

## 'A man of goodwill adrift in the land of the cynics', from Le Monde (5 January 1969)

**Caption:** On 5 and 6 January 1969, commenting on the events that took place in Prague during the summer of 1968, the French daily newspaper Le Monde looks back at the political career of Alexander Dubcek, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

**Source:** Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 05.-06.01.1969, n° 7459. Paris: Le Monde. "Un homme de bonne volonté égaré au royaume des cyniques", auteur:M. T. , p. 3.

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## A man of goodwill adrift in the land of the cynics

*VERY few people outside the country had heard of Dubcek's name a year ago. So what about within Czechoslovakia? A young Czech engineer whom we met just after last January's plenum told us he was not the slightest bit interested in the changes that had just taken place in the party leadership. In his view, Dubcek, Novotny and the rest of them were all members of the same 'clique', their principal characteristic being 'lack of education'. It took weeks of effort, particularly the great 'cultural revolution' of March, to get the general public to 'wake up'. Even then it took months, even for experts, to get to know the man whose name was synonymous with the achievements of the 'Prague Spring' Even today, our knowledge of the man remains sketchy, and does not match his popularity. Is Dubcek a hero, a 'brilliant strategist' or a novice and weak-willed? Opinions are still sharply divided.*

However, we now have better pointers than we had a year ago, and not only because of the events of 1968. The partial publication last summer of Mr Dubcek's speech to the Central Committee at its session at the end of October 1967 (the one that initiated the crisis) provides ample evidence that renewal was at the top of his political agenda, long before it actually got underway. He was even then demanding a 'fundamental change' in the methods of government, denouncing conservatism in terms that already left him open to the accusations that were later to be made against him of being 'soft on the right-wingers'. In asserting that 'Particularly in a period of change, the danger from conservatism and sectarianism is no less a threat to the party than liberal tendencies', he foreshadowed what his attitude would be when his 'orthodox' opponents came to criticise the rise of 'anti-socialist' forces. Similarly, he called the entire Soviet policy of hardening ideological positions into question when he said that, 'It is normal that the defence of our society against capitalist influences ... should be one of our fundamental duties. However, it is not enough to adopt a defensive stance, for therein could lie the seeds of stagnation and conservatism.' Or again, 'It would be a serious mistake to confuse cause and effect. Neither émigrés nor imperialist agents can cause us serious problems, therefore we should not flatter them with such powerful and unwarranted propaganda that also does us harm.' It is interesting to note that he said all that just six weeks before Mr Brezhnev came to Prague to investigate matters. The General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, who gave his blessing to the changes, has only himself to blame if the 'heresy' spread.

### **A stubborn animosity towards Mr Novotny**

And yet, when he took over as party leader on 5 January 1968, Mr Dubcek did not foresee what was going to happen any more than anyone else. He was certainly a reformer and perhaps even a bit of a 'revisionist', but he was by no means the 'liberal' that he was later to become in the minds of the people. If he triggered the liberalisation process, or allowed it to be triggered, it was, of course, in the name of a new conception of the party's role, one based on winning the people's confidence rather than on issuing commands, but he also had two specific motives in mind.

— First, there was a stubborn animosity towards Mr Novotny, the men around him and his regime. Here Mr Dubcek played the 'apparatchik' and, realising that there was no room in the party leadership for two rival teams, he advanced his pawns with the consummate skill of a tactician. And in fact it was Mr Novotny who fired the first shots in a speech at a factory in Prague at the end of February in which he questioned the conclusions of the January plenum. From that moment on Mr Dubcek abandoned the former First Secretary to his fate. To a large extent the spring groundswell can be traced back to the need to overhaul the party leadership.

— At the same time, the new party leader refused to sever his links with the progressive, activist wing, made up mainly of intellectuals who, more than anyone else, had helped him gain power and whom he continued to need in order to eliminate the old guard once and for all. Hardliners abroad were quick to attack him for this, accusing him of not seeing the 'greatest danger', of giving up the 'struggle on two fronts' and becoming a captive of the 'right'. In fact his critics were well placed to know that the struggle 'on two fronts' is possible under their systems only in periods of stability, when those in power are solidly entrenched. Today, the only country that can perhaps serve as an example in this respect is Hungary, but certainly not the USSR, where Brezhnev is increasingly reliant on Stalinist elements to carry out his anti-revisionist campaign. In

Czechoslovakia Mr Dubcek chose the opposite course. The most striking feature of his approach during this period was a concern, if not to openly encourage the radical progressives, then at least not to clamp down on them.

### **Keeping an eye on developments**

But that is as far as he went. For the rest, he seemed content to keep an eye on developments and let problems come to a head. We will not find in his speeches any clear-cut position on the real issues of the day. He kept his own counsel regarding the federation issue which was being decided in the first weeks of spring. For a long time he pretended to be unaware of Soviet pressure and he never publicly expressed his thoughts on the 14th Party Congress that was held in secret following the invasion. As a result, it was the men who rose and fell alongside him, in turn Kolder, Smrkovsky, Cernik, Mlynar and then Cernik again and Husak, Strougal, etc., who made the most noise and seemed to set the 'party line'. That tactic (if tactic it was) gave Mr Dubcek the advantage of not identifying himself unduly with each new twist in policy and thereby retaining his popular standing. On the other hand it left him open to criticism from those who suspected him of being in a game that was too big for him, of wavering and lacking a long-term strategy.

He is said to be influenced by the people around him, whether they be 'progressives', as in the spring, or 'hardliners' as was the case after 21 August. The public realises this and, basically, respects him not for the decisions he has taken or what he has sought to do, but for the changes that his regime has brought and for the personal qualities he is generally recognised as having: honesty, goodwill and an open mind.

### **The making of a legend**

His real moment of glory came in July when this 'small, quiet man' suddenly refused to bow any longer and repulsed, always calmly and without unnecessary bravado, the vociferous demands of his all-powerful 'ally'. Did he realise what was coming? It would appear not and one of his shortcomings was probably, despite his long acquaintance with the USSR and the personal contacts he is said to have had with Brezhnev, to have under-estimated the brutality of his partners. Be that as it may, his violent abduction in the early hours of 21 August and the painful return to Prague put the finishing touches to his legend but also broke something inside.

As he was to say himself, it was first and foremost the final act in a 'personal drama' (he suffered a real physical breakdown) but also the start of an extraordinary political ambiguity. For since the famous Moscow 'accords' (accords to which he, along with Mr Smrkovsky, was very reluctant to agree), Mr Dubcek has no longer found a role for himself. Of course he has tried to accommodate himself to the prevailing 'realism', as the firmness of his most recent speech shows, but he is not sufficiently broken to act like Kadar and he is too human to be a Gomulka. What is more he is still, for the moment, too popular to be overthrown, but he no longer has enough energy to take real control of the levers of power. In any event, it is a little late now to put up a successful resistance to Soviet pressure. So he is letting the 'realists' take front stage just as, six months ago, he let the 'progressives' have their way. Despite everything, history will no doubt bring a lenient verdict on this 'man of goodwill' adrift in the land of the cynics.

M. T.