

May 14, 1968
**P. Shelest Reports on Cde. Il'nyts'kyi's and Cde. Rusyn's
Visit to Czechoslovakia**

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Summary:

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- English Translation

CPSU CC

Having just been in Transcarpathian Oblast, I believe I should inform the CPSU CC about the following: On 10-11 May of this year, in connection with the 23rd anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from fascist occupiers, the First Secretary of the UkrCP's Transcarpathian Oblast committee, Cde. Il'nyts'kyi, and the chairman of the oblast executive committee, Cde. Rusyn, 129 visited the CSSR at the invitation of the KSC's East Slovakia regional committee and the Regional National Council.

The first secretary of the PZPR's Rzeszow province party committee, Cde. Kruczek, the chairman of the province executive committee, Cde. Duda, the first secretary of the MSzMP's Borsod province committee, Cde. Bodnár, and the chairman of the provincial council, Cde. Papp, were in the city of Košice, in the center of the region. 130

During the meeting, the first secretary of the East Slovakia regional party committee, Cde. Koscelanský, the chairman of the regional National Assembly, Cde. Gabriška, a secretary of the territorial party, Cde. Bobonko, the deputy chairmen of the National Assembly, Cdes. Ondrušek and Kubašovský, and two other senior officials from the KSC regional committee and National Assembly, Cdes. Novický and Oleár, took part in the discussions for the Czechoslovak side. 131

The Czechoslovak comrades sought to emphasize that at the invitation of the Soviet, Polish, and Hungarian friends to mark the anniversary, they wanted to express their solidarity with the socialist countries while at the same time doing everything possible to convince their guests that the events in Czechoslovakia will lead to good results. In their presentations, Cdes. Il'nyts'kyi, Kruczek, and Bodnár, when mentioning how favorably disposed the Soviet, Polish, and Hungarian peoples are to Czechoslovakia, expressed alarm at the processes under way in the KSC and the country.

Judging from the conversation, the Czechoslovak comrades believe that the speeches by anti-socialist elements at the 1st of May festivities are perfectly normal and are a reflection of the success of "democratization." Cde. Koscelanský, in particular, emphasized this point. He also stated that sentiment is growing in the KSC CC to ensure that a new constitution will not contain a provision enshrining the role of the Communist Party as the leading and guiding force in society. This is being done, the argument goes, to prove that the party can and must achieve its leading position not through administrative means, but through positive action. When our comrades and the Polish and Hungarian comrades expressed doubt about the appropriateness of this decision and argued that without the party's leading role it would be impossible to build socialism, Koscelanský declared that they [the KSC and the Czechoslovak

government] are justified in carrying out experiments.

In response to this, he was informed that experiments should be conducted in a kitchen laboratory, not in a country, particularly on such an important matter that affects all Communists and the whole socialist camp. With regard to the organs of propaganda, Koscelanský declared that the party is deliberately not interfering in the press, radio, and television, since those media “helped the CC replace the ‘conservative’ cadres. When the time comes, we will restore order [in the mass media].” 132

Cde. Koscelanský declared that they have 15,000 armed People's Militia forces in the region, which, together with the Prešov tank division, act only on his own orders, not the orders of the KSC CC. At the same time, he expressed worry that violations of the law were occurring in the country, including instances when the peasants seized land and are preparing to gather the fall harvest solely for themselves.

After Cde. Koscelanský left for a conference in Prague of the secretaries of party committees, Cdes. Gabriška, Bobonko, and Ondrušek began to speak more openly about the danger posed by events in the country and about the need to adopt decisive measures vis-à-vis the propaganda organs; but they are afraid to carry these out.

Cde. Bobonko, a secretary of the regional party committee, said that cadres are being destroyed in the country. All it takes is for someone to say something bad about a senior official, and that official is promptly removed from his post. The party committees do not offer protection for such comrades. A bit later he said that in their region the peasants are illicitly putting up crosses in the schools (in almost every school), as was the case during the bourgeois republic. And no one is speaking out against the stepped-up activity of the Catholic church. 133 The teachers are forcing the children of dismissed comrades to sit at separate desks and are mocking them. In the country, more than 7,000 senior party officials have already been dismissed and have been given no new work. Just a day or two ago, a group of young hooligans ransacked the apartment of the chairman of the Prague municipal executive committee, Cde. Cerný. 134

Referring to several senior officials, Cde. Bobonko said: “Smrkovský is Imre Nagy No. 2,” who at the state's expense has installed 400 people in the newspapers, radio, and television to shape public opinion in a direction favorable to him. 135 As far as Císar is concerned, he's a complete swine, and the same is true of the new minister of internal affairs.” 136

During the conversations, we sensed that Cde. Koscelanský is well informed about the line of the KSC CC, in particular about Cde. Dubcek's line. He told our comrades that Cde. Dubcek himself is already aware that things have gone very

far. However, he [Dubcek – trans.] is waiting for statements from below demanding that decisive measures be taken, and then, supposedly, he will take a firm stance. In a separate conversation with Cde. Il'nyts'kyi, Cde. Koscelanský said that Cde. Kruczek had stated, in a conversation with him, that the Poles are worried about the situation in Czechoslovakia and that, if it should prove necessary, they and the Hungarians will use their armies to help the Czechoslovak friends. 137

It is worth noting that during the discussions, the Polish and Hungarian friends completely supported our comrades and displayed a unity of views. The Transcarpathian Oblast party committee is maintaining its ties with the KSC's East Slovakian regional committee.

In private letters to friends, relatives, and acquaintances in Transcarpathian Oblast from Czechoslovakia, particularly from the Prešov region where nearly 200,000 Ukrainians live, the correspondents speak about the alarming situation in the Czechoslovak Republic and the persecution of Ukrainians, Hungarians, and Poles. 138 In a letter to I. M. Chendei (a writer), 139 one of his acquaintances, I. Prokipcak from Czechoslovakia, reports: "Our (i.e., the Ukrainian population's) situation is very difficult. We see that someone is sticking up for the Hungarian and Polish communities. Warsaw and Budapest from time to time speak out in defense of their compatriots. But no one is sticking up for us. As a result, nationalist pressure on us from a number of Slovak extremists is becoming all the more onerous and audacious."

On 13 May, at the request of the head of the interior ministry directorate in the East Slovakia region, Cde. Majer, a meeting took place with the head of the Transcarpathian directorate of the Ukrainian KGB, Cde. Zhabchenko. 140 During the discussion, Cde. Majer spoke, at his own initiative, about the situation in the country and about the stepped-up activity of anti-socialist forces and demagogic and anarchic elements. He showed our comrades a leaflet, typeset in Czech.

The leaflet, invoking Marxist-Leninist principles, gives an evaluation of events in the country in a very impassioned style. It says that events in Czechoslovakia are nothing other than a struggle between socialism and capitalism, which raise the stark question: who will defeat whom? The leaflet calls on workers to stand up in defense of the KSC and socialist gains, and to act decisively in putting an end to the anti-popular activities of the reactionary forces. Cde. Majer said that such leaflets were being distributed in large quantities in Prague. Our comrades got the impression that Cde. Majer suspects that the Soviet organs are in some way involved in the preparation and dissemination of these leaflets. 141

It is telling that, during the conversation, Majer was extremely interested in finding out the reasons for and results of the recent meeting in Moscow of the

heads of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland, the German Democratic Republic, and Bulgaria. These two matters obviously were the reason he requested to meet with our comrades. 142

On that same day, a meeting took place at the "Chekhiya" industrial enterprise, again at the initiative of the Czechoslovak side. 143 The head of the State Security division at the Cierna station, Captain Široký, his deputy, Senior Lieutenant Katan, and Senior Lieutenant Cernický met with two high-ranking officials from the UkrKGB in Transcarpathian Oblast, Lieutenant-Colonels Cdes. Oleinik and Demochko.

This conversation focused on the question raised by the Czechoslovak comrades: whether reports in the Western press and on Western radio were correct about a concentration of Soviet tank forces along the border with Czechoslovakia and about a partial mobilization in the Soviet Union to bring these forces up to full strength. 144

In response to our explanation that a regular troop exercise was under way, the Czechoslovaks noted that if Soviet troops actually took up positions along Czechoslovakia's borders, they [the Czechoslovaks] would be calm and it would be possible to restore order in their republic more quickly. The friends stated that the Czechoslovak people are certain that if a threat to socialism arises in their country, the Soviet Union will provide all necessary military assistance to them.

It is essential to point out that in the western provinces [of Ukraine] and in Transcarpathia, where I had to be, the mood among people was very good. Everyone with whom I spoke fully supports the decisions of the April plenum of the CPSU Central Committee and our readiness to provide all necessary assistance to the fraternal Czechoslovak people.

P. SHELEST

14 May 1968

Uzhhorod

No. 1/27

129 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Vasyl' Rusyn had been the head of the Transcarpathian Oblast executive committee since May 1957 and was also a candidate member of the UkrCP Central Committee.

130 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The officials listed here are Stanislaw Kruczek, Edward Duda, Ferenc Bodnár, and Lajos Papp.

131 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The officials listed here, in addition to Koscelanský, are Jozef Gabriška, Štefán Bobonko, Vincent Ondrušek (his name

is misspelled here as Ondruško; later in the document it is spelled correctly), Jozef Kubašovský, Ján Novický, and Štefán Oleár.

132 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Dubcek and other Czechoslovak officials frequently reassured their Soviet counterparts in 1968 that they would soon “restore order” in the mass media, but Soviet leaders increasingly doubted that these promises would ever be fulfilled.

133 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: These same matters were raised (almost word for word) by Yurii Il'nyts'kyi, the first secretary of the UkrCP's Transcarpathian Oblast committee, in his speech to the CPSU Central Committee plenum on 17 July 1968. See Part 3 of my article in the next issue of the CWIHP Bulletin.

134 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Ludvík Černý had been the lord mayor of the Prague municipal executive committee since July 1964.

135 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The references here are to Josef Smrkovský, one of the most influential members of the Czechoslovak leadership (who became a full member of the KSC Presidium on 5 April 1968), and Imre Nagy, the reformist prime minister in Hungary in 1953-1955 who was briefly restored to power in October-November 1956, during the abortive revolution in Hungary. After Soviet troops invaded Hungary en masse in early November 1956, Nagy sought refuge in the Yugoslav embassy in Budapest, but he subsequently was arrested by Soviet forces who deceived him into leaving the embassy building. In June 1958 he was executed by the Hungarian government and buried in an unmarked grave. Until 1989, Nagy was officially portrayed by the Hungarian and Soviet authorities as the leader of a “counterrevolutionary rebellion” and a “traitor.”

136 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The references here are to Cestmír Císar, a KSC Secretary since 5 April 1968, and Josef Pavel, the newly appointed interior minister (see Document No. 7 supra). Both were identified with the avidly pro-reform group in the KSC. From early May on, Soviet leaders repeatedly – but unsuccessfully – urged Dubcek to remove Císar and Pavel from their posts.

137 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Kruczek's statement reflects the sentiments that Gomulka and other senior PZPR officials were expressing both privately and (to some extent) publicly. See, for example, Gomulka's comments in “Zapis' besedy v TsK KPSS s rukovoditelyami bratskikh partii Bolgarii, Vengrii, Germanii, Pol'shi,” LI. 1-42. See also the interviews with high-ranking Polish military officers who took part in the invasion, in Lech Kowalski, ed., *Kryptonim “Dunaj”*: *Udział wojsk polskich w interwencji zbrojnej w Czechosłowacji w 1968 roku* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1992).

138 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: These allegations pertain to national minorities in Czechoslovakia: the large Hungarian community and much smaller Ruthenian

(Rusyn) community in Slovakia (discussed above), and the small Polish community (numbering roughly 71,000) in eastern Moravia, near the borders with Poland and Slovakia. The number of Ruthenians in the Prešov region (described here as Ukrainians) was far less than 200,000, as discussed earlier.

139 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Ivan Chendei was a well-known writer, satirist, and intellectual in the Subcarpathian Ruthenian region (i.e., the Transcarpathian Oblast) of Soviet Ukraine. As of 1968, his books, published both in Ukrainian/Ruthenian and in Russian translation, included *Bereznevyi snih: Povisti ta opovidannya* (Kyiv: Molod', 1968); *Teren tsvite: Novely, povist'* (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1967); *Koly na ranok blahoslovlyalosya* (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1967); *Znaiomtes': Tyachiv, Rakhiv, Yasynya* (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1966); *Yak cholovik vid'mu pidkuvav, a kishku vkhyv pratsyuvatakh: Zakarpats'ki narodni kazky* (Uzhhorod, Karpaty, 1966); *Ptakhy polyshayut' hnizda: Roman* (Kyiv: Radyans'kyi pys'mennyk, 1965); *Poedynka: Opovidannya* (Kyiv: Derzhlitvydav, 1962); *Teren tsvite* (Uzhhorod: Zakarpats'ke obl. vyd-vo, 1958); *Viter z polonyn: Opovidannya ta povist'* (Kyiv: Derzhlitvydav Ukrainy, 1958); *Skakav pip cherez plit: Zbirka zakarpats'koho ukrains'koho narodnoho humoru i satyry pro relihiu, tserkvu i popiv* (Uzhhorod: Zakarpats'ke obl. vyd-vo, 1958). He continued to produce many books and short stories (and even a film script) in the 1970s and 1980s.

140 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: See the preceding document for Zhabchenko's account of this meeting.

141 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: See the comments about this matter in Document No. 8 above.

142 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Shelest's strong assertions here provide a valuable illustration of his tendency to put the most sinister gloss possible on events in Czechoslovakia. Zhabchenko's own report (see Document No. 7) was much more qualified in its assessment of Majer's motives. By contrast, Shelest chose to state unequivocally that the only reasons Majer wanted to meet with Zhabchenko were to complain about the anti-reformist leaflets and to find out what had happened at the 8 May conference in Moscow.

143 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For an account of this meeting by one of the Ukrainian KGB participants, Lieut. Colonel Pavlo Demochko, see Document No. 9 above.

144 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: A large-scale effort was indeed under way to mobilize Soviet troops in the leadup to joint military exercises and preparations for other contingencies on Czechoslovak territory. Documents attesting to the redeployments of units, the call-up of reservists, and the requisitioning of civilian vehicles will be featured in the next issue of the CWIHP Bulletin. Originally, joint

exercises had not been due to take place in Czechoslovakia until 1969, but that schedule was moved ahead to June 1968. As it turned out, Soviet troops began entering Czechoslovakia even earlier – in late May 1968 – just after a delegation of high-ranking Soviet military officers visited the country to make arrangements for the upcoming exercises.