

November 21, 1989

Cable from US Embassy in Prague on Czech Demonstrations

Citation:

"Cable from US Embassy in Prague on Czech Demonstrations", November 21, 1989,
Wilson Center Digital Archive, FOIA request release
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/116243>

Summary:

Cable from the US embassy in Prague reporting on continued demonstrations in Prague and other Czech cities on November 20.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE IM/IPS/CR/IR/FF Date: 12/23/97
 RELEASE DECLASSIFY
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BRUSSELS FOR USEC - AMBASSADOR NILES
DEPT PASS TO ERIKA SCHLAGER CSCE COMMISSION
USIA FOR EU (OLASON, PENDERGRAST, JORJA); INFO DD
(KNOPP), C(PISTOR)

E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR
TAGS: PHUM, CSCE, PGOV, PREL, CZ
SUBJECT: DEMONSTRATIONS IN PRAGUE AND OTHER
CZECHOSLOVAK CITIES NOVEMBER 20

1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: THE PRAGUE
DEMONSTRATION OF NOVEMBER 20, AT MORE THAN 150,000
PEOPLE, WAS THE LARGEST YET. POLICE MADE NO ATTEMPT
TO INTERVENE OTHER THAN TO CLOSE BRIDGES TO PREVENT
THE CROWD FROM MARCHING ON PRAGUE CASTLE.
DEMONSTRATIONS ALSO OCCURRED IN SEVERAL OTHER
CITIES, INCLUDING BRATISLAVA. MEDIA COVERAGE
REMAINED MIXED, WITH "RUDE PRAVO" HOSTILE,
"SVOBODNE SLOVO" FAVORABLE AND TELEVISION
COVERAGE POSITIVE -- OR AT LEAST OBJECTIVE.
WHETHER AS A THOUGHTOUT PLAN OR THE RESULT OF
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LEADERSHIP DISAGREEMENTS, THE REGIME SEEMS TO
HAVE ADOPTED A CARROT AND STICK STRATEGY, WITH
SOME CONCILIATORY GESTURES AND A PROMISE OF AT
LEAST ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENTS COMBINED WITH A

NONE-TOO-VEILED WARNING OF SUPPRESSION IF THINGS REMAIN OUT OF HAND. IT ALSO IS CONTINUING ITS EFFORTS TO TAINT DEMONSTRATORS WITH CHARGES OF WORKING FOR FOREIGN INTERESTS. IT CANNOT HAVE BEEN PLEASED, HOWEVER, BY A SOVIET PRESS SPOKESMAN STATEMENT THAT DESCRIBED THE DEMONSTRATIONS AS PART OF THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE. IN ANOTHER PRESUMABLE REACTION TO THE DEMONSTRATIONS, GDR LEADER KRENZ HAS CANCELLED HIS VISIT TO PRAGUE. (NOTE: AS THIS CABLE GOES TO PRESS, CZECH REPUBLIC GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN KASIK ANNOUNCED THAT AN INVESTIGATION WOULD BE OPENED ON THE EVENTS OF NOVEMBER 17 AND WHETHER THE POLICE USED DISPROPORTIONATE FORCE. END NOTE.)
END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

2. (U) THE DEMONSTRATION DURING THE LATE AFTERNOON AND EVENING YESTERDAY, NOVEMBER 20, WAS THE LARGEST YET. THE COMMUNIST PARTY DAILY "RUDE PRAVO" ADMITTED TO 150,000 PEOPLE, BUT EMBOFFS PRESENT THOUGHT IT CLOSER TO 200,000. THE CROWD GATHERED SLOWLY DURING THE COURSE OF THE DAY AND DISPERSED GRADUALLY IN THE EVENING. A LAST GROUP OF SEVERAL THOUSAND STOOD OUTSIDE CZECHOSLOVAK RADIO AT ABOUT 10:00 P.M. AND THEN WENT HOME. POLICE MADE NO EFFORT TO INTERFERE WITH THE CROWD AS LONG AS IT STAYED WITHIN THE "GOLDEN CROSS" AREA OF WENCESLAS SQUARE AND NATIONAL AVENUE. SECURITY FORCES DID CLOSE OFF THE BRIDGES GOING ACROSS THE RIVER TO PREVENT THE
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DEMONSTRATORS FROM TRYING TO MARCH ON PRAGUE CASTLE.

3. (U) THE DEMONSTRATION APPEARED TO BE UNORGANIZED AND LEADERLESS, AND WHILE THERE HAS BEEN NO CALL FOR A GATHERING TODAY ONE IS GENERALLY EXPECTED. OTHER DEMONSTRATIONS OCCURRED THE SAME DAY OUTSIDE PRAGUE. THESE INCLUDED BRNO (AN ESTIMATED 30,000 IN THE CENTRAL SQUARE), OLOMOUC (6,000), TEPLICE (1,000), LIBEREC AND OSTRAVA. THEATERS AND SCHOOLS WERE CLOSED IN CESKE BUDEJOVICE, AS WELL AS PRAGUE -- WHERE PERFORMERS TALKED POLITICS WITH ANY AUDIENCE MEMBERS WHO SHOWED UP. DEMONSTRATIONS ALSO TOOK PLACE IN BRATISLAVA, BUT WE HAVE HEARD OF NO OTHERS IN SLOVAKIA. DEMONSTRATORS IN MANY OF THESE PLACES VOICED THE ANTI-GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-COMMUNIST DEMANDS HEARD IN PRAGUE, INCLUDING SUCH SLOGANS AS "JAKES IN THE

WASTEBASKET." TELEVISION NEWS REPORTS SAID THAT THERE WERE NO SIGNS OF DISTURBANCES IN OTHER PRINCIPAL CITIES SUCH AS PLZEN AND HRADEC KRALOVE, AND CONDEMNED THE NOVEMBER 17 POLICE BRUTALITY.

REGIME REACTION

4. (C) THE ONLY REGIME FIGURE TO ADDRESS THE DEMONSTRATORS DIRECTLY IN WENCESLAS SQUARE WAS VASIL MOHORITA, CHAIRMAN OF THE SOCIALIST UNION OF YOUTH (SSM). HE MADE SEVERAL POINTS THAT HAD BEEN INCLUDED IN HIS ORGANIZATION'S STATEMENT PUBLISHED IN "MLADA FRONTA" THE DAY BEFORE (PRAGUE 8106), IN WHICH HE SUPPORTED THE STUDENTS, AND HE SAID THAT HE WOULD OPPOSE ANY PROSECUTION OF STUDENTS ARRESTED ON NOVEMBER 17 AND WOULD RESIGN IF THERE WERE PROSECUTIONS. (COMMENT:

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WE REMAIN SUSPICIOUS THAT MOHORITA'S COMMENTS ARE MORE AN EFFORT TO COOPT THE STUDENTS THAN TO SUPPORT THEIR DEMANDS. END COMMENT.)

5. (U) THE CPCZ PRESIDIUUM HELD A SPECIAL SESSION DURING THE AFTERNOON OF NOVEMBER 20 TO TRY TO DEAL WITH THE SITUATION AND WITH "EXPRESSIONS OF INTENSE CONCERN" BY VARIOUS PARTY AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS. IT REJECTED STUDENT APPEALS FOR A GENERAL STRIKE NOVEMBER 27 AND CALLED ON STUDENTS TO RETURN TO CLASS AND ARTISTS TO RETURN TO WORK. IT ALSO REPORTEDLY DISCUSSED PRACTICAL STEPS FOR RESTORING ORDER, AND CONFIDENTIAL

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SUPPORTED A JOINT STATEMENT RELEASED BY THE FEDERAL, CZECH AND SLOVAK GOVERNMENTS.

6. (C) THIS STATEMENT, ENTITLED "DIALOGUE YES, CONFRONTATION NO," INSISTED THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN STRIVING FOR SOCIAL RESTRUCTURING AND DEMOCRACY AS WELL AS IMPROVING LIVING STANDARDS, GOING INTO SOME DETAIL ON THE LATTER POINT. IT EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE CURRENT DISTURBANCES SINCE THESE "ONLY PLAY INTO THE HANDS OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE RESTRUCTURING." THE GOVERNMENT WANTED A DIALOGUE AND A POLITICAL SOLUTION OF EXISTING PROBLEMS, BUT SUCH A SOLUTION "CANNOT BE FOUND IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF EMOTION AND ANTI-SOCIALIST MANIFESTATIONS." WHILE THE GOVERNMENT "DID NOT WANT TO GO VIA A PATH OF CONFRONTATION WHICH THE ANTI-SOCIALIST ELEMENTS ARE TRYING TO FORCE ON US," IT COULD NOT AGREE TO THE VIOLATION OF THE CONSTITUTION AND THE LAWS OF THE LAND OR "WATCH HELPLESSLY ACTIVITIES OF THOSE GROUPS WHICH ACT AT VARIANCE WITH THE CZECHOSLOVAK LEGAL ORDER AND ARE INCITED FROM ABROAD." THUS ALL THREE GOVERNMENTS SUPPORTED THE MEASURES

WHICH HAD BEEN TAKEN TO KEEP ORDER. (COMMENT: PRESUMABLY A REFERENCE TO SUPPRESSION OF THE NOVEMBER 17 DEMONSTRATIONS AND A WARNING THAT SUCH ACTION COULD COME AGAIN IF NEEDED. END COMMENT.)

7. (U) PRAGUE CITY PARTY CHAIRMAN MIROSLAV STEPAN, MEANWHILE, MET WITH CPCZ PARTY WORKERS OF THE MAJOR PRAGUE ENTERPRISES NOVEMBER 20 TO RALLY SUPPORT IN A PROBABLE EFFORT TO HEAD OFF A NOVEMBER 27 GENERAL STRIKE. HE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNISTS NOT BEING NEUTRAL IN THE CURRENT EVENTS AND TO OPPOSE
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THOSE FORCES WHO WANTED ALL OR NOTHING (I.E., WHO WERE NOT INTERESTED IN DIALOGUE OR COMPROMISE) AND STAND FIRM AGAINST EVENTS NOW GOING ON IN THE CITY.

8. (U) IN A REACTION FROM THE SOVIET UNION, SOVIET PRESS SPOKESMAN GERASIMOV WAS SHOWN ON CZECHOSLOVAK TELEVISION SAYING THAT THE DEMONSTRATIONS WERE AN INTERNAL MATTER FOR CZECHOSLOVAKIA, BUT THAT THEY REPRESENTED A PART OF THE CURRENT PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN EASTERN EUROPE. PRESUMABLY IN RESPONSE TO EVENTS IN PRAGUE, GRD LEADER KRENZ CANCELLED HIS NOVEMBER 21 VISIT TO PRAGUE AFTER MUTUAL AGREEMENT WITH THE GOC.

MEDIA REACTION

9. (U) "RUDE PRAVO" IS STICKING TO A LINE CRITICAL OF THE DEMONSTRATORS, PUBLISHING INTERVIEWS WITH WORKERS AND PARTY MEMBERS HOSTILE TO THE DEMONSTRATIONS AND SUGGESTING THAT SOME OF THE ORGANIZERS OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS ARE NOT STUDENTS. IT LIMITED ITS COVERAGE OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS TO PRAGUE AND BRNO, WITHOUT MENTIONING THAT ANY HAD TAKEN PLACE ELSEWHERE.

10. (U) THE SOCIALIST PARTY PAPER "SVOBODNE SLOVO," HOWEVER, REMAINED GENERALLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE DEMONSTRATIONS (PRAGUE 8106). IT ALSO REPORTED THAT 400 JOURNALISTS HAD MET NOVEMBER 20 AND REJECTED THE POLICE ACTIONS ON NOVEMBER 17, AS WELL AS MAINTENANCE OF THE LEADING ROLE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY. THE JOURNALISTS SUPPORTED THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED INDEPENDENT CIVIC FORUM (PRAGUE 8108) AND CALLED UPON

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THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CZECH JOURNALISTS' UNION TO DO
THE SAME OR RESIGN. THEY ALSO CREATED AN OFFICIAL
GROUP OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS.

11. (U) CZECHOSLOVAK TELEVISION COVERAGE WAS GENERALLY
POSITIVE, OR AT LEAST OBJECTIVE. IN ADDITION TO
COVERAGE OF THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN PRAGUE AND OTHER

CITIES, THERE WERE INTERVIEWS WITH THE STUDENTS AND
OTHER DEMONSTRATORS, GIVING THEM A CHANCE TO PRESENT
THEIR VIEWS TO A NATIONAL AUDIENCE.
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