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# THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND THE CENTRE/PERIPHERY MODEL: THE CASE OF SOUTH BOHEMIA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Studying local history is an important tool for understanding historical processes at national level. This paper focuses on the events related to the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution, with special emphasis on its regional actors on the territory of today's Czech Republic. Due to studying archive sources and secondary literature the paper examines the measure, motivation and circumstances of peoples' political engagement around 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989 in the South Bohemian Region. The paper is set within the context of Lipset and Rokkan's centre/periphery model and explains the course, speed, dynamics, and intensity of revolutionary events. It concludes that the South Bohemian economic infrastructure was not a hindrance of spilling-over the revolutionary processes and building of local Civic Forum branches. Even the transfer of power among old and new elites was relatively smooth. The cultural or political differences did not turn out to be so significant in comparison with the Prague centre. In this way, the mosaic of the political transformation's development and democratic transition in Central Europe is complemented by its small but not insignificant component.

**Key words:** Velvet Revolution, Czechoslovakia, centre/periphery, Communism, South Bohemia

## Introduction

A lot of time has passed since the November days of 1989 which changed significantly not only Czechoslovakia of that time and became an inspiration for many other ("colour") revolutions around the world that for many countries became the first stage of their democratic transition.

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The Revolution that was going on at the time has been labelled “Velvet” for its peaceful course. The situation in Czechoslovakia of that time could be described as “the atmosphere of anticipation in the wake of events” in its “neighbouring socialist countries” (Carter 1990, p. 253). From the current perspective, however, it could be seen rather as a well-orchestrated transfer of power from the Communist Party into the hands of new elites based on an informal covenant, than a fabulous naissance of budding liberal democracy *ex nihilo* (see Lieskovský 1997; Kieliszek, 2017). What is more, the Communist Party after the Revolution did not suddenly lose all its power at the end of November 1989, especially at local levels. This, consequently, remained a political problem well into 1990s. One of the most important signs of this power shift was the election of a dissident and playwright **Václav Havel** as President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic with the support of communist MPs. Moreover, almost none of the past officials have been punished for crimes of the totalitarian regime. On the contrary, many of them (or their children) have become successful businessmen and politicians, especially thanks to their social capital accumulated through the years. As exactly put by a former Czech Prime Minister and close Havel’s collaborator **Petr Pithart** (2016, p. 174), “it was social capital which decided who would belong to ‘the winners of November’ and who would make the biggest profit from the regime’s change”.

Even indicating this process of power-transition and country’s gradual democratization, which began at the end of 1989, could be seen rather as “a result of ‘negotiated revolution’ and, therefore, a native product created ‘at home’ rather than imported” (Pop 2013, p. 353). Indeed, many revolutions in socialist countries of that time do not fit easily into a classical notion of “revolution” because they were self-limiting actions “in which there was very little, or no violence; no radical break with the past; and very little or no revenge towards those who had been responsible for the injustice of the old regime” (Auer 2004, p. 364–365). Perhaps this is why a historian **Jiří Suk** (2003, p. 110–111) notices that on one hand the revolution’s “framework” was truly revolutionary. “People flooded the streets and squares, the society emerged from the grip of the totalitarian state, social movement evolved into systemic political, economic and social changes” while, on the other hand, “at the level of power-seizing, ‘November 89’ was a compromise”.

Anyway, historical events on a macro-level have already been thoroughly analysed. The results of such investigation were published in a significant number of outputs where the issue was seen largely from a historical

perspective (Wheaton, Kavan 1992; Bureš 2005; Blehova 2006; Perzi, Blehova, Bachmeier 2009; Krapfl 2013; Suk 2015). Memoirs of directly-engaged political actors (Pithart 2009; Krejčí 2014), microhistory publications mapping the “family reasons” of the Velvet Revolution (Možný 2009), as well as those analysing collective memory or society changes since the revolutionary year have emerged as well (Pearce 2011; Lyons, Bernardyová 2012; Vaněk, Mücke 2016; Greguska, Mihalik, 2016).

In this paper, a special emphasis is put on Revolution’s *local circumstances* within the territory of the South Bohemian Region located in the current Czech Republic in order to complement and broaden the conclusions of previous research (Vaněk 1993; Valeš 2003, 2018; Valeš, Petráš 2014, 2017) and make them more accessible to wider public. The aim is to assess and evaluate the degree and speed of revolutionary events on the periphery.

The “increasing Civic Forums all over the country are claimed to have assumed the role of revolutionary actors at all levels and with some delay emulated the events of the big squares even in the remote villages” (Ryšavý 2002, p. 133–134). Taking into account archive sources, chronicle protocols and secondary literature the measure, motivation and circumstances of peoples’ political engagement around the “velvet days” in the region are examined, not only on the example of local Civic Forums which were quite “chaotically structured and built rather on informal relationships” (Houda 2010, p. 433). They were, of course, not the only significant revolutionary actors in South Bohemia; students, actors, and strike committees were at times sometimes even more conspicuous.

To clear up what will follow, some core elements of centre/periphery model will be described as well as its application to a mutual relationship of revolutionary cells in the regions along with Prague. For the reason of clarity, the fundamental Revolution’s phases as well as its main actors will be properly described. Similarly, some attention will be drawn to the security and overall society atmosphere in South Bohemia of that time. The remainder of the article shall be concerned with the events of one of the region’s towns, Písek, during the very early days of the Revolution.

## **1 Centre/periphery model and Czechoslovakia**

Spreading of the Velvet Revolution from Prague to the regions was a *sine qua non* of its success. Many previous activities of political opposition and

dissent of that time failed being limited to a few large cities solely: Prague, Brno and Bratislava. However, there were also some other “successful” dissent and anti-communist activities prior to the Revolution. The religious happening in Velehrad of 1985 is one of the best examples (see Heppell 1985; Doellinger 2002, pp. 225–226). If the Revolution had to bring some good results, the whole country had to be dragged in the action. Revolutionary events were far from being limited to development in the centre; especially in places of their life the public experienced the November 1989 immediately.

Approximately 70 % of the Czech population lives outside major urban centres: either in the countryside, or in small and medium-sized towns. Therefore, if the Revolution’s historical development is to be properly reconstructed, it is necessary to begin at this level. As mentioned above, the main theoretical framework of this paper is **Seymour Martin Lipset’s** and **Stein Rokkan’s** centre/periphery model applied to the territory of South Bohemia face-to-face Prague centre in the revolutionary year. **Lipset** and **Rokkan** based their well-known model on the knowledge and experience of their times and thorough study of historical experience. It is undoubtedly true that their model originally refers to the gradual emergence of party systems and electoral behaviour mainly in Western Europe and it was not formulated to explain revolutionary change. Nevertheless, they formulated a theory explaining in a complex and systemic way both the process of state as well as national identity forming in Europe and its implication for power distribution, solution of social conflicts, and especially the form of democratic political systems. For these reasons, it could be plausibly used as a framework of our analysis.

One of the fundamental premises of their theory is the existence of the four cleavages where a centre/periphery is one of them (Lipset, Rokkan 1967). This model, based on the presupposed conflict between elites in the urban and more outlying areas, can be understood as the expression and consequence of fundamental opposition inside the population in a territory, resulting from the multiplicity of conflicts or, more precisely, from the competition of conflicting interests derived mainly from the fact of resource-holding (Frank 2002).

The centre is a natural and inherent core of a political system that is identified with the state while neglecting the possibility of separating the entire political system from technical and administrative structures of the state. Such a model aptly corresponds to the knowledge and availability of information-distribution at the time of its creation. In this model peripheries are those parts of the territory, which are physically remote from the centre while being subject

to its direct authority and control. In such a way, peripherality can be perceived “as a geographical or spatial feature; in this case, attributes of location, occupancy density, and infrastructure are important. The second perception is its identification using social or economic indicators, irrespective of location in the geographic area” (Halás 2014, p. 399).

A periphery is administratively, economically and culturally dependent on the centre. In the centres, there are the elites, resource-holders and decision-makers. On the periphery, however, there are controllers who are able to control only local economic and/or political resources and manage them to a limited extent. This is why three key features are essential to characterize them: (i) distance from the centre, (ii) difference and (iii) economic, political or cultural dependence.

Such a bipolar model could be aptly applied to the unequally developed regions of former Czechoslovakia where the form of economic development with the central position of the engineering industry and Prague as the capital led to concentration into a number of regional centres alongside dispersion often into very small towns (Myant 1992). To be sure, South Bohemia can serve as a good model example with a share of urban population within the range of 50 % in 1961 to 65.4 % in 2011 (Svobodová, Věžník, Hofmann 2013, p. 26). With its seven districts and population slightly higher than 600,000 inhabitants (2016), the region established on April 11, 1960 by Act No. 36/1960 Coll. on the territorial division of the state has currently the second largest area within the country (10,058 km<sup>2</sup>). Even within its previous borders from 1960 to 1990, the region belonged to geographically spacious regions, but the density of settlement was among the least inhabited areas of the former state (Dvořák 2003, p. 167).

The region maintains its demographic characteristics in spite of the changing circumstances when the share of inhabitants in the total population of the Czech Republic has a slightly increasing tendency: from 5.99 % in 1961 to 6.06 % in 2013 (cf. Obec a finance 2014). It should be noted, however, that “after the transformation and collapse of the former socialist agricultural and industrial enterprises, after the abolition of state border surveillance and also in connection with the further development and the economic crisis of 2008, the possibility of work as well as the possibility of work-commuting (...) has gone worse” (Kubeš, Kaft 2011, p. 826) in this region in comparison with the pre-1989 period.

It is illuminating to note that the most significant change in the country since 1990 has been the reversal of the relation between the cities and the countryside. Since the beginnings of urbanization, the urban population has steadily risen at the expense of the population in rural settlements. This is one of the main features of urbanization. The spread of the urban lifestyle into the cities' neighbourhood is its second main feature. That means decreasing amount of urban citizens and increasing number of inhabitants in neighbouring municipalities (i.e. suburbanization). Nevertheless, Prague, as the capital, maintains and partly strengthens its dominant position within the country.

Prague is both from the political and geographical point of view the centre of the Czech Republic. Except Brno, Ostrava and Pilsen, all the Czech towns represent just one of Prague's districts. It is also the capital where a significant part of the Czech population comes from several hundred kilometres distant regions in order to seek its working opportunities. This movement has caused, among other things, that almost every Czech family has its relatives or acquaintances in the capital. Not surprisingly, a significantly generalized theoretical model of centre/periphery dichotomy at the macro level "shows us the central position of Prague while everything else is periphery" (Halás 2014, p. 398).

## 2 Revolutionary phases

What is surely beyond dispute is that a better understanding of the Revolution's course on the periphery requires knowing its phases. These can be divided into three main ones (see Valeš 2014). Firstly, there was an *information phase*. People in the regions were more and more familiar with the events in the centre: from the fake news, through tendency information of media loyal to communist government, to more objective reports from the Western mass media. This information substantially helped to form people's viewpoints. This phase lasted roughly from 17<sup>th</sup> November (18<sup>th</sup> November) to 22<sup>nd</sup> November, with some differences within the towns.

Secondly, there was a *mobilisation phase*. Local oppositional individuals or groups managed the anti-regime protests and, based on their information, organized the first demonstrations. Securing the public support was their main goal. This phase took place between 22<sup>nd</sup> November and 27<sup>th</sup> November. An important breakthrough was the first big demonstration where the number of protesters did not count to dozens but to hundreds or thousands of participants.

After the events of 17<sup>th</sup> November, the general views of the possibility of change were quite mixed. At that time the vast majority of the population, probably under the impression of Prague Spring events, did not expect the political situation to change so dramatically. Nobody expected that immediate reaction caused by the intervention of the Public Security Emergency Corps on Národní třída and the subsequent reaction of the Czechoslovak public and the opposition forces would lead to the complete end of the Communist Party.

The overwhelming majority of society at that time expected a change just within the Party's leadership. It was considered that it would come to internal détente that would allow travelling abroad, i.e. to Western capitalist countries that it would be possible to run small businesses, and that the normal functioning of civil society organisations would be restored. Just few people expected that the Party's leading role would end up so quickly. However, there was a very misty and rather pessimistic imagination of what was going on. Therefore, governing establishment's stance towards revolutionary events was truly interesting. As **Oldřich Tůma** (2008, p. 16) points out, the government "undoubtedly had sufficient power tools to break the resistance of society. It would not be any problem to suppress the street demonstrations in Prague. (...) What was lacking was a will".

*Demands-formulation* was the third phase of the Revolution. Until then, the informal opposition transformed into a formal organisation: the Civic Forum, which can be loosely described as an "ideologically unclear anti-communist movement and the main actor of the first transitive period after November 1989" (Cabada 2016, p. 12).<sup>2</sup> The Forum chose its spokespersons and formulated its own demands. The Party was no longer a relevant power-keeper, definitively not after 29<sup>th</sup> November.

Negotiations with the Forum were taken over by a power outsider, a town National Committee. Its leaders were aware of the real situation and offered their cooperation to the Civic Forum. Both camps declared a common interest in a further development of the town and/or region. The opposition was an equal partner. An analogous situation arose at district and county National Committees. This revolutionary phase lasted from 27<sup>th</sup> November when the general strike took place in many towns as a key momentum of opposition's final victory until the plenary sessions of the National Committees, where the members of the town, county, and district National Committees resigned and

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<sup>2</sup> For more about the Forum see, for example, Bureš (2007).

new ones were elected, while still composed of the “old” members of the plenary sessions.

### 3 Typology of revolutionary actors

As described above, the exclusive role of Prague in the revolutionary process can be affirmed by the fact that actors who formed the opposition groups in the regions and the budding Civic Forums were overwhelmingly connected to the centre. Either these people were in direct contact with the Prague dissent, or they were studying, working or coming directly from the capital. In their opposition activities, they artfully used their contacts with the centre which had activated during the most heated days. Leaflets, newsletters, political papers, and office equipment were flowing right from the centre to the peripheries.

As mentioned above, there was an incontestable interaction between the Prague revolutionary centre and local branches of Civic Forum, which successfully transposed activities of the state’s centre to regional centres, i.e. smaller towns. During the most dramatic Revolution’s period a key role on the streets and squares of Czechoslovak towns was played not by the anti-socialist opposition, but by the ordinary people, i.e. loosely organised and “medium developed” (see Pop 2013, p. 355) civil society which definitely broke with the regime.<sup>3</sup> That was the main driving force of the Revolution.

On 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989, the so-called “professional dissidents” did not stand up against the cordons of the ruling forces. The most famous of them, **Václav Havel**, was staying at his cottage in Hrádeček at that time. Very revolutionary work was done by ordinary citizens willing to participate, especially younger generation in regions, i.e. on peripheries. Their private motivation as well as their social characteristics was quite different from the elite of dissent in Prague. Therefore, in the whole process, which was organized more or less spontaneously, some communication misunderstandings occurred.

Occasional verbal exchanges between the centre and periphery had an organisational dimension, as pointed out by **Lubomír Kopeček** (2010, p. 202):

“Since the idea of both maximising the possible decentralisation and spontaneity of the Civic Forum and resisting a hierarchical structure still prevailed at the time, the Prague centre did not command the leverage

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<sup>3</sup> Fink-Hafner and Hafner-Fink (2009, p. 1611) remind us that in Czechoslovakia “a lively civil society did not develop in spite of the periodical emergence of opposition within the intelligentsia”.

necessary to control the local forums. The local forums, likewise, had no major influence over the constitution of the central elite of the Forum. But the tensions appeared not only between the 'centre' of the Civic Forum and the activists in the regions, but also within the local Forum elites".

It is useful to note that such misunderstandings and communication failures are understandable because of the opposition's internal organisational and hierarchical structure. As rightly reminded by **Steven Saxonberg** (1999, p. 25), both the Czech Civic Forum and Slovak "Public against Violence" (*Verejnost' proti násiliu*) were

"all loosely-knit organisations without any clear goals or strategies and without even clear membership. Neither of these organisations had worked out a political or economic programme during the initial period of mass demonstrations. Rather than striving to conquer the state, they demanded future elections and the resignation of the most hard-line leaders. Not aiming at their organisations to obtain power, they could hardly be in the position of giving selective incentives in the form of future rewards".

Political demands of both organisations "were initially modest but expanded quickly" (Korpášová 2012, p. 114). Interestingly enough, between Prague and the districts there were some towns on the level of districts, which were supposed to play the pivotal role of regional political centres and to "pull" the Revolution on the periphery, although this was not the case. In terms of Revolution's development and speed, there are minimum differences between the Czech regions and district cities or towns with a comparable size. This brings us to the question of who were the people who "made" the Revolution in the centre and the periphery. They can be divided into several groups as follows:

The first one consisted of the so-called "*Chartists*", i.e. members of the anti-regime groups and signatories of documents against totalitarian regime. Although this group seems to have had a crucial role because of its dissident activity, it was not so. A number of signatories of some opposition groups restricted their oppositional stance just to such signature as such. Charter 77, which "emerged as the major platform that popularised ideas of the dissent in the society," (Simral 2011, p. 121) was signed in Prague and Brno, i.e. two biggest cities in the country, by people supporting the idea that was the first step of opposition activity.

*People outside the two cities or the main dissident circuit* symbolized, for example, by **Václav Havel** or **Václav Benda** (including the "dissidents" from the periphery) understood their signature quite differently. For many of them signing

the Charter was not a manifestation of their political opinion, but primarily their protest against the lack of freedom and society's conformity. They were not, contrary to Prague or Brno dissent, "opinion leaders" in their towns. Ordinary citizens did not know anything about them. They were not accepted in the middle-sized and smaller Czech towns. Charter's support was their individual act, which did not mean the beginning of opposition activity. This group did not become decisive for the Revolution on the periphery but their significance for the restoration of freedom was undoubted.

For the beginning of the revolutionary activity, the decisive were those *people who stood between the dissent and the "normal world"*. People who were somehow connected to opposition structures and partly participated in illegal activities – but who did not sign up for any of the anti-regime documents – were not intensely or at all persecuted by the State Security. They were allowed to do their jobs and thus be in contact with the majority of society. Furthermore, they were morally integrated and fearless at the decisive moment when it was far from clear what the Revolution's results would be. They were the first ones to organise anti-communist demonstrations and established, even with a considerable risk, the Civic Forum cells in the regions. It was also important that such revolutionary actors were not a subject of the provincial political culture; they belonged to a generation that did not suffer from the trauma of the Prague Spring and the subsequent political persecution. It should be added here, however, that not all members of the "grey zone" had come of age after 1968.

*Political prisoners of the 1950s* were another group of revolutionary activists. Although their amount was not so considerable, it was significant enough to boost the emerging local Civic Forums. Unlike young and enthusiastic people, they represented moral authority backed by a considerable life experience that the members of other groups could rely on.

In a similar point of view, *Generation of '68* could be viewed as another revolutionary group. It should be understood more broadly that just members of the Party's reformist wing who, after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops, were persecuted for their political attitudes. In general, they were people whose first or main experience with politics was somehow related to the Prague Spring. This group had a previous experience with politics and significantly greater knowledge of its functional mechanisms.

*The members of the existing non-communist political parties whose activities were tolerated and the National Front organisations* were another revolutionary group. The more progressive part of them expressed its support for the

emerging opposition movement and made a “revival” of their parties on a local level soon after the events on Národní třída in Prague. They had their own party secretariats and, therefore, a sufficient background and political experience that they could bring to the service of the newly-emerging opposition. Above all, their members were representatives at least at the plenary assemblies of National Committees of all levels. This all was their advantage. That was crucial for political change on the peripheries especially at the beginning when co-optation was not possible yet; it was necessary to select new members of the National Committees from existing, non-communist members of the already existing National Committees.

The last important group was the *local society elite*, i.e. opinion leaders. They were represented by important moral or professional regional authorities who held prestigious positions or professions closely connected to a university degree. This category includes doctors, teachers, lawyers or clergymen. They enjoyed a universal appreciation in the towns of their origin and were also able to gain their hesitating fellow citizens for a growing opposition movement. Such people formed a reservoir of newly emerging political elite.

#### **4 Atmosphere “on the periphery of South Bohemia” in 1989**

Thanks to their previous experience, the Czechoslovak communist elites relied heavily on the fact that the first wave of demonstrations and civil unrest of 1989 will be limited to the Prague centre and will not find wider support on the peripheries; exactly as some previous sporadic anti-regime actions of the opposition, having been taken place from the middle of 1980s, on Prague streets only (see Tůma 2008, p. 20). Until November ‘89, the opposition “failed to create a unified representation with a clear political agenda” (Blažek 2010, p. 135). Moreover, the “Czechoslovak opposition was entirely unprepared for the power takeover; it was lacking strategies how it would proceed” (Balík 2015, p. 26). The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia considered the relatively inconspicuous regions a barrier against the “Prague radicalism”. Within this context the words by **Jan Fojtík**, a secretary of the Party’s Central Committee of that time, said on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989 are quite pertinent:

“This coup d’état will not succeed because its initiators will provoke the strike they are striving for. We will show them such a demonstration of strength that they will lose their effort. Thousands of people from the districts and regions will gather in Prague to cool the hot heads. They shall show them that Prague is not the whole republic!” (Otáhal 1994, p. 101).

If the public activity could be prevented in other parts of the country, Prague would remain isolated. This would affect negatively further development in the power centre itself, and could significantly change the balance of forces between the communist elites and emerging opposition as well as slow down the entire democratisation process. The fall of the totalitarian regime and the establishment of democracy would look quite different. The fact that the “periphery” of South Bohemia did not sleep on the eve of the Revolution is proven by a whole array of archive records that aptly illustrate the situation at the time.

The first well-documented opposition act in South Bohemia can be considered that one from 25<sup>th</sup> January 1989. At that time, an inscription “Freedom and Democracy” appeared on a stone bridge over the Otava River in the Town of Písek. In the vicinity of the District Military Administration of Písek there was written: “Away with the Communist Party” (Archives of Security Departments... 1989). That was all for January 1989, at least from the records of the National Security Corps.

It can be said that in the first half of 1989 there was almost an idyllic calm in South Bohemia especially in comparison with Prague and some other regions of the country. In March, the local department of the National Security Corps reported the occurrence of the so-called defective leaflets and inscriptions from Písek, České Budějovice, Chotýčany near České Budějovice and Třeboň. In the international express, a “dead mailbox” was found at České Velenice station, with some German prints supporting Charter 77. The owners of the prints have never been found. In addition, the head of the Party’s District Committee in Strakonice received an anonymous threatening letter. A writer threatened with fires during harvest time in case that the supporters of Charter 77 would be persecuted and arrested (ibid.).

In the District of České Budějovice the Communist Party received a pamphlet entitled “Who is **Václav Havel**” published in *The Rudé právo Daily*. However, some queries appeared, asking for more information about the Letter of Artists to the Prime Minister of the Federal Government, the Charter 77 programme, and finally about the representatives of the opposition structures and their views. What communists criticized in media (and even in *The Rudé právo Daily*) was

“overprinting the polemics of the Soviet press, especially the criticism of **Stalin** and other leaders who were leading the state. Criticism is being uploaded to *Mladý svět*, a journal of the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of

Youth, where contributions are published without being verified (...), such as the contribution of ing. **Vratislav Franci** of Prachatice in Vol. 5/1989, in which he appreciates the personality of **T.G. Masaryk** and his involvement within a civic education” (Bureau meeting... 1989).

Even some “illegal structures” were quite active by distributing 12 leaflets posted in Tábor and Sezimovo Ústí; the leaflets were allegedly calling for anti-state activity. In Český Krumlov the inscription asking for **Václav Havel’s** release from prison appeared under the bridge on the road to České Budějovice. Party’s District Committee in Jindřichův Hradec received a letter addressed to the Prague Castle (i.e. the president of the country) with ten questions that allegedly undermined the authority of the Party and the Czechoslovak People’s Army. What was considered a serious disturbance of the May Day celebrations was an event in the second largest town in the region: “In Tábor a shop assistant **Renata Pánová**, born on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1971 in Tábor, ran to the parade and tried to unfurl a banner supporting Havel and other anti-socialist people. Thanks to the prompt intervention of the National Security Corps this case did not attract much attention” (An evaluation... 1989).

In the middle of 1989, there was also a significant activity of ecological activists, who demanded a broad public discussion on the Nature Protection Act. It is noteworthy that during the revolutionary events “the attention to environment’s disastrous state was one of the main arguments in the political speeches on the tribunes” (Vaněk 1999, p. 153). Preparing new Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic had to be enriched with the competence of ecological activists to issue final opinions on the construction of economic facilities. At the public assembly of district organisation of their union convened on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1989 there was an unprecedented event: during the greeting of the secretary of “about 50 to 80 participants left the hall in protest and returned after the end of his speech. The course of the correct, politically prudent speech of the National Front District Committee secretary was disturbed by the attempt to boo the speaker” (Bureau meeting... 1989).

## **5 Revolutionary activities in the Town of Písek**

For the success or failure of the Revolution, the successful expansion beyond the capital was essential. The radio stations Free Europe and Voice of America played an important role as well. The shift of the Revolution from the centre to the periphery prevented the government from its elimination and finally

led to regime's end. In the final part of our study, the revolutionary movement in the South Bohemian town Písek (founded in 1243) with the number of citizens slightly lower than 30,000 will be described.

During the Revolution's first week, just like in other Czechoslovak towns, a considerable uncertainty and fear mixed with hopes that something significant could happen prevailed in Písek. It was crucial for the further development that there were some people who did not let themselves be intimidated because they had already had their bitter experience with oppressive communist power and were also willing to undergo a real risk of failure and possible subsequent persecution. That was a decisive and crucial condition for starting the Revolution as well as its further course. "When on Friday evening, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989 security intervention units suppressed student demonstration in Prague, a number of locals learned it out from the widely eavesdropped foreign radio stations; this information was rapidly spreading. Mass promotion at the workplace was eliminated only due to the weekend" (Prášek 1999, p. 152).

In comparison with the centre, the region of Písek was affected by various regional delays as well as the process of creating local opposition structures, the emergence of district and regional Civic Forums which brought Czechoslovak and South Bohemian society to a significant, not just a symbolic action.

This is closely connected with the general strike held on Monday, 27<sup>th</sup> November and the involvement of local factories, schools, institutions and their employees. The attention should also be paid to the internal situation of the Party at the urban level, the evaluation of the support of the Party and state power by security forces represented by the Czechoslovak People's Army whose units were located in the barracks near Písek and prepared to intervene immediately, the units of the National Security Corps, in particular Public Security, as well as the so-called "Party's armed fist", i.e. People's Militia.

The considerable attention should be paid to the building of a new democratic political system, which was tightly associated with significant personal changes at all levels of the National Committees. The negotiations between the Communist Party representatives in the regions and their oppositional counterparts as well as the reformation process of the already existing political parties and formation of new ones played an important role as well (State Regional Archive Třeboň 1989, p. 116–117).

When evaluating Prague events, the Party's decision-making process was crucially influenced, especially on the peripheries, by the weekend after the

protest on Národní třída; the Party did not respond in a flexible way. One of the revolutionary activists, **Ivan Úlehla** – the spokesperson of Písek Civic Forum – later wrote: “On Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> November, after the weekend of busy Prague events and demonstrations, I brought an appeal of DAMU<sup>4</sup> students and theatre actors for a protest strike in which the call for a general strike held on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1989 was included. I wrote out this appeal and displayed it on the building of the permanent theatre stage in Písek. It was dropped by the morning and the theatre ceased to play; not by joining the theatre strike, but because it was closed down to the public due to the ONV – OV KSCĚ (the District National Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party)<sup>5</sup> decision” (Úlehla 1986–1990, p. 12).

However, the development of situation against the Party’s intentions and its leaders could no longer be stopped; in spite of all efforts of Party’s District Committee in Písek and the District National Committee and their representatives. That was the same for the entire country as well as for Písek region and its centre, just exactly as above-mentioned **Ivan Úlehla** wrote in his protocols:

“This was also the case in our district, and in particular the district, where the news of early fall of the communist regime and totalitarianism spread at the workplaces and where the Party’s opponents cells were slowly emerging. They were sympathetic to the Charter 77’s appeal called the ‘Several Sentences’ which raised the nation to direct confrontation with the leadership of the socialist establishment through the dialogue in July and August 1989. The State Security, the National Security Corps and the People’s Militia intensively intervened against the so-called illegal demonstrations and gatherings of young people and those celebrating an anniversary of **Jan Palach**’s burning to death against the occupation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic by the Soviet Army in 1968 etc. Although no such events took place in the Písek region and in our town, the number of people who signed the ‘Several Sentences’ increased slowly and they became the speakers of independent initiatives in the district. Even in Písek the events of 17<sup>th</sup> November raised the level of people’s resistance against the regime. (...) It must be concluded that even after 17<sup>th</sup> November 1989 Písek became

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<sup>4</sup> DAMU = the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

<sup>5</sup> ONV – OV KSCĚ = District National Committee – District Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

one of the towns in our country where the overwhelming majority of citizens spontaneously expressed its desire for a free and democratic regime and permanent liberty (...)" (ibid.).

## **Conclusion**

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 is undoubtedly one of the crucial political events which "contributed gradually to the weakening and ultimately to the fall of communist regimes" (Žatkuliak 2014, p. 194) of the former Soviet bloc. Symptoms predicting the collapse of a totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia can be divided into geopolitical and domestic causes. The former ones are well known. The communist regimes in Poland, Eastern Germany and Hungary had already effectively collapsed. The Communist Party leadership correctly understood that in this situation the best that could be hoped for was a negotiated settlement, which is what occurred. The prospect of external military aid, as in 1968, was not longer an option. The latter ones were influenced mainly by country's internal demographic and socioeconomic factors as well as political factors within the Party.

To begin with the last one, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia changed gradually. At the end of the 1980s, it was no longer a "vanguard of the working class". Although workers were the most numerous group, the dominance of this social class was barely visible. A relevant percentage of members consisted of intelligence and pensioners. For most of the population it was no longer a career lift; perhaps with the exception of intelligentsia. Workers and young people did not have any interest to enter it. This meant that the Party was getting older, becoming less flexible, more conservative and immune to new intellectual impetuses. The example of South Bohemia shows us that resistance to the regime grew steadily even on the periphery and the islands of dissent emerged.

It should be noted that the Party in accordance with its Soviet counterpart was a strictly centralised political organisation, where the lower levels were almost subject to orders from above. Therefore, Party's indecision in the first week after 17<sup>th</sup> November spilt over to its regional organisations that were eager to adopt decisions of the Party's leadership. As a consequence, Politburo's indecision completely demoralised the work of the Party at lower levels. This provoked the local government officials who themselves began to negotiate with the opposition's representatives about the power shifting. Thus, the model from

the centre was repeated and emulated on peripheries: the Civic Forum's partner in Prague was the central government or, more precisely, the Prime Minister **Ladislav Adamec** and not the Party as such. In light of this, Prime Minister's decision separated party politics from its governmental counterpart after forty years of integral unity (see Ondria, Viselka 2015, p. 218).

To reiterate, although South Bohemia was unofficially labelled as an oasis of peace, security and well-being, people's overall dissatisfaction with politics increased gradually. The citizens saw and suspected those controversies that the communist elites were just whispering about at their party meetings. With the exception of specific areas such as, for instance, the North Moravian region with a strong concentration of heavy industry and a very rigid leadership of the Party, the revolutionary course in South Bohemia did not differ so much.

The response of peripheries to Prague events was *quite quick and with minimum delay* in comparison to the centre. The course, speed and intensity of revolutionary events, including the dynamics of the gradual surrender of communists, did not depend primarily on geographical circumstances. The distance of regions from Prague was not so important.

Other aspects were demographic and social ones. Citizens' participation in the Revolution on the periphery level was affected mainly by the social and educational composition of the population and the overall political and cultural level. In case of towns with a continuous settlement, strong local identity, democratic political traditions and a developed network of local formal and informal associations, there was usually a strong civic awareness that was activated at the time of the Revolution and transformed into the organisation of anti-regime protests, the formation of opposition structures, as it was in the case of Písek.

Furthermore, significant sources of democratic tradition affected the speed of revolutionary changes on a periphery level, i.e. the existence of the first Czechoslovak Republic associated with the name of the first President **T.G. Masaryk**, the collective memory of the Prague Spring and the liberation of part of the Czechoslovak territory in 1945 by the American (and not just the Soviet) troops. This was particularly in South as well as West Bohemia.

Although a complete analysis of other Czech "peripheries" requires an analysis that lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is clearly visible that South Bohemian (or, more precisely, Písek) distance from the centre played a marginal role within the process of information spread of revolutionary events in Prague. When taking into account a wide network of well-established regional

economic units in pre-1990s period, South Bohemian economic infrastructure cannot be considered an obstacle of spreading the processes of the Revolution and building of local Civic Forum branches. Even the transfer of power among old and new elites was relatively smooth. The cultural or political differences did not turn out to be so significant in comparison with Prague. The overall society and security atmosphere at that time shows that a change “was in the air” although no one expected such a dramatic and fast political rupture.

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