

Reforming Socialism: Aims and Efforts Before and After 1968

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Alexander Dubcek's program for ambitious political and economic reform, his support from society, and finally the intervention of the Warsaw Pact in Czechoslovakia were the most significant expressions of the socialist world in 1968. While usually integrated into the global phenomenon of protest, or studied through national lenses, these events have received limited interest as a part of the transnational practice of socialist reform. The 50th anniversary of the Prague Spring serves as an opportunity to rediscover post-World War II attempts of socialist restructuring as a distinct object of historical inquiry. Moreover, the semi-centenary gives us the chance to reevaluate the role played by the events of 1968 for similar practices in the socialist states and parties around the globe.

While Czechoslovakia remains one of the most dramatic and recognizable cases of attempted socialist readjustment 'from above' since the 1950s, the majority of socialist governments undertook socio-economic reform. The Yugoslav path of market socialism and self-management, Hungarian *gulyáskommunizmus*, East German *Neues Ökonomisches System*, the Chinese experience of the 1980s, Gorbachev's attempts at system-saving under the siege of the Cold War, and many others all stand together under the same umbrella of socialist adaptation. Reforms occurring across the socialist states were usually attempts to abandon the hegemony of administrative intervention in command economies. In most, if not all, they were an act of departure from the Soviet domination and autarkic model of development based on heavy industry. Envisioned improvements to economies were in many ways followed up by political liberalization and socio-cultural transformation. Henceforth, when referring to socialist reforms, we would like to conceptualize it as multiple intertwined layers involving its agents as creators, implementers, or receivers; the content of the reforms or the idea and program of restructuring; and its economic, political, and social effects from a macro and micro perspective.

Socioeconomic reforms in socialist practice and imagination comprise an independent historical fabric that calls for further inclusion into present academic considerations. On one hand, while political transformations and social revolutions are well represented in monographs by Geoffrey Swain, Geoffrey Hosking, and more recently David Priestland and Silvio Pons, the economic sphere of socialism is less present in the historiography. Already during the Cold War, however, economists, such as Janos Kornai, Alec Nove, and Branko Horvat, produced far reaching analyses of socialist economic organization, planning, and attempts at market reform.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, historical science rarely offered a systematic analysis of the various attempts at reform. Instead, research trends turned towards the indirect effect of those reforms, as for instance, in the development of consumer habits and popular culture, or the transfer of people and knowledge between the West and the East. Nevertheless, a particularly promising step towards the goal of this conference is the most recent *Cambridge History of Communism*. A set of three volumes, this collection gathers works of some of the most relevant scholars dealing with the widest possible number of aspects of global socialism.

Studies looking specifically at the 1968 usually position it as a critical moment for socialist systems and parties. The period that followed the upheaval is usually described as normalization, or more specifically, as Jeremi Suri put it, a domestic 'balance of order'. It is also regarded as a turning point for the unity of the socialist bloc, which brought about the general decline in the faith of socialism abilities. Those interpretations resulted in the perception of the 1968 as the endpoint of all genuine ideological and political endeavors to reform socialism. Nevertheless, when looking at the unprecedented increase in cooperation with the capitalist states in the 1970s, the attempts at reform emerge rather as a permanent component of the history of socialism after World War II, rather than as a specific experience of the 1950s and 1960s. The same can be concluded for the new theoretical innovation of Eurocommunism in Italy, or even the new economic choices that prevailed in socialist Europe in the 1980s. In this background, the role of the Prague Spring demands reevaluation and contextualization within the broader framework of socialist reform practices, both before and after 1968.

A set of general questions underpins the conference: Why did socialist governments decide to readjust their socio-economic systems in the first place? Where did the agents of reforms seek theoretical and practical inspiration? What were the effects of those changes and to what extent did those readjusted systems become more socialist, or did they remain socialist at all? And ultimately, how did those practices change over time and to what extent were they affected by the experience of the Prague Spring? Accounts of programs, as well as the implementation and effects of innovations in the form of a coherent triangle of the political, economic, and social spheres are generally absent from recent scholarly debates. Hence, we would like to unite the three domains and offer a more nuanced and comprehensive image of socialist societies and their transformative dynamics.

This conference aims to shed light on successful and unsuccessful as well as short and long-term attempts to further develop and integrate socialist theory and practice in the period from the mid-1940s until the fall of the Berlin Wall. Additionally, while the historiography has approached reforms as part of a broader framework within a single, usually national, narrative, we desire to establish a transnational or even global understanding of these post-World War II experiences. In light of this endeavor we decided to take 1968 as a central year, since it witnessed both the rise and fall of one of the most advanced reform attempts in the history of the eastern bloc. Among others, some of the potential topics we would like to see addressed in this conference are:

- Socialist reform programs (around the globe from the end of World War II until the fall of Berlin Wall) in national or transnational context.
- Specific aspects of reform agendas, aims and direct effects (economic, technological and organizational modernization, marketization, consumerism, opening towards the West, centralization-decentralization, unemployment, social discontent vs social peace and order).

- Reformers, implementers and receivers(communist elites, economists, ideologists and their commentators, companies, managements, workers, peasants and other social groups, civic and political institutions, etc).
- External influences (the role of supranational financial and other institutions from the East and West, their influence on reform programs, and relations with communist parties, governments and businesses).
- 1968 in context (the impact of the Prague Spring on socialist countries and communist parties, and responses to the Soviet intervention).
- Reforms as the first step towards transition (what is the relation between reforms and transition to capitalism in the post-1989 period).

Our confirmed keynote speaker is János M. Kovács from the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, a well-established scholar of the history of economic thought in Eastern Europe, editor and co-author of several books and edited volumes on socialist and post-socialist economies. At present he is working on the project *Between Bukharin and Balcerowicz: A Comparative History of Economic Thought under Communism*; the second keynote speaker will be announced once the presenter confirms the attendance.

Reforming Socialism: Aims and Efforts Before and After 1968 is organized by two doctoral researchers from Department of History and Civilization, Aleksandra Komornicka and Saša Vejzagić. The conference will take place at the [European University Institute](#) in Florence, from 25 to 27 October 2018. Abstracts of 500 words maximum, with a 300-word biography (essay like), should be submitted to reforming.socialism2018@eui.eu by **15 May 2018**. Applicants will be notified about the results by the end of June 2018. Written papers (of 5,000-6,000 words) should be submitted by 15 September 2018, so they can be circulated to the participants in time. There will be an opportunity to publish some of the papers in an edited volume or special issue. While the accommodation expenses for the all participants will be fully covered by the organizers, coverage of travel expenses will be reserved for speakers with limited or no support from their home institutions. For further details and updates, see our website: [Reforming Socialism 1968](#)

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