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The Course of the Šik Reform and Its Possible Final Form, *Part II*

Abstract: This second part of the study turns from the course of the Šik Reform to the form it was intended to take. Drawing on the Action Programme of 1968, draft legislation on socialist enterprises and contemporary theoretical documents, it reconstructs the projected model of enterprise autonomy, workers' councils and the receding role of directive planning. It then follows the gradual curtailment of these designs after August 1968 and the political rejection of the reform by early 1970.

Keywords: Šik Reform; economic planning; socialist economy; Czechoslovakia; 1968; workers' councils; enterprise autonomy

1. The Possible Final Form of the Šik Reform

The third and final stage of the reform process began in 1968, when Alexander Dubček assumed the post of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz) in January, and Ota Šik was appointed Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Reform in May. The reform thus gained new momentum, and certain “taboos” that had previously constrained the scope of reform were abandoned under the new political leadership. Although this stage was never completed due to the external intervention of Warsaw Pact forces in August 1968, it is possible to trace the intended direction of the Šik Reform through legislative drafts and theoretical documents produced by various experts and institutions during 1968 and 1969.

The principal political document of the so-called “post-January period” was the *Akční program KSČ* [*Action Programme of the CPCz*], adopted by the CPCz Central Committee on April 5, 1968.¹ This document marked a conceptual shift from decentralization to democratization. At the April plenary session of the CPCz Central Committee, Dubček² declared his intention to deepen and accelerate the reform with the following words:

“We want to implement the new system of management in practice. We must stop speaking only of improving the system and clearly state that what we seek is a profound economic reform, aimed at creating a new model for the functioning of the socialist economy.”³

The *Action Programme* stated, among other things, that the economic plan should be transformed “from a tool of command into an instrument through which society determines, by scientific means, the most advantageous long-term direction of its development.” It criticized the system of protecting

¹ ŠULC, Zdislav (ed.). *Dokumenty k hospodářské politice v Československu z let 1963–1969...* [*Documents on Economic Policy in Czechoslovakia from 1963 to 1969...*], s. 78–79.

² KOSTA, Jiří. *K historii a koncepci československé ekonomické reformy v letech 1965–1969...* [*On the History and Concept of the Czechoslovak Economic Reform in 1965–1969...*], s. 31.

³ *Rok šedesátý osmý v usneseníh a dokumentech ÚV KSČ* [*The Year 1968 in the Resolutions and Documents of the CPCz Central Committee*]. Praha: Svoboda, 1969, s. 83.

economically inefficient and backward enterprises, along with the associated pricing, subsidy, and grant policies, especially the system of surcharges in foreign trade:

“It is not sustainable to blunt economic policy by taking from those who perform well and giving to those who manage poorly.”

Differences in enterprise income levels were henceforth utilized to reflect actual differences in economic performance. Enterprises were to be granted freedom in all matters directly related to their management and operations, with the ability to respond creatively to market needs. Economic competition – especially with advanced foreign competitors – was emphasized as a key motivating force.

The programme also introduced a vision for the democratization of the economy, which included “the realization of enterprise and enterprise group autonomy and their relative independence from state organs.” Enterprises would have the right to form voluntary associations, decide the scope of their activities, leave such associations, operate independently, or join new ones.⁴ This process, however, was not to take place spontaneously, but under government-defined rules – later formalized in the draft *Law on Socialist Enterprises*.⁵ Additionally, it expressed support for cooperative enterprise in agriculture. Unified agricultural cooperatives were to be allowed to sell a portion of their produce directly to consumers and the retail network. Cooperative activity was to be permitted wherever cooperatives could finance their operations through their own revenues. The long-term goal was to transform individual cooperatives into autonomous, fully-fledged organizations and to dismantle unnecessary administrative centralization. Supervisory bodies over cooperatives were to be limited to those performing economically beneficial functions. In the service sector, small-scale personal enterprise was also to be granted a legitimate role.⁶

⁴ *Ibidem*, s. 125–127.

⁵ ŠULC, Zdislav. *Hospodářská politika [Economic Policy]*. Praha: Consus, 1993. ISBN 80-901004-7-3, s. 100.

⁶ *Rok šedesátý osmý v usneseních a dokumentech ÚV KSČ... [The Year 1968 in the Resolutions and Documents of the CPCz Central Committee...]*, s. 128–129.

The *Action Programme* also addressed the question of enterprise governance. In the new model, enterprise work collectives were to feel directly the consequences of both good and poor management, while also gaining influence over how enterprises were run. So-called democratic organs within enterprises were to be granted formal authority over enterprise leadership. Directors and senior managers would be accountable to these bodies for the overall results of their management and would also be appointed to their positions by them. These governance organs were to be formed through a combination of elected representatives from the enterprise's workforce and selected external participants with the expertise and qualifications needed for effective decision-making.⁷ Although the *Action Programme* did not explicitly name this model, it effectively laid the foundation for a system of enterprise self-management, in which decision-making would be shared with specific internal governance bodies—namely, *workers' councils (rady pracujících)*.⁸

Among most members of the CPCz Central Committee, the preferred design was the so-called “one-third model,” according to which one-third of the council would be elected by enterprise employees, one-third would consist of appointed external experts (e.g., academics), and one-third would be made up of representatives from state authorities (such as ministries). Ota Šik opposed this model. He proposed that workers' councils should be elected solely by the enterprise's employees, with external experts allowed to join only with the consent of the workforce. The council would be accountable to the employees and subject to their control. It would also be responsible for selecting, appointing, and overseeing the enterprise director.

Šik publicly presented this concept on May 20, 1968, and thanks to the substantial media attention it received, enterprises quickly embraced the idea. Some had already begun electing their self-governance bodies even before the proposal was formally approved by the government on June 6, 1968. The issue of workers' councils was further elaborated in the document *Zásady pro zřizování kolektivních podnikatelských orgánů v podnicích* [*Principles for the*

⁷ *Ibidem*, s. 126–127.

⁸ LONDÁK, Miroslav. *Ekonomická tzv. Šikova reforma...* [*The So-Called Šik Economic Reform...*], s. 335.

Establishment of Collective Entrepreneurial Organs in Enterprises], dated May 24, 1968.⁹ Among other things, it stated:

“The creation of collective entrepreneurial organs – enterprise directorates and workers’ councils – is a major step in enforcing enterprise autonomy, eliminating bureaucratic and directive forms of enterprise management, and represents a significant move toward the democratization of the entire national economy.”¹⁰

Although the *Action Programme* laid out a clear path for continuing the economic reform, there was ultimately not enough time for its full implementation due to the Warsaw Pact invasion. Part of the most visible elements that were successfully introduced were the *workers’ councils*, which remained in place roughly until the summer of 1969. Under heavy pressure from the Soviet Union, they were dismantled by the spring of that year. The last functioning council, located at the Škoda plant in Plzeň, was forced to cease operations on November 12, 1969.¹¹

After August 1968, the reform movement lost one of its key figures: Ota Šik. At the time of the invasion, Šik was on vacation in Yugoslavia. Branded by the Soviets as a leading “counterrevolutionary” whom they wished to remove, he did not return to Czechoslovakia. Instead, he submitted his resignation by telegram on September 2, 1968, and chose to emigrate to Switzerland, where he subsequently accepted a position at the University of Basel.¹² In a televised interview for Swiss television on November 24, 1968, Šik was asked how closely his proposed model resembled capitalism. He responded

⁹ ŠIK, Ota. *Jarní probuzení – iluze a skutečnost...* [Spring Awakening – Illusion and Reality...], s. 179–180. Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Zásady pro zřizování kolektivních podnikatelských orgánů v podnicích z 24. května 1968* [Principles for the Establishment of Collective Entrepreneurial Bodies in Enterprises of 24 May 1968], s. 1.

¹⁰ Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Zásady pro zřizování kolektivních podnikatelských orgánů v podnicích z 24. května 1968* [Principles for the Establishment of Collective Entrepreneurial Bodies in Enterprises of 24 May 1968], s. 1.

¹¹ KOSTA, Jiří. *K historii a koncepci československé ekonomické reformy v letech 1965–1969...* [On the History and Concept of the Czechoslovak Economic Reform in 1965–1969...], s. 38.

¹² ŠIK, Ota. *Jarní probuzení – iluze a skutečnost...* [Spring Awakening – Illusion and Reality...], s. 210, 217.

that it was still a socialist model that did not depart from the principle of collective ownership – specifically, it did not envisage the introduction of private ownership in industry. The only exception would be small businesses based on personal or family initiative, which would be permitted as private enterprise. Everything else would be either cooperative property or a newly conceived form of collective ownership, distinct from bureaucratic state ownership. The aim was the complete separation of enterprises from the state.

This form of collective ownership would apply to large enterprises, which would have no shareholders and pay no dividends. Profits would not be distributed to private owners or shareholders but would instead serve the interests of the enterprise's employees. Enterprises would be required to act as independent market players and develop technologically in response to competition. After paying taxes, all earnings would remain within the enterprise and could be used for further development through investment or for increasing employment.¹³ The economic plan would no longer set binding targets for enterprises from the center. Rather, it would serve as a guiding framework, offering insight into key macroeconomic relationships to help enterprises formulate their own forward-looking strategies. To this end, medium- and long-term scientific planning and forecasting would be employed.

Even after August 1968, reformers still briefly held out hope for continuing the reform process and implementing its core elements. Various theoretical proposals were prepared during this time. Before the August invasion, a comprehensive document titled *Nástin koncepce dalšího rozvíjení ekonomické soustavy řízení* [*Outline of the Concept for Further Development of the Economic Management System*] had been created by economists from the Economic Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (M. Horálek, Č. Kožušník, and O. Turek) and the National Economic Secretariat of the Government Presidium (M. Sokol). It was presented for public discussion and published in *Hospodářské noviny* on April 5, 1968.¹⁴

¹³ Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 21, a. j. 215, *Rozhovor s. Šika s redaktory švýcarské televize 24. listopadu 1968* [Interview of Comrade Šik with Swiss Television Reporters, 24 November 1968], s. 17–19.

¹⁴ VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969...* [The Economic Reform 1965–1969...], s. 263, 292.

This text combined theoretical considerations with practical recommendations for both systemic and regulatory changes to the economic mechanism. In retrospect, it reveals clear progress in reform thinking, though certain epistemological limitations for further development still remained.

In October 1968, a new theoretical group led by Karel Kouba was established under the Economic Council.¹⁵ Its goal was to resume work on a substantive and time-bound comprehensive programme for further reform. The group aimed to rigorously separate the enterprise sphere from the state, break up monopolies, define new forms of state economic policy, and address the key causes of reform stagnation – including conflicting interest groups, inflationary trends, and structural imbalances in the national economy.

This theoretical group, composed once again of members from the Economic Institute of the ČSAV and the National Economic Secretariat, gradually submitted several proposals refining their vision and making certain concessions in response to the increasingly restrictive normalization policies imposed by the CPCz leadership. These proposals culminated in a document titled *Náčrt základní koncepce rozvíjení ekonomické reformy* [*Draft of the Basic Concept for the Development of Economic Reform*], dated May 12, 1969. However, these proposals encountered resistance from central authorities and never moved beyond the Economic Council. The government never formally discussed them.¹⁶

Until the early months of 1969, efforts were still underway to push forward legislative proposals that would have advanced the economic reform to the next stage. Chief among these were the *Law on Socialist Enterprises* and the *Law on Entrepreneurial Activity*. The most developed versions of these efforts are likely represented by the *Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises* dated April 21, 1969, and the *Draft Principles of the Law on Entrepreneurial Activity* dated February 21, 1969.

¹⁵ PRŮCHA, Václav a kol. *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992...* [*Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992...*], s. 388.

¹⁶ VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969...* [*The Economic Reform 1965–1969...*], s. 14, 15, 439, 449.

Although the term “privatization” was omitted for ideological reasons, these proposals nonetheless addressed the transformation of ownership relations. The fundamental change was to be the de-statization of the enterprise sector (though this term, too, was avoided) and the introduction of pluralistic ownership. By defining core capital and registering it in the enterprise register, a legal separation between enterprises and the state – specifically the state budget – was to be established. The state would no longer have the right to directly intervene in enterprise operations (except as defined by law), nor would it guarantee enterprise liabilities. In contrast, the state would be obliged to compensate a socialist legal entity for any damages resulting from its interference in the enterprise’s economic activities.

The legal status of enterprises was defined as follows:

“An enterprise acts in legal relations under its own name, may acquire rights and assume obligations, and bears property liability arising from these relations. The enterprise has the right to legal protection against any party that unlawfully interferes with its rights.”

The proposals also addressed market protection. Entrepreneurs would be prohibited from abusing market positions, restricting competition, or engaging in unfair business practices. Sanctions for such violations were to be imposed through judicial proceedings.

Additionally, the proposals called for the separation of ownership and management functions in enterprises that exceeded the scale of small production. Ownership functions would be exercised by an *enterprise council*, elected both from among employees and external experts. Management functions would be performed by the enterprise director, appointed by the enterprise council through a public selection process. The drafts also envisaged foreign participation in the Czechoslovak economy.¹⁷

Hopes of enacting these legislative proposals – and of continuing and deepening the reform process – persisted until April 1969, when Dubček was replaced as First Secretary of the CPCz by Gustáv Husák. After this leadership change, government institutions no longer pursued reform initiatives, and some

¹⁷ ŠULC, Zdislav (ed.). *Dokumenty k hospodářské politice v Československu z let 1963–1969...* [Documents on Economic Policy in Czechoslovakia from 1963 to 1969...], s. 78–138.

officials – particularly within the State Planning Commission – secretly began preparing a return to centralized planning.¹⁸

As early as December 1968, a resolution of the CPCz Presidium had already associated the economic reform with inflationary trends and macroeconomic imbalances: “The economic conditions established during the transition to the new management system failed to create a sufficiently demanding environment for the enterprise sector—one that would counteract inflationary pressures and promote macroeconomic balance.”¹⁹

A somewhat ambivalent stance toward the reform was expressed by Prime Minister Oldřich Černík during a CPCz Central Committee meeting on December 12, 1968. He stated that reform should “proceed thoughtfully through gradual implementation” but also warned that “economic reform cannot be introduced precipitously,” and that “implementing economic reform all at once would have such profound economic, social, and societal impacts that it could provoke a shock with unforeseeable consequences.”²⁰

The subsequent resolution of the CPCz Central Committee, published in *Rudé právo* on December 16, 1968, stated:

“The economic management system has so far failed to restore balance in the national economy, because it remains underdeveloped, has been introduced in an incomplete and inconsistent manner, and the transition has not been managed or understood.”

Nonetheless, the resolution called for “submission of a draft law on the status of the socialist enterprise and a law defining the basic conditions of socialist entrepreneurship.” These laws were intended to establish a framework enabling “enterprises and certain enterprise groupings to become organizations with full economic responsibility and the capacity to operate independently

¹⁸ PRŮCHA, Václav a kol. *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992...* [*Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992...*], s. 389.

¹⁹ Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Usnesení předsednictva ÚV KSČ z prosince 1968* [*Resolution of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPCz from December 1968*], s. 1.

²⁰ Národní archiv, f. 01, sv. 201, a. j. 127, *Stenografický zápis ze Zasedání ústředního výboru Komunistické strany Československa dne 12.–13. prosince 1968* [*Stenographic Record of the Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Held on 12–13 December 1968*], s. 18, 24.

within the framework of the state's economic policy and its regulatory interventions." The deadline for submitting the legislation was set for the first quarter of 1969.²¹

The *Law on Socialist Enterprises* was also discussed during a meeting between the delegations of the governments of the Czech Socialist Republic (ČSR) and the Slovak Socialist Republic (SSR), held in Bratislava from February 26 to 27, 1969. The following day, *Rudé právo* published a joint communiqué from this meeting of the national governments, which stated, among other things, that:

"Both governments emphasize their commitment to further developing the economic reform, whereby the fundamental principle must be the organic integration of planning and the market—and under no circumstances a return to the directive management system, nor the creation of an unregulated market."

It further declared that:

"Maximum effort will be made to ensure that the *Law on the Socialist Enterprise* is adopted as soon as possible."²²

The explanatory report attached to the resolution of the Czechoslovak government from March 3, 1969, stated that preparation of the *Law on Socialist Enterprises*:

"is in accordance with the current effort to consolidate and further successfully develop our socialist society,"²³

and emphasized the need:

"for the law to be discussed and enter into force as soon as possible."²⁴

²¹ *Usnesení ÚV KSČ k hlavním výsledkům, problémům a úkolům hospodářské politiky v současném období* [Resolution of the Central Committee of the CPCz on the Main Results, Problems and Tasks of Economic Policy in the Current Period]. *Rudé právo*, 1968, roč. 49, č. 336, s. 2.

²² Národní archiv, f. ÚV ČSR – Praha 1969, *Záznam z jednání schůze vlády dne 4. března 1969* [Record of the Government Meeting of 4 March 1969], s. 4.

²³ *Spolutvůrci celostátní politiky. Ze společné schůze národních vlád* [Co-Creators of National Policy. From the Joint Meeting of the National Governments]. *Rudé právo*, 1969, roč. 49, č. 50, s. 1–2.

²⁴ Národní archiv, f. 07/15, sv. 12, a. j. 114, *Důvodová zpráva k Usnesení vlády Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 3. března 1969 č. 38 k informaci o hlavních problémech diskuze k návrhu zákona o socialistických podnicích* [Explanatory Report to the Resolution of the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic of 3 March 1969 No. 38 on the Main Issues of the Discussion on the Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises], s. 1.

Even as late as April 28, 1969, the newly elected Chairman of the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Alexander Dubček – who had stepped down as First Secretary of the CPCz just eleven days earlier – remarked in his inaugural address to the legislature:

“Among the important legislative acts that will allow us to gradually implement the fundamental objectives of the economic reform and stabilize our national economy will be, above all, the laws on socialist enterprises and socialist entrepreneurship.”²⁵

However, by May 1969, the CPCz Central Committee had already adopted an implementation directive that marked the first step toward restoring the primacy of central planning. The definitive political rejection of the economic reform came in late January 1970, when the CPCz convened a full session dedicated to economic issues. The national economic plan, together with the reaffirmed leading role of the Party in the economy, was once again declared the principal instrument for resolving the crisis in the Czechoslovak economy.²⁶

2. Conclusion

From its founding in 1918 to its dissolution in 1992, Czechoslovakia experienced several fundamental transformations of its social structure, political system, and mechanisms of economic governance. This unusually high number of systemic changes in a relatively short period was shaped both by external forces – especially the influence of global powers – and by internal efforts to identify an ideal form for managing a relatively young, independent state. More than half of Czechoslovakia’s existence was defined by the communist regime, which held power from 1948 to 1989. Today, particularly among younger generations who did not live through that period, the era is often viewed simplistically as four decades of political repression and economic

²⁵ *Stenoprotokol 2. schůze Federálního shromáždění Československé socialistické republiky ze dne 28. dubna 1969* [Stenographic Record of the 2nd Session of the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic Held on 28 April 1969]. Dostupné z: <https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1969fs/slsn/stenprot/002schuz/s002001.htm>

²⁶ VONDROVÁ, Jitka (ed.). *Ekonomická reforma 1965–1969...* [The Economic Reform 1965–1969...], s. 15.

inefficiency under the strict control of the Communist Party. A closer examination, however, reveals that this period was not monolithic. The regime itself, particularly during the 1960s, searched for solutions to improve unsatisfactory – above all economic – developments.

These reform efforts were most evident in the second half of the 1960s, especially in 1968, when economic reform was accompanied by a partial loosening of political conditions. This attempt at building what was called “socialism with a human face,” which enjoyed broad public support, was ultimately rejected by the Soviet leadership and violently suppressed in August of that year. As a result, Czechoslovakia was denied the opportunity to fully develop and apply its emerging vision of a modern socialist society. Precisely because that opportunity was lost, examining surviving documents from this period is all the more compelling. They may help answer whether the reformist ideas of that time were viable under contemporary conditions – and how closely the envisioned management model would have approached the form of capitalism known today.

The theoretical part of this study described the broader economic and political framework in which the Šik Reform unfolded. Initial discussions about the need for reform began in the early 1960s, during the period of the Third Five-Year Plan (1961–1965). That plan was overly optimistic, and when combined with other internal and external challenges, it quickly failed. A resulting economic crisis peaked in 1963, when – for the first time since the end of World War II – the national income actually declined. In response, state leadership adopted several measures, one of which was the initiation of the first steps toward the Šik Reform.

The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1966–1970), during which the reform was primarily implemented, set more realistic targets. Most of these, including national income growth, were successfully exceeded. Although economic development showed signs of improvement, some issues persisted – such as the rushed wholesale price overhaul in January 1967, which caused greater-than-expected price increases and created price distortions.

The practical part of this study analyzed the course of the Šik Reform, placing special emphasis on the shifting attitudes of political leaders and the evolution of both implemented and unimplemented reform elements –

particularly regarding enterprise autonomy and the role of central planning. The reform emerged as a response to the economic downturn of 1962–1964, prompting top CPCz officials to engage in critical dialogue with economists about the hitherto untouchable command-administrative system. In 1963, the CPCz entrusted the progressive economist Ota Šik with drafting the reform framework together with his team. From the outset, however, development of the reform was complicated by the resistance of conservative politicians and economists who remained committed to the old directive system and were reluctant to accept change. For ideological reasons, the proposed documents also had to avoid radical ideas that might evoke a shift toward capitalist models.

The reform was officially approved and published in January 1965 as the *Main Guidelines for Improving the Planned Management of the National Economy*. The first elements of implementation began on January 1, 1966, and further acceleration came with the *Programme for the Accelerated Implementation of the New System of Planned Management*, launched on January 1, 1967. A turning point came in early 1968 when the conservative Antonín Novotný was replaced by the reform-minded Alexander Dubček. The CPCz *Action Programme*, adopted in April of that year, went beyond economic reform and called for political change as well. The dynamically unfolding reform process was, however, abruptly halted by the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968.

Even after the invasion, reformers continued to push for progress, as evidenced by the *Draft Law on Socialist Enterprises* (April 1969) and the *Draft Principles of the Law on Entrepreneurial Activity* (February 1969). Yet under the new so-called “normalization” leadership, headed by the conservative Gustáv Husák who replaced Dubček, these and other proposals failed to advance. From the second half of 1969 onward, Czechoslovakia gradually returned to the old command-administrative model of economic governance, bringing the Šik Reform to a definitive end.

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