

Thirty-five years after Czechoslovakia's "velvet revolution" Saša Uhlová asks what capitalist freedom really means.

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Thirty-five years of freedom? Maybe we're just misunderstanding what the word means. Czechia's post-Soviet development based on individualism and the concept of freedom as nothing more than the freedom to own, freedom of expression and freedom of movement is proving to be unlivable.

Listening to the radio while driving, I'm constantly exposed to the preparations for the November 17th celebrations [Essf : anniversary of the 1989 political revolution that overthrew the "Communist" regime]. The slogan "Thank You, That Now We Can" has accompanied my drives in various permutations. And when the radio shows too much enthusiasm about this our freedom, which we all apparently need to celebrate, I pound my fist on the dashboard. Why isn't part of the recollection of the November coup also a reflection on the current situation or the ideological framework we have been operating in since 1989 and how it has affected us? 30 years after November 1989, can we really still ask people to be impressed that they are free? And this despite the fact that many of them are not actually free because they are dealing with very basic existential problems?

I used to think that eventually the social issues would get more prominence, and we would no longer hear that everyone who talks about them is a Stalinist. But during my last commute, the inevitable invitations to join the 17 November celebrations brought me back to reality. The reporter asked the head of the labour office about the assaults that are apparently multiplying against labour office employees. They talked about how they would have to hire a security agency and how the bureau had begun hiring psychologists to work with assaulted officials. And also how the different branches of the employment offices will work with the police. On a side note, it was briefly mentioned that some clients are angry because they are not getting some benefit or other... And now that the system is going to be changed again, it is anticipated that there will be more people who will be frustrated, who will be aggressive. We are not going to ask the question how that frustration, that desperation is possible. No. Instead, we are just going to create more and more security measures to pacify these people. So my faith that the real problems of the people will one day force politicians to act is fading.

The polls show what we all sort of suspect. There is no consensus in our society about whether we are better off after the 1989 change of regime than before. Only 48 per cent of people think we are better off, 31 per cent think we are worse off now and the rest see it somewhat similarly. The anniversary of 17 November has traditionally been an occasion to come together at various events, with some expressing their undying gratitude for living in a free society and others occasionally protesting. On several occasions over the years, I have more or less accidentally found myself at events where the question of how to reawaken the ethos of 17 November and how to explain to people that they should value freedom has been addressed quite seriously.

Ironically, the same survey from which the data on the relationship between the past and the present comes from says that “freedom is key for Czech society, especially in the individual sense, with people most often emphasising the ability to travel, work and study freely, as well as freedom of expression.” Yet it is the framing of freedom as a purely individual matter that is at the heart of our social problems. The part of society that sees itself as a beneficiary of the post-Soviet regime is understandably much more involved in how freedom is talked about. But this does not mean that people who are dissatisfied actually feel free. They just don’t have the cultural and social capital to promote a different perception of the concept in society. And so, slowly, freedom is gradually becoming - at least for a part of society - something you probably don’t actually want to live in. Maybe because it doesn’t feel good. You’re stressed about how you’re going to pay the rent, you’re worried about getting sick because that would be a downfall for you, you’re being bullied at work, but if you leave your job, you’ll find yourself without an income for a while and you can’t afford that. Your employer forces you to work overtime. You associate all this with freedom, or rather with a regime that pretends to be pure freedom.

The terror of individualism

In public discussions on this topic - whether virtually on social networks or on the occasion of various debates and panel discussions on the topic of freedom or reminiscing about the past regime - uncritical defenders of the post-Soviet development often argue for personal responsibility. And those who feel forgotten and are critical of the post-Cold War development are often accused of refusing to take responsibility for themselves and demanding that the state take care of them. This creates the image of two camps, one of responsible people who have studied at university or decided to go into business and have their lives firmly in their hands, and some other camp of rather uneducated, apparently stupid people who just hold out their hands and shout “solve our problems for us!”

Individual responsibility has become a mantra that is hard to reasonably oppose in a short discussion. This image of the world quite naturally generates the notion that less educated and less “successful” people, who nowadays also often consume some type of misinformation, should reform themselves and understand that if they stop complaining and grit their teeth, they too can have a good time. But can they really?

If we are serious about who is to blame for the current state of our society, for our economy being based on cheap labour, and that we are no longer investing at all in the reform and development of our education system, then of course we can find fault at various levels. We can complain about post-war politicians, but they are elected. Or about global capitalism and the historical context to which we have adapted. But if we think quite honestly about who among us has had a better chance of influencing the system, then we have to conclude that it is those people who often rise above the rest. So here we are, as the elite, sending our children to the better schools, but mocking those whose children did not get a better education because the system did not allow them to. People who often do jobs that our society could not do without. And we want them to understand that they should be grateful to live in a free society. But they are often not free.

And it’s not just workers in the traditional sense of the word - there are also people living in insecurity and stress who do so-called platform work, delivering other people’s food, and those who are not employed but “work” without proper contracts. Paradoxically, these includes the “unemployed” freelancers who keep Czech public media running. Maybe we are actually the majority in the Czech Republic, we just don’t know how to win our rights. We do not know how to unite. And that is why the much better organised captains of industry assert their interests. They know how to unite, they know that unity is strength, and they can influence the shape of laws.

The emphasis on individual responsibility that has taken away the only tool we have to fight a much more powerful enemy. That tool is self-organisation and collective bargaining.

Unions as a very dirty word

After the 1989 change of regime, trade unions were seen as a relic of the previous system . And so we plunged into a new world without any possibility of resisting the power of capital. In the 1990s (but also in the noughties and sometimes even today) unions were portrayed in the media and in public debate as something with a flavour of unattractive buffoonery.

But in recent years we can observe a certain evolution. In spite of the dislike and contempt with which labour unions are written about in the Czech media, and the image that many politicians have helped to create, the popular view of unions is changing.

Exciting new projects such as the ALICE union, the ICT union (which has different demands and tackles slightly different problems than just low wages) or the Modern Trade Union at ČSOB, all promise a new era in which union organising will no longer be embarrassing. In the early days of Covid, for example, Ryanair workers also formed a union. The main organiser founder was immediately sacked by his employer, but the company recently lost a court case over. Unions in supermarket chains have won better wages - it really wasn't just about management goodwill.

In addition, we also have traditional unions, where in some sectors, such as industry, we can trace a certain continuity since 1989, and thanks to that, for example, metal workers have relatively decent wages. They do not strike very much and they improve their conditions mainly through collective bargaining, but this is still a major Success.

Actually, it is really difficult to strike in the Czech Republic without breaking the law. Although the right to strike is enshrined in Czechia's Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, and therefore part of the constitutional order, it is in fact regulated by a single law - which basically makes it impossible to strike. still, the various small successes of the trade unions create hope that things may not go badly for us in the end .

The question arises as to what the post-1989 plan actually was for people who didn't make it as entrepreneurs or high-level managers earning lots of money, and would toil somewhere near the assembly line. Could anyone really have thought it would be enough to tell these people over and over again that they should be grateful to live in a free society? Why did so many politicians and journalists take the trouble to ignore the unions at best, ridicule them at worst, and write about their protests only in order to discredit them? What were they thinking? That poor people would continue to obediently vote for right-wing parties or not participate in elections so that their voice would not be heard? If we want people to vote for parties that won't want to disrupt the existing order, we need to live in a society where a critical number of people are at least living decently, even if not well. To believe that this will happen out of the benevolence of employers is a naivety unworthy of educated people. Yet they are guilty of it. 35 years after the revolution, now is perhaps a good time to realize that this is not the way.

Not polarization, but fragmentation

I read another piece of recent research on the polarization of Czech society - according to it, our society is actually not polarized enough. That may sound counterintuitive, but the joke is that you can't predict what an individual will think about other people's views on a topic, based on their attitudes. This means that society is actually split into lots of little parts, and it's hard to find any consensus within opinion or interest groups. This is problematic from the point of view of trade

union organising, for example. To put it simply, the mere fact that you are an employee does not mean that you are aware of your rights and want to fight for them.

We can, of course, wait for history to take its course and we will then - as we always do - adapt. We can rely on the European Union, whose directive leads us to believe that 80% of our employees should be protected by collective agreements, or we can try to do something ourselves. If, for example, althose of us who could join a trade union did , we could significantly change the face of our society.

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P.S.

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