

# REPORT

## The Prague Spring and the 1968 Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in an international context

Monday 24<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, 09:30 – 15:00  
Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU

- The conference organized by EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, the Prague House and the Czech Centre in Brussels took place on September 24, 2018 in Brussels. The discussions reflected on the events of 1968 and what they mean for the Czech Republic and Europe today, the impact of these events on the regional cooperation after 1990 and the use of 1968 narrative in the current political and social discourse.
- The event featured HE Jaroslav Zajíček (Deputy Head of the Czech Permanent Representation to the EU), Lucie Čadilová (Head of the Delegation of Prague to the EU), Jitka Pánek Jurková (Director of the Czech Center Brussels), Petra James (ULB), Jakub Machek (Metropolitan University Prague), Gabor Egry (Institute for Political History in Budapest), Rick Fawn (University of St Andrews), Zuzana Poláčková (Slovak Academy of Science), Vít Havelka (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy). Andrea Petö (Central European University), Michal Vít (Metropolitan University Prague) and Pavel Tychtl (European Commission) took on the moderation of the panel discussions. Zuzana Stuchlíková (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy) closed the conference.

The event started with opening remarks from **Ms. Lucie Čadilová** (Head of the Delegation of Prague to the EU), and **Ms. Jitka Pánek Jurková** (Director of the Czech Center Brussels) who briefly looked back at the events that were organized during the year 2018 to commemorate 1968 as an important part of Czech and European history.

**HE Jaroslav Zajíček** (Deputy Head of the Czech Permanent Representation to the EU) then delivered a keynote speech where he set up the scene for the discussions. He highlighted that 1968

was a turning point for freedom, emancipation and democracy in Central Europe and went back on the events that happened during the spring and led to the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The first panel *Culture versus politics: What was the main driver of reforms of 1968?* was opened by moderator **Ms. Andrea Petö** (Central European University) who presented a series of questions to the panelists related to the historical context of 1968: what was 1968 about? A *global disruption*? How to move from the cultural and Cold War logic determined



definition to understanding Revolt? **Ms. Petra James** (ULB) drew on a quote from French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva to talk about the fact that there is a difference in the way 1968 events were perceived at the time and the way they are perceived now. For Ms. James, the idea of a '*violent desire to rake of the norms*' as described by Kristeva is the most important uniting fact between the East and the West at the time. For instance, Ms. James said that there were similar revendications and preoccupations within the students who were active in the 1968 movement in France. Later, **Mr. Jakub Machek** (Metropolitan University Prague) said there were a request for Western Culture at the time: western design, movies, music... However today the idea of Central Europe is now coming back to the Czech Republic, with a common historical heritage (deriving from being invaded) and a certain political feeling of protest against the West, with distrust towards the elites. The panelists then discussed the role of *tradition of protest in Central Europe*, the issue of *consumerism* (was 1968 about better consumption?) and the *role of emotion* in the narrative of 1968 events. Ms. James noted that the *strategy of emotional narrative* was the most used at that time by human rights movements in a context of an important competition to gain attention of the media and a large public support.

To conclude the first panel, the speakers discussed the role of women in Czechoslovakia during 1968, pointing out their absence. Women were only present as symbolic figures but are not part of the current historical and popular figures. Questions from the audience addressed the role of the media at that

time, the popular reminders and the economic perspective on the 1968 events.

Next to take the floor for the second panel *How neighboring countries inspired Prague Spring and what was impact of their participation of invasion?* were **Mr. Gabor Egry** (Institute for Political History in Budapest) and **Mr. Michal Vít** (Metropolitan University Prague). Both talked about the issue of creating a common identity and identification in Central Europe regarding the 1968 events. Mr. Egry, as an historian, stressed the importance of taking into account different regional perspectives as a crucial point within the issue of creating a common identity. Building on this remark, Mr. Vít indicated that the policy of repopulation of the borderland in Czechoslovakia has been executed without the stress on the identity of the inhabitants, as opposed to Poland, and that is a factor that lead to a deficit of understanding nationality. The substance of *regional cooperation* was one of the main points of the discussion.

The third round of discussions *Western Europe and the influence of the 1968 events on regional and European cooperation after 1990?* featured **Mr. Rick Fawn** (University of St Andrews), **Ms. Zuzana Poláčková** (Slovak Academy of Science) and **Mr. Vít Havelka** (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy) and was moderated by **Mr. Pavel Tychtl** (European Commission).

Mr. Tychtl gave a short introduction on the complexity of the cooperation in the region and in Europe after 1990, sharing a story about him finding



in his parent's basement objects representing memories of 1968.

Ms. Poláčková identified 2 messages regarding the Prague Spring: the importance of working for and defending *liberal democracy*, and the necessity of *keeping Europe together* as much as possible especially in the face of superpowers such as Russia and the United States. She also reminded that the 1968 events brought together Central European countries in the Visegrad cooperation.

Next to speak was Mr. Fawn who suggested that the impact of the Prague Spring is indirect and delayed. Talking about the influence of 1968 on regional cooperation, he declared that everybody wanted to claim Visegrad (in the region) because it is a success.

To finish, Mr. Havelka talked about the influence of 1968 on the population of the region, saying that if we want to access the influence of 1968, we have to

perceive it not as a single event, but as a piece of a puzzle of the Czech perspective on the 20th century.

A second lesson Mr. Havelka mentioned is that Czechoslovakia was too small and had to seek allies to be heard on the international scene.

Questions from the public gave the speakers the opportunity to dig more into the V-4 cooperation and the Western perception on Visegrad during this time. Responding to a participant, Mr. Fawn talked about the *institutionalization of V4*, stressing that there is no need to have buildings to have institutions when there are meetings, presidency programmes. Another topic addressed during the Q&A was the *bipolar division* as one of the characteristic of the Cold War at the time, and the responses from the different communist parties across Europe who, for most of them, condemned the Warsaw Pact invasion.

The conference was closed by **Ms. Zuzana Stuchlíková** (EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy).

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