

March 21, 1968
Memorandum from the Secretary of the Transcarpathian Oblast, Ukrainian CP about tensions in Czechoslovakia

Citation:

“Memorandum from the Secretary of the Transcarpathian Oblast, Ukrainian CP about tensions in Czechoslovakia,” March 21, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 25, Spr. 27, Ll. 18-23.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112161>

Summary:

A report on a conversation between Yu. V. Il'nyts'kyi, Secretary of the Transcarpathian Oblast of the Ukrainian CP, and Jan Koscelanský, 1st Secretary of the KSC's East Slovakia regional committee on the developing situation in Czechoslovakia.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

- English Translation

C P S U C C

Attached is an informational memorandum from the Secretary of the Transcarpathian Oblast of the Ukrainian CP, Cde. Yu. V. Il'nyts'kyi, about the events in Czechoslovakia.

P. SHELEST

21 March 1968

No. 1/22

CENTRAL COMMITTEE
COMMUNIST PARTY OF UKRAINE

STATUS REPORT

For your information I want to report that on 18 March 1968, the 1st Secretary of the KSC's East Slovakia regional committee, Cde. Jan Koscelanský, called me and requested that we meet at the border that same day. I should note that we have been having these sorts of meetings more or less regularly, mainly at his request. The meetings allow Cde. Koscelanský to share his views about ongoing party and economic work and also about events in the country. The most recent meeting before this one occurred on 10 January, when he informed me about the results of the October, December, and January plenums of the KSC CC. At previous meetings, Cde. Koscelanský always had been accompanied by the chairman of the provincial executive committee and one or two secretaries from the regional committee. We have had the same level of representation on our side. But on this latest occasion, at his request, the meeting was one-on-one. Cde. Koscelanský informed me about recent events in his country.

He said that the municipal and regional party conferences in their country were very tempestuous. Sharp criticism was directed against the old methods of leadership, which had given rise to a cult of Novotný. 22 In his view, the conferences went well. The first set of cadres in the party committees were elected by a secret vote.

Regarding the events under way in Czechoslovakia as a whole, he stated that they are wider and more profound, and will have more far-reaching consequences, than the events of 1948.

The Czechoslovak comrades believe that social development in their country after 1948 moved in the right direction until the beginning of the 1950s, when a period of the cult of personality began both in their country and in other socialist countries. 23

In the CSSR this cult took a particularly monstrous form once Novotný arrived. . . . At present, new progressive forces have been growing, who have waged a decisive struggle against the conservatives. Now the question has arisen of how to foster conditions for the development of democracy in the full sense of that word.

Why, for example, was it possible in the bourgeois republic to criticize the president and to make caricatures of him, whereas it is impossible to do this in the socialist countries?

The Czechoslovak comrades believe that full democracy requires the elimination of any kind of censorship, the ending of instructions and orders from above to the radio, press, and television, the elimination of judicial proceedings and repression against citizens for their political views and statements, and the rehabilitation of all those who were repressed. 24 In connection with this the State Security organs behaved improperly during the cult of personality. To ensure that there are no antagonistic classes in the country, the StB organs will be reduced to a minimum and the regular police organs will be expanded. Citizens will be permitted to leave the country, either permanently or temporarily, without any sort of restrictions; and the electrified fence along the border with the FRG will be removed. 26

Cde. Koscelanský said that they must work in such a way that the capitalists are fenced off from them, rather than being fenced off themselves from the capitalists. The opportunity will arise to create new social organizations (student, peasant, and other organizations). A decision also has been adopted to postpone regular elections so that favorable conditions can be created for them.

A very important question, in their view, is the linkage of broad democracy with the leading role of the party. They understand it this way: Officials in party organs must be so authoritative and must speak with the masses so convincingly that the masses will support these officials as well as the party without any sort of pressure from above. For this purpose they need new cadres who are able to play such a leading role. . . .

. . . Many questions have been raised at the party conferences about why Comrade L. I. Brezhnev came to Czechoslovakia in December of last year. 27 In response to this question, the Czechoslovak comrades have been saying that Novotný invited Cde. L. I. Brezhnev without consulting any of the other members of the CC Presidium. When Comrade L. I. Brezhnev saw that there were two different points of view in the Presidium about how to resolve festering problems, he responded that we will not interfere in your internal affairs, since your party is monolithic and solid, and the healthy forces in it can resolve all the problems. 28

Such an answer and such behavior by Cde. L. I. Brezhnev won universal approval.

Further on, Cde. Koscelanský said that some of the conservatives, in particular the CSSR representative at CMEA, Simunek, justify the obsolescence of the economy by attributing it to the unequal trade agreements between the USSR and Czechoslovakia. 29 In response to this, I remarked to Cde. Koscelanský that I can't speak about trade as a whole, but Czechoslovakia now is third in the world in the production of metals per capita, and once you begin operating the metallurgical combine in Košice with a capacity of 6 million tons of steel a year—a combine that was equipped with assistance from the USSR and with our raw materials, and every day receives 23,000 tons of Kryvyi Rih iron ore and 6,110 tons of Donets'k coal—your country will occupy first place in these categories. 30 And this is at the same time when, for example, in our oblast there is a shortage of metal and we are unable to keep the work force busy. 31

Cde. Koscelanský agreed with this and assured me that they are waging and will continue to wage a struggle against all those who try to cover up for their inactivity by making accusations against the USSR.

. . . . Turning to the national question, Cde. Koscelanský said that Czechoslovakia will be a federated republic (Czechs and Slovaks), and the national minorities (Hungarians and Ukrainians) will be given autonomy. 32 In response to this I said to him that autonomy is their internal affair, but I requested that he take a look at the Ukrainian newspaper “Nove zhittya,” published in Prešov, which features nationalist opinions about the Transcarpathian in the name of the workers of the province, something that is completely unacceptable. 33 Cde. Koscelanský assured me that the current events are not a repetition of the events of 1956 in Hungary, since in Hungary the popular masses rose up against the party and Central Committee, whereas in the CSSR they are speaking out against the conservatives and the Novotný group and are supporting their party, the CC, and friendship with the Soviet Union. The CC First Secretary, Dubcek, enjoys great authority among all spheres of the population. He cited an example that when Cde. Dubcek recently had to go to the hospital, students visited him and brought him bouquets of flowers and bottles of “Elinek” plum brandy.

Further on, Cde. Koscelanský reported that on 28 March, they have a CC plenum scheduled, where an “Action Program” will be adopted and the question of Novotný's tenure as President of the Republic will be decided. 34

In his view, the shortcomings of the current campaign arise not because many dishonorable people have joined in, but because some do not understand it properly. In addition, the Czechoslovak students sent a greeting to the Polish students, which obviously caused Cde. Gomulka to be angry at the Czechoslovak comrades. 35

In conclusion, Cde. Koscelanský requested that we convey to the Soviet friends that, beginning with Cde. Dubcek and going through every rank-and-file Communist, they will do everything possible to strengthen friendship with the Soviet Union and to advance the cause of socialism on the basis of the principles of Marxism-Leninism.

FIRST SECRETARY, TRANSCARPATHIAN
OBLAST COMMITTEE, CP OF UKRAINE
Yu. IL'NYTS'KYI

22 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Following the death of Klement Gottwald in March 1953, Antonín Novotný became First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. When Novotný's main rival, Antonín Zapotocký, the President of the CSSR, died in November 1957, Novotný succeeded him while also keeping his post atop the Communist Party. From that point until the end of 1967, Novotný ruled as both KSC First Secretary and President of the CSSR.

23 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This period marked the height of show trials in Czechoslovakia, which continued even after the deaths of Josif Stalin and Klement Gottwald in March 1953. For the official report on this era, which was suppressed in Czechoslovakia after the August 1968 invasion, see Jirí Pelikán, ed., *Potlacená zpráva: Zpráva Komise ÚV KSC o politických procesech a rehabilitacích v Československu 1949-68* (Vienna: Karz, 1970). For detailed background and statistics on the use of political repression in Czechoslovakia during the Gottwald and Novotný years, see František Gebauer et al., *Soudní perzekuce politické povahy v Československu 1948-1989: Statistický přehled*, Study No. 12 (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dejiny, 1993), esp. pp. 3-178.

24 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For a very useful overview of these issues, see H. Gordon Skilling, *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 333-411.

25 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The State Security (Státní bezpečnost, or StB) organs in Czechoslovakia, modeled after the Soviet state security apparatus, were a notorious instrument of repression under both Gottwald and Novotný.

26 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The Czechoslovak border guards had begun dismantling the barbed-wire and electrified fences along the border with West Germany as early as the last week of March and the first week of April; see "Les militaires enlevent des barbelés a la frontière germano-tchèque," *Le Monde* (Paris), 5 April 1968, p. 5. A law permitting free travel abroad was discussed in parliamentary committees in the summer of 1968 and was due to be enacted in the fall.

27 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: When a deep split emerged in the fall of 1967 between the anti-Novotný and pro-Novotný forces on the KSC Presidium, Novotný urged the CPSU General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, to come to Prague in December 1967 as a gesture of support. Crucial meetings of both the KSC Presidium and the KSC Central Committee were due to be held that month, and Novotný was eager to have Brezhnev attend. The KSC leader extended the invitation when he was in Moscow in early November 1967 during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the "October Revolution," and he did so without consulting or even informing his colleagues on the KSC Presidium, much to their dismay later on. Brezhnev had never been particularly close to Novotný (in part because of Novotný's well-known misgivings about the dismissal of Brezhnev's predecessor, Nikita Khrushchev, in 1964), but the Soviet leader decided to accept the invitation, not realizing that Novotný had kept the matter secret from other top Czechoslovak officials. Brezhnev often resorted to "personal diplomacy" in difficult situations, and in this case he was hoping to mend the political rifts in Czechoslovakia and to forestall a showdown between Novotný and his opponents. In the end, though, Brezhnev's visit, far from helping Novotný, contributed to his downfall. Brezhnev initially had intended to offer strong support for Novotný in the leadership dispute, but soon after he arrived in Prague on 8 December, he realized how unpopular the KSC First Secretary had become. Brezhnev spent 18 consecutive hours holding individual meetings with senior Czechoslovak officials, and by the end he was convinced there was nothing to gain if he tried to prevent the impending dismissal of Novotný from the top party post. Hence, during the rest of his brief visit, Brezhnev generally refrained from appearing to take sides whenever the question of leadership in the KSC arose (though he did openly endorse Novotný's position on the role of the KSC Presidium vis-à-vis the KSC Central Committee). Brezhnev also decided that it would be best if he did not attend a KSC Presidium meeting scheduled for 11 December, lest his presence be construed as too overt an endorsement of Novotný. Instead, the Soviet leader flew back to Moscow on the evening of the 9th. Brezhnev's abrupt departure and his lukewarm support for Novotný left the KSC First Secretary vulnerable to a challenge from the anti-Novotný forces, a challenge that paid off when the KSC Central Committee convened in the latter half of December 1967 and early January 1968. For valuable declassified materials and memoirs about Brezhnev's visit, see "Z vystoupení L. Brežneva při setkání s vedením KSC na Pražském hrade, 9.12.1967," 9 December 1967 (Top Secret), in ÚSD-SK, D VII; "Záznam telefonického rozhovoru J. Kádára s L. Brežnevem, 13.12.1967," 13 December 1967 (Top Secret), in ÚSD-SK, Z/M; A. M. Aleksandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva: Vospominaniya diplomata, sovetnika A. A. Gromyko, pomoshchnika L. I. Brezhneva, Yu. V. Andropova, K. U. Chernenko i M. S. Gorbacheva* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994), pp. 144-147; and Alexander Dubcek, *Hope Dies Last: The Autobiography of Alexander Dubcek*, trans. and ed. by Jirí Hochman (New York: Kodansha International, 1993), pp. 120-123.

28 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This account of Brezhnev's visit is largely accurate (though again it should be noted that Brezhnev did support Novotný's position on a few key issues). It was later widely reported, both inside and outside Czechoslovakia, that Brezhnev had told senior Czechoslovak officials "Eto vashe delo" ("This is your own affair") when he was asked to intervene in the KSC leadership dispute. Declassified materials from Brezhnev's visit show that he made remarks very similar to eto vashe delo, but whether he actually used those three words is unclear. Dubcek, who was present at the meeting, later was unsure whether Brezhnev had used the expression. Other prominent KSC officials, such as Josef Smrkovský and Jirí Pelikán, did believe that Brezhnev had uttered the three words, but neither of them was actually present at the meeting. Whatever Brezhnev did or did or did not say, his posture by the end of his two-day visit was very much in keeping with the spirit of "Eto vashe delo." That, however, was not the way Koscelanský viewed the matter at the time. In a secret conversation with the Soviet consul-general in Bratislava at the end of 1967, Koscelanský argued that "Brezhnev's arrival in Prague was very harmful because it implied that come what may, Novotný should be kept in his posts. Brezhnev pretended not to want to interfere in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs, but everyone understood what his real purpose was. He was there to bolster Novotný's standing in the Party." Cited in "Informatsiya k voprosu o polozhenii v rukovodstve KPCh," Cable No. 110 (Top Secret) from I. Kuznetsov, Soviet consul-general in Bratislava, to A. A. Gromyko and K. V. Rusakov, 28 December 1967, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 299, LI. 9-14.

29 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The reference here is to Otakar Šimunek, who, in addition to serving as the Czechoslovak representative at the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, was a full member of the KSC Presidium and a CSSR deputy prime minister. (He was removed from those posts in April 1968.)

30 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Kryvyi Rih and Donets'k are both in heavily industrialized areas of Ukraine. Kryvyi Rih, in central Ukraine, is the site of a huge iron ore combine and a central power generating station. Donets'k, in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, is at the heart of the Ukrainian coal mining and natural gas industries.

31 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Similarly, Nikolai Baibakov, the head of the Soviet State Planning Agency (Gosplan), informed the CPSU Politburo that Czechoslovakia was obtaining many raw materials from the USSR that it could not get from other suppliers unless it paid in hard currency. Czechoslovakia, he added, also was receiving substantial quantities of machinery and semi-finished goods. Trade with the USSR, according to Baibakov, amounted to one-third of Czechoslovakia's total foreign trade. See "Spravka o zhizhnennom urovne naseleniya Chekhoslovakii," Memorandum to CPSU Politburo member A. P. Kirilenko, 26 July 1968, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 562, LI. 7-21.

32 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The large Hungarian community in southern and eastern Slovakia, numbering more than 560,000 (and perhaps as many as 750,000) in 1968, seized the opportunity during the Prague Spring to voice long-standing grievances. From the time the Czechoslovak state was created in 1918, perennial tensions had emerged in Slovakia between the Slovaks (who had languished for centuries under Hungarian rule) and the Hungarians, who in 1968 complained openly about postwar "re-Slovakization" and the suppression of their cultural heritage. The Cultural Union of Czechoslovak Hungarian Workers (Csehszlovákiai Magyar Dolgozók Kulturális Szövetsége, or Csemadok) was especially active in pursuing far-reaching autonomy for ethnic Hungarians in Slovakia, including separate Hungarian institutions and schools. These demands provoked hostility among many Slovaks, who sought to restore the local branches of Matica Slovenska (the main Slovak cultural organ) as a counterweight against Csemadok. See Robert R. King, *Minorities Under Communism: Nationalities as a Source of Tension Among Balkan Communist States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 109-123. The much smaller Ruthenian community, numbering roughly 60,000-65,000 and concentrated mostly near Prešov in Eastern Slovakia, initially were less active than the Hungarians in 1968, but were gradually emboldened by the sweep of reforms. In this document, Koscelanský and Il'nyts'kyi refer to the Ruthenians as "Ukrainians," but that is not strictly correct. Although the Ruthenian and Ukrainian languages are now almost indistinguishable (especially the written languages), the Ruthenians actually are a distinct group known as Rusyny, who lived for many centuries under Hungarian rule. See Ivan Vanat, "Do pytannja vzyvannja terminiv 'Zakarpattja' ta 'Prjasivscyna'," in *Zovten' i ukrajins'ka kul'tura* (Prešov: Kul'turna spilka ukrains'kykh trudyashchykh, 1968), pp. 602-603. From 1919 to 1938, Subcarpathian Ruthenia (Podkarpatska Rus) was an integral part of Czechoslovakia, but it was reoccupied by Hungarian troops from 1939 to 1944. In mid-1945 it was incorporated into Soviet Ukraine, leaving only a small percentage of Ruthenians in Czechoslovakia. (In early 1946, Subcarpathian Ruthenia was converted into Ukraine's Transcarpathian Oblast.) In the 1950s the Ruthenians in Czechoslovakia were harshly persecuted, but in 1968 they made a short-lived – and fruitless – effort to achieve greater autonomy. The Cultural Association of Ukrainian Workers (Kul'turna spilka ukrains'kykh trudyashchykh, or KSUT) pressed demands not only for autonomy, but for restoration of the Ukrainian National Council in Czechoslovakia, which had been abolished in 1949. (The Council ended up not being revived, but if it had been, it was due to be renamed the Council of Czechoslovak Ruthenians.) The Ruthenian community in Prešov had long been putting out a number of Ukrainian-language publications, and had also been broadcasting Ukrainian programs on the Prešov radio station. These publications and broadcasts were readily available to many residents of western Ukraine, particularly those in Transcarpathian Oblast, as is evident from the documents I compiled for Part 3 of my "Ukraine and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Crisis of 1968" in the next CWIHP

Bulletin.

33 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: At times, some of the Ukrainian-language publications based in Prešov, including *Nove zhittya*, did indeed feature criticism of the situation in Soviet Ukraine. For a detailed overview of these publications, see Hodnett and Potichnyj, *The Ukraine and the Czechoslovak Crisis*, esp. pp. 54-75.

34 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Actually, Novotný was forced to resign “for reasons of ill health” just three days later (i.e., on 21 March) amidst a plethora of revelations about recent abuses. After an unconventional “nomination campaign” in late March, which included nominations of Cestmir Císar, Josef Smrkovský, and other leading reformers as potential successors to Novotný, General Ludvík Svoboda was formally approved as the new president on 30 March 1968. Novotný's resignation and Svoboda's candidacy had been endorsed at a preliminary session of the KSC Central Committee plenum on 28 March. The main part of the plenum began a few days later, from 1 to 5 April, culminating in a vote approving the new KSC Action Program (*Akcí program Komunistické strany Československa*) on 5 April. The program, as published in a lengthy supplement to *Rudé právo* on 10 April, laid out a wide-ranging agenda of political and economic reform. It became the symbolic blueprint of the Prague Spring from April through August 1968. By the standards of the Soviet bloc in the mid- to late 1960s, the Action Program was remarkably bold and comprehensive, and it was intended as the prelude to a longer-term program of sweeping reform that would be worked out by the government and the legislature.

35 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: During the first few weeks of March, Polish students held riots and demonstrations on the streets of Warsaw and many other Polish cities, carrying signs in support of Dubcek and proclaiming “Polska czeka na swego Dubczeka” (Poland is awaiting its own Dubcek). When the Polish authorities violently quelled the protests, Czechoslovak students responded by issuing a message of solidarity with the Polish students. The episode helped convince Wladyslaw Gomulka that events in Czechoslovakia, if allowed to proceed, would have an “increasingly detrimental effect on Poland.” Gomulka became the first Soviet-bloc official to attack the Czechoslovak reforms publicly when, in a speech before party activists on 19 March, he averred that “imperialist reaction and enemies of socialism” were gaining strength in Czechoslovakia. See “Umacniajmy jednoczność narodu w budownictwie socjalistycznej Ojczyzny: Przemówienie Władysława Gomułki na spotkaniu z aktywem warszawskim,” *Zolnierz Wolności* (Warsaw), 20 March 1968, pp. 3-4. The full speech was republished in *Pravda* (Moscow) on 22 March 1968, pp. 3-4. For a detailed overview of the turmoil in Poland, see Jerzy Eisler, *Marzec '68: Geneza – przebieg – konsekwencje* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Trio, 1991), which also includes an extensive bibliography. In addition, see the comments by one of

Gomulka's chief rivals and his eventual successor, Edward Gierek, in Janusz Rolicki, ed., *Edward Gierek: Przerwana dekada* (Warsaw: BGW, 1990), pp. 46-48. The unrest in Poland posed a dilemma for Soviet officials, who initially were unsure what, if anything, they should say about the riots. The director-general of the Soviet TASS news agency, Sergei Lapin, felt the need to contact the CPSU CC Politburo for permission just to publish in *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* a brief dispatch from the official Polish Press Agency. Brezhnev personally approved the request. See Lapin's secret memorandum of 11 March 1968 in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 25, L. 3. A notation in Brezhnev's handwriting at the bottom says "tov. Brezhnev L. I. soglasen" ("Comrade L. I. Brezhnev agrees").