



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic social briefing:

30 Years After:

**How the Czech Republic Commemorated the Anniversary of the
“Velvet Revolution”**

Dr. Ladislav Zemánek

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

30 Years After: How the Czech Republic Commemorated the Anniversary of the “Velvet Revolution”

The Czech Republic commemorated the 30th anniversary of the so-called Velvet Revolution on the 17th of November, which brought about the fall of socialism in our country. The anniversary was massively publicised in the media, while the political opposition together with a civic protest movement exploited it for pursuing their interests and putting pressure on the government, led by the PM Andrej Babiš, and the president Miloš Zeman. In the analysis, I will inquire into the dominant narrative about the 1989 events which represents one of the essential myths of the Czech post-socialist regime. Subsequently, I will present events held on the occasion of the anniversary comparing the anti-government rally with consensual PM's speech which can be considered to be one of the crucial speeches Andrej Babiš gave in his office.

The dominant interpretation of and narrative about the so-called Velvet Revolution is based on the following keystones: First, the 1989 events were a genuine *revolution*, not only overthrow of a government or handover of power. Second, it was a *popular* revolution whose initiator, mover and subject were the people themselves. The regime change was not arranged by the global superpowers, i.e. the USSR and the USA. Third, the revolution was a struggle between good and evil, between a totalitarian, non-democratic, oppressive, violent regime and democratic forces which strove for freedom, democracy, establishment of a Western-style political and economic system, *truth and love* (how the most famous revolutionary slogan, formulated by Václav Havel, proclaimed). Such a black-and-white narrative reduces the complex social processes, overlooks many other factors which played their role in the fall of the socialist system and the transition towards liberal democracy and capitalism and functions primarily as a modern national myth legitimising the new “socioeconomic formation” (using Marxian terminology). Within the anniversary, nearly no space was given to alternative interpretations which would take into account or explain a wide array of other facts or aspects. It should be noted that the media as well as political discourse has been recently dominated by the hegemonic narrative described above which is obviously connected with the anniversary and efforts to consolidate and fixate the mainstream concept.

Manifold faces of the Velvet Revolution

Let's mention at least several theses alternative interpreters or participants put forward. First, the Velvet Revolution was not a revolution *sensu stricto* but handover of power from the communist party, whose representatives gave up power without any resistance, towards incoming elites recruited partly from the dissent (first of all Václav Havel), partly from the communist apparatus. Second, the handover of power was made possible owing to a deal between the SSSR and the USA. The popular protests did not play a substantial role not being the real cause of the fall of the regime. Third, the stressed and mythicised clash between the security forces and peaceful demonstrators in Prague on the 17th of November was in breach with the interests and orders of the highest state and party authorities who in fact restrained from violent suppression of the protests. For instance, according to the long-time economic advisor of the Senate chairman and the prime ministers Jaroslav Šulc, the so-called Velvet Revolution took place on the basis of US-Soviet deal and the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's direct support, the Soviet interests being pursued by the Czechoslovak State Security (StB) with the assistance of the Soviet KGB. In 2013, the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes declassified materials revealing that the Soviet military troops deployed on the Czechoslovak territory should have become involved on the protestor's side in case of suppression of the upheaval by the People's Militias, controlled directly by the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

Similarly, one of the active participants of the November events, the State Security lieutenant Ludvík Zifčák claims that the opposition organisations such as Charta 77 were infiltrated, thus at least partly formed by the secret police collaborators and – what is even more important – that the 17th of November manifestation was initiated, called and manipulated by these collaborators with the aim of instigating changes in the highest echelons of the state and party and reforms following the Prague Spring ideals. According to the Zifčák's evidence, the State Security in accordance with the Gorbachev's programme and interests endeavoured to achieve reforms within the existing socialist system with regard to the conservativeness and anti-reform moods among the party leadership. To conclude this historical episode, lieutenant Zifčák faked his own death during the 17th of November clash in Prague which stirred up the general public and gave new and stronger impetus to the upheaval.

Fourth, some scholars remind that the November events were not characterised by people's demands of restauration of capitalism and Western political model but, on the contrary, by desire to revive socialist principles of people's participation and economic democracy as well as to deepen the interconnection of socialism, democracy and the rule of law. According

to a public opinion survey in the end of 1989, mere 3 per cent of respondents preferred the transition to capitalism, whereas 92 per cent favoured a socialist system or a hybrid one. These affairs have not been addressed in the media and political discourse recently which is, nevertheless, natural because the opposite would disrupt the ruling narrative of the Velvet Revolution.

On the occasion of this year's national holiday, a wide array of different events were taking place, be they organised by the state or by private, civic organisations. In this regard, one can mention manifestations, memorial ceremonies, concerts or official gatherings with the participation of foreign guests. It should be noted that the day of the 17th of November is not connected only with the fall of socialism in Czechoslovakia but originally with the events which happened in autumn 1939, following the German occupation and establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In the end of October and in November 1939 peaceful protests were held during which, notwithstanding, several people were killed. Massive repressions, arrests, deportations to concentration camps and executions were accompanied by closure of the Czech universities on the 17th of November not being opened before the end of the World War II. Subsequently, this day become the world-wide known International Students' Day. Every year, these two historical events (1939 and 1989) are commemorated together, even though the significance of the first is overshadowed by the latter. Nevertheless, the 1939 has higher potential to unite the Czech society and contribute to social integration and coherence nowadays than the 1989 which – in spite of quite a consensual reception – remains to be conceived equivocally by a part of the society.

Andrej Babiš and his challengers

In relation to the 30th anniversary of the so-called Velvet Revolution, I would like to aim the attention to two relevant events comparing them with each other. One day prior to the anniversary, the civic initiative Million Moments for Democracy organised a manifestation in Prague against the Czech PM Andrej Babiš and his government as well as the president Miloš Zeman. The initiative was launched in 2018 with the aim to force the PM to step down. For two last years, the organisation has been holding a fierce campaign against Andrej Babiš calling several manifestations. The last one was attended by around 250,000 people demanding resignation of the incumbent Minister of Justice Marie Benešová, who is closed to the president, and surrender of the proprietary rights to the Agrofert holding company which – according to the organisers – the PM still hold. The protesters have been afraid that Andrej Babiš poses a

threat to the media and judiciary independence, thus to the liberal democratic system as such. In their rhetoric, they provably present a misleading interpretation and overlook repeated administrative as well as public prosecutors' decisions in favour of the PM together with the fact that Andrej Babiš is not an owner of the holding company anymore which arises from the very essence of the legal institute of trust. Not by coincidence, Miloš Zeman called the movement undemocratic basing on three arguments: (1) refusal of public prosecutors' decision in a case of possible fraud; (2) refusal of the Chamber of Deputies' negative decision about a constitutional suit against the president for alleged violation of the Constitution; (3) denial of the constitutional president's right to pardon. Recently, the movement has established cooperation with the political opposition starting to exert pressure on the opposition parties to form a wide anti-Babiš front and urge a reform of the electoral system which would damage only the Babiš' leading ANO movement under current circumstances. That is the reason why many commentators and politicians point out that the movement challenges the results of democratic elections and majority will of the citizens undermining principles of parliamentary democracy.

Character of the 16th of November manifestation is in contrast with a speech Andrej Babiš gave during the official gathering in the National Museum the day after. The speech can be described as statesmanlike, conciliatory, consensual, uniting, patriotic and constructive. It was full of gratitude to former generations who struggled for freedom, independence and dignity. The PM appreciated the activities of the dissent, exile and active citizens prior to 1989 and afterwards, put emphasis on the Czech Republic's membership in the NATO and the EU and called upon the people to actively participate in the public affairs. Highlighting the achievements of the last years (as low unemployment, rising standard of living, safety or steady economic growth), he expressed conviction that the Czech Republic will further develop overtaking many other countries in Europe and beyond. In addition, the event became a proof of deep cooperation and understanding among the Visegrád Group countries how demonstrated by attendance and speeches of the Slovak PM Peter Pellegrini, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki who were accompanied by the president of the Bundestag Wolfgang Schäuble. The V4 prime ministers unanimously stressed the principles of freedom and democracy and the level of friendship among our nations who share common historical experiences and represent the future of Europe as Viktor Orbán stated.