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**78. Telegram From the Embassy in Czechoslovakia to the  
Department of State<sup>1</sup>**

Prague, February 3, 1969, 1455Z.

245. Subj: Knowledgeable Czech Views Situation Darkly.

1. Longtime Embassy Czech source, self-styled progressive frequently well-informed about party affairs, made number of observations on current scene Feb. 1 which he characterized as adding up to "very bad" situation. His view reinforces other indications of declining elan and cohesion of progressives and growing assertiveness of

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<sup>1</sup> Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 672, Country Files—Europe, Czechoslovakia, Vol. I 1 Jan 69–31 Jan 70. Confidential. Repeated to Moscow and Munich.

conservatives and "realists" in wake of emotional upsurge evoked by Palach suicide. Highlights follow.

2. Although public opinion overwhelmingly favors their views, progressives, while still overall majority in party, have lost cohesion and are baffled how to combat hardliners. Latter, boosted by Soviet support, increasingly confident events running in their favor and time on their side. Centrists share this appraisal and now tend at best to take noncommittal positions. Hardline comeback underway in some local party organizations, whose impending annual meetings will see attempt to change delegates to 14th Party Congress, elected before August and predominantly progressive. Extreme hardliners increasingly active; they held another meeting in Prague factory recently and, forming clique for Strougal,<sup>2</sup> backed recent People's Militia activity and influenced its results which very displeasing to many rank and file PM members.

3. In leadership, Dubcek's standing with public increasingly ambiguous: while he still highly regarded for integrity and object of widespread sympathy, doubts growing over his capacity to withstand heavy pressures or resume role as symbolic leader of reform. Smrkovsky<sup>3</sup> very popular among workers but on shaky ground in party. (Recent anti-Smrkovsky pamphlet traced to extreme hardliner working through member of CC apparatus.) Husak and Strougal both thoroughgoing "careerists" who will use all means for personal advancement. Husak stronger and abler of two and, despite present bitter unpopularity in Czech lands, has better chance to reach top. Soviets working on leadership and party policies primarily through Strougal and Bilak.

4. Worsening development in security forces although progressive sympathizers still numerically stronger in both Defense and Interior Ministries. Situation especially confused and difficult in State Security where hardliners trying to push through repressive measures and progressives frequently "sabotaging" their efforts. Risks for latter growing, however, both because of party developments favoring conservatives and heightened direct Soviet influence on security forces. Soviets and Strougal want to restrict contacts between Czechs and Westerners; this one ground for recent expulsions of journalists which widely criticized in various party circles and generally assumed to have taken place at direct Soviet behest.

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<sup>2</sup> Lubomir Strougal, Vice Prime Minister, a party official and defense expert.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Smrkovsky, President of the Czechoslovak Chamber of Deputies and a leading progressive.

5. Palach self-immolation was major setback for hardliners, arresting trend toward public apathy on which they count. Leadership's seemingly exaggerated apprehension in Palach aftermath reflected fear (with grounds) that hardliners planning "putsch" if disorders developed.

6. Moves have been initiated against media workers, but implementation temporarily stymied in Czechoslovak television because Party Committee refusing to carry out ordered moves and has sent letter to Presidium so stating. Buck thus passed back to highest party level. However, not much confidence that personalities affected can continue as before, and some assignments as correspondents abroad being quickly prepared for them.

7. Sik<sup>4</sup> under heavy pressure from hardliners in party. At Jan. plenum he was saved from Jakes<sup>5</sup>-promoted inquest into his post-August activities by Piller's<sup>6</sup> intervention. Some fear Sik may be target for direct Soviet action to remove him from public scene.

8. *Comment:* We have regarded source as controlled for long time and on occasion he obviously has relayed information and viewpoints intended to reach US officials. In Saturday conversation he spoke at least in part more "personally" than usual, and his overall pessimism may reflect his individual view as well as that of more-or-less progressive circles in party and government (including security services).

**Baker**

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<sup>4</sup> Ota Sik, former Deputy Prime Minister and reformist economic planner.

<sup>5</sup> Milos Jakes of the CSSR Communist Party Central Committee.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Piller of the CSSR Communist Party Central Committee.