

# Puppets and Freedom in Czechoslovakia

by Doug Reardon

**A**licia Souckova had a modest request to make when she marched through the impersonal hallways of the once all-powerful national committee of Prague's fifth district.

Little more than a year had passed since the revolution that ousted the Communist overseers of her country. For four decades their totalitarian state had dulled individuality and initiative, while alcohol sales helped deaden the system's failures. Those who still tried to rebel in 1968 had been crushed by Russian tanks.

The Communists' government and ideology had pervaded and attempted to control every aspect of Alicia's life. The national committee, the local state organ of self-serving party hacks and misdirected ideologues, had dictated where she could live with her daughter, when she could hope to have a telephone, and even what she could do for work.

Scarcely a year had passed since anyone who spoke out for freedom faced imprisonment, when Alicia resolutely appeared before the national committee in 1990.

Her request was modest. "I told them," Alicia smiled recently, "I want to make puppets."

Puppets. Three-headed green dragons, witches, and princesses.

If Alicia's request to the committee seems quaint, reflect also upon the courage required of her simply to declare her own freedom.

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The 26-year-old is a divorced mother who supports her 6-year-old daughter by herself. Alicia had a job in one of the innumerable state planning bureaucracies, a job where attendance was about the only requirement to receive her monthly salary. Yet she was determined to quit, to end dependence on the state and risk starting her own business making puppets.

And in many ways, Alicia's experiences are illustrative of the profound changes, perils, and future in Czechoslovakia. For in her dreams of selling puppets, one can see the struggles of a nation coming to terms with freedom.

The tentacles of totalitarian government extended deep into society in the decades that passed after the Communists seized power in 1948. But the interim government of democratic parties that took power after the so-called Velvet Revolution in November 1989 has begun to uproot the inefficient and corrupt organism created by the Communists. Under President Vaclav Havel, a Czech playwright and former dissident, the temporary government has pledged to establish a democratic constitutional government and to create a fundamentally free market economy.

Government's role remains far from limited in scope. Alicia still had to seek the approval of the national committee to begin her enterprise in 1990, and the committee continues to regulate a great deal (rents, allocation of flats, local public health care, etc.).

However, great progress has been made in curtailing the state's interference in people's

lives. In the case of Alicia's business, the state committee's role was reduced to the collection of a fee to issue her a permit rather than the power to ban activity altogether.

Moreover, a great deal of attention is being paid to repairing the damage wrought on the country by the Communists' disrespect for private property. As elsewhere in the world, after the Communists gained power, they used state organs, police, courts, the legislature, and often brute force in the orchestrated theft of property. Further, the state denied citizens even their right to own property beyond the most basic commodities.

Prague bears witness to the disrepair and misuse of resources that inevitably result when people have only an indirect stake in their living quarters, and property has no correlation to value. Once beautiful single-family homes and elaborate buildings predating the Communist seizures are now run-down, battered, and sadly haunting. There is a cobbler, who earns less than \$200 a month, occupying a state-owned store on Wenceslaus Square, the heart of a capital city with 1.2 million people. While the cobbler fiddles about on the valuable piece of prime real estate, nearby hotels, which rent rooms for nearly \$200 each night, are turning away customers for lack of space.

Fortunately, significant reforms are taking place to restore the bulwark of private property to society. Every week since January 1991 there have been auctions where individuals can bid for hundreds of small businesses and shops now owned by the state. The auctions soon will be increased to twice a week, and eventually every day, as the privatization process picks up speed. Soon large scale state-owned firms also will be put on the auction block, and the bidding opened to foreign firms. The country also has embarked on the complicated and trying task of restoring to the rightful owners the property seized by the Communists after 1948.

Despite noteworthy efforts, there are ominous clouds threatening. The mandate of President Havel's interim government runs out this spring. The political prospects for the economic reforms are not clear. It is against these foreboding skies that tales of individual initiative, like Alicia's puppet business, shine forth with promise of a bright future.

Fear of accepting responsibility is one of the gravest legacies of the pervasive state control of

life for two generations. Suddenly freed, many Czechoslovaks now are afraid to act as free men and women.

"They are deformed," Alicia said.

"Before people could just stay at their desks, and they always would have a job," she pointed out. "They don't have ideas. They know only to wait for what the government will say to them."

All but echoing Alicia's words, Vaclav Stevko, the union leader in a Czechoslovak arms factory, said in a recent interview, "We are willing to close down the defense industry . . . [but] somebody has to say what we shall do instead."

The defense industry exemplifies the quagmire of structural economic weakness and human dependency caused by the state. This legacy now threatens to slow down the transformation to a market economy and even to split the country.

Utterly impervious to the marketplace, Czechoslovakia's heavy industry was built up in the eastern, Slovak, region primarily to serve the Red Army and Warsaw Pact military alliance. Other industries developed in a similar fashion, namely, shielded from competition and driven by the whim of central planners.

## Opposition to Reform

The economic reforms now pushed by the finance minister of the federal government, Vaclav Klaus, would force industries to stand on their feet in the marketplace. But there is considerable opposition to these reforms, especially in Slovakia. For example, Slovak officials estimate as many as 80,000 people would lose their jobs if arms production were to cease without a replacement.

Some politicians exploit fears of unemployment caused by the market-oriented reforms and rally Slovak nationalist sentiments for their own political gain, according to Vasil Hudak, a Czech specialist in political affairs at the Institute for East West Security Studies in Prague. Firebrand Slovak politicians like Vladimir Meciar have garnered substantial popular support by calling for greater independence from the federal government, even possible secession for the Slovak Republic, and by pledging to slow down the reforms. Meciar further promises to maintain a "social safety net" of income, housing, and health guarantees.

Decades of conditioning people to be depen-

dents of the state are hard to overcome. Yet there is much to be optimistic about when people like Alicia have thrown off the yoke and declined the sugar cube of dependence on the state.

"It was quite hard in the beginning because it wasn't sure," said Alicia.

She reports the puppet business now is going great guns. In a week, she can make enough puppets in her home to sell in shops and earn twice her former monthly salary at her old job in the bureaucracy. Recently she hired an em-

ployee to help her on a part-time basis.

"Now everyone is afraid . . . they must change," she said while tying red ribbons around one of the necks on her smiling green dragons.

"But I like this," she said, adding with some pride, "I'm an entrepreneur."

Of course, puppets won't solve all of Czechoslovakia's problems. But the spirit of enterprise, of freedom, and of independence which can solve these problems, does exist. People like Alicia already are cutting the strings. □

# Of Skunks and Salmon

by James A. Maccaro

**E**nvironmental bureaucrats are trying to regulate Mother Nature, with disastrous results.

In New Hampshire, state officials attempted to attract recreational fishermen by reducing the state's skunk population. For a while, the plan seemed to work because it alleviated vacationers' fears of encountering the odorous beasts. Soon, however, anglers noticed that the fish population also was shrinking, and decided to vacation in neighboring states with more plentiful stocks.

State planners later learned that skunks control the snapping turtle population by eating their eggs. Without the skunks, the turtle population of New Hampshire grew almost unchecked. The over-abundant turtles, in turn, feasted on fish eggs and thus decimated the fish population. Eventually, New Hampshire officials had to import skunks to re-establish the natural balance.

Another attempt to improve on Mother Nature's work occurred in Montana, where the state introduced mysis shrimp into rivers to feed the salmon which flourished there. However, the tiny shrimp soon consumed large amounts of

plankton, which is a major food source for salmon. As a result, the number of salmon spawning in Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park fell from 100,000 to a mere 200. Moreover, bald eagles, which were attracted to the park by the fish, now bypass it. From a peak of 639 in 1981, only 13 bald eagles were last counted in the park.

Because of the chain reaction started in a state bureaucrat's office, Glacier National Park has an abundance of minuscule shrimp, but few salmon and even fewer eagles. The park thus no longer attracts so many visitors, whose trips to the area to view the eagles greatly contributed to the local economy. From a peak of 46,000 tourists, only 1,000 visited during the 1990 fall season.

Government planners are no more successful in micro-managing the natural world than they are in regulating the economy. When government tries to correct perceived problems, it creates unforeseen results.

The economy, in common with the natural world, is not static. Thus, bureaucrats cannot tamper with it without creating imbalances in the overall system, whether the system be economic or ecological. The results will be counterproductive, whether the state attempts to control the level of wages and prices or of skunks and salmon. □

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