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1956, 1968, 1980–81: Three Uprisings against State Socialist Regimes. Similarities and Differences – a Comparative Study

Miklós MITROVITS

During the existence of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe three uprisings took place which influenced the entire region. The first was the Hungarian revolution of 1956; the second, the Prague Spring of 1968; and the third was the Polish Solidarity movement of 1980 – 1981. There is a general consensus in the literature that the uprisings, which occurred roughly at twelve-year intervals, were a continuation of each other, just like waves upon the sea's surface, dealing consecutive blows against the communist system which finally collapsed in 1989.

In my paper I examine whether these revolutions and riots did indeed arise from each other and what kind of connections we may detect among them. It is an accepted fact today that the direction in which the Hungarian revolution of 1956 and the Czechoslovakian events of 1968 were pointing, had the Soviet tanks not forestalled further development, was that of a democratic state system. The transition of 1989, in which the Solidarity movement played an invaluable part, also proves that Polish events in 1980 – 1981 were also heading in the same direction. Naturally, the mass movements which unfolded during the three uprisings differed in terms of volume, character, social base, the kind of agendas which became public and the degree to which they were embedded in the international context. We must also bear in mind the fact that the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian events started amongst the reform circles of the Communist Party itself, and gained mass support, until eventually the governing parties lost control over the events and certain of their leaders even took sides with the

masses. By contrast, in Poland, the mass movement which came to be called Solidarity evolved fully from bottom up, from the ranks of society itself, independently of the party. The measures taken by the Soviet leadership were determined by these facts, no less than by the economic and international political position of the Soviet Union. There were several other differences as well, as regards the emergence and course of events. Each of the revolutions in question was also powerfully marked by the diverging traditions arising from the different national histories and political cultures of these countries. In my paper, I offer a detailed discussion of these differences.

A common trait among the events in question was the active participation of intellectuals (particularly writers) and workers, as well as the fact that, in each of the three cases, they adopted and further developed the tradition of the self-government of workers. There is sufficient evidence that, in both 1968 and particularly in 1980 – 1981, the experiences of the 1956 revolution were studied systematically. Leaders of the Polish "Solidarity" movement consciously avoided any such demands as threatened Soviet hegemony and the foundations of the international socialist system, but they did build most powerfully on the traditional practice of workers' self-government.

The latest archive documents also allow me to make it quite clear in my paper that, besides the revolutionaries, the leaders of the regimes also learnt their lessons from these cases and subsequently tried to apply different, less harsh methods against their opponents. I base my research work on Hungarian (the National Archives of Hungary), Polish (the Central Archives of Modern Records), Czech (the *National Archives)* and Russian (the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History) archives as sources. The present piece of research forms part of a larger project comparing different communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe, conducted by the Institute of Political History.

1. Tools and methods of the resistances

Eastern Europe saw a number of attempts to change the state socialist system which existed between 1947 and 1989. By change, I mean a broad range of possible adjustments, such as raising living standards, improving working conditions, ensuring respect for social and human rights; indeed, there were even attempts to liberalise the system of centrally controlled economy inherited from Stalinism and adapt a different model in its stead.

From time to time attempts were also made to reform the political system: to break the Communist Party's monopoly on power, to create a pluralistic political arena or to increase the role of trade unions in political and economic decision-making.

Different groups of society had access to different means to pursue these goals. The broader strata were forced to limit their hopes to only modest goals in this period (improving living standards and working conditions, broadening social rights) and had a limited set of means for attaining them (strikes, street demonstrations, samizdat publications). Changing the entire system would have required a far more profound intellectual enterprise, more potent means and methods, and an adequate apparatus, even if by this we mean merely the introduction of a new economic model or the decentralisation of economic and political decision-making, instead of a full political transition, the replacement of state socialism by capitalism, abolishing the leading role of the Communist Party or the acceptance of a pluralistic political life. Obviously, such requisites were unavailable to any except the ruling parties and their nomenclature. Within the framework of the political, economic and social system which emerged during the Stalinist era and persisted even after Stalin's death, change was actually unimaginable through any other channel than the party apparatus, even if there were some attempts at change coming from the outside. The broad masses of society (workers, peasants, intellectuals and university students) lacked information, adequate tools and the necessary capital for reforming the dictatorial system by their own resources.

After the revolutions in October 1956, and after the initial hopes were dispersed, it became clear that the system wasn't heading for decentralisation and democratisation, as the party bureaucracy was unwilling to hand over controlling posts of economic and political power to the society, but were making efforts to concentrate these even more in their own hands. This was the experience which motivated, from the mid-1960s onwards, the intellectuals to elaborate and articulate their objectives.

a.) The *'Open Letter' to the party* (to the PUWB, in 1964), by Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, called for a 'workers' democracy' based on the self-government of the workers to replace the existing system. Thus their main aim was to change the conditions of production by destroying the rule of the bureaucratic class. As long as this system existed, no decentralisation was possible. The workers would have an increased influence on dividing the profits. Kuroń and Modzelewski would have ensured higher objectives (a wider

social safety net) with the help of social control, which was prevented precisely by the existence of the bureaucracy.

b.) After Stalin's death it was a characteristic of the times that social movements grew stronger at times when the party's leading role weakened so much that the public could sense it. But even in these cases, societies could only achieve any success when conditions were favourable both in the international arena and the socialist camp. This is the kind of opportunity which Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski recognised when, in 1971, he published his essay, *Theses on hope and hopelessness*. He drew the conclusion that rigidity of system depends on how far its inhabitants are convinced about this very rigidity. Because of its internal contradictions, the system was constantly working to weaken itself. This weakness was what society should take advantage of.

c.) Eventually, it was Adam Michnik who articulated the mission of the intelligentsia. It was published in his famous essay, *New evolutionism*. Continuing Kołakowski's line of thought, he stressed that opposition politics should be addressed to society. It is for the people, not the party, that you need to create a programme. The best guide for the party should be the pressure coming from below. The essence of 'new evolutionism' which he proclaimed was that the intelligentsia, with the help of the workers, would force central administration to allow change.

2. The origin and social base of the events

The social explosion which took place in Poland, and particularly in Hungary, in 1956 was preceded, and indeed provoked, by a power crisis within the Communist Party and direct intervention by the Soviet leaders. The Hungarian revolution did not start on October 23rd 1956 – it had begun as far back as the summer of 1953 when, after Stalin's death, Khrushchev and Beria directly interfered with the replacement of leaders within the Hungarian party and put Imre Nagy in the place of Mátyás Rákosi. Prime Minister Imre Nagy's programme meant the end of Stalinism in the classic sense in Hungary and this détente brought about the 'awakening' of a broad layer of intellectuals consisting mostly of economists and writers. This effervescent intellectual life contributed considerably to the defeat of the Stalinists after the internal power struggle which became exacerbated once more after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. The

demonstrations of October 23rd turned into a bloody revolution because the Hungarian Stalinists were willing to put up an armed struggle against a society clamouring for change, and lend armed assistance to the old leadership despite the de-Stalinisation programme that had been proclaimed. With this, an anti-Stalinist uprising turned into an anti-Soviet freedom fight.

The Polish events were also heavily influenced by the 20th Congress and the power crisis that emerged after the death of that country's Stalinist leader, Bolesław Bierut. The uprising which broke out in Poznań (June 28th) mainly focused on economic and social demands. It was not sufficiently broad or well-organised to aim at radically transforming the regime or at least the existing political model. The fact that the central power once more responded with armed retaliation was due to internal power struggles. Even so, the Stalinists failed to retain their positions and, on 19 October, Władysław Gomułka, who had plainly rejected the existing regime in his speech held at the 8th plenary session of the Central Committee, was able to return to power. The 'de-Stalinisation' processes were highly popular with the societies of both Poland and Hungary. In Warsaw, these sentiments were so powerful that the Soviet leadership decided to refrain from direct interference with the replacement of the leadership. In Hungary, although the freedom fight was stifled with military assistance, János Kádár did indeed fulfil the original objective of the anti-Stalinist rebellion of preventing the return of the previous regime.

The Prague Spring of 1968 also finds its origin in the de-Stalinisation processes. In Czechoslovakia, the eradication of the Stalinist regime was delayed by a certain set of reasons and took place more slowly and without a social explosion. From the early 1960s onwards (after 1962 – 1963), the Communist Party leadership showed an increasingly strong determination to reform the system. This mainly meant market liberalisation and the decentralisation of a redistribution mechanism working through a powerfully centralised planned economy governed in a top-down fashion. Similarly to the Hungarian processes of 1953 – 1956, these circumstances made it possible for an effervescent intellectual life to develop within the intelligentsia which significantly contributed to genuine reform plans being discussed by the decision-making bodies after leaders were replaced in early 1968. Similarly to 1956, the initiating role was played by economists and writers.

The Polish events of 1980 – 1981 go back to a very different origin. While in the previous case it was clearly visible that processes starting in

the leadership of the Communist Party generated a political and social situation which mobilised first the intelligentsia and then the broader strata of society, the events in Poland in 1980 took a different course. Within the Polish United Workers' Party there were practically no reform initiatives; indeed, the congress held in February 1980 was dominated by an air of satisfaction and self-confidence. Nevertheless, change had profound roots in Poland. Between 1956 and 1980, the misguided economic and social policy of the party and the overt use of power to stifle signs of social discontent led to the emergence of opposition forces amongst those ranks of the intelligentsia which were independent of political parties, as well as among industrial workers and the peasantry. The various social strata only gradually joined forces after 1976. The strikes which broke out in the summer of 1980 in response to yet another in a line of price rises led, in a way unprecedented in history, to the emergence of a mass movement amounting to some ten million people within a few months. This movement was an entirely independently organised social initiative, unrelated in any way to the party or the old trade unions associated with it. It was essentially based on workers of heavy industry but also had close ties with the intelligentsia, the peasantry and the Catholic Church which played an integrating role. The movement, which soon received the name of 'Solidarity', developed into a phenomenon unique within the history of Central and Eastern Europe.

3. Objectives and results

The goals of these three revolutionary attempts were in many ways similar but they also diverged in a number of important aspects. In Poznań, workers were clamouring for their overdue wages, overwork payments and bonuses. They were outraged by the fact that the city was treated with negative discrimination by central headquarters. They also wanted a payrise. Naturally, as events progressed, demands affecting Polish–Soviet relations also emerged. The buildings of the local party headquarters and the state security organisation were attacked as symbols of the regime. Thus the initiative was clearly directed against the regime but time was too short for them to formulate a progressive programme. The Hungarian revolution had more time for this. The majority of people who flooded the streets on October 23rd 1956 were motivated by more than mere discontentment with economic and social relations. They were at least as keen to get rid of the Stalinist heritage, to cleanse themselves morally of a recent past

laden with a sense of guilt, and to tie in socialism with genuine democracy. They demanded that Soviet troops be removed from the country, Soviet–Hungarian business agreements be revised, Stalinist leaders be removed and the establishment of a 'national government'. At the same time, the majority were appreciative of the fundamental traits of the existing socialist economic and social system – the dominance of collective ownership, economic planning, full employment and social security. Hungarian society did not wish to give up on the idea and requirement of social justice and equality for the future. In other words, the Hungarian revolution was an anti-Stalinist uprising which was aimed, not at a restoration of the capitalist social and economic model, but at transforming the Stalinist-type state socialist system through a revolutionary process and developing a socialist system based on genuine social control, which might go so far as to permit the emergence of a multi-party system and a coalition government.

The Polish October formulated similar objectives. Workers were powerfully driven by an ideal of self-government which was to operate as an effective interest protection mechanism and a decision-making forum. Workers' councils were recognised, temporarily, in both countries.

The Hungarian revolution and freedom fight was stifled by Khrushev with the help of the Soviet Army, while the Polish revolution failed due to the intervention of Gomulka's armed forces in autumn 1957. The question is whether all that had been achieved was eventually lost or was it possible to salvage some of the results of the uprisings? Did the reforms become incorporated with the politics of the Communist Party? Were these uprisings in any sense successful?

The answer is clearly yes. The period between October 1956 and October 1957 played a more powerful catalytic role than anything beforehand in the dissemination and development of opposition ideas. Władysław Gomułka came into power relying on a strong social base, particularly the working classes but, in return for this legitimacy, the party was forced to take into account what were thought of as 'Polish characteristics'. Thus, the predominance of peasant farmsteads was allowed to survive, the relative freedom of the Church also prevailed, while the cultural sphere (music, film, theatre) came upon an unforeseen degree of freedom in Poland. One of the results of the Polish revolution was that the regime, previously aiming at a Stalinist-type totalitarian rule, was now replaced by a post-totalitarian system in which the central power no longer used its previous

methods and society experienced a general air of relative freedom in which it was able organise its later actions against the regime.

After the Hungarian revolution, János Kádár – appointed by the Soviets as the new leader – restored law and order using harsh retaliations and terror. Executions, mass-scale emigration, the reorganisation and restriction of the press, and the establishment of the workers' militia were reminiscent of the Stalinist period. Eventually, however, this was not the path that Kádár chose to take. It soon transpired that the de-Stalinisation process in Hungary was being resumed, even if strictly controlled by the party. The Soviet party leadership did not interfere directly with Hungarian domestic politics and Kádár interpreted his own position as one which gave him a relatively free hand in the country as long as he first restored order.

As a result, from 1957 onwards, meeting the needs of the general population and continually improving living standards became a strong priority. At first, the state financed its growth using loans from the Soviet Union but soon the policy regarding living standards came to be at the centre of economic policy. In January 1957 a process was launched, with the help of economists of a 'bourgeois' hue, of radically transforming the control mechanism of the economy and allowing the mechanisms of the market economy to play their part. At the head of the project was István Varga, an economist formerly associated with the Smallholders' Party but, in April 1957, the government called off the efforts of economic reform. After the 1962 congress of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, however, the plan for radically altering the system of economic management inherited from the Stalinist period was put on the agenda once more. As a result, after a great deal of debate and long elaboration, on 1 January 1968 the new economic mechanism came into force.

Around the turn of the 1950s and 1960s the country's agriculture was reorganised on an industrial and cooperative basis, but without the use of Stalinist methods. The aim was not to withdraw resources but to modernise agricultural production. Later on, a private form of farming was also permitted in the form of what was called home farmsteads. The country became open to Western visitors, and foreign travel was also made easier for Hungarians. The central power no longer strove to interfere with people's lives; political agitation and propaganda was withdrawn from everyday life. However, the latest achievements of the arts and sciences did not find their ways as easily into Hungary as they did into Gomulka's Poland.

The processes of 1968 affected each of these three countries but with varying intensity and on different levels. After all, it was not only in Czechoslovakia that serious objectives were set out to change the existing regime, but in Hungary and Poland also. It is a fact that the new leadership of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party, headed by Alexander *Dubček*, came to champion reforms of a degree unparalleled in the entire region. Hungary's new economic mechanism, however, was not only similar to the Czechoslovakian ideas but survived longest in practical operation. By contrast, in Poland, the student demonstrations held in March against the dogmatic Conservative Party leadership also voiced some slogans demanding major adjustments to the regime. Foremost of these was the demand for workers and university students to be granted self-government – however, this did not come to play a serious role until later. In Prague, the 1968 *Action Programme* of the Czech Communist Party openly strove to do away with the former, Stalinist-type economic structure and centralised, command-governed planning and redistribution. 'The former methods and orientation of the control of the national economy are outdated and instantly call for a new system of economic control which offer the option of change in the direction of intense development.' However, authors of the *Action Programme* aimed to change, besides the system of economic control, the entire political superstructure.

The Hungarian party leadership had a keen and sympathetic eye on the changes that took place in Czechoslovakia from early 1967 onwards. In October that year, *Antonín Novotný* gave a detailed account to János Kádár of the results they had achieved up to that time. Kádár assured him that the Czechoslovakian initiatives had his wholehearted support. Later, in May 1968, *Dubček* and Kádár pointed out in Budapest that the reforms taking place in the two countries showed great similarities. However, in the event, the Czechoslovakian processes took a different course, primarily because their 'de-Stalinisation' was delayed. One might say that the process which took place in Poland and Hungary in 1956 – 1957, although among very different external and domestic conditions, did not come about here until 1967 – 1968. In Hungary in 1968, the majority of the population was very much in favour of the reforms but powerful mass movements, comparable to those in Czechoslovakia, were unable to emerge because of the memory of the 1956 retaliations. Thus, while Hungarian society watched the developments of the Prague Spring quietly and with secret joy, it exercised no pressure on the party leadership in Budapest to tie in economic reform with the transformation of the political system.

After the defeat of the Prague Spring, contrary to the revolutions of 1956, there was barely anything that the reformers were able to retain from the achievements they had attained before the military intervention. What is worse, this intervention scarred the unity of the socialist world profoundly. Despite the fall of the uprising, it was this historical experience which confirmed Leszek Kołakowski's already-quoted theses and this is also what Adam Michnik drew on in his famous essay, *New Evolutionism*. The latter came to the conclusion that a social resistance movement can form a counterweight and may be able to limit and further weaken the regime. Michnik emphasised that it was not the party but the people that had to be given a programme. For the party, the best guidance is the pressure that comes from below. The essence of new evolutionism is that it is by leaning on the working class that the central power can be forced to bring about gradual changes. Ultimately, this was nothing other than applying Polish historical experiences to the existing conditions. Not insignificantly, Pope John Paul II, a Pole by birth, proclaimed a social policy within the Church which entailed openness toward non-believers, emphasising the uniting force of Christian culture which served in Central and Eastern European countries, but particularly in Catholic Poland, to organise society and render it capable of exerting influence over the central power.

When the Solidarity movement emerged in 1980, those dictating its programme made sure they did not make the kind of mistakes they had made before. The social movement itself was organised as a trade union, and its demands did not affect the deep foundations of the existing regime. It did not openly question Poland's external alliances, either. This is precisely why Jadwiga Staniszkis aptly termed the Solidarity movement a *'self-limiting revolution'*.

Naturally, the question of reforming the political system was also discussed as a prerequisite for economic reform. It was believed that economic change could not be attained without breaking down the limitations of the existing political regime. However, it was not determined just what kind of reform was necessary. At this time, most people still believed in a system in which workers' self-governments could play a significant role in company management and redistribution. Objectives included developing a two-chamber system in which the upper house would exercise genuine social control over the decisions of the lower house. At the same time, as early as 1981 a programme was proclaimed, associated with the work team headed by Leszek Balcerowicz, which would lend far more room to market processes and contain fewer restrictions. According to this concept,

the free market could help the country survive the crisis. This liberal idea was counter to the concept of workers' self-government supported by the majority.

Although the state of war, introduced on 13 December 1981, prevented further debate and the full unfolding of reform ideas, in the final balance it contributed to the victory of those demanding the liberalisation of the economy. This coincided with what the Western capitalist world expected in exchange for economic assistance.

To sum up, we may declare that the revolutionary movements of Central and Eastern Europe were aimed at changing the Stalinist and post-Stalinist systems of economic and social management. The primary objective was always to decentralise and democratise the decision-making procedure. Over a 25-year period (1956 – 1981), means and methods changed considerably, and conditions of external and internal politics were also altered. However, we may also point out that, due to several of the experiments carried out by reform groups and opposition movements, some of these objectives, despite temporary failures, became incorporated in the system; foremost among them, the demands for liberalising the society. By 1989 there were political and economic systems active in the region which were suited to adapting themselves easily to the capitalist world economy. It is also a fact that communist leaderships of any of the affected countries were more willing to concede to liberal demands than to the full scale unfolding of workers' self-governments. This is where the events discussed above played a considerable role.

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Resumé

V snahe o zhrnutie môžeme vyhlásiť, že cieľom revolučných hnutí v strednej a východnej Európe bola zmena stalinských a poststalinských systémov ekonomického a spoločenského riadenia. Primárnym cieľom bolo vždy decentralizovať a demokratizovať rozhodovacie procesy. Počas obdobia 25 rokov (1956 – 1981) sa nástroje a metódy značne zmenili, aj podmienky vonkajšej a vnútornej politiky prešli zmenami. Môžeme však zdôrazniť, že vďaka niekoľkým experimentom, ktoré uskutočnili reformné skupiny a opozičné hnutia, sa niektoré ciele, napriek dočasným neúspechom, stali súčasťou systému, predovšetkým požiadavky na liberalizáciu spoločnosti. V roku 1989 jestvovali v regióne politické a ekonomické systémy, ktoré sa ľahko dokázali prispôsobiť svetovej kapitalistickej ekonomike. Je tiež faktom, že komunistickí vodcovia v každej z daných krajinách si skôr želali pripustiť liberálne požiadavky, ako dovoliť robotníckym samovládam, aby sa naplno rozvíjali. Tam zohrali vyššie diskutované udalosti pozoruhodnú úlohu.