

Statement by Pierre Grégoire on the international situation after the occupation of Czechoslovakia (16 October 1968)


Caption: On 16 October 1968, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister, Pierre Grégoire, makes a statement to the Luxembourg Chamber of Deputies on the international situation following the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops.

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The invasion of Prague has shattered a situation which we, both as individuals and as nations, have perceived, for several decades now, to be stable and secure, and I was keen to review before the House as soon as possible the new reality in Europe which now presents itself. We need to reconsider together a number of issues in accordance with the imperatives which our reciprocal obligations place upon us, and we need to adopt a clear position so that we may make changes, where appropriate, to our previous ways of thinking. I shall not, in this very brief exposé, dwell on the background to the crisis in Czechoslovakia but shall focus on the lessons that we may draw from the events there, events which we have watched unfold towards their inevitable dénouement and which, undoubtedly, give cause for very deep concern. I shall not shrink from voicing my fears, because I hope that they will be shared by a majority only too aware of the further responsibilities that we may have to shoulder if we miscalculate and fail to define our national policy correctly.

The extreme seriousness of the international situation stems not so much from the build-up and imbalance of military forces on the ground — the Eastern bloc being clearly stronger, both in troop numbers and weapons of war — or from the uncertainties created by the actions of the Soviet Union, which has just blatantly given the lie to its past doctrine that all philosophies and all regimes may coexist peacefully. This abominable and cowardly blow, delivered Hitler-style by the five Warsaw Pact countries, has not only snuffed out the flame of freedom in Czechoslovakia but also fatally wounded the immense confidence of Western Europe which, by dint of unfailing goodwill, patience and unprecedented effort, we had successfully transmitted to all nations, our own and those in Eastern Europe.

Moscow's theory, made current and real by acts of war, that every country with a Marxist government forms *ipso facto* part of the Kremlin's sphere of influence, is all the more bewildering and dangerously cynical in being applicable not only to present-day 'Socialist' countries but also automatically to those which might, in future, after Communist meddling in the internal affairs of any nation, be induced to change their political structure. Put simply, this means that the Soviet political map indisputably includes the GDR, Yugoslavia, Albania, China, North Korea and North Vietnam, areas of the Near and Middle East and North Africa, until such time as the insatiable appetite of the USSR devours other victims who have been vanquished and won over by an unanswerable persuasion of the bayonet.

Inquiries into the motives behind the Soviet action will inevitably take us into the realm of conjecture. Who is going to persuade us that the occupation of a supposedly friendly country was born of caution, when the Soviet Union has been watching the Communist bloc rapidly losing its cohesion as a result of exposure, in the very recent past, to liberal and humanitarian influences which the Soviet Union cannot control? Is a repeated recital of 'the facts' enough to convince us that the Soviet Union's wish was to preserve its hegemony in Eastern Europe, even at the cost of discrediting itself in the eyes of the world? Is the strategic value of Czechoslovakia really enough to justify this appalling act, when there were other ways of keeping the country within the bosom of 'Socialism'?

The Soviets certainly believe that strategic concerns are shaped by ideology. Now that the Kremlin has extended its sphere of influence to the Arab countries, the Mediterranean has become vitally important to it. It is here that the USSR is currently establishing another buffer zone, to protect its flanks, and this area marks the outer ring of its planned fortifications. From this point of view, the invasion of Czechoslovakia is just one stage along the route to the Mediterranean. Yugoslavia might be the next, since it provides access to the Adriatic. So we have been warned. And this is the danger faced by Europe. Let us not be too sure that the Red Armies will advance no further! Other and equally unexpected pressures may follow and attack other nerve centres in our continent. That small political group which calls itself the Communist Party here will always be happy to applaud Soviet acts of force, plunging millions into poverty, bloodshed and despair and inviting the barbarians to make haste and gobble up little Luxembourg too. The only crime of which these poor victims of oppression have been guilty is to have cherished an illusion, to have believed the myth that Bolshevism, through contact with the advocates of détente, would magically change into liberal democracy. But Europe, as we now know, cannot with impunity be polite and turn the other cheek. It cannot

sacrifice to the Devil and expect God to hear its prayers. The Communist leopard, of whatever nation, and even if it puts on a different face to impress the public, never changes its spots when it comes to essentials. The minor disagreements within the Communist bloc, seen in the case of the Czechoslovak invasion, while they were united in supporting the Soviets over Budapest, count for nothing compared with the consensus over basic doctrine, which is by definition imperialist. It is wholly unrealistic to interpret the words of censure emanating from certain Communist quarters as a distancing from or opposition to the Soviet action. The coup in Prague may have changed many things, but it certainly has not made the Stalin-worshippers into liberals.

Another question worries me constantly: has this provocative act by the five Warsaw Pact nations had the effect of radically changing the mind-set of the Western countries which have banded together in communities to guard against all manner of threats, disasters and dangers? What has been the response of the United Nations, NATO, the European Economic Community, the Western European Union and Benelux, and how will they plan their future operations to ensure that their member countries are not caught napping again?

Well, the UN in New York provided the stage on which the invaders faced the prosecutors and judges appropriate to their crime. The condemnation was severe, and even though it was not possible to hand down any punishment, it seems to me that the verdict of this world forum indelibly branded the oppressors for all time. Admittedly, that will be of no immediate help to the victims, but I am sure that it will give them solace, new strength and determination to resist. In this tragic and terrible story, what seems to me the ultimate paradox is the attitude of the Czechoslovaks, which is admirable beyond words. Faced with the brutal force of the 'conquerors', and irredeemably let down by an alliance of free nations, this country silently, and through non-cooperation, has shown brave and almost perfect solidarity and closed ranks behind its leaders, giving them undivided popular support. I hope that those in positions of responsibility at the NATO Council of Ministers' meeting, brought forward to mid-November, will learn a lesson from this aspect of the problem which will enable the alarmed nations of the West to understand why the reaction of world leaders has been so muted or, at least, to silence any accusations of complicity in tacitly dividing the globe into two spheres of influence.

But for us, too, a cool and objective examination of the situation from the point of view of national security will have consequences which are not altogether pleasant. Our unequivocal support for the NATO alliance, of which we are a member, will require us to play a loyal part, through deeds not words, in any proposed defence measures, where necessary by making an additional contribution, since greater military training and a more efficacious stock of weaponry will hardly be enough. I must say this in all frankness and remind the Chamber that, one way or another, we shall have to use all the possibilities allowed us under military law. If we think that peace for this country may be guaranteed by greater physical and financial effort on the part of others, if we want a comfortable life on the back of sacrifices by our allies, this is an attitude which will earn us no favours; nor, in a crisis, will it entitle us to absolute protection from our friends if we have refused to support them in the same way.

If I have correctly interpreted some Luxembourg reactions to the act of aggression in Czechoslovakia, they want us to make a sacrifice, not by giving direct aid to the invaded country — we extend such aid wholeheartedly to all refugees by helping them to obtain asylum and jobs and by giving them other assistance — but by targeting the institution of diplomatic embassies. I confess that I am taken aback by that idea, although I should have liked and should have endorsed the proposal that one of our representatives in Prague should immediately be chosen to voice our sympathy for the hapless Czechoslovaks. Personally, I should prefer us not to act as if we are bringing up the heavy artillery, when all we are doing is firing a popgun. Let us not forget that, although we may be a small country geographically, we are entitled to express our views. And, if Luxembourg features in this scenario as a very specific example of national existence, independence and freedom, secured at a high price out of a desire to live, live well or behave well, then that is primarily thanks to her official representations. I should not wish this living extension of our nation to be reduced in any way, because its role in reaching out to other countries is a vital one.

Any further efforts that we might be able to make in the context of Community security can be made only

through the policy of détente. We have seen that the general climate of good East–West relations has brought about a gradual weakening of the Eastern bloc. This is still very much in evidence, and it continues, notwithstanding the reaction of the Warsaw Pact countries, which will have trouble denying its existence after their bloody action to halt it. This policy may be further improved if certain risks are eliminated and a number of misunderstandings made impossible. And NATO, provided it remains intact, can change its objectives as needed. If we advocate a return, perhaps difficult and certainly slow but absolutely necessary, to the confidence achieved through détente and underpinned by the most effective means of collective vigilance, we ought, in due course, to be able to review our policy on arms reduction and pursue this, too, on new foundations and in line with different criteria.

It is indeed possible that, in energetically pursuing our policy of ‘détente’, we have taken our dreams of peaceful cooperation, based on rules agreed amongst people of good faith, to be reality; almost certainly we have made miscalculations, but does that mean we should abandon our efforts? I do not think so. On the contrary, I think that we have to start again from the beginning.

We might usefully consider the following question: would the countries in the Soviet orbit have dared to invade Prague if a united, strong and resolute Europe, combining all the countries of the free West, had existed?

Sadly, Europe is not yet strong enough to pit its weight against the superpowers as they compete for domination of the planet. The conclusion is clear: we must activate and strengthen what we already have, in order to be a player in the deadly game of power politics which has been under way for the last twenty years. Our problem, however, is that we in the West must always strive for consensus, ever since we sat down around the same table to determine the destiny of our continent. Five out of the Six favour firm action, but action requires a united front. And that is difficult to achieve.

Should we go along with France? Where will she lead us? To the Urals, or nowhere? Do the events which have just torpedoed the views of Paris mean that we should make a move towards Great Britain? The alternative is clear.

And yet we must persevere in our policy of trying to persuade France. But for how much longer? Already people are saying to me: ‘after so many setbacks, after our best intentions have suffered so many defeats, after so many attempts to move forward indirectly, can we go on disappointing the would-be members? Are we going to settle for a small and scarcely viable Europe? Or should we not, as a last resort, try something really new, even if we have to do it without France, if she does not want to, but never against France?’

This is the dilemma caused by recent events. This is the choice we have to make! We have only one option, and that is Europe, a wider Europe — provided that its enlargement in no way undermines the Communities that we have already established.

There is nothing to be gained by meeting individual obstinacy with collective obstinacy, but a crucial decision must be taken. And I am happy to report that an idea close to my heart is in the process of taking shape: the WEU provides a promising venue for talks between the Six and Great Britain, although it cannot be seen as an alternative to the accession of the countries applying for membership of the EEC, and the Ministers have decided to meet in Rome to attempt a new approach.

Benelux has worked brilliantly throughout these weeks of political action and upheaval, and, although there is no longer any talk of reform along the lines of institutionalisation, the three Benelux countries have agreed courses of action which, I hope, will take us quite a lot further towards a definitive configuration of the Communities.

A country’s foreign policy may be shaped only by the vital principle that its citizens are independent and free, independence being measured by the creative power of culture and the productive power of the economy, and freedom consisting in a body of national wealth great enough to guarantee to each individual a minimum of well-being, so that the individual is prepared to fight for what he has in a shared desire to

determine the country's destiny. This means that international relations are not the only factor when one considers the situation of the moment: security is vulnerable to dangers from within, as well as from without. Once the soundness of the nation's foundations is weakened, either by a lifestyle whose substance is no longer the result of ongoing productive effort, by a categorical refusal to make the personal sacrifices needed to accomplish ever-broader national tasks, or by widespread indifference towards the simplest and most natural civic duties, then these obvious signs of decline herald difficult days ahead which will quickly lead to control by foreign banks or subjugation under the invader's boot.

From this lofty vantage point, it is becoming increasingly evident that Luxembourg seems to float with astonishing ease in a kind of permanent euphoria, reluctant to address the fundamental changes taking place on the world stage, where explosive situations might, from one day to the next, destroy her privileged status.

I think that we have a duty, from time to time, to remember how vulnerable we are in the apparent stability of our society and the extent to which we seem to be living beyond our means, whilst millions of people have neither the freedom nor the means of support that they need for a truly decent existence.

Let us ponder these basic truths for a while, in the blinding light of the events in Czechoslovakia! And let us hope that they will move us to salutary emotions and thoughts!

*

Motion tabled by the three national parties and adopted by the Chamber of Deputies

The Chamber of Deputies,

Having heard the statement by the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the events in Czechoslovakia and their implications for the free world,

Endorses the protests made at the time by both the Government and the national political parties condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact forces which was undertaken in breach of the inalienable right of self-determination proper to all countries;

Expresses its solidarity with Czechoslovakia in her time of trial and pays tribute to the courage of her people under foreign occupation;

Deplores the attitude of the Luxembourg Communist Party which had sided unconditionally with the aggressor, thereby distancing itself from public opinion in Luxembourg;

Asks the Government to provide more generous assistance to Czechoslovak refugees seeking asylum in the Grand Duchy;

Seeks an undertaking from the Government that the staff of the Embassies of the aggressor countries of the Warsaw Pact will be restricted to numbers commensurate with their actual role and importance;

Calls on the Government to continue its efforts, through a policy of firmness, to secure the enlargement and strengthening of the European Communities without delay;

Expresses a general wish to see democratic freedoms and human rights respected everywhere and peace restored in all areas of the world;

And moves on to the agenda for the sitting.