

**Programs to Enhance Human Potential vs. Socio-Political Reality.  
The Czech story<sup>1</sup>**

The lifetimes of human societies are occasionally punctuated by revolutionary moments when something that for many years had been beyond the unthinkable suddenly appears to be within reach. Old institutional frameworks collapse and ingrained forms of behavior are transformed and replaced by others (or at least they would seem to be). Thousands of individual and collective projects enter the public realm, struggling for limited political, economic, and intellectual resources. Exceptional individuals have a greater chance of shaping the ongoing changes according to their vision of what direction society should take in the future... I myself have had the bad luck and good fortune to experience two such turning points in person. The first such event, the passionate days of the Prague Spring, was filled with positive (though in many ways idealistic) energy and resolve, but surprisingly quickly descended into twenty chilly years of “normalization”. The second event, November 1989, opened up enormous possibilities for the inclusion of Czech society into the mainstream of European culture and civilization, but over the past twenty years, the ethos of the revolution has continuously run up against the substantial cognitive and moral limits of the populace, politicians, and bureaucrats, as well as institutional barriers.

I have written this paper in the first person, since I was involved in the creation and/or implementation of the majority of program documents that I have chosen to analyze and compare with actual developments in the country – thus offering me the opportunity to apply the method of participant observation. For this reason, I must naturally be all the more cautious in what kind of interpretations I present for further discussion in the following text. I shall start with a few words about the ways in which I was or was not prepared, in 1989, to comprehend the problems facing the country and its inhabitants. Between 1975 and 1989, I had worked in the gray zone of research, attempting – together with many other of my colleagues – to come up with a solid methodo-

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for the international project “*Theory and practice of the Welfare State in Europe in 20th century. Ways to the Welfare State*”, Prague 2011. An updated version of: Martin POTŮČEK, *The Sociopolitical Dimensi on of Changes in Society, 1989–2009. Programs vs. Reality*. In: Libor Prudký (ed.), *Tehdy a teď. Česká společnost po 20 letech [Then and Now. Czech Society after 20 Years]*. Praha 2010, pp. 123–130.

logy for the social sciences and to name social problems by their true name.<sup>2</sup> In the second half of the 1980s, I led a team consisting of representatives from several institutions, disciplines, and areas of research, focused on the role of sectors responsible for human development (education, healthcare, culture, physical fitness, and social welfare) in cultivating and realizing human potential<sup>3</sup> Our analyses and forecasts led to the clear conclusion that, compared to the situation in the West, the former regime was in conflict with human health<sup>4</sup> Czechoslovakia had by that time already clearly run out of breath and was significantly lagging behind its neighbors on the other side of the Iron Curtain in terms of life expectancy or its approach to education, culture, lifestyle; the polluted environment threatened people's lives, but economic performance - perversely measured primarily in terms of megatonnes of coal mined and steel produced - continued to get the green light.

On 19 November 1989, I became active in the Civic Forum's coordinating center. I felt that it was important to create a political program that would give the Forum's political activities a sense of direction. The natural platform for my endeavors was the Forum's program committee, at that time headed by the unforgettable Josef Vavroušek. After Milan Petrusek (sometime in late January 1990) decided to fully devote himself to founding the new Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, I took over his chairmanship of the social committee, one of several specialized committees of the program committee. At the same time (until my departure for the London School of Economics in September 1990), I participated in the activities of the Sociological Initiative (which had been active since May 1989 under the leadership of Josef Alan) and in the newly founded (after November 1989) Sociological Forum, and I headed the Working Group for the Reform of the Czech Healthcare System. I have selected three program documents from the year 1990 and other four consecutive initiatives. I have compared their proposals with the actual course of events over the subsequent more than two decades.

<sup>2</sup> 1975–1983 Comprehensive Modeling Department, Sportpropag Prague, 1983–1988 Institute for Social Medicine and Organization of Health Services, Prague.

<sup>3</sup> Martin POTŮČEK, *Lidský potenciál v rozvoji čs. společnosti* [Human Potential in the Development of Czechoslovak Society]. *Politická ekonomie* 36, 1988, No. 2, pp. 175–188; Same, *Lidský potenciál československé společnosti* [Human Potential in the Development of Czechoslovak Society]. *Sociológia* 21, 1989, No. 3, pp. 325–342; Same, *Člověk v měnící se společnosti – příklad Československa* [People in a Changing Society – the Example of Czechoslovakia]. *Sociologický časopis* 26, 1990, pp. 269–275; Same, *Pojetí lidského potenciálu* [The Concept of Human Potential]. *Psychologie v ekonomické praxi* 26, 1991, No. 3, pp. 115–124; Same, *The Concept of Human Potential and Social Policy*. *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Oeconomica*, 1992, No. 1, pp. 51–67.

<sup>4</sup> Same, *Sociální determinanty zdraví československé populace* [The Social Determinants of Health Czechoslovak Population]. *Čs. zdravotnictví* 38, 1990, No. 8–9.

1. Declaration of Sociologists (letter to the President)
2. Civic Forum Social Program (a comparison with the Forum's Electoral Program)
3. Plan for Social Reform
4. OMEGA Project - civic affinity, human solidarity (1994)
5. Social Doctrine of the Czech Republic (2002)
6. Jsme občané (We the Citizens) (2007)
7. ProAlt (For Alternatives) (2010)

In my opinion, these comparisons need not be (and should not be) understood as a mere nostalgic look back at a past that cannot be changed. We can also use them to draw relevant conclusion on what moves society; when, who, and how we can influence the form and manner in which public and social policy are implemented; and perhaps we may even infer the fate of similar future activities...

#### DOCUMENT 1:

Created: Early 1990

Declaration of Sociologists (letter to the president)  
Martin POTŮČEK, *Křižovatky české sociální reformy*. [Czech Social Reform at a Crossroads]. Sociologické nakladatelství, Praha 1999, pp. 237–239.  
Reprinted In: *Sociologický časopis*, Vol. 40, No. 5, 2004, pp. 763–764.

#### Description:

The document informs the president of the urgent need to keep in mind social issues during the transformation of society, and to look for answers among the social sciences and practical social policy.

#### Reality 22 years later:

The document astutely diagnosed certain dangers that fully manifested themselves during subsequent social and political developments: the deficiency of neoclassical economic recipes when it comes to addressing social problems; the difficulty of coordinating decision-making across various disciplines as a result of measures enacted by the National Economic Council on the basis of one-sided economic perspectives; and the resulting risk of neglecting the social sphere, which influences “the use of the potential hidden within our people and which, if not activated, will cause even the best intentions of economists or politicians to remain unfulfilled.”

DOCUMENT 2: Created: February 1990 (31 March 1990)

Civic Forum Social Program  
(a comparison with the Forum's Electoral Program)

In: M. PUTŮČEK, *Křižovatky české sociální reformy*. [Czech Social Reform at a Crossroads], pp. 240–245.

*Description:*

The social sphere is defined primarily as a target, not as a source. Society should be socially just (in the sense of providing equal opportunities). Society should be socially sensitive, must provide aid and support to those who are not succeeding in the more difficult climate of a society geared towards output and performance. The state should guarantee a living minimum and should implement differentiated social programs for the protection and support of disadvantaged individuals, including those persecuted by the previous regime. In the substance of the program's aims, we can find an independent strategy for revitalizing and promoting the health of the populace; social welfare and support for the elderly, the disabled, and families; an accelerated expansion of the populace's level of knowledge and education; the development of leisure time service; and expanded independence for towns, municipalities, and regions. In coordination with economic reforms, the document anticipates the development of a system for the protection of employees and consumers, an active employment policy, and an attempt at dealing with issues related to the Gypsy minority. The document anticipates the creation of an independent agency (the Social Council) for coordinating and consulting initiatives at the federal level; this agency would be responsible for preparing and implementing an independent and comprehensive social policy that would be regularly updated to reflect the overall development of society. (The Forum's Electoral Program, edited by Miloš Zeman, diverges significantly from the basic priorities of the Social Program described above: "If we are to avoid entering the European Community as a poor cousin on the lookout for pity and handouts, our return must be based not only on the things advanced countries have in common - political democracy and market economics - but also on what can be specific to Czechoslovakia. This could be the ability to reshape national pride into a willingness to make sacrifices. In view of our current state of underdevelopment, we will have to work harder than the others, to consume fewer of the

fruits of our labor and reinvest more".<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the paragraph on "Social Policy" contained in the section entitled "Pathways" is located after the paragraphs "Democratic Political System," "Foreign Policy," and "Economic Policy". The document mentions state-guaranteed social minimums and support and the creation of a reliable "social safety and support net" at the local level. It also proposed indexing all social welfare payments and handouts.)

*Reality 22 years later:*

With some minor deviations on both sides, we can essentially say that reality unfolded in accordance with the policies of the Electoral Program, i.e., with an emphasis on the formation of a democratic political system and a market economy, while ignoring the concept of the welfare state.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the final "victory" of economists over sociologists had already been sealed at the outset of the political battle regarding the goals and principles of the future direction of society.<sup>7</sup>

DOCUMENT 3: Created September 1990

Social Reform

Hospodářské noviny, 1990, 4 September, pp. VI–VII.  
Reprinted in: M. POTŮČEK, *Křižovatky české sociální reformy*. [Czech Social Reform at a Crossroads], pp. 246–254.

*Description:*

This remarkable document was enacted by the Federal Government of the Czechoslovak Federal Republic at the same time as the Plan for Economic Reform. In its introduction, it calls attention to the fact that the government has bound itself to building up the rule of law and to an environmentally oriented market economy. Its main efforts are supposed to be drawing up a constitution and legal, economic, and social reforms. The economic reform plan formulates the humanist foundation for governmental policy, i.e., social justice and protecting the weak and those

<sup>5</sup> Civic Forum Electoral Program, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> This is remarkably similar to the Copenhagen criteria for the accession of new member states, as formulated by the European Union in 1993.

<sup>7</sup> As we know, when privatization was planned and launched several months later, the economists "beat out" the lawyers as well.

who cannot work. Social strategy is focused on employment policy (the completion of an institutional system for employment), employment income policy (relying on mechanisms of collective bargaining and collective contracts and the introduction of the concept of minimal wages), family policy (a system of social support consisting of handouts, services, and shelters), and social security (reforming the manner in which pension payments are calculated, including regular adjustments to reflect changes in the cost of living and wage increases and transferring social security financing into a system of funds existing separately of the state budget).

Social policy will have to be tentatively conceived not as a goal of social development, but as a corrective mechanism alleviating the negative impact of economic transformation on people.

*Reality 21 years later:*

The concept of a socially oriented market economy remained only on paper. In practice, social policy received only marginal attention from Czech political representatives, all the more so because, following the 1992 elections and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, public debate and actual politics were dominated by the ideology of a pure free market economy.

The institutional foundations for employment policy were laid right at the beginning of the 1990s (the Ministry of Labor's Employee Services Administration, a regional network of employment offices). Collective bargaining was retained and minimum wages introduced. Families paid the most for the path towards transformation that we chose - state support for the family was significantly cut back. In 1995, child benefits were redefined not as universal support, but as welfare support for the poor. The first comprehensive family policy concept was not created until 2005. A state social security administration was established, but we did not manage to build a comprehensive and independent system of professionally equipped agencies with boards of directors. The social security fund was not separated from the state budget.

DOCUMENT 4:

Created: March 1992

The OMEGA Project: civic belonging, human solidarity

In: M. PUTŮČEK, *Křižovatky české sociální reformy*. [Czech Social Reform at a Crossroads], pp. 255–259.

*Description:*

This informal citizens' movement attempted to stimulate public debate regarding the conception, substance, and tools of social policy. The ALPHA of societal transformation had been the introduction of a free market. Because the free market was being discussed left and right while the creation of opportunities for a sense of civic reciprocity (state-guaranteed public social services) and human solidarity (activities on the part of civic sector organizations inspired by a sense of empathy and the need to help others in need) were left to shiver on the sidelines, the group chose to call itself OMEGA. These themes - which were incorporated into several documents and offered at public discussions and at seminars in Prague, Brno, and Bratislava - included a conception of social policy, relations on the employment market, relations on the market for goods and services, inherited and new poverty, the tax system, education and culture, the health of the nation, housing, families, and minorities. OMEGA was active between December 1991 and June 1994. Reality 20 years later:

This type of grassroots movements with a broad thematic range found little public reception within Czech society. Only a few dozen specialists and activists were actively involved in the organization, and only rarely did individual politicians or bureaucrats show an interest; media interest was minimal.

DOCUMENT 5:

Created: 2001

Social Doctrine of the Czech Republic 2002. Social Policy, no. 1–2, pp. 7–11.

*Description:*

Work on this program document took almost three years and involved dozens of experts from various institutions, scientific disciplines and ideological and political directions. The project involved five preparatory conferences organized by the SOCIOKLUB civic association. All the participations were unified in their conviction that social policy as it existed in practice lacked a long-term direction. They hoped that this document might represent a minimum shared starting point for those involved in shaping and implementing Czech social policy in the future. The document was presented for discussion, criticism, and - potentially - acceptance on the part of Czech politicians and bureaucrats regardless of party membership, ministry, level of government or association in the hope that it might become a starting point for long-term conceptual work that would

ensure that future Czech social policy would keep up with the changing demands of the time and with public expectations.

The document described certain objectives and defined its approach to addressing social issues in the Czech Republic in the broader context and in the long-term perspective. It described the values on which it was based, defining human and social rights as its main goal, and provided a list of priorities for practical social policy as well as ways of implementing this doctrine within social policy. Reality 10 years later:

In 2001 and 2002, the Social Doctrine of the Czech Republic was presented at several public discussions organized in part by the Ministry of Labor and the Czech Senate. Following the 2002 elections, the document was mentioned in the coalition agreement between the ČSSD, KDU-ČSL and Freedom Union as a foundation for the work of the emerging coalition government. It was assumed that the document would be further discussed and subsequently implemented in actual social policy. In reality - despite the document's authors' repeated and unanswered urging of the chairmen of the coalition parties at the turn of 2002/2003 - this never happened: any actual decisions made in this area were either made *ad hoc* in response to immediate pressures or were the result of lobbying on the part of specific interest groups.

DOCUMENT 6: Created: 2007

Jsmě občané (We the Citizens)

<http://www.jsmeobcane.eu> (The website is no longer active.)

*Description:*

This civic initiative operated for the first time in the Czech Republic with the help of the internet. Announced in January 2007, thirty years after Charter 77, it was focused on fundamental inequalities in Czech (social) political practice resulting from the neo-liberal doctrine; on the wording of the Czech constitution regarding the rights of ethnic minorities and migrants; discrimination of young people, women and the elderly; the life of homeless people existing outside the realm of elementary human dignity; and the shrinking space for public discussion of these issues. Between January 2007 and 7 February 2008, this appeal was signed by 661 citizens.

*Reality 5 years later:*

693 citizens signed the document between January 1, 2007 and November 24, 2008. Some information appeared in the print media, but none of it reached the “*media highway*”. No significant influence of this initiative upon public policy has been observed. The website of the initiative was not in the operation in the beginning of 2009.

DOCUMENT 7:

Created 2010

ProAlt (For Alternatives)

<http://www.proalt.cz>

*Description:*

ProAlt is the civic initiative criticizing the governmental reforms and promoting alternatives. It brings together people of all professions, generations and opinions, who refuse insensitive cuts and reforms in pensions, health, social and family policy, employment law, education, science and culture, as prepared by the current government coalition, and want to actively refuse them. Its short term goal is to stop or at least mitigate the reforms in these areas. Its long term goal is to create confident, active, inclusive and sustainable society.

*Reality 1 year later:*

ProAlt has been the first Czech civic initiative in the field of social issues, which was able to effectively penetrate into the public space, including “*media highway*”. It has organized public hearings, discussions and demonstrations. Nevertheless, its influence is still rather limited.

## Conclusion

How come is it that the Czech welfare state has not yet collapsed but continues to function despite its clear failure to meet its duty to sufficiently cover even the most basic needs, and despite the fact that the public is clearly dissatisfied with the quality and extent of public social services?<sup>8</sup> In fact, attacks on the essence of

<sup>8</sup> For more detail, see: Martin POTŮČEK, *The Czech national model of the Welfare State. Tradition and changes*. In: St. Golinowska – P. Hengstenberg – M. Zukowski, (eds.), *Diversity and Commonality in European Social Policies: The Forging of a European Social Model*. Warsaw 2009, pp. 33–69. Available at <http://www.martinpotucek.cz/ebooks/Ebert.pdf>.

the welfare state have not let up, and have been growing stronger with the crisis at whose outset we currently find ourselves. The answer to this question is far from simple. The institutions of the welfare state show a high level of inertia, and any changes in their form and functions or in the services they provide require perseverance and determination - and even then, this is a long-term task. Another factor is the inability of our political representatives to reach an agreement on political compromises enjoying broad political support.<sup>9</sup> Also, for the entire 22-year period, the Council for Economic and Social Agreement functioned quite well. Thanks primarily to the informed standpoints of labor unions, the council managed to act as a last-ditch safety mechanism for preventing the potentially most destructive excesses. Nevertheless, there were numerous deficits<sup>10</sup> in the level of communication among the broader spectrum of public actors, which under other circumstances might have led to improved decision-making.<sup>11</sup> The analysis of the briefing on social rights (Potůček in print) leads me to conclude that communication has been fragmented into several independent areas of discourse (administrative, political, profession, and civic) without any greater overlaps or synergetic effects.

Neither the Czech Republic nor its inhabitants or political representatives have matured to the point of realizing that their first and foremost political task is ensuring the quality of people's lives, creating the conditions for cultivating and applying human potential, or developing human abilities and inclinations through public social services. This is why all program documents that formulated the issue in this manner were only realized to a very limited extent in practice. Essentially, there has been no change since November 1989 in the general factors influencing the reproduction and development of society, in particular when it comes to setting key political priorities and the manner in which public budgets are created and distributed: despite many differences, in this country active social policy that improves the quality of people's lives and the cultivation of human potential through sectors responsible for human development runs up against barriers similar to those that existed during the time that we had, in those heady moments twenty two years ago, hoped to quickly forget... In addition, we must point to the influence of the neo-liberal paradigm, which

has set the tone of public debate and politics on a global level and which has been much easier to promote in the post-communist world (including the Czech Republic) than in the established western democracies. In the twenty two years since November 1989, a decisive segment of our political representatives, the media and the general public has not managed to free itself from the idea that the primary goal of our efforts should be a booming economy, and that human lives, capabilities and skills are merely the tools necessary for achieving this simple goal.

<sup>9</sup> At the time, one herald of better times was the so-called Bezděk Commission, which - with the support of all parliamentary parties and their experts - focused on the possibilities of reforming the pension system. However, as soon as the commission's recommendations made it onto the parliamentary floor, all promises of change immediately disappeared.

<sup>10</sup> Aleš KROUPA - Zdenka MANSFELDOVÁ, *Participace a zájmové organizace v České republice* [The Participation and Interest Organizations in the Czech Republic]. Sociologické nakladatelství, Praha 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Paul SABATIER, *An Advocacy Coalition Framework for Policy Change and the Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein*. Policy Sciences 21, 1995, pp. 129-168.