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CZECHOSLOVAKIA: Opposition Gaining Strength

The hardline regime seems near collapse in the face of huge rallies and opposition efforts to form a unified front and seize the political initiative, though it may try to buy time by using force. 


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Some 250,000 demonstrators gathered yesterday in Prague's Wenceslaus Square demanding the ouster of the regime. Leading dissidents joined a leader of the once-subservient Socialist Party and some Communist party members to establish a "Civil Forum" and are threatening a general strike Monday unless several party leaders, including President Husak and General Secretary Jakes, resign. More and more political and social groups are condemning the violence that met demonstrators Friday. Universities in Prague, Brno, Olomouc, and Bratislava have been closed by student strikes, and theaters in Prague and Bratislava have suspended performances and are holding political discussions. Dissident leader Vaclav Havel said in an interview that miners in northern Bohemia and workers in numerous factories will participate in the general strike. 


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The Czechoslovak Government met in an emergency session Monday and issued a warning that it is prepared to quell further demonstrations. Havel claims a power struggle is under way to replace Jakes and that Havel has been in contact with the country's leadership, including Premier Adamec. 

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Comment: The reaction against the violent suppression of the demonstration Friday probably will force the regime eventually to make concessions. Senior leaders might try to buy time by ordering police to quell demonstrations in addition to forcing Jakes to resign. Interior Minister Kinel and Prague party chief Stepan, who are directly responsible for the Prague police, might also become scapegoats. Such moves without policy changes are not likely to satisfy the public, and further concessions may be necessary sooner than the Central Committee plenum set for 14 and 15 December. 

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Dissidents probably will make the Civil Forum a coordinating group for reformers of all political stripes, hoping to sustain the momentum started by the mass demonstrations. The group is likely to attract Communists bolting from a party on the edge of collapse and may gain authority rapidly. Suppressing yet another rally would probably swell the strike set for the 27th. Moscow has not yet commented publicly on the demonstrations but is likely to criticize any brutal suppression as leading to further instability. It is likely to accept rapid change in Czechoslovakia—preferably to a Communist reformist regime, possibly including some Communist leaders of the 1968 reforms with whom Moscow reportedly established contact this summer. 

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