

Kopp, Botho von

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# The Eastern European Revolution and Education in Czechoslovakia

BOTHO VON KOPP

The ongoing changes in Eastern Europe will bring about new political, economic, and ideological structures that will shape the future for the next decades and directly and indirectly affect and even determine conditions of education.

The sociopolitical and economic results of the changes themselves can hardly be predicted at present. As for Czechoslovakia, the euphoria and consensus of the first days of the “velvet revolution” are gone. President Václav Havel in an emphatic speech in December 1990 (on the threat of separatism) disavowed the “critics-of-discontent” students who spoke about the “stolen revolution.” But he warned that in the face of serious problems perhaps one day we will speak about the “gambled away revolution.”<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, euphoria and consensus have given way to daily politics and a normal differentiation and concurrence of interest groups, programs, and ideas. On the other hand, it is perhaps also true—and many aspects of the present political life seem to confirm it—that the people as a whole are “somewhat neuroticized by the heavy burden of freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

The success of the revolution, and thus conditions for education, will depend not only on the national but to a high degree also on the international context. The end of the Cold War might not exactly be “the end of history as such” as Francis Fukuyama interprets it: that is, “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”<sup>3</sup> But it certainly marks a victory for the West in general and a victory, it seems, for the dawning American New World Order—whatever this will be—in particular. And yet, not only the East has changed and is changing, but the West also. In the moment when East met West, the latter had experienced a decade or so of a neoconservative, some say “plutocratic,” revolution,

<sup>1</sup> Václav Havel, speech in the Federal Assembly on December 10, 1990, cited from *Lidové Noviny* (December 11, 1990), pp. 1–2. (In the original: “ukradená revoluce”—“promarněná revoluce.”)

<sup>2</sup> Václav Havel, New Year’s speech, January 1, 1991, cited from *Rudé právo* (January 2, 1991), pp. 1–2. (In the original: “dnes jsme všichni trochu zneurotizovaní tíhou svobody.”)

<sup>3</sup> J. Elson, “Sorting through the Runes: How Pundits and Scholars Are Interpreting the European Revolution That None of Them Predicted,” *Time* (international edition), no. 17 (April 23, 1990), p. 52. See *National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989), for an extended discussion of the ideas of U.S. State Department policy planner Francis Fukuyama.

which was rather undramatic on the surface but nevertheless effective.<sup>4</sup> Its outcome is a well-documented growing gap between rich and poor, both on a national scale between social classes and on an international scale between the First World and the rest. Of course, its consequences are felt more in the poor than in the rich countries. Since retrenchment in traditional government (public) services and their transformation into high-risk and highly competitive market systems is an integral part of neoconservative politics, this polarization between haves and have-nots extends also to education. A growing number of children from poor families enter schools, but education is no longer an easily accessible road to social mobility. In some countries it is increasingly difficult even for the middle class to bear the cost of good education—if there is a choice at all. In parts of the so-called Third World, however, the proportion of school-age children who do go to school is decreasing for the first time since World War II.<sup>5</sup>

The context of this conservative revolution affects Czechoslovakia in two ways. First, today's patterns and philosophies of Western market economy provide the dominant model for the former Eastern bloc, and Czechoslovakia has committed herself fully to this neoconservative policy. Second, Czechoslovakia is by no means a rich country. The social recklessness of the monetaristic model is cushioned somewhat in rich countries but will be felt much more directly materially and psychologically in Eastern European countries. World economic perspectives do not look bright at present as important Western countries struggle against recession. Without doubt, the world economy will recover sooner or later, but for Eastern European countries in transition any momentary problem means an extended period of transition and a deepened crisis. All these issues, together with nationalistic demagoguery—a parasite apparently of many a crisis—can give rise to a dangerously explosive mixture. This point seems already to have been reached in some parts of the region.

Conditions vary among Eastern European countries, however, and Czechoslovakia is definitely not on the edge of catastrophe. But there is also no guarantee that future explosions will bypass Czechoslovakia. In addition, there is total uncertainty about the fate of the republic as a whole, which might break into segments.

So far Czechoslovakia's educational system seems to be financially better prepared for the future than is the case in most other countries in

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Phillips, *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990); Ken Jones, *Right Turn: The Conservative Revolution in Education* (London: Hutchinson, 1989); Stephen J. Ball, *Politics and Policy Making in Education* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See Gabriel Cárceles, "World Literacy Prospects at the Turn of the Century: Is the Objective of Literacy for All by the Year 2000 Statistically Plausible?" *Comparative Education Review* 34, no. 1 (February 1990): 4–20.

the region. Unlike Poland, for example, where the budget for higher education in 1988 was 20 percent lower than 10 years ago, and where tens of thousands of university graduates are estimated to have emigrated in the 1980s, in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic (CSFR), the higher education budget has not declined. The future, however, is uncertain since inflation in 1991 might reach between 20 and 40 percent. In any case, Petr Vopěnka, Czech minister of education, has made it clear that his financial policy will be a "tough, restrictive" one. There is, for example, no hope for the moment that teachers, poorly paid for years, can count on an increase. Vopěnka explained why: "What was promised in the summer of last year [1990], in practice does not count any longer. That was a period of euphoria, of promises without an economic base."<sup>6</sup> At least a part of the occasionally dramatic financial situation is transitional. The abolition of many old administrative structures strains budgets, and the underdeveloped new structures sometimes leave "black holes." In some cases it is not clear where the money for running schools and other public services from month to month will come from. But this will change sooner or later. Although lack of money might become the most serious problem for the educational system, a factor at least equally important is agreeing on priorities for the distribution of money.

### **The Educational Heritage**

After World War II public education in all countries of Eastern Europe was generally based on a common set of ideas about socialist education: ideology as a universal principle of teaching and education; general access to a high level of education; uniformity of curriculum; expansion; and, last but not least, the polytechnical principle, that is, integration of vocational and general education. However, there never existed a unified schooling system in the Eastern bloc. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) had a system that was different from that of the Soviet Union and East Germany. Both the Soviet Union and East Germany had the 10-year general school, which in the case of the Soviet Union provided a common upper-secondary-school-leaving certificate. East Germany, on the other hand, required 2 more years for the completion of upper secondary education in an extremely selective course. The education system of the CSSR was somewhere in the middle in regard to this aspect of selective versus mass secondary school and in structure was similar to schools in Poland and Hungary.

The structure of the CSSR system was based on an elementary school containing the primary level unified with schools of the former lower

<sup>6</sup> Petr Vopěnka, minister of education of the Czech republic, in an interview with *Rudé právo* (February 15, 1991), p. 1. (In the original: "To co se slibovalo v polovině loňského roku, prakticky neolať. Byla to doba euforie, nepodložených slibů, ekonomicky nezajištěných akcí.")

secondary level. Continuation was possible in the former upper grades of grammar and technical schools, which now became independent institutions. Thus, after completion of 8 or 9 years of elementary school (the length was revised several times), school-leavers went on to the 4-year gymnasium (between 1953 and 1968 a 3-year "General Education Middle School"), or to the 4-year upper secondary technical schools, and finally to 2–4-year semidualistic vocational training (partly school instruction, partly practical training). All 4-year technical and vocational schools provided their graduates with job certification and a general school-leaving certificate ("matura"). Several attempts were made correspondingly to "integrate" general education. The strategy of superimposing a polytechnical mass education system on the upper secondary level changed several times, leaving the structure overall unchanged, but destabilizing the gymnasium. The strategy of integrating vocational and general education, which was adopted in the last 2 decades, stressed the vocational aspect in general education but left unchanged the three main streams of secondary schooling, where different sets of specialized subjects were grouped around a core of common content and standards.

The initial idea of providing practically all youth with the secondary-school-leaving certificate, ordered at the Party meeting of 1959 to be completed within 10 years, was changed later to "provide the majority of the youth with the possible highest education and qualification." But even this goal was difficult to reach under existing conditions. During the last decades, the percentages of 18-year-olds who graduated from secondary school with the "matura" were roughly 20 percent from gymnasia, 23 percent from technical schools, and 1–5 percent from vocational schools. Thus, some 45 percent could compete for admission to the university, which had an intake of around 15 percent of the 19-year-olds. In a drive to match the Soviet system, compulsory schooling was extended to 10 years in 1984; at the same time, elementary school was once again cut back from 9 to 8 years. Thus, compulsory education reached into all types of secondary schools. Apprentices had legally become students.<sup>7</sup>

Problems of the old school system included uniformity, lack of opportunity for individual work with pupils, textbooks that did not develop individuality, overcrowded classes, overload of work for students, lack of autonomy for schools and universities, dramatic lack of teachers, and inadequate integration of general and vocational education, especially in the gymnasia, thus devaluing both. This at least was the set of problems presented by the last minister of education in the Czech republic just

<sup>7</sup> On the school system of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, see Botho von Kopp, "Czechoslovakia," in *World Education Encyclopedia*, 3 vols., edited by G. T. Kurian (New York and Oxford: Facts on File, 1988), 1:291–309.

some few months before the November revolution.<sup>8</sup> Her Slovak counterpart had no better news. He merely added facts about a still worse situation in Slovakia as far as teachers and rooms were concerned and a regret for the precipitate closing down of small countryside schools and the insufficient level of Slovak language teaching in the schools of the ethnic minorities (Hungarians and Ukrainians).<sup>9</sup>

Some reforms were undertaken during 1988 and 1989. For instance, in the first grade of elementary school, written opinions on pupil progress replaced marks. In the gymnasium, Latin was to be taught again as a noncompulsory subject. In regard to vocational and polytechnical content, schools were allowed to deviate up to 30 percent from the prescribed curricula. Reforms provided more differentiation in the upper grades of the gymnasium "in accordance with the choice and abilities of the individual student." Universities were given some autonomy.<sup>10</sup> But like the Czechoslovak version of "perestroika," reforms came too late and were not radical enough to solve major problems or to calm discontent. In the meantime a climate of total criticism has arisen out of a need to show that the turn from Communist to post-Communist society is unfolding successfully. Often it is forgotten that even the Socialist system took over and built on traditional structures and functions.

Commentaries from the outside world on the education system of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic were usually not overly critical.<sup>11</sup> A high qualification level and the good skills of workers and technicians were generally acknowledged. Moreover, what is true for education in the German Democratic Republic, as described by a highly regarded functionary in the Protestant church, could well be true for Czechoslovakia: namely, that it had a "relatively high standard," and this "in spite of all the weak points and in spite of all the state regimentation, which aimed at hampering creativity." This spokesman goes on to point out that "the polytechnical educational system gives people flexibility and helps them change the work place. It provides citizens with the basis for a stable feeling of self-esteem."<sup>12</sup>

The serious deficiencies that existed in the system were due not so much to flawed concepts and plans as to poor execution of reforms. Schools and universities, like all other institutions of society, had become,

<sup>8</sup> Jana Synková, minister of education of the Czech Socialist Republic at a Party meeting, cited from *Růde právo* (April 3, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ludovít Kílár, minister of education of the Slovak Socialist Republic, *Rudé právo* (March 1, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Rudé právo* (April 3, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> For example, David W. Paul, *Czechoslovakia: Profile of a Socialist Republic at the Crossroads of Europe* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1981), p. 172. ("In the Communist era, education and science have made good progress in many respects.")

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Stolpe, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, no. 27 (July 2, 1990), p. 42.

especially during “normalization” after 1968, increasingly “institutions from which the spirit has gone” (using an expression from Max Weber); that is, “their functions and promises are no longer supported, accepted and believed. A ‘passive anarchy,’ at least cynicism, spreads out.”<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that education and educators were mere victims of something going on outside. But too often in a dictatorship even good aims and a reasonable reform program are vulnerable to capricious decisions. In Czechoslovakia, educators as a professional group were no more and no less involved in this process than other people.

### **The Starting Point for the Future Educational System: First Changes**

#### *The Structure*

Immediately after the revolution, school issues were pushed to the fore by the citizens movement.<sup>14</sup> However, the new education authorities initially moved to revive the school system of the First Republic, which was based on a well-developed inherited infrastructure of the Habsburg Empire. That system had been so progressive that it would not be totally outmoded even today. After the initial moves, however, strategy has become differentiated.

Some structural changes have taken place; others are planned. For instance, the last scaling back of elementary school from 9 to 8 years in 1984 was rescinded. By contrast, compulsory schooling was again reduced from 10 to 9 years. But overall, the structural changes are not very radical. The traditional 8-year grammar school (gymnasium), which initially was to be promptly restored, was reintroduced, only experimentally. It is not at all clear if this will be the only regular form of general secondary schooling since there are also voices advocating the maintenance of a differentiated comprehensive school. Very few changes can be expected in secondary technical schools.

Vocational education is being drastically affected by privatization. Initially, many companies tried to close down their vocational programs as being “no business” or “too expensive.” Although these companies were (and in most cases still are) state owned, they lack the formerly automatic state subventions and thus find closing schools to be the easiest way to cut costs and to prepare for the coming market competition. By February 1990 in Slovakia alone around 60 enterprises were told to schedule the closure of their schools— a move that would have affected 11,000 students

<sup>13</sup> Claus Offe, “Die CDU-Wähler, die Arbeiterklasse und die unbekannte DDR” (The voters of the Christian Democrats, the worker’s class and the unknown German Democratic Republic), *Frankfurter Rundschau* (November 6, 1990), p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Jaroslav Kalouš, “Dokumenty doby: Školství a občanské fórum” (Documents of the time: Schooling and the citizen’s forum), *VV nezávislá revue pro výchovu a vzdělání* 1, no. 1 (September 1990): 8–9.

(about 9 percent of all apprentices).<sup>15</sup> Where the schools continued to function, the parents and the trainees were often told that after their training students would not be employed by the company, although this was part of their contract. In formerly free boarding schools, fees were now charged. In some cases, excessive tuition was suddenly required, reportedly a sum equaling an average employee's or worker's monthly net salary.<sup>16</sup> Internal coordination was difficult because the schools were run partly by the Ministry of Education (for general and theoretical instruction) and partly by the company (for practical training).

The situation became so critical that the state decided to take over supervision of vocational schools completely. This has been only a partial solution, however, and discussions continue. Ironically, despite pronouncements about more free market and less state control, there has been a shift of expertise from industry to the state that might lead to a shift also from practical training on the job to training in schools. In fact, this can be seen as the continuation of an old trend. On the one hand, there always was, though barely visible on the surface, concurrence between industry and the Ministry of Education, which always advocated extending general and theoretical learning in the curriculum as a way to enhance its hold on vocational education. On the other hand, industry was always interested in practical training and immediately usable qualifications. Possibly in the future a mixed system will emerge in which companies wishing and able to run practical training in their own schools as they did before could do so again, but some schools would be run by the Ministry of Education and the respective branch ministries.

An important change is the opportunity to set up and run private schools. At the beginning of the school term of 1990–91 there were seven church-run and nine other private schools. Some are set up by educators, enthusiasts who want to employ their pedagogical ideals. Probably the first private elementary school in the country was initiated by a teacher in the city of Mlada Boleslav in the early summer of 1990. It now has five teachers and 16 pupils (some 40 more applied for next year). The program stresses learning by playing, without homework but with foreign languages as part of the curriculum. Tuition so far is 500 Czechoslovak crowns, about one-fifth to one-sixth of an average net income.<sup>17</sup> There is also great interest in such models as Waldorf education. The number of private schools will certainly grow, although that sector will probably not seek, or be able to replace, the existing school system.

<sup>15</sup> *Rudé právo* (February 2, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> "Školné za 2.500 měsíčně" (Schools fees for 2500 a month), *Rudé právo* (December 10, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> See *Rudé právo* (September 18, 1990), pp. 1, 5.

Apart from this, other initiatives like nonprivate secondary language schools are promoted. They offer intensified foreign language teaching and plan to increase outside contacts through pupil and teacher exchanges. There are already three French, one Spanish, and three German schools (one affiliated with Germany and two with Austria). All receive support such as textbooks and money from the outside countries.

School administration, which was in the old regime integrated into the structure of "National Committees" set up by the leftist coalition after the war, has changed considerably. In principle, the function of the committees was similar to "soviets." Their corresponding geographic-administrative structure however resumed a much older tradition. These committees functioned on three levels: regional, district, and local. On each level there was an education section. Members of this section were concerned not only with the material side of school and the employment of teachers but also, since they were under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, with all aspects of schooling, including ideological supervision. The committees have now been disbanded; education is separate from general administration and, as in the First Republic, comes under the exclusive control of the Ministry of Education and its supervisory authorities (inspectors). The ministry now shares control with local boards made up from elected representatives of the municipality, teachers, and parents. These boards are responsible for managing the allotted budget.

The question of the ownership of school buildings is a delicate one in many cases. Some school buildings had been expropriated before, some after, 1948 and handed over to the National Committees. In some cases when buildings are returned, it is very difficult to find an equivalent structure in a given school district. The Church, which lost a great deal of its property under the First Republic, and then once again in 1948, is actively seeking to get back as many buildings as possible.

Under Communist rule the federal character of Czechoslovakia dating from 1968 encouraged educational similarities between the two republics. Indeed, most legal acts were identical for both republics and simply were issued in the Czech and Slovak languages. There were, however, some minor differences. For example, in the 1970s a larger proportion of youth enrolled in gymnasias in Slovakia (in 1976, 25 percent of the 15–19-year-olds) than in the Czech republic (with only 20 percent of this age group).<sup>18</sup> It is not yet clear if in its final form the country will consist of a three-state federation (Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Slovakia), as some favor, or a loose confederation with total separation, as a radical movement in Slovakia advocates.

<sup>18</sup> Compare *Statistická ročenka Československé Socialistické Republiky, 1977* (Statistical yearbook of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1977) (Prague: Státní nakladatelství technické literatury [SNTL], 1977), pp. 96, 540.

A question of great importance for its impact on social stability is the schooling of ethnic minorities. Generally these groups have been and are guaranteed education facilities in their own language if there is a sufficient number of students. Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and others, however, all remain under 0.5 percent of the population. Some schools exist for Poles and Ukrainians who are concentrated in certain areas, whereas others like the Germans and the Czechs in Slovakia and the Slovaks in the Czech lands are dispersed.

The largest minority are the Hungarians who live in Slovakia, close to 11 percent of the population (3.8 percent of the entire Czech and Slovak Federal Republic).<sup>19</sup> They have their own elementary and secondary schools but seek higher education in Hungarian. Slovak authorities, however, take the position that the level of Slovak language instruction in Hungarian schools is not always adequate. An article on a new law concerning the official language in Slovakia refers to this problem by providing that the task of the school is to secure a sufficiently high level in the Slovak language.<sup>20</sup> Although not really dramatic so far, tensions exist, and the country is susceptible to extreme nationalism. When the principal of a vocational school in Komarno, Slovakia, ordered the playing of not only the Czech and the Slovak state hymns but also the state hymn of Hungary, he was immediately suspended from office.<sup>21</sup>

A group so far not recognized as an ethnic minority are the Gypsy-Romanies. They represent up to 0.5 percent of the population in the Czech republic and 3.3 percent in the Slovak republic, and their reproduction rate is much higher than that of the other ethnics.<sup>22</sup> Ethnic education for Romany children (with specially prepared teachers and in the Romany language) had been undertaken experimentally, though on a very small scale, under the former regime. But mainstream policy sought assimilation of this population. The Romany were pressured to send their children to Czech or Slovak schools where, from their point of view, they were alienated from their own culture. Considering their strong resistance to mainstream culture, the success of this policy was not insignificant. Repressive as it was, the policy improved their level of literacy, general schooling, and professional qualifications. Although many Romany children did not complete school to an 8th or 9th grade level, a remarkable number entered secondary and higher education.

<sup>19</sup> Compare *Statistická ročenka Československé Socialistické Republiky, 1988* (Statistical yearbook of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1988) (Prague: SNTL, 1988), p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> "Zákon o úradnom jazyku v Slovenskej republike" (Law concerning the official language of the Slovak Republic), *Lidové noviny* (December 9, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Rudé právo* (September 14, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> "Rómové medzi námi, nebo s námi? Neobviňujeme se navzájem, hledejme řešení" (The Romany: Among us or together with us? Let us not accuse each other, let us look for a solution), *Rudé právo* (July 28, 1989), p. 4.

On the university level, an undergraduate program of 2–3 years leading to a bachelor's degree will be introduced, representing a considerable change. Formally, a uniform program lasting a minimum of 4 years led to a regular (advanced) certificate (diploma); graduates in nonuniversity fields received titles like “engineer” or, in art academies, “academic painter.” Academic titles for university graduates have changed several times, however. Starting in the 1970s, after having completed an additional examination, the title “doctor of ———” (philosophy, law, etc.) was given. Students with good marks received the title “doctor” automatically. This was not a title comparable to the candidate of science degree, which is roughly equivalent to the Ph.D. in Anglo-Saxon countries or the Dr. in Germany, and has now been abolished. Currently, a doctor's degree is to be given only on completion of advanced study and the submission and successful defense of a dissertation. This new doctor's degree (Dr.) will no longer designate the faculty of origin, as was the case with the former less rigorous doctorate. Instead, graduates of the regular advanced 4–6-year program will be granted the newly introduced title “master of ———” (with the field of study designated), and graduates of 2-year courses will be awarded the title “bachelor of ———.”

A main point of university reform of course deals with the question of the autonomy of the university and democratization of its inner structures. Universities now have considerable autonomy. Admission criteria are today the full responsibility of each institution. The academic senate is again, as it used to be traditionally, the elected body that represents different groups inside the university and exercises control over all university matters. For the time being, students, who as a group had been very active and perhaps even decisive at the beginning of the November movement of 1989, have improved their political position, with up to 50 percent of the votes on some committees. But power may shift again in favor of the tenured faculty.

There is also great interest in setting up new universities or colleges. On the one hand, branches of existing schools or faculties seek independence; on the other, universities try to set up new schools or branches in regions without higher educational institutions.

An important aspect of the ongoing changes is the rehabilitation of the former regime's victims who were often university professors and school teachers (of the latter, perhaps as many as 20,000)<sup>23</sup> who had lost their jobs for political reasons. In addition, immediately after the Communist party came to power in 1948, about 10,000 students were expelled (nearly 3,000 from Charles University in Prague alone).<sup>24</sup> Like others, however,

<sup>23</sup> *Růde právo* (June 21, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Compare “Čekají na naši smrt” (They wait until we die), *Reportér*, no. 23 (October/November 1990), p. 8.

even a “velvet revolution” has its purges. In the first months of the current reform, sometimes “wild” replacements of school headmasters and teachers took place, organized mostly by parents and not the ministry. In universities, some people were dismissed or forced to leave on their own. In certain cases, all teachers in a department were dismissed but could immediately compete anew for their jobs. In the process of turning the tables, it is not surprising that those who were released were not always more qualified than those connected with the old regime, and not all who have their say now were heroes of resistance.

*The Content*

Under the conditions of continued democratization, the real contrast to the old regime will perhaps be found not so much in structural and institutional changes as in the content of education and in the everyday classroom praxis of teaching and educating. Taking into account the present on the one hand, and the first signs of coming reforms on the other, it should not be hazardous to prognosticate some main areas of change:

*Greater pluralism and freedom.*—This, of course, is not difficult to predict. Not so easy to predict, however, is where people who have been guided and controlled in most aspects of their work now seek freedom and where not. Recently, the first teachers’ demonstration took place in Prague. Among other things, it protested that the ministry had “no concepts.” The minister responded that there are so far no new textbooks and curricula; that teachers, at least those in the secondary schools, have to help themselves; and that the constant generation of “concepts” was typical of the past. He strongly rejected demands for guidance and advice and made clear that for him well-qualified and motivated teachers should be able to teach, even under the most adverse conditions without any textbook and teaching aids.<sup>25</sup>

*A modernization of education.*—In the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the education system, indeed the whole society, took on the character of an “educational dictatorship.” Socialist education policy sought to create the “new man,” but dogmatism and the lack of pluralism resulted in a school that promoted the “immobilized man.” Still, the end of educational dictatorship means less concern for those who are not competitive, a large segment of the younger generation that may suffer disorientation.

*Selection by achievement.*—Selection to upper secondary and higher education will unequivocally include criteria of achievement and excellence. Although it is not true as a rule that in the old regime even the least capable could enter the university only if he or she (or his or her parents)

<sup>25</sup> *Rudé právo* (January 22, 1991), p. 1.

were politically active, political reasons could always endanger a career, and a “good political profile” could make the final decision when two candidates were otherwise similarly qualified.

*Stronger separation of vocational and general education curricula.*—Industry was never happy with the great number of general education subjects required. Moreover, many teachers of job-related and practical subjects thought the general education portion of the curricula to be “unnecessarily demanding.” But now, in the gymnasium vocational or polytechnical content will no longer play any role; the first job of the gymnasia will again be to prepare for university entrance.

*Curricular changes.*—Among other curricular changes, there will be stress on foreign languages besides Russian, a foreign language starting in grade 5 (3 hours a week), and a second foreign language beginning with grade 7 or 8. (Graduation from the gymnasium will require study of two foreign languages.) Religion will be introduced as a noncompulsory subject, ideological teaching in “civic education” will be abolished, there will be greater differentiation from grade 6 on, and specialized study in modern languages and the natural sciences will be included.

*Changes in the universities.*—In the universities, there will likely be a strong decline soon in the proportion of students in technical fields compared with those in the humanities and social sciences. The system of syllabi prescribed by the ministry and mandatory year-to-year advancement has been eliminated. Students now have more choice in selecting lectures. Universities will have to cope very quickly with the changed academic requirements, especially in subjects related to economy, trade, and management.

### **Conclusion: Opportunities**

Czechoslovakia is changing rapidly. What will happen to education in this context? The country is faced with grave economic problems, inflation, unemployment, and very limited resources—conditions that will directly influence education.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons why the future for education can be seen with a certain moderate optimism. First, liberty and pluralism (if sustained) will probably set free the enormous potential of engagement, ideas, ideals, and talent. Second, the educational infrastructure is very well developed in spite of the problems and deformities of the past, allowing for greater focus on the content of the system. Finally, the country has a long, unbroken tradition of esteem for education as the foundation of nationhood. In the nineteenth century, the school was the very basis for the national “rebirth,” and on the eve of the Prague Spring, it was

on the lips of Milan Kundera when he gave his inspirational speech at the Czechoslovak Writers Congress of 1967. The legitimation and strength of the independent existence of a small nation does not lie in its power, but in its rich and humanistic culture, one that can flourish only with an educational system committed to high standards and the realization of democratic principles.