

Mgr. Marie Černá, PhD.

## The Czechoslovak Prague Spring of 1968 in intra-party communication

The Prague Spring is one of the most studied periods and topics in Czechoslovak history, both in terms of domestic and foreign historiography. The complex emancipation and liberalisation process in society, which took place on the basis of political changes at the highest levels of power, has already been explored from the position of various actors and perspectives. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of events directly within the hierarchical structures of the Communist Party, that is, not only at the centre but also at local levels. The starting point of my paper is the materials of district, and to a lesser extent regional, party committees from selected Czech and Slovak cities. Ambiguous, often contradictory impulses from the party centre and social upheaval have caused a real crisis at this level of communist rule in which, on the one hand, there is an assessment of existing practice, or its reinterpretation, and on the other a search for a way forward and a new conception of the party's leading role. It is accompanied by doubts, unresolved questions, new and traditional elements of intra-party communication such as criticism and self-criticism, fears and hopes, to a lesser extent concrete measures, but above all extensive debates. It is these that offer remarkable insights into otherwise implicit and unnamed power processes both within the party hierarchy itself and in relation to society. They also show that the relatively widespread interpretation of the Prague Spring as a struggle between progressive and conservative forces is highly simplistic. Firstly, because the meaning of these terms was contextual and open to constant renegotiation, secondly, because particular party organs had to act collectively in confrontation with other actors, which as a result significantly relativized the personal positions of individuals. Of the wide range of topics opened up by these debates, I am particularly interested in how, in this ambiguous situation and the declared renunciation of authoritarian violence, an all-party consensus was negotiated on key concepts, including the fundamental and complex question of the party's leading role in society, whether and how the traditional instruments of intra-party communication and control were transformed, how local authorities reacted

to the breakdown of previous informational exclusivity, and what information resources they had at their disposal. I am interested in specific responses to major contestations and new challenges (including their interpretation) in the local communist bodies, which were manifested above all by a functionary replacement. And with that, questions about the mechanism, logic and consequences of personnel changes, especially in comparison to the post-1968 purges. At the same time, one must take into account the dynamics of the development of this "liminal" period, which basically did not allow any temporarily negotiated consensus to stabilize. This essential openness and erratic nature only began to close with the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968, which brought repressive and coercive instruments of power back into play. On a more general level, one might ask what insight into party structures during this period tells us about communist governance as such. In doing so, I draw on longer-term collective research on local communist structures of the 1960s and 1970s conducted at the Institute for Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague.

Kontakt:

Mgr. Marie Černá, PhD.

Institute for Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences

cerna@usd.cas.cz