100 Years since the founding of KSČ conference – a report

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On May 19–21, 2021, a conference called *100 Years since the Founding of KSČ. The Legacy of Czechoslovak Communism* took place in Prague, or rather online. As this issue brings together some of the papers presented at this conference, it becomes even more important to present an overview of the event that gave the momentum to this thematic issue of the journal *Securitas Imperii*.

The conference has been jointly organized by the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in Prague. The centenary of Czechoslovak communism, which is derived from the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ), has declared its ambitions to offer a "complex approach to Czechoslovak communism" that would include the insight from the fields of political science and sociology and match them with a more traditional historical perspective. Further, the context of the developments of the KSČ was promised, comparative papers were warmly welcomed and the event promised state-of-the-art research. As with many similar events during one of the pandemic C-19 waves in 2021, this conference, originally framed as a live, in-person event turned into a practically fully online series of sessions. This report shall cover the format of the conference, assess the level to which the ambitions were reflected in the event itself, and attempt at summarizing the lessons learned regarding such an event.

The conference consisted of a three-day online academic event, but it has actually been inaugurated and framed by a public debate held at the Vaclav Havel Library with some of the leading Czech public intellectuals: an essayist, former politician and dissident Petr Pithart, former dissident, politician and publicist Daniel Kroupa and an art historian and publicist Milena Bartlová. The selection of the members of this round table and the script of the debate turned out to be well thought through, since the speakers represented different experiences and different views on the phenomenon of Czechoslovak communism and especially the stance towards its legacy. It might even be appropriate to call these views archetypical, at least in the public discourse: a deontological, classical liberal, a conservative and a progressive liberal voice. In spite of the fact that none of the speakers has a track record in sys-

tematic research on the topic, still, it gave good insight into some typical positions and clashes within the academic debate on the matter, like the assessment of the modernization and emancipation aspects of the communist regime, or intersections between the biographies of the speakers and their views. Less fortunate was the selection of the moderators, since Oldřich Tůma has rather played the, again archetypal, role of a historian in a public debate, rectifying "incorrect" information and opinion. Having resigned on the role of creating a neutral environment for the debate, he felt the necessity to become one of the speakers himself.

Two keynote speakers and one introductory note, present in writing in this issue in the "academic talks" section, come from well-established researchers and represent a wide variety of approaches, disciplinarily speaking, but also regarding the scale to which they have chosen to speak about their methods etc. These lectures set the rhythm of the three conference days. Jacques Rupnik is the father-founder of a systematic, rigorously academic and synthetic writing about Czech(oslovak) communism. He has accordingly reflected upon the changing conditions for research in an essayist style. The key thought of his introductory speech about the development and the current situation of the research context was that with the declining power of the existing Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM), the successor to the KSČ, a more discriminate approach that separates politics of memory from systematic academic research. One might not share his strong belief in the feasibility of making such a clear-cut distinction between memory politics and historiography. However, he might be right about the decline of the KSČM and (at the time of the conference) awaited a change of its status to non-parliamentary party as a symbolic turning point that reduces the mobilization potential of memory politics. Moreover, he has captured two key nodes of the current historiographic discourse on Czechoslovak communism: revisionism (not in a strong, derogatory sense) regarding the anti-communist movement in the 1950s and the focus on the dynamics of consensus present between 1948 and 1989. Awaiting these clashes to be directly tackled in the course of the conference has, however, materialized only to a limited extent, perhaps also because none of the protagonists of the first notional drive has participated.

Libora Oates-Indruchová, a sociologist and literary studies expert of the University of Graz represented one stream of the current interdisciplinary approaches to the shape and informal rules of the life-worlds of (academic) elite with her detailed, empirically based study. Though Indruchová's paper has not been a match to the conference at first sight due to its detailed nature and particularity of the topic ("just" part of the academic elite in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s), I see its merit in offering a concentrated insight into a conceptual approach and techniques of ethnographic and/or qualitative sociological methods and their relevance in the research of some aspects of Czechoslovak communism.

Mark Kramer (a historian from Harvard University) chose to present a general overview of the relationship between the KSČ and the "center" Soviet power group(s) within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The format of Kramer's paper has been close to a university lecture in its synthetic nature. Finally, Tim Haughton, a political scientist at the University of Birmingham whose keynote is again present in this issue has put forward a nuanced analysis of the role of communism and its legacy in the post-1989 political arenas of the Czech and Slovak Republics. His focus on capturing the dynamics of the role including its scale and his comparative notes on the differences between the Czech and Slovak republics stood out especially if one takes the relatively disconnected social science and historiography in the domestic research.[1]

The six panels, each with five speakers, varied in quality and in the way their chairs approached their role. An excellent, active and effective chairing has been demonstrated by Jiří Kocián or Matěj Bílý, who both have well prepared the course of the discussion and synthesized questions posed in the chat of the stream. Less active, rather formal approach consisting mostly of handing over the questions without mediation has been the case of Matěj Spurný, Ondřej Vojtěchovský or Oldřich Tůma. It might be reasonable to think that the activity of the latter has been limited by the digital mode of the conference: informal control over the length of answers, command of questions from multiple sources and other non-conducive factors compared to the "normal", in-person format might have limited the chairing.

Apart from the three keynote international speakers, there were two more non-Czech or Slovak presenters in the panels. Both Stefan Gužvica and especially Molly Puci have added a welcomed value to the international panel, but their presence only in the "international" frame has shown limits to the appeal and conception of the conference. Despite being held bilingually in Czech (Slovak if speakers from Slovakia presented) and English, its international character was limited and it became primarily a showcase of the current or even earlier projects of Czech and Slovak researchers. Still, notable arguments were put forward throughout the panels related to varying scopes of inquiry: from a well-chosen microhistorical study by Václav Kaška, who has probed the transformation of Zlín/Gottwaldov city, paradoxically a shop window of both pre-war capitalism and post-war communism. This sort of micro-historical study with well-argued characteristics of the case (selection) possesses a high potential for generalizations. On the other side of the spectrum, providing more iterative dialogue between the general (especially central documents and ideological postulates) and particular turning points and illustrative moments was the aforementioned Molly Puci, whose take on devel-

1 Cf. ČINÁTL, Kamil: Normalizace v interdisciplinárních souvislostech (Normalisation in interdisciplinary contexts). In: ČINÁTL, Kamil – MERVART, Jan – NAJBERT, Jaroslav (eds.): *Podoby česko-slovenské normalizace. Dějiny v diskuzi* (Forms of Czechoslovak Normalisation. History in discussion). Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Praha 2017, s. 102–157.

opment of the "national question" policy, itself one of the key debating points of the current research on communism,[2] was a dialogue between the programmatic politics and its forms and shapes in the field.

Unlike a number of other conferences in 2020 and 2021 that turned an event planned in-person into an overpacked, unbearably intense online programme without any transformation, this conference did not feel overwhelming or too packed. Two panels per day with a keynote on the top remained reasonably focused. What seemed less of a success was the limited questions from the viewers. Only one-way chat was allowed for the passive participants with only a handful of those repeatedly posing questions. What seemed to help make the event work better was the relatively limited space for ceremonial elements, or rather the flexibility of the online stream format spread over more days which allowed the viewer to get an intense experience.

It is interesting to reflect upon the differences between a similar conference held in 2011 and organized by the same two institutions (unsurprisingly under the name *90 years of Czech and Slovak Communism*). The event from 2011 also positioned itself as an international conference, but it was even less one compared to the 2021 event. Both the conferences served well as an overview of the current domestic (and Slovak) research projects. Even more of a shift from the keen focus on the central organs of the KSČ towards a picture taking into account the regional and less hierarchically prominent milieus of the communist world is visible compared to what Vítězslav Sommer has observed in the earlier conference.[3] One could also see a shift towards inter- or transdisciplinary dialogue, with sociologists, political scientists and their methods being now present not only on the fringes of some panel, but also within the keynote speakers. Though a true dialogue might not be easy to detect, even the symbolic gesture of a real interest shown by putting more discipline-guarding historiographical approaches with other social scientists is a marked, and welcomed, shift.

2 Cf. FITZPATRICK, Sheila: Review of Get your story straight, by Jonathan Brunstedt and Krista A. Goff. *London Review of Books*, 2. 12. 2021 – see https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n23/sheila-fitzpatrick/get-your-story-straight (quoted version dated 6. 12. 2021).

3 SOMMER, Vítežslav: 90 Jahre Tschechischer Und Slowakischer Kommunismus (90 years of Czech, and Slovak Communism). *Bohemia*, 2012, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 356–359.