

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DO-13

Pohraniční stráž 50/763
160 00 Praha 6
Czechoslovakia
Tel: 311 0777

Sept. 30, 1991

THE COUP AND CUCUMBER SEASON

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 W. Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter and friends:

There's a Czech phrase for the summer vacation months -- cucumber season. It means summer doldrums, or a time when not much is happening besides the growing of cucumbers.

The cucumbers grew as usual this summer -- a fine crop -- but there were lots of other things going on. At the top of the list is the problem that won't go away -- the tug-of-war over the division of power among the Czech and Slovak and federal governments. Simply put, they can't agree on who gets what. You could say these are growing pains and awakened national pride that inevitably come with newly gained freedom. So one republic puts "Slovak Republic" signs on its borders and the other welcomes travelers as the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic. But these "growing pains" have grown into bickering, delays or blocking of laws and agreements -- domestic and international -- disinformation and just plain lies. After months of negotiations, the two republics don't see eye to eye on what it means to be a federation. This is a very deep-rooted, very complex problem, and it threatens Czechoslovakia's very future.

For months, people underestimated this issue's staying power and the damage it could do. Today most still think it will be handled non-violently. But just about everyone now says something has to be done, and fast.

Some Slovak nationalists want to stop the federative train and get off. They want their own country and their own kind of economic reform -- in general slower and more state-controlled. Others call for "sovereignty" within the framework of a

Dagmar Obereigner is an Institute fellow studying political and social change in Eastern Europe, with a focus on Czechoslovakia

federation -- a federation that's built "from the bottom up," with the lion's share of power in the republics. And some Slovak leaders who say they are pro-federation have made it clear they see the federation arrangement as temporary -- probably just until Slovakia gets more on its feet economically.

Everything I have read and heard indicates that Slovaks would fare worse than the Czechs if the country were to split up. They draw a bigger share than the Czechs from federal coffers, and their economy is in the early, difficult stages of weaning itself from emphasis on heavy industry. One recent analysis predicted 300,000 people in each republic would lose their jobs as a direct result of a break-up. That would hit Slovakia harder because it has a smaller population (about 5 million versus 10 million in Bohemia and Moravia).

The Slovak leaders searching for "sovereignty" say they want to be on equal footing with the Czechs, and then decide what kind of "new" federation they want. A friend of mine calls this "trying to kick in an open door." Slovakia has its own National Council (republican parliament), which makes Slovak laws. In addition, the federal Parliament takes into account the National Council's views on proposed federal laws, and representation in the federal Parliament is structured in such a way that Slovaks can block legislation they don't like.

Confusion about division of powers has complicated just about every aspect of life here -- from the legal to the economic to the psychological. A referendum law has been passed (and another law, which would set the rules for how the referendum would be conducted, is before Parliament now). Thousands of pro-federation Czechoslovaks have signed a petition urging that the referendum be held. As of Sept. 26, a total of 192,498 people in Bohemia signed. A similar campaign is under way in Slovakia, where 21,541 people have signed. President Havel appeared before Parliament recently to deliver the same message: Let the people decide their future. He says he was elected to build a democratic federation and is working to keep it together. But if we are to split up, let us do so in a civilized, constitutional manner, he said.

Several times over the summer, Czech and Slovak leaders headed to "various castles and chateaus" (as one disgusted politician sarcastically recalls) to hammer out compromises. Both sides then would say they'd accomplished a lot and understood each other better, but a short while later all bets were off. The Czech and Slovak prime ministers even climbed a mountain together -- maybe to show that they can be reasonable at high altitudes.

Public opinion polls so far show that most Czechs and Slovaks want to remain in a federation, but that in itself doesn't mean anything. It's hard to say whether Parliament will get its act together and vote to hold a referendum by the end of the year (the deadline). If not, this crisis most likely will drag on at least until the next parliamentary elections, in June. If a referendum is held, careful wording of the referendum question

and a thorough public information campaign in both republics will be needed. Somehow I don't have much faith that this will happen. And even if it does, and the people vote to stay together, I don't think the problem will go away.

Meanwhile, regular folks tried to make sense of all this over the summer by watching as many television news shows and rambling political discussions as they could stomach. They read the newspapers and listened to the radio. Or not. A lot of people are starting to say they don't have the strength for all the political machinations and power plays. (I do struggle to keep up but am continually frustrated by the media's failure to give sufficient basic information.)

People took off to the country, and those who still could afford it got out of the country. For vacationers who didn't want to let a little ethnic strife spoil a trip to the seashore, newspapers published "how-to" articles for carefree driving through the Yugoslavian war zone.

Then came August 19th, and the coup in the Soviet Union. The shock waves quickly reached Czechoslovakia, and a chill swept through the country. Once again it seemed small and vulnerable. One woman I know, who's lived through the Nazi terror and the Soviet tanks, was unable to stand the strain and spent the first day crying. She never had been too certain whether she could believe this new democracy was here to stay. Other people apparently made sure their passports were in order and made plans to flee if necessary. But, true to form, the most visible immediate reaction was people jumping into their cars and getting in line at gas stations. The Soviet Union supplies nearly all of this country's crude oil. I guess to some people, one more full tank before it all fell apart was the most important thing. The lines disappeared when government officials assured people that there would be no curtailing of gasoline. Soviet-watchers said the coup organizers probably would try to keep energy supplies undisturbed to show stability and reliability.

When I heard the news, a cold fear crept through me. The Soviet troops were gone -- even the pink tank (painted that way earlier this year as an artistic statement/protest) commemorating their liberation of Prague had been removed. But they weren't far away. They were never far away. All of a sudden it didn't matter how far along we were on the "road back to Europe." It didn't matter how many Western firms had set up shop, how many visitors were happily walking Prague's beautiful streets that morning. All of a sudden the borders felt weak, the democracy fragile, the Western support a bunch of words and handshakes. All of a sudden I was scared. I thought of Ina and once again sent a prayer her way.

It was a Monday morning. Presidential spokesman Michael Žantovský would be having his regular weekly news conference. I ran over to Prague Castle, figuring, correctly, that President Havel would join him, given the situation. The president, who had been notified of the coup during the night, first read a statement in

which he said there was no cause for alarm. He expressed confidence that democracy would win out in the Soviet Union.

"There's no doubt that difficult moments await the nations of the Soviet Union," he said. "But it's not possible to turn back the cycle of history. We are convinced that the development on the road toward democracy is irrevocable even in the Soviet Union, and that democratic forces will celebrate victory in the end."

He noted that this crisis came just before a solemn date for his nation -- the Aug. 21 anniversary of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. [The last of the Soviet troops didn't leave until June of this year. They're also out of Hungary, but thousands remain in neighboring Poland and Germany.]

"The latest events in the Soviet Union inevitably recall memories of sad historic events from more than 20 years ago, which occurred exactly during these summer days. For this reason too we cannot take the latest development in the Soviet Union lightly and fall victim to any kind of illusions," Havel said.

He said Czechoslovakia's international standing was "firm, and it's not possible to reverse the process of radical political and economic transformation. Our country is an integral part of Europe, and its security also is linked to Europe."

The president reserved a few sentences for the Czechoslovak people. He said we should re-evaluate our domestic problems in light of what had happened and decide what is "tolerable and what isn't, what contributes to our security and what doesn't." Havel also mentioned concern about possible refugees from the Soviet Union. Later in the day, Czechoslovak troops were moved into eastern border areas to reinforce them.

Thanks to the fact that CNN is shown on one of Czechoslovakia's three channels for several hours every day, my Czech friends and I were able to monitor the coup's progress. It seemed like a bad movie. We watched, dazed, unable to not make comparisons to 1968. There were so many ironies and similarities that it seemed trite to point them out. Everyone knew. Everyone just sat and watched.

Some people thought there was a silver lining inside even this Communist cloud, and predicted (or maybe just hoped) that Czechoslovaks would realize how petty they had been and start working together. I didn't share this optimistic view.

Luckily, the coup ended quickly. Just as quickly, Czechoslovaks seemed to forget about it. It did shake up politicians worldwide and move them to action. And it probably will accelerate the aid coming to Eastern Europe, or at least the signing of various economic and political agreements. Czechoslovak government officials realize more than ever the need to build strong ties to the West and probably will at least try to go into higher gear to make that happen. All in all, I think it's safe to say that not many people gave much thought to cucumbers this summer.

All the best, Dagmar

Received in Hanover 10/17/91