

June 4, 1968
**Report on the Trip by a Delegation of Soviet
Workers to the CSSR**

Citation:

"Report on the Trip by a Delegation of Soviet Workers to the CSSR", June 4, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 25, Spr. 28, Ll. 180-189.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/113088>

Summary:

V. Shcherbyts'kyi reports to P. Shelest on events and observations from a USSR workers' delegation traveling in the CSSR.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

SecretUKRAINIAN CP CCto Comrade P. E. SHELESTOn the Trip by a Delegation of Soviet Workers to the Czechoslovak Socialist RepublicAs directed by the CPSU CC, a delegation of Soviet workers, consisting of 25 people altogether, was in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 25 to 29 May to exchange tokens of peace and friendship between the peoples of the CSSR and the USSR in marking the 23rd anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the fascist occupiers. During their stay in the CSSR, the delegation visited a number of cities and villages in Slovakia—Košice, Rožnava, Banská Bystrica, Rimavská Sobota, and the village of Švermovo—and also the Košice metallurgical combine, the Pešok machinebuilding factory, the Forestry Technical Institute in Zvolen, and other places. At the invitation of the CC of the Slovak Communist Party (KSS), I went with six other members of the delegation (party officials) to Bratislava, where we had a discussion with secretaries of the KSS CC, officials of the party control committee, and the leaders of the Slovak National Assembly. On the evening of 28 May, I attended the official opening in Czechoslovakia of the Days of Culture of the Ukrainian SSR. 214In general, the treatment of the Soviet delegation by Czechoslovak officials was exceptionally polite and courteous, though not always sincere. As a rule, the leaders of local party organs, senior officials in the regime and in public organizations, and representatives from the Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Union took part in all the ceremonies. During the whole time we were in Slovakia, not a single openly hostile remark was made about the Soviet delegation. However, the behavior of most of the leaders of local party and other organizations reflected alarm, uncertainty, and trepidation about their own fate. We got the impression that senior officials were trying to prevent members of the delegation from having broad interaction with workers, peasants, intellectuals, and rank-and-file Communists. They avoided open contacts and held candid discussions only among a narrow circle—during train or car rides, or at other convenient times when no one else was around. There were no mass meetings of the delegation with the public, aside from a meeting on the Soviet-Czechoslovak border in the village of Švermovo. At our request, discussions were organized at the Pešok machinebuilding factory and the Košice metallurgical combine with instructors and a group of students from the Forestry Technical Institute in Zvolen. We had nearly a three-hour discussion with the members of the Presidium of the KSS Central Slovak regional committee (in Banská Bystrica), which took the form of an exchange of views about party and council work. In all, the members of the delegation had roughly 20 collective discussions and many individual conversations with the Czechoslovak comrades and local population, which enabled them to form certain impressions of the situation in local party organizations and workers' collectives. 1. The discussions and personal observations indicate that the state of affairs in Czechoslovakia does not fully correspond with the optimistic assessment provided in reports from KSC leaders. Many local comrades declared to us that in recent weeks the situation in the KSC and the CSSR not only had failed to stabilize, but had become even worse and more tense. Developments in this respect are working to the benefit of the anti-socialist forces. The anti-socialist elements are becoming increasingly active, and the influence of the KSC is weakening. At the factories, according to the local comrades, the KSC's primary party organizations are being kept apart from the workers' collectives. At some of the enterprises, new trade union committees are being selected without Communist participants; unjustified changes in management are under way; unrealistic demands are being voiced for increases in pay; and discipline is sharply deteriorating. Workers at the factories are restless and are often expressing dissatisfaction, which in a number of cases is justified. Some of the workers at the Pešok machinebuilding factory declared: "Earlier they said to us that the working class is in charge of the country, but now only the intellectuals appear on television and radio. We ourselves have no such opportunity." The KSC's primary party organizations, district committees, and regional committees are effectively abstaining from any sort of mass-political work among the population. Workers and the local party aktiv express varying opinions, and disagreements have emerged about the ongoing events. We could definitely sense that a deliberate attempt is under way to remove from the political arena not only A. Novotný, but also all of those who actively worked with him and supported him. Under the influence of anti-Communist elements, the population and even many leading party officials openly express the view that the KSC should not be a ruling, leading party and should instead be only a prominent force in society. 215 They also say that the KSC should not interfere in the work of the government, public organizations, and so forth. 2. On

the basis of information at our disposal, we believe that conditions in Slovakia are more auspicious, and that the Communist Party of Slovakia is in full control of the situation and is not yielding to the onslaught of anti-socialist forces. Nevertheless, it is clear that even in Slovakia the political situation is complex and dangerous. Negative processes are spreading ever more widely, and anti-socialist, anti-party, and anti-Soviet developments are intensifying. A good deal is being said about the federalization of the country and about the improper treatment to which the Slovaks have been subjected by the central CSSR organs. 216 Hostility toward the Czechs is rapidly increasing. In addition, the local comrades were speaking about the shared historical experiences of the Slovak, Russian, and Ukrainian peoples and the similarities of their cultures, languages, and other features. As in the Czech lands, the active resistance of anti-socialist elements in Slovakia has undermined the measures that the KSC CC is trying to carry out to establish control over the mass media and propaganda organs. 217 Thus, under the influence of forces hostile to the KSC, the Social Academy of Slovakia, the workers of Tesla Strašnice and the Plzen turbine factory, and peasants from the J. Komenský mass cooperative adopted a resolution to continue the so-called "democratization process," with demands for freedom of the press and freedom of speech and a struggle against those who are seeking to obstruct these processes. Communists and workers of the Košice metallurgical combine also adopted a resolution demanding that democratization and liberalization be continued. In a television broadcast in Bratislava on 28 May they said that a proposal is in the works to give land back to landowners in the mountainous districts of the Carpathians. Kulaks and other petit-bourgeois elements are engaged in a vigorous propaganda campaign against the KSC's primary party organizations and against cooperatives. All sorts of wild stories are circulating about bad conditions in the public economy and its loss-making nature. 218 The party activists are being harassed and threatened with physical reprisals. Despite the greatly increased activity of hostile elements, the CC of the Communist Party of Slovakia is not taking appropriate measures to rebuff them. There has been no increase at all in the activity of party members; quite the contrary. The work of many party committees is exceptionally poor. For example, the secretary of the KSS Central Slovakia regional committee, Cde. A. Tažký, said, during a conversation between the Soviet delegation and members of the regional committee presidium, that after the January (1968) Plenum of the KSC CC, the regional committee was left without secretaries and without an apparatus. 219 As a result, the oblast party organization was unable to carry out any sort of work. Not until very recently, after the selection of a new presidium, was it possible for work in the oblast committee to resume. However, the party organs even now are functioning poorly in the locales and are not giving instructions to the primary party organizations or relying on them. At the Pešok machinebuilding factory, which has 2,800 workers and 560 KSC members, organizational and ideological work has been neglected. For 7 years the factory included no one from the oblast party leaders, and after the January Plenum of the KSC CC, there was no one even from the district leaders. No one came to speak at the factory, and no one explained the situation and the tasks ahead. No party slogans and exhortations can be heard at the factory. On the walls in the factory sections they have put up photographs of half-naked women, rather than agitational posters. According to the acting director of the East Slovak metallurgical combine (in Košice), party and work discipline at the combine has recently deteriorated. Many demagogues have infiltrated the combine, spreading dissent about improper economic relations with the USSR and other matters. It is alarming that during the official meetings, receptions, and discussions, none of the Slovak comrades would speak about the leading role of the party or about the KSC CC. They expressed no practical suggestions about how to organize party work under modern circumstances. The majority of employees in Slovakia with whom we met were bitterly critical of the former KSC CC leader A. Novotný and the former oblast committee secretaries because there had been no collective leadership in the party and no collective discussion of directives and decisions. 220 All party work was extremely centralized and secretive. Many discussions are being held about instances of legal violations, unworthy behavior by former party leaders and their alienation from the masses, the loss of party spirit, and even moral and political collapse. As a rule, all the leading officials tried to assure us that everything there is going well, and that the process of

democratization is necessary for them and valuable for the KSC and the CSSR. Don't worry, they often said to us, you can rest peacefully, knowing that we have everything under control and are coping with the situation. Different opinions are of no danger to us. They work to the benefit of our struggle for socialism. Certain leaders declare that the KSC even has a stake in such processes because they supposedly help the party expose its enemies, who can then easily be vanquished and rendered harmless. However, the reality of the situation raises doubts about the accuracy and sincerity of these statements. We get the impression that the party activists overall are not especially alarmed about the fate of the party and the cause of socialism in Czechoslovakia. They are not carrying out a fundamental and clear-headed assessment of the situation in the country and the party. They are giving in to euphoria and smugness. Even during confidential discussions, none of the party officials said that the party is devising practical measures to normalize the situation in the country. As we observed, the situation is all the more complicated because the KSS is not carrying out a necessary ideological struggle against revisionists on the theoretical front. In this respect, a typical instance occurred during a discussion between the members of our delegation and a group of instructors and students from the Forestry Technical Institute in Zvolen, including the prorectors of the institute, the head of the department of Marxism-Leninism, and the secretary of the party committee. During the discussion they said it is unnecessary to teach students about the history of the party. On questions of philosophy, political economy, and "political studies," the educational institutes themselves must work out their own programs in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Higher Education, without any sort of interference from the KSC CC. Instructors from the institute believe it is necessary to eliminate general economic planning in the country, leaving the state planning organs responsible only for certain of the most important categories (volume of financing, deductions from profits, and taxes). All other categories must be based on recommendations from the enterprises themselves, including the nature and volume of production, marketing, and so forth. They believe that the collapse of Communist youth organizations in the educational institutes is a normal development. During a discussion with our delegation, the students of this institute declared that the Czechoslovak Youth Union has outlived its purpose and should be disbanded completely. 221 The students do not want to be in the same organization with workers and peasants, since these groups have their own special interests. They propose to create a "Student Parliament" as a union of students, which would be concerned with the students' everyday life, culture, and academic programs, without any sort of political platform. The leaders of party organizations in Slovakia who came to office after the January and April plenums of the KSC CC include officials with politically immature and even patently revisionist outlooks. Among examples of this phenomenon worth citing is the ideology secretary in the KSS Central Slovakia regional committee, a former instructor in philosophy, Círík, who, in the presence of a large group of people at dinner on 26 May, expressed anti-socialist and anti-Soviet views with great relish. 222 He declared that Marxism is obsolete, and that during the period of struggle against the "conservatives," the ideology of Marxism-Leninism has been experiencing a crisis, which has essentially negated the leading role of the party. He said that the USSR did a lot of harm to Czechoslovakia and is not able to serve as a model of socialism because people's living standards in the USSR are inadequate and salaries are low. A bit later he said that there are four groupings in the KSC CC Presidium. 223 To ensure unity in the leadership, it will be necessary to remove "conservatives" from the CC Presidium and to reconcile the views of the other members. None of the local officials who were present spoke up against these unsavory views, even though none of them supported what had been said. The members of the Soviet delegation gave a decisive rebuff to this sorry excuse for an ideologist, attacking his theoretically bankrupt and anti-socialist views. Along with such elements, there are undoubtedly healthy forces in Slovakia, who view the situation in the country with alarm and recognize how dangerous it is. They are speaking frankly about the necessity to be ready for an armed struggle against the enemies of socialist Czechoslovakia. A number of Slovak comrades - the secretary of the KSC 224 Rožnava district committee, Cde. A. Molnár, the chairman of an agricultural cooperative, Cde. Boruška, the former commander of a partisan detachment, Cde. Kuchta, and others - said that they will stick by the

Soviet Union and the CPSU to the very end, and that the comrades in Prague should talk less and do more. Even if they gain a reprieve in Prague, they declared, we ourselves will take up arms in defense of socialist Czechoslovakia. In this struggle we will rely on the working class and the working peasantry, who are faithful to socialism, and on the armed People's Militia at the factories and cooperatives, who fully support the KSC and stand for friendship and unity with the Soviet Union. A number of such comrades (7-8 of them) asked me to assure them that the Soviet Union will not leave them to their own fate. They requested that we accelerate the schedule for maneuvers of the Warsaw Pact armed forces. These same comrades said that the anti-socialist forces in the KSC have systematically disrupted the work of the party. Many primary party organizations and Communists who are dedicated to the party are acting without any definite plan and without centralized leadership. Even if the party organizations adopt resolutions against the anti-socialist forces, no one will read the resolutions aloud. Even in the party organizations themselves, not all the Communists will always know about the resolutions because party discipline has plummeted and fewer than half the members of the party are bothering to turn up for meetings. In such circumstances, the Communists and party activists awaited the May plenum of the KSC CC with great alarm. None of them ventured to predict how it would turn out. Some of them expressed the view that even if the Plenum adopts proper resolutions, there is no certainty that they would be implemented in a timely manner under the current KSC CC leadership.³ In a highly confidential discussion with me, the first secretary of the Central Slovakia regional party committee, Cde. A. Tažký, who has close ties with Cde. Bilak, reported that Cde. Dubcek supposedly has at his disposal a document showing that at the time when criticism of the KSC CC and of A. Novotný was unfolding [in March 1968], a list was compiled of 60 leading party officials who would have to be put under arrest. ²²⁵ These lists included Cde. Dubcek and Cde. Bilak among others. Generals Šejna and Janko were supposedly involved in this plot. A. Tažký also said that if A. Novotný would not step down from the CC voluntarily or behaved improperly, Cde. Dubcek would read this document aloud at the May Plenum of the KSC CC. During the visit to the Košice metallurgical combine, a secretary of the East Slovakia party committee, Štefan Bobonko, ²²⁶ also told me confidentially that the chairman of the combine's party committee, Cde. Rigo, who is also a member of the KSC CC Presidium but does not command authority among them, said before leaving for the CC Plenum that, in light of the situation in the country, he would declare he was stepping down from the CC Presidium. ²²⁷ Having been apprised of the situation in party organizations and workers' collectives in Slovakia, we can affirm that the portrayal of events in the CSSR and KSC offered at the latest session of the CPSU CC Politburo is correct. ²²⁸ The pressure from right-wing forces has steadily increased in recent days, and the influence of anti-socialist parties, societies, and clubs is growing. At the same time, the strength of the KSC, the influence of the party on the masses, and party discipline overall have greatly diminished. Party organizations are working unsatisfactorily even in implementing the recently adopted "KSC Action Program." As before, there are still no fundamental changes for the better in the mass media and propaganda organs. Under these circumstances, according to many of the Czechoslovak comrades, it is difficult to foresee how the "KSC Action Program" will proceed, even though it must remain the basic document of the forthcoming congress. Hence, the convocation of a KSC congress in September and the elections due in the middle of next year for the ruling organs might lead, in the view of the party aktiv, to a sharp erosion of socialist positions and a reduction of the KSC's leading role and authority. Based on an analysis of the facts and the events under way in the political life of the CSSR and KSC, it is impossible to ignore the danger that if events in the future continue to develop in the same way as now and the KSC CC does not act as soon as possible to adopt concrete and decisive measures—including the dismissal of officials and disbandment of organizations that are hostile to the KSC, socialism, and the USSR—there may well be a fundamental reorientation of the internal and external policy of Czechoslovakia, and we will lose the CSSR as a friendly and socialist country. V. SHCHERBYTS'KYI 4 June 1968 No. S-251214 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: These festivals were extensively covered in the Ukrainian press as well as in secret reports prepared by Soviet diplomats and intelligence sources. See, for example, "Tsentral'nyi Komitet KPSS," Memorandum No. 1/61 (Top Secret), 25 June 1968, transmitting a report from V. I. Klovov, member

of a UkrSSR government delegation attending the Ukrainian Days of Culture in the CSSR, in TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 25, Spr. 30, Ll. 161-165; "TsK KPSS: Informatsiya o prebyvanii v ChSSR delegatsii USSR v svyazi s Dnyami kul'tury Ukrainy v Chekhoslovakii," Memorandum No. 1/62 (Top Secret), 25 June 1968, in TsDAHOU, F. 1, Op. 25, Spr. 30, Ll. 150-156; and a large number of reports, memoranda, and cables in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, Dd. 60, 66, and 298-300.215 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This passage and others below were underlined by typewriter in the original document. 216 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Under Novotný, no discussion was permitted of possible changes in the Czech-Slovak relationship. That taboo disappeared soon after the Prague Spring began, when proposals to federalize the country, with separate Communist Parties and republic governments for the Czech lands and Slovakia alongside the central party and state organs, were vigorously debated. The KSC Action Program committed the authorities to pursue federalization (albeit without any specific guidelines), and a scheme for federalization took shape in the spring and summer of 1968. Following the Soviet invasion, however, the scheme was only partly implemented. On 28 October 1968 the Czech Republic and Slovakia received their own separate governments (of equal status) alongside the federal government, and the National Assembly was divided into two chambers of equal status, thus partly assuaging Slovak grievances about "majority domination" (majorizacia). This structure was fully implemented in January 1969, and it was the only product of the reform movement in Czechoslovakia that survived the whole period of "normalization." Nevertheless, the federalization of the state was more than offset by the retraction of plans to federalize the Communist Party. Before the invasion, the intention had been to set up a separate Czech Communist Party, which would be equal to the Slovak Party. Both would have existed alongside the KSC. After the invasion, Brezhnev pressured the KSC leadership to abandon plans to form a Czech Party, apparently because he feared that such a move would weaken the KSC and set a precedent for the establishment of a Russian Party that would detract from the CPSU. (During one of the post-invasion negotiations, Brezhnev remarked: "If the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic [in the USSR] has no Communist party of its own, why should there be a separate Communist party for the Czechs?") At a KSC Central Committee plenum in November 1968, Czechoslovak leaders finally succumbed to Moscow's pressure, announcing that plans to establish a Czech Party would be postponed indefinitely. A separate Communist Party of Slovakia (Komunistická strana Slovenska) continued to exist under the KSC's auspices, but no separate Czech Party was set up. Instead, the November plenum merely created a KSC CC "Bureau for the Czech Lands," a modest step that was widely viewed in Slovakia as a disappointing retreat. The failure to establish a separate Communist Party for the Czech lands implied that the Czechs, represented by the KSC, were broadly overseeing Slovakia and the KSS.217 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For an illuminating survey of cultural developments and changes in the mass media in Slovakia in 1968, see Juraj Fabian, "Analýza masových oznamovacích prostriedkov (1967-1970)," in Komisia vlády SR pre analýzu historických udalostí y rokov 1967-1970, Slovenská spoločnosť v krízových rokoch: Zborník štúdií, 3 vols. (Bratislava: Politologický kabinet SAV, 1992), Vol. 2, pp. 116-184 (hereinafter cited as Komisia vlády SR, Slovenská spoločnosť v krízových rokoch, with appropriate volume and page numbers).218 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This criticism, voiced earlier by economists such as Ota Šik and Radoslav Selucký, was a prominent theme in the landmark document authored by Otakar Turek and three other senior economists, Nástin koncepcie ďalšieho rozvíjenj ekonomické soustavy řízení, which was published as a supplement to the newspaper Hospodářské noviny in both Prague and Bratislava on 5 April 1968. For a recent analysis of the economic conditions in Slovakia in 1968, see Michal Štefanský, "Niektoré aspekty ekonomicko-sociálneho vývoja na Slovensku," in Komisia vlády SR, Slovenská spoločnosť v krízových rokoch, Vol. 1, pp. 95-125.219 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: In addition to serving as first secretary of the KSS Central Slovakia regional organization, Anton Tažký had been elevated to the KSS CC Presidium just two months earlier, on 9 April. He was known to be a strong supporter of political liberalization and a far-reaching restructuring of the Czech-Slovak relationship.220 TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Discontent in Slovakia had mounted during the final years of Novotný's reign because of a perception that Novotný wanted to perpetuate Slovakia's subordination to the Czech lands. Dubcek was able to use the

issue in late 1967, when he was still first secretary of the Slovak Communist Party, in his bid to displace Novotný as head of the KSC. Although Dubcek and other KSC leaders initially envisaged only modest reforms in Czech-Slovak relations, the question of federalization (of both the state and the Communist Party) was on the agenda by the early spring of 1968.²²¹ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: On the decline of the Czechoslovak Youth Union in 1968, see my annotation to Document No. 16 above.²²² TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The official in question is Vladimír Cířík, who took office in March 1968.²²³ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For a similar analysis of the contending factions on the KSC Presidium, see Brezhnev's comments at the five-power conference in Moscow on 8 May, transcribed in "Zapis' besedy v TsK KPSS s rukovoditelyami bratskikh partii Bolgarii, Vengrii, Germanii, Pol'shi," LI. 152-154. ²²⁴ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The document mistakenly says CPSU here rather than KSC, but the context makes it obvious that KSC is correct.²²⁵ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: For similar comments by a senior KSC official about Novotný's efforts to stay in office, see "Zapis' besedy Prezidiuma TsK Kommunisticheskoi partii Chekhoslovakii, glavnym redaktorom gazety 'Rudé právo' tov. Oldrzhikom Shvestkoi," by A. I. Lukovets, member of the editorial board at Moscow Pravda, transmitted to the CPSU Politburo by Mikhail Zimyanin, editor-in-chief of Pravda, 20 May 1968 (Top Secret), in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 26, LI. 33-40.²²⁶ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Bobonko's surname is incorrectly transliterated in the document as Bobojko.²²⁷ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: If Rigo did say this before leaving for the plenum, he clearly changed his mind by the time he got there, for he made no mention of stepping down.²²⁸ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: The "latest session" of the CPSU Politburo was on 27 May, a session that proved crucial for Soviet policy. (See my commentary preceding Excerpt No. 2 from Shelest's memoirs in Issue No. 10 of the CWIHP Bulletin, pp. 236-239.) The transcript of the session is "Rabochaya zapis' zasedaniya Politbyuro TsK KPSS ot 27-ogo maya 1968 g.," 27 May 1968 (Top Secret), in APRF, F. 3, Op. 45, D. 99, LI. 270-274. See also "TsK KPSS," Memorandum No. 14194 (Top Secret), 27 May 1968, from V. Stepakov, K. Rusakov, and V. Zagladin to the CPSU Politburo, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 60, D. 19, LI. 109, 133-136.