

# **Shaping the Public Space in Czechoslovakia through the Liberal Democratic Discourses**

Matej Ivančík, PhD.

## **Final Report of the Visegrad Fellowship at the Open Society Archives**

### **I. Research Concept**

Since the Velvet revolution, the nature of public space and its interpretation has changed. To a major extent, it was influenced by a global narrative represented by the so called Washington consensus representing the measures to be taken by governments of the respective post-soviet countries. Czechoslovakia was an exemplary country that underwent such policies. The fall of the iron curtain symbolized a total denial of both attitudes and interpretation of public space. The split with an old tradition is thoroughly inherent in new legislature that either united Czechoslovakia or, after 1993, two independent states Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, put into force. Clearly, the continuity was disrupted by an active political intervention, but the nature of public space, although a subject to current political situation, cannot be shaped solely by a governing apparatus. On the contrary, it rather floats, operates or exists within a vast amount of policies, interpretation, attitudes, philosophies or a whole variety of discourses, depending on how we understand public space. My project was determined to search and identify the political, cultural and philosophical discourses on public space provided by external opposition, in order to look for possible intellectual transfer from Western Europe to Czechoslovakia, in the field of public space and its interpretation.

When analysing the discourses on both public space and its interpretation from the external point of view, several aspects need to be acknowledged. Both the nature of public space and its discourses were ideologically manufactured within socialist Czechoslovakia. Therefore, any external influence, e. g. Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty broadcasting, must have been confronted with the domestic one. With this in mind, OSA archival research has served as a necessary part to my further research that will be carried out at the domestic soil. In order to understand the nature of external discourse on the Czechoslovak public space, the institutional structure of the impacting institutions, such as Radio Free Europe, needed to be examined. Moreover, the efficiency of an external, oppositional if you want, discourse requires a proof check.

For the purposes of the above mentioned objectives, I will carry out methodological approaches based on the analysis of a variety of sources from Open

Society Archives, namely the fund of The Media and Opinion Research Department, in order to measure the impact of Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty broadcasting and to generally survey public opinion. Since the medial discourses produced by western media, mainly newspapers, are vital for understanding the differences between the liberal democratic nature of public space and that of the socialist Czechoslovakia, I scrutinized the US Office funds with its Czechoslovak Subject Files. Nonetheless, a rather delicate approach needed to be applied, since the features of Czechoslovak medial, political or cultural natures of public space could have been nuanced by the respective, both regional and historical characteristics. Moreover, the research of the whole Czechoslovak Unit with its Press Surveys and Western Press Archives had to be carried out. While researching these archival funds I attempted to trace and examine the aspects of the liberal democratic discourses, particularly their notions and practices oriented towards the criticism of the Czechoslovak policies on public space, which included, e.g. free speech, the public itself, public opinion, freedom of assembly and many others. These concepts were nonetheless not examined in their pure form but rather from a perspective of their relation to a complex interpretation of public space. Such an interpretation can be attributed to other ideas, e. g. urban planning, cultural institutions, leisure, private life etc. Furthermore, these may as well become a topic of research.

## **II. Materials**

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute

HU OSA 300-7 US Office – Czechoslovak Subject Files

HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit

Since my research was focused on the liberal media's discourse analysis, the range of materials I was able to examine was rather limited. This does not necessarily mean that the Open Society Archives do not provide a collection complex enough for further examination. However, my research period was limited for two months, a period in which one simply cannot carry out a thorough examination of all the materials offered by an institution. Nevertheless, I have collected copies of more than 4 600 documents concerning a variety of subjects, of which the most important were documents on:

- Buildings and monuments
- Cinema
- Cultural life
- Education
- Intellectual life
- Housing
- Public opinion

These materials provided me with some rather substantial documents which were mostly dealing with an international frame of some specifically Czechoslovak issues. The level to which these materials can be used as documents of some “public space” interpretation scope is to be yet examined.

### III. Further Examination

Here is where my granted research fellowship at Open Society Archives has proved to be most useful to me. My original methodological approach resided in Habermas’s interpretation of the public sphere transformation. Furthermore, this sole attitude, would apparently not be enough to address the issue of Czechoslovak public space and its shaping by Western liberal discourses. Originally, I decided to apply a Foucauldian approach in order to analyse the transition of power after the Warsaw pact armies’ invasion of August 1938. I was mainly inspired by Paulina Bren and her interpretation of a private life in Czecho-Slovakia during the “normalization era”. Finally, my research topic was influenced by a number of works that have recently been published, mainly on the issues of writers and their entanglements with the government.

At this part, it is necessary to address my discussions with András Mink and István Rév. Since my range of interest was outlined in rather less exactly formulated research goals, a successfully conducted result needed to be directed in a more precise manner. For this, I very much thank to both András Mink and István Rév.

András Mink helped me to “think outside the box” and focus on other countries’ framework, or realm so to speak. This attitude implies mainly an understanding of the differences of both the intellectual and public discourses among the respective former socialist states. For instance, the 1956 Hungary welcomed a completely different discourses than the 1968 Czechoslovakia. In addition, and most importantly, professor Rév has made me being aware of the current interpretations of public space as well as

the area I should be examining from a theoretical point of view. Moreover, he encouraged me to propose a theoretical paper on the very possibility of writing about public space in the totalitarian regime, that Czechoslovakia, even during the so called Prague spring, by any standards, was.

Any further examination would have to deal with looking for the “cracks” within the totalitarian regime that might have been considered a form of a public space as it is understood within liberal regimes. A question needs to be posed, on how did they emerge, how were they influenced by the writers’ “revolt” and to what extent did they persist. To this range of questions one must include the areas examined in the Open Society Archives, since they also cover the western liberal perception of the Czechoslovak issues, and, to a major extent, they provide researchers with an international frame of the otherwise solely domestic events.

Last but not least, I would like to express my thanks to the members of the staff of Open Society Archives. To name just a couple of them, I would like to thank Katalin and Nora for providing me with a very welcoming atmosphere and a kind willingness to help whenever possible. Furthermore, I would like to thank to Robert and Judith at the research room. The whole stay has generally contributed to my both personal and professional development.