

## **How far did the 'reform communism' in the 1950s and 1960s present a viable alternative form of development?**

Reform can be both political or economic, and it can take different directions. The socialist states of Eastern Europe, and even the Soviet Union all deviated from the dominant Stalinist model in one way or another, in some cases they were successful and in others they were not. I will begin by analysing Czechoslovakia and Hungary as the main examples of how reforms failed. In these cases the reform process got out of control and the Warsaw pact members had to intervene to correct it.

I think the experiences of the Prague spring and Hungarian uprising are far more complex than a simple struggle between reform-minded and hardline communists, instead they reflect the national conditions of the time. For example Czechoslovakia was allowed some national autonomy due to the genuine popularity of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In the 1935 elections it received around 10% of the vote and it came first in the 1946 elections after the war, (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010a, p. 471) this gave it a mandate and a certain confidence to defeat bourgeois parties in a free electoral competition. Consequently the character of the Prague spring was largely of popular support for top-down reforms led by Dubček and the Communist Party.

Hungary had a very different background; while it had the history of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, it also had the recent influence of the fascist Arrow Cross party. In 1939 this party received 14% of the votes (2010b, p. 899) and it was the head of a puppet Nazi government from 1944-1945, so it had some popularity. Within this context the Hungarian uprising took on a more national chauvinist character which was driven from below. It was also spurred on by broadcasts from Radio Free Europe which promised support from the imperialist bloc. (Féher and Heller, 1983, p. 23) This contributes to a view of the uprising as essentially anticommunist and therefore completely unviable as a form of development for a socialist country.

The crucial difference when both these cases are compared with the reform in the rest of the socialist bloc is that they rejected some of the essential principles for building socialism. These essential principles were articulated by Soviet spokespeople and diplomats as:

- a) *The leading role of the party (to which is linked the leading role of the working class).*
- b) *Democratic centralism within the party.*

c) *Political censorship and an implacable opposition to 'pluralism' within the mass media, the arts and culture as well as in political life.*

d) *Proletarian internationalism.* - (Mortimer et al., 1979a, p. 250)

These are primarily concerned with maintaining political control and don't touch on economic reforms, and this is strange because marxists place a lot of value on the economic base of society. I would argue that opening up production to capitalist ownership is more damaging because, from a marxist perspective, this is where power is concentrated.

In Czechoslovakia the economic reforms were called the New Economic Model, and they entailed a transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy.(Schaffer, 1965, p. 37) Ota Sik, one of the main architects of the New Economic Model, applied certain conditions to this later on, the most important being the application of an anti-monopoly mechanism to stop the re-centralisation of economic power.(Šik, 1972, conclusion, part 3)

The influence of the Czechoslovak reforms is in the way they deviated from the Soviet model and in doing so opened up a new space for national roads to socialism(Windsor and Roberts, 1969, p. 6). For example 'Czechoslovakia's road to socialism' was reflected in the Western European Communist Parties as the *British Road to Socialism* or *Socialism in the Colours of France*. Many of Czechoslovakia's reforms in the late 1960s, such as support for political pluralism, were visible in the positions of the Eurocommunist movement of the late 1970s. The response from the Soviet Union was that while there can be many roads to socialism, there can be "only one socialism", (1979b, p. 249) and that by confusing the means for the ends Dubček was in effect abandoning socialism altogether.

However, under Sik's model the commanding heights of the economy would still remain under popular control, so while it does deviate from the Soviet model of socialism neither does it represent the full restoration of capitalism. In this way the experiment with 'socialism with a human face' did show some potential as an alternative form of development. Unfortunately the Warsaw pact intervened directly before the reforms could have a significant effect so history cannot definitively judge whether they would have been successful.

Both Yugoslavia and Albania in Southern Europe successfully carried out political and economic reforms in the 1950s. Albania's position can be seen as an amplification of Stalinism and therefore represents a break from the new reformist Soviet Union but a continuation of its own path of

development. The interesting case is Yugoslavia which put large parts of the economy under co-operative ownership as opposed to direct state ownership,(Jelena, 2011) liberalised the media, promoted militant trade unions, devolved state power down to federal republics and pursued a non-aligned foreign policy(1963, part 2). It did all this while maintaining the political dominance of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and keeping harmony between the national republics under one pan-Slavic union.

The experience of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s shows that without the universal idea of Communism to unite the Slavic nations there was a recourse to ethnic fragmentation and sectarian nationalism. Alternatively one could argue that the reason the Yugoslav economy collapsed was because of its integration with the world market, particularly its willingness to take on foreign debt. Despite being an associate member of COMECON, Yugoslavia was not entirely reliant on it because it also traded extensively with Western Europe and North Africa.(Jovanovic, 1972, p. 587-589) However, without the ability to shut itself off from the world market and rely on its fraternal socialist countries for trade and assistance it turned inwards instead, separating into smaller parts. Ultimately it could not maintain the contradiction of being a unit of production in the capitalist system while simultaneously asserting its independence as a socialist state. This is one of the disadvantages of its non-aligned position and its path of development.

If we disregard its eventual collapse, the Yugoslav model showed a successful model of development in that its goal was to accelerate the transition from Socialism to Communism and it stayed true to these intentions.

There is also a geopolitical argument that Albania, Yugoslavia and to some extent Romania were able to enact reforms which would have been unacceptable elsewhere because of their status at the fringes of the Eurasian heartland. The Soviet Union had also already conceded control of the Mediterranean by allowing Greece to stay in the hands of the Greek monarchy. When taken from the geopolitical perspective, any reforms which opened up the way for independent or anti-soviet countries in North-Eastern Europe such as Poland or East Germany would be far less tolerated because these countries act as a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and Western Europe.

The Soviet Union itself underwent some moderate reforms after Nikita Khrushchev's speech *on the Cult of Personality and its Consequences*(1956) at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU. In the speech Khrushchev denounced Stalin and set in motion a process of de-stalinisation. This process on its own dealt with the harsher aspects of the Stalinist period, namely it improved conditions in the

penal colonies and freed many of those who were unfairly imprisoned. It also did away with Socialist Realism as the official cultural model and generally relaxed restrictions on public expression.(Cohen, 1979, p. 134-135) Other aspects of Stalinism such as collectivisation and heavy industry were also reduced slightly, though there was a tension between this and the desire to expand the economy to compete with the USA. For example, Khrushchev was keen to carry through Stalin's mass industrialisation of agriculture with the Virgin Lands program. Although they represented a break with Stalinism these reforms did not significantly alter Soviet society; as such I do not think they merit being labelled as a completely alternative form of development. Instead I see them as a natural consequence of the ending of class struggle in the Soviet Union and the transition from a proletarian dictatorship to a system which catered for the 'whole Soviet people'. (Rosa, 1949, p. 490-491; Sobolev, 1954)

In conclusion, the experiences of reforms in the socialist bloc were varied, and in some cases led to outright revolution. Often they were tailored to specific historical and national conditions, and there were tensions between these and the Soviet model which was developed in very different conditions. In the end however the economies of Eastern Europe grew consistently through the 1950s and 1960s(Miacek, 2010) and provided impressive welfare for their people; in this respect their reforms were successful.

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