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Late Socialist and Revolutionary Achievements of the Township of Filipov

Jiří Kabele

Filipov is a township of three thousand, in the border and mostly agricultural county of Dubno, in Eastern Moravia. Life in the township pre-1989 and the transformations that occurred in the 1990s were studied in some detail by a team of Prague and Brno sociologists and anthropologists.¹ This study was driven by the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the interactional basis of transformation processes – the interactions between the variously paced changes of the local actors and the transformations occurring in the general market and administrative relations. The data we obtained allowed us to consider how, throughout the 1980s, the township of Filipov had been able to fend off relatively successfully the erosion of Real Socialism, but why, despite this, in the end the Velvet Revolution was quite enthusiastically embraced.

Though Filipov took a long time to recover from the post-war collapse and the socialist transformation, it gradually became a stable and prosperous municipality in a quiet county where, even as late as 1989, there was almost no indication that some changes in its well established way of life would soon arrive. When the changes occurred, the people of Filipov successfully passed through the phases of the Revolution (or, more precisely, the transfer of power) in a way that mirrored exactly how changes occurred at the centre. It was not until the period 1997 to 1999, when the township was studied, that Filipov was forced to confront a crisis because of overspending on development motivated by the “Construction Spirit”, a legacy from Real Socialism.

On a superficial level, development in Filipov went against common sense. Filipov achieved socialist successes based on beliefs, methods and practices which from today’s point of view may often seem irrational. According to current, well-established social science theories², these methods should have quickly led to collapse, not to stable development. How, then, did the people of a socialist Filipov complete an almost ideal “Velvet Revolution” when the town was doing quite well? And why in the end did these successful people of Filipov fail?

I will investigate these mysteries, though not all to the same degree. I will briefly describe the government in Filipov and the “Filipov revolution”, and then later examine what is also partially a mystery: Why so late? and/or Why so easily?

Local government in socialist Filipov

¹ See Jiří Kabele, "Metodologie intervenčního heuristického vyšetřování" (The Methodology of Heuristic Investigation), in Josef Kandert (ed.), *Filipov II*, Prague, Institut sociologických studií UK, 2000, p. 113-36 ; Jiří Kabele, "O vládnutí na místní úrovni" (About Local Government), in Josef Kandert (ed.), *Jihomoravský venkov po socialismu. Filipovsko na konci devadesátých let 20. století* (South Moravian Countryside After Socialism. The Filipov Region at the End of the 20th Century), Prague, Matfyzpress, 2004, p. 199-213 ; Jiří Kabele, "Polistopadové proměny filipovské radnice" (The Transition of Philipstown City Hall), in Josef Kandert (ed.), op.cit., p. 73-116 ; Jiří Kabele, "Z kapitalismu do socialismu a zpět. Teoretické vyšetřování přerodů Československa a České republiky" (From Capitalism to Socialism and Back. A Theoretical Investigation of Transitions in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic), Prague, FSV UK, prepared for print.

² See Edgardo Buscaglia, "Law and Economics of Development", in Boudewijn Bouckaert, Gerrit De Geest (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Law & Economics*, Ghent, Edward Elgar-University of Ghent, 1996-2000 ; Douglas North, "Understanding Economic Change", in Joan Nelson, Charles Tilly, Lee Walker (eds.), *Transforming Post-Communist Political Economies*, Washington, National Research Council, 1997 ; János Kornai, *The Socialist System. The Political Economy of Communism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.

Communists accounted for only about one tenth of the population of Filipov. They governed Filipov through two bodies: the Municipal Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (hereinafter MC), and the Municipal National Committee (MNC). The elementary school was the natural bastion of the Communists; at the time MC Chairman Čížek was the school headmaster (before and after August 1968), and a member of the Council of the County National Committee (CNC), Palečková, and the Chairman of the National Front,³ Kaláb (today chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia), were both employed there.

Čížek's influence overshadowed that of the young, pro-invasion Chairman of the MNC, Široký. When Čížek vacated his position in the middle of the 1970s, Široký took over his dominant position in the town. The MNC Chairman had power because his was a paid position, and thus the MNC Chairman had time, an office and sizeable resources. In contrast, the position of MC Chairman was voluntary and it was not easy to find a replacement after Čížek left.

Both the MC and MNC Chairmen mainly concerned themselves with ensuring that the people in Filipov had work and that the working people could participate in social or hobby organisations.

In addition to the Communist Party, the Popular Party was also present in Filipov; the Socialist Youth Union, hunters, football players, Czech handball (women) and firemen were among the active organisations in the local National Front. The Catholics of Filipov were generally loyal to the regime; in contrast, both the local power structures and the people of Filipov thought the maladjusted Protestants (the *Rams*) were insular and unfathomable. When the Protestant minister lost state approval in 1972, a new one did not arrive until just before the Velvet Revolution, though in the interim the group functioned as if he were still there.

The economy of Filipov was dependent upon two prospering agricultural plants, a co-operative, and a state farm. The five largest enterprises were branches of county or regional enterprises from Bohemia and Moravia. Some services were provided at the state level (for example, the savings bank), but most were at the regional level (bakeries and coal warehouses), and, to some extent, at the county level (county enterprises of services, housing etc.). The only local service was the Central Working People's Club, a cultural institution (House of Culture) located in a reconstructed synagogue. In the middle of Filipov stood a chateau, which, like everything else that was not the direct responsibility of the town, was disintegrating. The roads were in a critical state.

The people of Filipov derived their Construction pride from a housing project (not prefab), a new shopping centre, supermarkets, and a fire-fighting complex, all of which were constructed through the "Z Action" programme (a sort of "DIY" communal programme financed as part of the state five-year plan). The town was dominated by the brand new Fruta company building. Everywhere a person looked, there were gardens, vineyards and apricot orchards.⁴ The Construction Programme for the next Five-Year Plan, which proved to be disastrous for Filipov in the second half of the 1990s, envisioned the construction of a healthcare centre and a home for the elderly.

Organisationally, the Communist town hall differed little from the post-November 1989 town hall. To a large extent it was an office where the elected bodies convened: plenary meetings of

³ The National Front of Czechs and Slovaks, in which – pursuant to the 1960 socialist Constitution – “social organizations were associated”, was established as a “political expression of the union of the workers in towns and in the countryside, led by the Czechoslovak Communist Party”. In practical terms, this meant that no social organisation could exist outside the Front. The National Front was completely controlled by the Communist Party. When staging elections with a one-candidate list, the National Front played the role otherwise played by political parties.

⁴ We usually studied changes in Filipov at the beginning of the apricot season, at the time of a fair when the last supply of the Filipov wine for tasting was consumed.

the MNC (today the Board of Representatives) and the Council (today also the Council). Both the MNC and the Council were headed by the MNC Chairman (today the mayor has this role). The division of labour between the MNC Secretary and the Chairman is probably similar to what it is today. The only unusual aspect of the organisational rules of the MNC was that in no way did it address the issue of the division of power between the state administration and self-administration.

The City Council was subordinate to the County National Council in Dubno. In addition to legal provisions (it made decisions on all controversial administrative matters), the County National Council's superior position was also determined by the fact that the Council was the strongest economic player and the largest direct and indirect county employer. Filipov had one representative in the thirteen-member Council of the CNC. The county bureaucracy acted as an intermediary through which documents from governmental offices were passed to Filipov. The journey of such documents from Prague to Filipov took approximately half a year; the only exception was the Year Plan, which took even longer to arrive.

The leading role of the Communist Party in Filipov

The Communist Party "led" the other organisations in Filipov. All responsibilities rested with the Municipal Council of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and its Chairman. However, the Council did not control all the party organisations in the town. The upper Party hierarchies of larger companies that were part of county, regional or national enterprises were not located in the town. Therefore it was in the town's interest that the directors of all large enterprises, the co-operative, and the state farm were members of the MC, where they met with the chairmen of the MNC and the National Front.

Financially, the Committee of the Party had scarcely any resources of its own. The Czechoslovak Communist Party in the town did organise a wide range of events, but its budget basically only covered Party meetings. May Day, International Women's Day, feasts, and other events were directed but not produced by the Party. The resources usually came *ad hoc* from local organisations and enterprises with property and financial resources.

The power of the MC Chairman rested in his central position in the local institutional network and in being appointed to supervise its "operation". It was possible for an experienced MNC chairman to assume the central coordinating role (especially if a chairman of the Party organisation was not ambitious, was problematic or lazy); at higher levels such swapping of roles was not possible.

In Filipov we were assured repeatedly that the crucial actor in the Communist Party structure was the County Committee and its functionaries. Filipov had two representatives in the County Committee: a female manual worker from the company Fruta, and a female employee of the kindergarten. But the presence of these representatives was solely a formality and therefore they did not play any major role in the local world of Filipov.

At the county level, one could observe the same dual structure as we saw at the municipal level, consisting of, on one hand, the state administration and self-administration (County National Committee), and Party bodies (County Council of the Czechoslovak Communist Party) on the other hand.⁵

⁵ See János Kornai, *The Socialist System*, op.cit. ; Maria Csanádi, *Party-States and Their Legacies in Post-Communist Transformation*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 1997 ; Martin Hájek, Tomáš Holeček, Jiří Kabele, Petr Koutek, Zdena Vajdová, "Výklady komunistického vládnutí. Závěrečná interpretace" (Comments about the Communist Rule. Final Interpretations), in Jiří Kabele (ed.), *Výklady vládnutí v reálném socialismu* (Comments on Real Socialist Rule), Prague, Matfyzpress, 2004, p. 7-62.

The county intruded into the life in Filipov through the Secret Police (StB), “*economic criminal investigation police*”, and of course other county “power bodies”, the prosecutor’s office and corporate People’s Militia. There were two dissidents living in the micro-region, and they were responsible for one of the transshipment locations for exile literature smuggled into the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. This was located in the house of the local Protestants, next to a courtyard where the Party chairman Masák lived.

Very few were willing to talk about the activities of StB in the region. One of the few exceptions was the MNC Chairman Široký: *“Incidentally the secret police played an important role. The best ones went there; they had control over the functionaries who would steal where they could. Yes, they were experts. They probably never collected information about me, but the Party had to have control. I never encountered it myself. (...) Sometimes we met with some of them over a glass of wine but it was just that. There were able people in the StB.”*

There were two purely local supervisory institutions in Filipov: an auxiliary guard and an informal network of informants of the MNC Chairman.

Peaceful transfer of power and preparations for municipal elections

An anonymous author took stock of the activities of the Co-ordination Committee of OF (Civic Forum) Filipov in this way:⁶

Very brief account:

Results achieved:

From 27 November 1989, the following were organised:

- 4 roundtable sessions
- 15 meetings of the Civic Forum (OF) Co-ordination Committee
- 6 debates of the OF with the public
- 1 session with the National Front

- German lessons
- co-optation into the MNC
- removal of communist slogans (especially in public spaces)
- establishment of the “Filipovan” choral association
- establishment of the Popular Party
- changing the name of Gottwaldova Street to Větrná Street

The Filipov “Velvet Revolution”⁷ was brief and was the work of a small group; Protestants predominated. This group ensured the transfer of power, and after the office of the mayor was

⁶ The report was probably drafted before the 1990 parliamentary elections.

⁷ **CHRONICLE OF THE REVOLUTION IN FILIPOV**

1989	
27.11.	General strike and establishment of OF Filipov (Civic Forum Filipov) and OF of Filipov enterprises
3.12.	1 st public debate of OF
7.12.	Establishment of the Coordination Committee of OF Filipov
27.12.	Crisis team to help Romania (MNC, OF, ČSČK (local Red Cross), JZD /the Unified Agricultural Farm/, Fruta and Sigma)
1990	
1.1.1990	Institution of independent municipalities of Blovice, Filipovské Petrovice and Vidly effective as of the 1990 elections
31.1.	Roundtable (originally on the topic of the environment – but then reconstruction of municipal bodies)
19.3.	Reconstruction of the MNC (54 MPs, of whom 19 were members of KSC) and division into Commission, election of the mayor etc.

assumed by the Protestant Karvaš, the Revolution lost its *raison d'être*. Corporate forums played a greater role in the first month after November 1989, after which the OF Co-ordination Committee rose in prominence because it guaranteed the transfer of power. There was practically no fighting over power in Filipov. Therefore, revolutionary merit did not inspire horror or admiration, nor could it have served to confer special status. In the (quite unwillingly) provided descriptions of the transformation that we obtained (approximately eight years after the fact), the local revolution tended to be downplayed, and in some cases there was some nostalgia for the former times – not nostalgia for the Communist rule but for the peace of the Filipov's Hobbiton where rapid changes were not welcome.

Why so late...?

As is clearly illustrated by the cases of Kladno and Filipov, Czechoslovak society was not in an economic crisis. Although the regime was gradually becoming “worn out” politically, it did manage in principle to secure the loyalty of the “working people”. With respect to the potentially disloyal groups (in this case the two local dissidents and the Filipov “Rams”), the local regime came to a mutually respected *modus vivendi* with them. It was a disintegrating but still viable regime. The comparison of Filipov and the County Town of Dubno gave us an opportunity to study the sources of this viability.

According to the laws and the Statutes of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, power belonged to collective bodies: the board of town representatives (MNC) was governed by the County Board (CNC); above the collective Party leadership of a town (MC) was the county collective body (County Committee of the Party). Behind this façade of a hierarchy of collective actors, influence was exercised by functionary hierarchies of heads of units, secretaries, chairmen and deputy chairman who, from the county level up, were appointed and controlled by hierarchically higher party bodies.⁸ Thus constructed, the centrally-managed, parallel power structure jealously guarded its monopoly. The seemingly democratic façades of hierarchies of bodies and organisations were, however, also important. They anchored the superiority of the value of labour over freedom, and thus created social space for functionary hierarchies to exercise influence over events.

The main criterion for assessing each and every functionary at all levels was their success at promoting the leading role of the Party (in extreme cases even using the method “do as you can”); observation of the law and custom-based rules was secondary. The possibility of open political and/or economic competition, or even strife, was out of the question.

There was only one criterion for demonstrating party reliability and party accountability: promote the leading role of the Party. This guaranteed the superiority of the all-permeating party hierarchy over the practical hierarchies of the state administration, enterprises and other organisations. All socialist organisations were obligated to establish and maintain a unified organisational scheme (local, county, region, republic and national nodes) meeting the principle of democratic centralism. It was an organisational principle which by nature

I/1990	OF action: “the end of the steel giant” (removal of communist symbols from the square) Marek cultural society: the first events, for example, included a concert of Iva Bittová Change in the publisher of the Filipovský zpravodaj (Filipov Newsletter): the publisher is not the MC but only the MNC
1.4.	Split-off of the Olomouc-based enterprise Strojbal (including the Filipov branch) from Strojbal Hr. Králové s.p., establishment of “Strojírny potravinářského průmyslu” (Food Industry Engineering Works)
8.-9.6.	Parliamentary Elections

⁸ Martin Hájek, Tomáš Holeček, Jiří Kabele, Petr Koutek, Zdena Vajdová, art.cit.

generated areas of uncertainty, and which, in Crozier's terms, established the power of the party on controlling such areas of uncertainty.⁹

The main tasks of the administration of nomenklatura consisted of: (i) approving, confirming, voting or giving opinions on cadre proposals for peopling all important positions at all levels of the administration and economy, and (ii) managing the member base of the party (accepting candidates of the Party, Party members and disciplinary action against members or their expulsion).¹⁰ These main activities were accompanied by the creation of cadre reserves, the political-ideological training of cadres and reserves, as well as decisions on important matters concerning cadre issues, such as medals, the awarding of scientific titles, appointments to positions included in the nomenklatura as part of the fulfilment of party goals, trips to capitalist and non-capitalist countries, etc. The methods for managing the nomenklatura were applied to a wide range of non-party affairs, where the practice of interviews, writing cadre reviews, and often exercising an unofficial and thus non-transparent influence on awarding various jobs played a major role.

Although the Construction Spirit as a foundation of the leading role of the Party lost its grounding in the revolutionary myth, it successfully became institutionalised in the described hierarchies of the party-state. The Spirit did not invoke loyalty that was based on faith – society was more frustrated than anything else by the lack of visions and beliefs – but one that was utterly pragmatic, based on satisfying interests and expressed through a conforming vote. This slowly dying-out loyalty, which also affected the Party, laid the ground for the proclivity to believe in a new, concrete vision of a major shift.

Conclusion: why so easily...?

We have to see the Velvet Revolution in Filipov as a result of a double mediation: if it had not been for the undermining of the communist power in Poland and Hungary, symbolically climaxing with the fall of the Berlin Wall, there would probably have been no “Velvet Revolution” in Prague. If there had been no “Velvet Revolution” in Prague, there would have been no general strike in Filipov, nor would the Communist Party have peacefully transferred power here to the Civic Forum Coordination Committee.

The Communist rule in the Czech Republic ended “communistically”. The Civic Forum mobilised the public (communists would say the masses), and at roundtables negotiated the cooptation of OF representatives into all decision-making bodies, including legislative bodies and national committees. The new majorities of OF MPs and non-communist parties of the National Front then systematically recalled representatives of the Communist Party from key positions. The processes which took place with greater scope and at the central level, trickled down to the regional and county levels, and from there to the municipal level. There was always a two-week interval between when the co-optation of new representatives and election of new councils and chairmen occurred at the upper level and when such changes occurred at the municipal level. This interval attests to the ascription of the decreasing importance of the lower levels as well as to the greater difficulty of mobilising local support for a new regime among the population in small cities and villages.

After the abolition of the constitutionally guaranteed leading role of the Communist Party and the appointment of OF proponents to national committees, state administration could legally continue because the skeleton of constitutional institutions was in principle preserved, even

⁹ Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964.

¹⁰ Vladimíra Hradecká, František Koudelka, *Kádrová politika a nomenklatura KSČ 1969-1974* (The Cadre Politics and Nomenklatura of the Czechoslovak Communist Party 1969-1974), Prague, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny, 1998.

during Real Socialism. The Czech “perestroika” between 1987 and 1989 significantly improved this opportunity for preserving the “legal continuity”.

The gradual process described above was a carbon copy of the power transfer at higher levels.¹¹ This, however, de-dramatised the change itself. At the lowest municipal level it does not make rational sense to speak of a “revolution”. In trickling down into the local worlds, the myth of the “Velvet Revolution” was less applicable when describing local events. Although the drama of the Velvet Revolution was set primarily in Prague and Bratislava, it was a collective action that affected all local worlds. The mobilisation of the public – among other things also thanks to the bottom-up organised dissolution of “central municipalities”¹² – was so strong that even small towns or municipalities could not pretend not to know, as rational choice theory would have it.¹³

Our findings do not substantiate Možný’s hypothesis that the explanation for the ease with which the Revolution occurred was that the socialist cadres (as quasi-owners of enterprises) had a vision of registering their property, and thus changing their social capital into economic.¹⁴ This opportunity only presented itself with the governmental *Scenario for economic reform* in the middle of 1990 and the spontaneous course of privatisation, which could not have been reliably predicted in advance. What does remain valid, however, is the claim that party members were forced to ask what to do with a leading power that, for some time before the events of November 1989, had been leading nowhere.

¹¹ According to ODS chairman Vilman (1999): “The reconstruction of national committees was discussed on the radio, on television, but once it was published in the newspaper (how to do it), we had something to rely on.”

¹² Since 1976 the little-popular “central municipalities”, the basic administrative units, generally merged several smaller municipalities.

¹³ Gordon Tullock, “The Paradox of Revolution”, *Public Choice*, vol. 65, (1), 1971, p. 89-99.

□ Ivo Možný, *Proč tak snadno...* (Why so easily ...), Prague, SLON, 1991.