and hard-line provincial party bosses.

The conservative tendency of the leadership was reflected in the original theses prepared for the congress. As the congress has drawn nearer, however, party leaders have admitted the inadequacy or unacceptability of some of the proposals generated by the theses and have accepted bills and reforms which appear to be more liberal than originally envisaged. The explanation for this seems to be that the leadership is being unusually realistic and is convinced that a Communist Czechoslovakia--and their own continued rule--cannot survive or progress without these reforms. The propaganda, therefore, tends to be on the conservative rather than the liberal side--and can be expected to be so at the Congress--to placate the conservative opposition, but the actions, the laws, tend to the liberal side to meet the requirements of the society.

Liberals, particularly liberal intellectuals, feel harassed and fear for the future of "liberalization." Movement since the last party congress, however, has been in only one direction. Jagged or precarious as the path has been or will be, even the party has admitted that there is no turning back. Any personnel changes that may occur at the congress, even at the party presidium level, are not likely to alter this.

Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is not likely to be a source of dispute at the

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congress, even though there is constant struggle and debate within the party and government in this area. In the past few years, Czechoslovakia has tried to adjust its relations with Communist Europe and the West to the end of gaining greater economic stability and, to some degree, independence. There has been no major reorientation of trade, but Prague has tried to improve its relations with the West in other areas, to promote more trade with Western Europe and the US, and to place its trade relations throughout the world on the basis of economic self-interest. This policy, because of its ramifications for Czechoslovak relations with Moscow and the rest of Eastern Europe, has been a source of dissension in Prague.

With the change of leadership in Moscow in 1964, Novotny tried to place Czechoslovakia in a somewhat better bargaining position vis-a-vis Moscow in what has developed into a limited and mild de-Russification in Czechoslovakia. Prague has been placing its own needs above those of Moscow and the bloc, sometimes causing minor conflicts such as last year's hassle with Moscow over grain and probably other deliveries.

There have been indications that the Czechs are discouraged by the failure of Communist Europe's Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA) to become an effective planning and trade unit. Although they probably still hope that somehow this economy-coordinating body can become useful, the Czechs have begun to refer increasingly to the Warsaw Pact organization as the major unifying factor in Eastern Europe.

The decision to improve relations with the West has been complicated by disunity on the issue within the Czechoslovak party. Even so, commercial relations with West Germany and relations with Western Europe in general have become closer in the past few years. Improvement in political and diplomatic relations with West Germany, however, has not progressed, mainly as the result of Soviet and East German pressure on Prague. Relations with the US have not developed as well as those with Western Europe, and political forces in Prague opposed to an improvement has been strengthened.

CZECHOSLOVAK COMMUNIST PARTY PRESIDIUM	
Antonin Novotny	
Jiri Hendrych	
Jozef Lenart	Likely to be re-elected at 13th Party Congress
Otakar Simunek	
Alexander Dubcek	
Michal Chudik	
Jaromir Dolansky	Likely to be dropped
Zdenek Fierlinger	
Drahomir Kolder	Possibly to be dropped
CANDIDATE MEMBERS	
Antonin Kapek	Likely to replace Dolansky and Fierlinger
Martin Vaculik	
Michal Sabolcik	Likely to be re-elected

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The Congress Itself

The congress may take on the aspect of a collection of dull speeches, perhaps highlighted by some platitudes from the reported guest of honor, CPSU boss Brezhnev. There will be some personnel changes, none of which is expected to lead to significant policy changes, and there may even be some new organizational and technical measures announced. The most important aspect of this congress, however, is the atmosphere in which it is taking place; that is, the heated debates, controversies and problems which have preceded it, that may occur in its closed sessions, and that probably will follow it. The 12th party congress of 1962 authorized the opening of a Pandora's box and the 13th party congress of 1966, unable to close the box, will try to cope with the consequences. 25X1

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