

Petr Uhl: Social Self-Government is a Dream I Haven't Given Up On

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Petr Uhl (born Oct. 8 1941), Czech journalist, longtime prisoner of conscience and former member of the 4th International. Since the 1960s he has been one of the foremost representatives of the radical left in Czechoslovakia. In 1968 he was one of the main organisers of the Intellectual Association of the Left (Názorové sdružení levice), which attempted to propagate radical left theory and orient political praxis towards the radical left. In September of the same year, following the Soviet occupation in August 1968, the Association was dissolved. In December 1968 Petr Uhl was a co-founder of the Revolutionary Youth Movement (Hnutí revoluční mládeže). In December 1969 he was arrested for his activity in the Movement and was subsequently sentenced to four years in prison, together with 18 other participants who received lighter sentences. This was one of the first and largest political trials after 1968. During the course of 1969 approximately one hundred young people, predominantly students, took part in the activities of this movement.

In 1977 Uhl was one of the founders of Charter 77 and in 1978 he co-founded the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (Výbor na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných, VONS). During the same period he published the samizdat journal Information about Charter 77 – one of the longest-published samizdat journals in Czechoslovakia. The journal's primary purpose was to provide information about the activity of Charter 77, VONS and other independent initiatives in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and other countries, while at the same time, as the journal stated, it aimed "to be an element of democratic control over the work of the spokespersons of Charter 77, the activity of VONS and the work of other Chartist or opposition collectives and groups." In 1979 Petr Uhl was once again sentenced for his activity, this time to five-year prison term, and again he served the entire sentence.

After his release in 1984, Uhl continued to engage in activities directed towards defending human rights. He founded the East European Information Agency; he was present at the birth of the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee, Czechoslovak-Polish Solidarity; he worked on the editorial board of the Czech version of Inprekor (Inprecor) magazine, which was published by the United Secretariat of the 4th International, and whose Czech version began publication in 1986.

After the revolution of 1989, Uhl served as a member of parliament in the Federal Assembly and, during 1990–1992, as managing director of the Czech News Agency (ČTK). He was also a member of the radical left-wing organisation Left Alternative. Beginning in 1991 he worked on the UN Commission for Human Rights, and in September 1998 the Czech government appointed him an envoy for human rights. He played an active role for example in campaigning against the establishment of a US military radar and military base within the territory of the Czech Republic, against the neoliberal policies of the governments of Mirek Topolánek and Petr Nečas, and against discrimination toward minorities. At present he works as a journalist, writing columns for the daily

newspaper *Právo*, for *Deník Referendum*, and other media.

One of the central ideas promoted in his writing is the principle of social self-government as an alternative to parliamentary government. He formulated his ideas most extensively in his book *Socialism Imprisoned: A Socialist Alternative to Normalisation* (*Le socialisme emprisonné: une alternative socialiste à la normalisation* [Paris: Stock, 1980]). The book was published in Czech two years later by the exile publisher Index. His 1969 article "Czechoslovakia and Socialism" was also included in this volume. He further elaborated his political views in two later books, *Justice and Injustice as Seen by Petr Uhl* (*Právo a nespravedlnost očima Petra Uhla* [Prague: C. H. Beck, 1998]) and his recently published memoirs *I Did What I Thought was Right* (*Dělal jsem, co jsem považoval za správné* [Prague, Torst 2014]).

Before 1989 you ranked amongst the fiercest critics of the former regime from positions of revolutionary Marxism. How did you come to revolutionary Marxism, and when did you first adopt Marxist positions as your own?

I came to revolutionary Marxism via authentic Marxism, Marxism without qualifiers. I gradually began to identify with Marxism during the first few years of my studies at the Faculty of Engineering of the Technical University in Prague, under the influence of associate professor Jiří Hermach. On the basis of his lectures, he convinced me of the legitimacy of Marxist thought. He later belonged to the reform wing of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ). He was a member of the team that drafted the *Action Programme of the KSČ*. He worked at the Academy of Sciences. After 1969 he was expelled from the party and later he signed Charter 77. Within the Charter organization he worked with a group of former Communist Party members. Later he went into exile. Along with other factors, he had a very strong influence on me.

Due to the fact that, thanks to my father, I learned French at high school, I also had access to French literature. I was familiar with Trotsky, whose works had been relatively quickly translated in Czechoslovakia (*The History of the Russian Revolution* was published in Czech in the years 1934-1936, and *The Revolution Betrayed* was translated towards the end of 1937). But some books I had in French. Later, from 1965 onwards, when I was only 24 years old, I began to travel to France. At the time I went there upon the invitation of Alain Krivine, who was later a leading representative of the *Ligue Communiste* (which was renamed the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* in 1974). My wife and I are still in touch with his brother Hubert Krivine and his sister-in-law Catherine Samary.

How did you view the situation of the French radical left at the time in comparison with what you'd had the opportunity to see in Czechoslovakia?

I was in France at the time when the National Union of Students of France (*L'Union nationale des étudiants de France, UNEF*), which was then under the influence of the French Communist Party, began to fragment. It split into three factions, which then gave birth to separate organisations. One of these was what later became the Revolutionary Communist League (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*), which was the French section of the 4th International. The second was made up of people who were termed "pro-Togliattis." [1] This was a reformist, rather social-democratic group. The third was composed of those who remained loyal to the party line of the PCF. The latter were our common opponents. They were not only hardline pro-Muscovites, but also dogmatic. At the time I sympathised rather with the "pro-Togliattis," but due to the influence of a number of circumstances, I eventually began to co-operate with the French section of the 4th International.

You were a member of the 4th International beginning in 1984, but you've never declared yourself to be a Trotskyist. What then were your objections to Trotskyism, and what motivations led to you leave the 4th International in 1991?

Initially I refused to join the 4th International, since I had an unresolved issue with the class struggle, but mainly with their characterisation of the USSR as a bureaucratically *degenerated* workers' state, and their characterisation of the countries of the Eastern Bloc as *deformed* workers' states (according to them those states were not degenerate, because they had never been proletarian, and thus they could not degenerate; instead they termed them *deformed* workers' states). I had a problem with this not only at the time but also later. Nonetheless, when I was released from prison for the second time in 1984, I spoke to Catherine Samary (on the roof of the house, where there were no bugging devices) about the 4th International. The French section of the 4th International then selflessly provided support to prisoners of conscience and their families, regardless of who was who, whether they were Catholic, Protestant, atheist, Marxist or non-Marxist. Their solidarity was total, and my gratitude for their activity was so great that I said to myself that I must overcome any ideological disagreements. And so without declaring myself to be a Trotskyist I therefore also joined the 4th International. When someone referred to me as a Trotskyist, I slightly jokingly corrected them, saying that I was a revolutionary Marxist. People like me, especially if they're organised within the 4th International, are usually called Trotskyists by others. They frequently apply the term to themselves, but that wasn't my case.

And what's the reason why you eventually left the group?

In 1991 I left following a rather long conversation in Paris with Hubert Krivine and Catherine Samary. We spoke for several hours about the situation in Czechoslovakia. And they began trying to demonstrate to me that I was no longer a Marxist. At the time I grew angry, because I'm the one who decides whether or not I'm a Marxist, but I admitted that I was not a revolutionary Marxist and announced that I was quitting the 4th International.

You said that you rejected the theoretical view of the degenerated or deformed workers' state. But where did you stand for example with regard to the idea - which was developed also within the framework of Trotskyism - that what we were dealing with were not degenerated workers' states but rather state capitalism, and that a new ruling class, and not merely a parasitic bureaucracy, had formed within the USSR?

I broadly agree with the evaluation of Lev Davidovitch Trotsky, that state capitalism is nonsense, that it's a *contradictio in adjecto*, and as a result I don't use this expression to describe the regime in the USSR. Nevertheless, when I wrote my memoirs I felt the need to somehow delineate the former regime, and I inclined towards the term "state socialism." In Charter 77 we used to call that regime a dictatorship. Those of us who were bound together by a Trotskyist revolutionary Marxist orientation (this was the case, for example, with Jaroslav Suk), then very often we also used the term "bureaucratic dictatorship." But this term doesn't say a lot. In fact even Stalin criticised bureaucracy, and so eventually I inclined towards the term "state socialism."

The United Secretariat of the 4th International sent *Inprekor* magazine (in its English and French versions, *Inprecor*) to Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia you were one of the main authors on the Czech editorial board of the Czech version of the journal. Can you explain what kind of journal it was, how it was founded and what kind of readership it had?

The name "*Inprekor*" was an abbreviation of "*Internationale Pressekorrespondenz*," which was a journal originally published before the Second World War by the 3rd International. In the 1970s this journal was revived, and the United Secretariat of the 4th International began to publish it. It was published in a number of different languages (French, German, English, and Spanish). The Czech version, or rather excerpt, was published from 1986 onwards in Paris and was smuggled into Czechoslovakia. After November 1989 this magazine was published by Adam Novák.

Were there any other Trotskyist-oriented publications here under the former regime?

Earlier there was the journal *Information Materials* (*Informační materiály*). It was published in Berlin in the years 1971–1982, during which period 41 issues came out. It declared itself to be the magazine of “Czechoslovak revolutionary socialists,” and it was a platform for radical left thought. It was published by comrades in West Berlin: Sibylle Plogstedt, Ivana Šustrová, who is the sister of Petruška Šustrová, Richard Szklorz, Jiří Boreš, Jan Pauer and others. The name was taken from the Prague magazine *Information Materials*, which was published in 1968 in Prague by the Intellectual Association of the Left.

Were there any groups in Czechoslovakia that directly declared themselves to be Trotskyist?

In 1969 there were a number of people there who sympathised with Trotskyism in one way or another, but no group in Czechoslovakia directly declared itself to be Trotskyist. Even the Revolutionary Youth Movement wasn't univocal in its ideological orientation. Various influences were combined in it: Trotskyism, Che Guevara, Marcuse, the Frankfurt School; some members supported Maoism, etc. But it's true that Trotskyist sympathies were predominant.

Were there any Trotskyist organisations in other states of the Eastern Bloc, and did you have any contact with them?

Primarily in Poland there was a far left group. Modzelewski and Kuroń were educated enough to know that they couldn't refer to themselves as Trotskyists. The 4th International also didn't call them Trotskyists, but rather Marxists – and they were Marxists. Nevertheless, in social discourse they were commonly spoken of as Trotskyists. In fact they weren't Trotskyists, but I don't know if they were sentenced for it. [2] Adam Michnik, on the other hand, was convicted of Trotskyism, though he never was a Trotskyist. He wasn't even a Marxist. In contrast with classic Trotskyists, Kuroń and Modzelewski referred to the party politburo and the secretaries of the Central Committee as a class. For them, the relations to the means of production was the defining measure, and with regard to the fact that nobody else other than this group had these means at their disposal, and that nobody else decided on the use of these means, they conceived of this group as a class, even though it comprised only a few, or a few dozen people. In my view, though, it's not possible to refer to these people as a class.

So in Poland there was a radical left group based around Kuroń and Modzelewski. In Russia there was a group based around Memorial. These were the posthumous children of Trotskyists who died in the 1920s and 30s; they were posthumous in the literal sense of the word – children and grandchildren who were working for their parents' and grandparents' rehabilitation, political, juridical, and otherwise.

What about contacts with Yugoslavia?

I personally didn't have contact with anyone in Yugoslavia, but of course there were certain contacts here. For example, some people attended the seminar on the island of Korčula. [3] Jan Kavan went, as did others. Although he didn't profess to be an adherent of the radical left, he was very close to it. He was later involved in the left wing of the UK Labour Party, of which he was a member for several years. I don't remember if there were any such similarly oriented organisations in Hungary or Romania.

France and the Radical Left

You said that you were in Paris in 1968. When exactly?

I was there at least twice that year. First in June.

So you experienced the echoes of the events of May.

Yes, I experienced the echoes of May. Some student strikes, as well as workers' strikes in which students were involved in some way, were still ongoing. So I caught the tail end a little. I was in France for the second time that year from the end of July to the end of August. And it was there that I learned about the military intervention in Czechoslovakia. Hubert Krivine then took me to Brussels, where the United Secretariat of the 4th International hastily convened. There were about six or seven people there. They wrote a declaration in which they expressed support for Dubček's leadership, and at the time I told them: "Comrades, I'm not a member of your organisation, but surely you of all people can't be serious about approving the policy of Dubček's government like this." And so the whole thing was rewritten. A demand was formulated for the release of the political representatives of Czechoslovakia who had been kidnapped and taken to Moscow, but a certain distance from the policy of the Czechoslovak leadership was also inserted into the declaration, albeit in mild form. I slept at Ernest Mandel's flat, and then Hubert Krivine drove us back down various country roads to France. On the journey we had to avoid border controls, since I didn't have permission to enter Belgium – I had a visa only for France. Europe was unifying via *facti*, not on the basis of ideas.

Let me return for a moment to how you were affected by the atmosphere of May?

It had a pronounced effect on me. It's interesting how everything is connected. Shortly before my second visit to France that year I'd also been in Poland. I stayed for two days with Janusz Onyszkiewicz, who twenty years later became the Polish Minister of Defence. At the time, however, he was working as an assistant at the University of Warsaw, and he was living on the top floor of a building above the courtyard of the Warsaw Polytechnic. A student strike was under way there, and he explained to me how the bakers were taking bread to the students. He was enthusiastic about this joining of forces between workers and students – what the French term the *jonction entre ouvriers et étudiants*.

But in the end this joining of forces didn't materialise to any great extent.

It didn't, but it was characteristic that although the Polish and French students knew little about each other, they were asserting the same demands, they had the same feelings and the same movements could be seen in both countries. When, after returning from Poland, I left for Paris, I met with Charles Urjewicz, whom I'd known since 1965. Today he's an emeritus professor at an institution which was then called the École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes. For them Czech, for example, was an Oriental language. Around that time he also brought Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski's famous *Open Letter to the Party* to Paris, where it was translated and published in French.

And this is the document that you translated in 1968?

Yes, I translated it together with Miloš Calda, and it was published by the Prague Student Parliament.

Did the ideas of Paris's May 1968 in any way influence the thinking and mood in Czechoslovakia?

I tried desperately to make it happen, but I was quite alone. At the Charles University Faculty of Arts I gave a lecture when the strike of November 1968 was under way. [4] I managed to place political cartoons from French journals of the time in *Student* [5] magazine. There was a certain degree of interest, but it was nothing too impressive.

And did that November strike in some way link back to the events of Paris in May? Did it base itself on their example in some respects?

It linked back to Paris in that it was declared as an *occupation* strike. That word was used. There were undoubtedly common elements. But it linked mainly to the November congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and it was declared in advance that its aim was to support the progressive wing of the Communist Party against the conservative wing. I remember back then that Karel Kosík came into the assembly hall of the Faculty of Arts, straight from a meeting of the Central Committee, and he said that comrade Jakeš had also spoken at the meeting and that when he'd heard him speak he'd realised that it was no longer possible for both comrade Jakeš and him, Karel Kosík, to be members of the same political party. About six months later Kosík was either expelled from the party or left of his own accord, I don't know which.

You mention Karel Kosík, what kind of relationship did you have with him?

I used to bring him the *Information about Charter 77*, but I never got to know him well.

The Intellectual Situation of the Left

In 1968 the Intellectual Association of the Left, in which you were active, was founded. Could you please briefly describe this federation?

It was actually founded on the basis of an advertisement printed in the daily *Rudé právo*, and also in some other newspapers, I believe. It was placed there by Ms. Nováková. What was her first name... ?

Julie.

Yes, Julie Nováková. I replied to the advertisement, and as a result I met with Zbyněk Fišer (pseud. Egon Bondy) and his spouse Julie. He was absolutely hopeless as an organiser and had no interest in it, so I took over organisational matters. This organisation had members such as Jiří Müller, the left-wing Catholic Václav Trojan, the sculptor Rudolf Svoboda, the philosopher Jan Smíšek, Vladimír Říha, Štěpán Steiger, and others. Approximately fifty to a hundred people. We decided to hold various meetings. The main speaker was Zbyněk Fišer [Egon Bondy], and then there was a discussion about what he'd said. The meetings were held approximately once a month. We published the *Information Materials (Infomat)*, which we printed on a stencil duplicator with the support of the Ecumenical Council of the Church. I ran the magazine. In fact, I came here from Paris in June 1968 so that we could publish it. A discussion was held, and then I went back to France. Also in attendance for example was Pavel Filipi, today a professor at the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, and Jakub Trojan, Protestants who sympathised with the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli state. There were also four secret police, who directly declared themselves to be State Security employees, though we didn't know whether or not they'd been sent there.

They just turned up and said that they were from the StB (the State Security agency)...

Of course. And we considered this to be correct behaviour.

The Revolutionary Youth Movement

You mentioned the strike of November 1968. The Revolutionary Youth Movement in fact originated in connection with this strike...

Yes, the Revolutionary Youth Movement was founded by radical, left-oriented students, but there was also one additional group. This was a group formed by Václav Trojan and Petr Meissner. It was a group which represented, as I've called it, under a French influence, the *ouvrierist* deviation. They wanted to establish direct contact with workers and hold joint events. One of their actions for example was to carry paving stones into the cellar of the Faculty of Arts in order to use them as defence. So I don't know if that really made them more left-wing.

As regards the Revolutionary Youth Movement, I have here a thick notebook I wrote in prison. There were originally two such books, but I lost the first of them. This one actually contains what's in my criminal file; it doesn't contain much beyond that. (There's a copy in the National Archive, but there's also one in the possession of the Office for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism.) It has a number of sections: 1) The first section discusses the Intellectual Association of the Left and then also the Revolutionary Youth Movement – the sources are the RYM and its links to other organisations, groups and people within the country; 2) connections abroad; 3) activity of the RYM; 4) its material base; 5) a proposal for statutes and organisational structure; organisational meetings; 6) Jan Palach; 7) Addenda.

You're probably most interested in the connections abroad. This section has 26 sub-chapters: 1) The People's Republic of China, materials from the People's Republic of China; 2) Kuroń and Modzelewski – the *Open Letter*; 3) a Statement of the [German] SDS on Czechoslovakia; 4) Library and the importing of literature from abroad; 5) Preparation for West Berlin – a number of people from the RYM travelled there; 6) West Berlin – course of events and reception; 7) Ernest Mandel; 8) Duplicate from West Berlin; 9) Encoding of all types (although this was nonsense); and so on and so on.

It's all carefully sorted.

We were allowed only one pen in prison, but I had a four-coloured one.

In the records you mention here the magazine *Black Dwarf*. Did you contribute to it?

Sibylle Plogstedt wrote in it during the time we lived together. I contributed rather to *Rouge* and other journals.

Was Egon Bondy also involved in the Revolutionary Youth Movement?

No. And I didn't even offer him the option, or at least I don't remember doing so. Perhaps I mentioned to him that he could get involved, but in any case he didn't join us. In the Revolutionary Youth Movement, of the people who were older than me, the only distinguished figure was Štěpán Steiger. At the time he was the third member of our cell within the framework of the RYM. In the autumn of 1969 we changed the organisational structure of the RYM, since we knew or felt that it was necessary to act in a conspiratorial manner. It was necessary to have a cell system. Sybille Plogstedt and I naturally belonged to the same cell, and we sought a third member, since the rule was that there must be at least three people to form a cell. The third in ours was Štěpán Steiger. It was a Francophone cell, so meetings were held in French.

Charter 77

Can you say something about your involvement with Charter 77?

When we founded the Charter, I was one of eight people who met to discuss the form of the organisation's basic declaration. From the left there was also Zdeněk Mlynář, then Jiří Hájek, but there was also Jiří Němec, who was Catholic but had radical left views. Personally I was very careful to ensure that individual political conceptions and ideas were not projected into any documents of the Charter, which were intended to express the opinions and stances of the *entire* Charter. In this respect I had a dispute with Jaroslav Šabata, who on the contrary did everything in his power to include as much as possible of what he was politically advocating, which could be called Marxism. I was against this attitude. Together with Ladislav Hejdránek, in this respect we endeavoured to ensure a kind of "Chartist political purity."

What was the reason for this? To ensure that the Charter could embrace the broadest possible range of ideological and political currents?

Yes, but it did have its consequences. When I came to Ladislav Hejdránek, who was a spokesman for the Charter, with the intention of founding the Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), he greatly welcomed the proposal, but at the same time he was unequivocally and energetically against VONS being a part of the Charter. I had to recognise this. And so VONS did not become a part of the Charter.

And why didn't Ladislav Hejdránek want VONS to be a part of the Charter?

Because VONS was not stated in the fundamental declaration of the Charter that all the Chartists had signed.

But if VONS had been a part of the Charter, considering how much attention was focused on the Charter abroad, this could to a certain degree have protected members of VONS against persecution.

Of course. But it didn't happen, and it didn't protect them. During the investigation and trial with VONS, the investigators were better able to avoid – and they did generally avoid – the word "Charter," even if they weren't enable to omit it entirely.

When you were criminally prosecuted for the second time and subsequently sentenced, this generated a great wave of solidarity and support from abroad. [6] Can it be said that this support helped you, or did it rather harm you?

As regards the guilty verdict and the severity of the sentence, it's impossible to say whether it helped or harmed me. The authorities had various means at their disposal in that trial. For example, you weren't permitted according to law to be "in contact with a foreign power or a foreign agency." At the time, the sentence for that was ten years. I got five. The "foreign agency" that we were "in contact with" was *Amnesty International*. Nevertheless, foreign support led to an improvement in the conditions of my imprisonment; it provided a certain degree of protection against the brutality of the State Security; it facilitated the early release of some prisoners of conscience and served as a warning to those in power against carrying out further repression.

How did Charter 77 function organisationally?

The Charter was not actually an organisation, even less so a democratic one. It had no democratic mechanisms. It was corporatist, although we didn't use that expression. There were certain groups

which could be referred to as corporate entities. With the exception of the underground and the radical left, and also perhaps of the Protestants and Catholics, most of these entities were based around former members of the Communist Party who knew one another professionally. Many of them published their own journal and engaged in other activities. They were journalists, historians, sociologists, philosophers, etc. And the authors of the new document of Charter 77 contacted these groups, asking them whether they had any objections or additions. I took great pains to ensure that this took place, because in a certain sense it was a substitute for democracy.

By what method were the documents of the Charter approved?

It depended on the spokespersons. For this reason the principle applied that one of those three (there always had to be at least one, in exceptional cases two) had to be a former member of the Communist Party. One was from a Christian milieu, either Catholic or (more frequently) Protestant. And the third came from an artistic or otherwise unspecified milieu. So links to people from various circles were ensured in the selection of spokespersons.

And did all three have to agree?

Absolutely.

The E-Club

During the period of so-called “normalisation” following 1968, there was also the “E-club,” in which Eurocommunist-oriented theorists and politicians were associated. What kind of relationship did you have towards Eurocommunism and the E-club?

We gave the name “E-club” to a group of around twenty people who were former members of the Central Committee of the KSČ. Those who were elected to the Central Committee at the Vysočany congress, but were not co-opted onto the Central Committee on 31 August 1968, were not counted as former members of the committee (this applied to about twenty people). [7] Only former members of the Central Committee (that is, not those who were not co-opted) could be members of the E-club. The “E” stood for “Eurocommunism.” This club included, for example, Milan Hübl, whom Husák later had imprisoned, Zdeněk Mlynář (who later emigrated), Jiří Hájek, Miloš Hájek, Rudolf Slánský, Jr., Vladimír Kadlec, and a number of others. Most of them were Chartists, but not all were. A custom was observed that the e-club would propose one of the three spokespersons of Charter 77. This practice developed after Jiří Hájek became a Charter spokesperson, followed by Jaroslav Šabata who, although he wasn't from the E-club, was seen by them as a kindred spirit. If you look at the list of spokespersons, in every period there was a former Communist on this list. But it wasn't former Communists in general who decided upon this; it was this E-club.

So, as far as we were concerned, that was the E-club, nothing else. I would like to emphasise that there were three people who could have been included in this E-club but chose not to be: František Vodsloň, František Kriegel, and Gertruda Sekaninová-Čákrťová. Other Chartists who had been expelled from the Communist Party viewed them as “old school communists”.

We've spoken about the Intellectual Association of the Left, the RYM, the Charter, and the E-club. I'd also like to ask about the Left Alternative. This was a project that emerged in the spring of 1989. After November 1989 the Left Alternative joined the Civic Forum. Could you outline what kind of organisation this was?

The Left Alternative was founded on 18 November 1989. We'd prepared its establishment and fundamental declaration about a month or two before that. It featured Jakub Polák, naturally Egon

Bondy, Petr Kužvart, and others.

After 1989

When a vote was held within the Civic Forum after November 1989 on its programme, there was a proposal that the means of production should be privatised. You and three other people at the time were against this. Do you know who those three others were?

I don't know, but I don't believe whatsoever that the phrase "means of production" was used. I can't remember it very well. It most probably relates to a meeting held in the Laterna Magica theatre. When I was released from prison, i.e. on 25 November 1989, I attended those meetings for a couple of days. And at the time it was the case that whoever turned up there voted, which is a trifle comical. I tried to bring a little order to the proceedings, so that for example there would be some kind of body which, even if unelected, would be in some way defined. Some kind of programme was approved, and I was one of few who didn't agree with the programme, but I can't remember the details.

And what was your idea of the direction that developments in Czechoslovakia could take after the Velvet Revolution?

I considered it the simplest and most realistic path to dust off the ideas and demands of 1968. These included, among other things, the idea of social self-government in the form of workplace councils. This was discussed, for example, by Rudolf Slánský, Jr. and Rudolf Battěk; a number of people wrote about self-governance at the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences. But at that time I had so many specific practical tasks relating to the prison system and later the Czech News Agency [from February 1990 to September 1992 Petr Uhl was managing director of the Czech News Agency, ČTK - Note P.K.], etc. And then in June 1990 I was elected as a member of parliament to the Federal Assembly (I wasn't co-opted, I refused to be co-opted there), [\[8\]](#) and I had a lot to deal with. And there was no intellectual environment here that could have produced any alternative to parliamentarianism.

Don't you think it's a shame that neither the former communists, for example, nor those on the radical left, were able to propose a viable project that could have offered an alternative to privatisation and Klaus's market fundamentalism?

I think it is a shame, but those people were not interested in such a project. The former communists who'd been expelled after 1969 were so encumbered by a whole range of prejudices that it was difficult to find any kind of common ground with them. One exception for example was the father of Anna Šabatová, Jaroslav Šabata, with whom I did find common ground, because he was very consensual and at the same time a very intelligent man who understood my positions. But with the others it was very difficult. Their prejudices, which dated back to the 1950s, were deeply engrained in them and they didn't recognise any other approaches.

So do you think that there was simply no possibility of linking back to the programme of 1968?

I couldn't see any possibility. Because I was alone. There was also Jaroslav Suk, but to attempt to form a left-wing group I would have needed people such as Jiří Hermach or Zdeněk Mlynář, Rudolf Slánský, Jr., and others.

How do you view today's Trotskyist organisations? In the Czech Republic we have *Socialist Solidarity*. If you were to evaluate the activity of radical left-wing organisations in the

Czech Republic, what is your view?

I follow the activities of *Socialist Solidarity*, or at any rate of their magazine *Solidarity*. I read it with interest. I have a very good relationship with them, but the time when I would have been actively engaged, either as a member or a sympathiser, has long passed. I have a positive view of *ProAlt* [9] and other such groups. A substantial shift can be seen in society, caused by the government of Petr Nečas (far more than that of Topolánek). [10] People have taken a stand against the advancement of fundamentalist market principles, against the technologisation and technocratisation of power. This shift can be seen everywhere. In fact, even journalists no longer regard it as *entirely* taken for granted that they should push this fundamentalist, undiluted capitalism, and many are now open to the possibility that there may be other paths.

In the past you have advocated a programme of social self-government. How do you view the idea of social self-government today?

I am of the opinion that today the idea of social self-government lives on in conceptions of participatory democracy and in models advocating direct democracy. I haven't been so bold as to put together a group of people who, *after* November 1989, would advocate social-self government as an alternative to the parliamentary system, but I haven't given up on the idea that people should govern themselves within certain collectives. For me, social self-government is a dream I still haven't given up on.

What do you think today's radical left should focus on? And what kind of strategy should it choose?

I don't want to dispense advice. I still write, because I've written all my life, but I don't want to give advice.

Petr Kužel
Petr Uhl

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P.S.

Kontra Dikce

http://filosofia.flu.cas.cz/upload/_files/Kontradikce_2016.pdf

Footnotes

[1] After Palmiro Togliatti, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, who promoted the establishment of centres of the communist movement independent of Moscow. (Note P.K.)

[2] Kuroń and Modzelewski were sentenced in 1965 for writing *An Open Letter to the Party* (published in English in *New Politics* 5 (Spring 1966), pp. 5–46), in which they attacked the

regime and called for workers' democracy. Kuroń was sentenced to three years in prison and Modzelewski to three and a half. They were released in 1967, but in 1968 they were sentenced again to three and a half years of prison for engaging in renewed political activity. (Note P.K.)

[3] Between 1963 and 1973, Marxist humanists associated with the Yugoslavia-based journal *Praxis* organized a series of meetings on the island of Korčula. These Korčula Summer Schools were attended by critical Marxist intellectuals from throughout Eastern as well as Western Europe, and they represented important events in the creative interchange of critical approaches within the framework of Marxism. (Note P.K.)

[4] On 18 November a three-day occupation of universities began in Czechoslovakia. This was a reaction to the results of the November congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, where the reformist wing of the party was de facto defeated. The aim of the strike was to support the reformist wing of the party, and amongst other matters to also support the retention of the Action Programme of the KSČ from April 1968. Despite widespread support for the strike in Czechoslovak society, the demands were ignored. (Note P.K.)

[5] *Student* was an influential student weekly published from 1965 to 1968. In 1965 its circulation was 30,000, and a year later this number rose to 40,000. In 1968 the magazine's editorial stance was critical and radical in its support for the Communist Party's new pro-democratic orientation. The last official issue of *Student* was published on 21 August 1968, the day of the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. After the beginning of the occupation, five unofficial issues were released, but when Czechoslovakia's political leaders signed the so-called Moscow Protocol accepting the "brotherly aid" of the armies of the Warsaw Pact, the editorial board chose to dissolve itself. (Note P.K.)

[6] There was also a large wave of solidarity surrounding Uhl's first criminal prosecution in connection with his involvement in the RYM: "Solidarity with the sentenced members of the RYM was expressed in an 'Open Letter to the Czechoslovak Government' by the left-wing intellectuals Ernst Bloch, Ernest Mandel, Jean Paul Sartre, and others. Demonstrations against the imprisonment of RYM activists were organised mostly by national sections of the 4th International. Protests were held in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Italy, West Germany, West Berlin, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, the USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. In Paris, Bern, and Stockholm Trotskyists occupied the Czechoslovak embassy, in Stockholm there was a clash with the police." Pavel Pečínka, *Pod rudou vlajkou proti KSČ* [*Under the Red Flag against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*] (Brno: Doplněk, 1999), p. 61. (Note P.K.)

[7] The Vysočany Congress was a hastily called extraordinary session of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, held on 22 August 1968 – one day after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. At this congress a resolution was passed condemning the invasion, and a new Central Committee was elected on which the Party's reformist wing predominated. On 31 August, however, Czechoslovakia's political representatives in Moscow signed under duress an agreement known as the Moscow Protocol, which declared the Vysočany Congress and its resolutions to be invalid. This agreement also declared the newly elected Central Committee to be invalid and declared the Committee that had existed *before* the Vysočany Congress to be the legitimate representative body. Nevertheless, in a compromise aimed at easing tension in Czechoslovakia, this original Central Committee co-opted certain reformist members of the Committee who had been elected at the Vysočany congress. Uhl thus refers to a group of reform Communists elected by the Vysočany Congress who *not* subsequently included among those co-opted onto the new, compromise Central Committee. (Note P.K.)

[8] The “Velvet Revolution” began on 17 November 1989. On 28 December 1989 the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly passed a so-called “co-optation law” according to which vacated seats in the assembly could be filled without calling new general elections, but could instead be filled via “co-optation,” that is, through a vote taken by the Federal Assembly itself. In the course of December 1989 and January 1990, 76 mainly Communist deputies resigned from their positions, and new deputies were co-opted onto the Federal Assembly in their place. Petr Uhl refused to be co-opted and was regularly elected to the Federal Assembly in the general elections of June 1990. (Note P.K.)

[9] *ProAlt* was an initiative opposing austerity measures and promoting political alternatives. It was created in reaction to the formation of the neoliberal government of Petr Nečas after the parliamentary elections of 2010. (Note P.K.)

[10] Mirek Topolánek’s government was in power during the period 2006-2009. It pushed through tough neoliberal reforms. Its mandate ended with a vote of no confidence. The government of Petr Nečas was in power during the years 2010-2013. Its fall was brought about by the so-called “Nagyová affair”. In June 2013, the director of the Section of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet, and the Prime Minister’s lover, Jana Nagyová, was detained and accused of bribery and of organising the abuse of the authority of an official. (The latter accusation related to suspicion of misuse of the military intelligence service.) Then Prime Minister Petr Nečas subsequently submitted his resignation, bringing about the fall of the entire government. (Note P.K.)