Building the Idea of the Common Good in People's Democracies

A Case Study of Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1950s

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la Tchécoslovaquie communiste dans les années 1950*

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Building the Idea of the Common Good in People's Democracies

A Case Study of Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1950s¹

Édification de l'idée d'intérêt général dans les démocraties populaires : le cas de la Tchécoslovaquie communiste dans les années 1950

Roman Krakovský

- 1 In November 1948, the city council of Ruzyně, a village on the outskirts of Prague, discussed new regulations concerning quotas of lard. The issue provoked a lively discussion which testified to growing tension among local councillors as political inequalities increased following the communist seizure of power. One of the councillors, the craftsman Mr Vohánka, expressed little surprise upon seeing how much the new measures were welcomed by Mr Valeš, his colleague from the Communist Party, since “he doesn’t breed animals and therefore he will have nothing to pay.” He struggled to understand as well why he should be “treated the same way as a farmer who doesn’t fulfil his quotas.” He mentioned that as a craftsman, he “doesn’t receive any rationing tickets, allocated only to the working class” despite the fact that he “doesn’t count his shifts.” Mr Valeš replied that from now on everybody should benefit from pig-breeding and “not just the very few and always the same people,” as the pig “is fed with surplus which belongs to all !” Tempers flared and voices rose. The regional representative and the mayor, both communists, intervened and reprimanded the craftsman for his offensive talk “against the new measure and consequently against the new government.” “The decision is fair,” concluded the mayor, because it gives “everybody a piece of meat, not like before, under bureaucracy and capitalism, when all went to very few and nothing to the others.”²
- 2 This trivial quarrel occurred at the moment when the coalition government led by the Czechoslovak Communist Party was shifting to the “dictatorship of proletariat.” What was to be the basis for the relationship between state and society, and among citizens in general, in this new regime ? How were personal and collective liberties defined in this new political environment ? And, on the whole, how was this new political system institutionalised while its popular support was, at the very least, doubtful ?

- 3 An examination of the public sphere can help answer some of these questions. The public sphere remains a relatively recent subject in the historiography of communism. In the past, it was often analysed as a physical space (place, street) under the regime's direct control.³ But this material definition underestimates a fundamental part of the problem : the nature of the citizens' community and the role of politics.⁴ In order to consider these issues, it is necessary to return to the concept of public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas (Öffentlichkeit). Habermas defined the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed." It comes into being "in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body [...] and confer [...] about matters of general interest." It requires specific means for transmitting information such as newspapers and later radio, television or internet, a certain level of education, and free access to this sphere guaranteed to all citizens. This area is distinct from the state : it is a "site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state."⁵
- 4 From the very beginning, Habermas made it clear that the concept of the bourgeois public sphere was elaborated in a specific context : the French, English (and partly German) liberal bourgeois societies of the 17th-18th centuries. Several population groups were excluded from it (depending on education level, social status, sex or race), although these exclusions tended to diminish over time.⁶ Other forms of public spheres existed as well, such as the proletarian public sphere.⁷
- 5 Industrialization, democratisation and the development of the welfare during the 19th century led to the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere. Progress in mass education and the development of print media considerably expanded participation in public discussion and led to what Habermas called the "plebeian public sphere." The economic crisis at the end of the 19th century plus deepening inequalities engendered by laissez-faire capitalism favoured the development of state interventionism in economic and social life. The outcome of this process was the development of industrially advanced mass democracy, organized in the form of the social welfare state in which state and society progressively mingled. Group needs which could not expect satisfaction from a self-regulating free market now tended towards regulation by the state. In this way, conflicts previously restricted to the private sphere intruded into the public, which had to mediate these demands. This development led to the establishment of what Habermas termed the "plebiscitary-acclamatory public sphere" in the liberal democracies of the 20th century⁸.
- 6 Habermas based his analysis on West European societies. But what was the situation in Central and Eastern Europe ? Did the advent of communism in this region lead to similar consequences ? How was the notion of the common good enacted in regimes advocating the dictatorship of proletariat and disrespecting fundamental liberties ? To answer these questions, we will turn to post-war Czechoslovakia and to the city of Ruzyně and its city council.⁹ Indeed, the local level is a good observation point. In the words of a local representative of Ruzyně¹⁰ in 1945, "What is at stake on a national level is reflected in local politics."¹¹
- 7 A city of approximately 4,500 residents (in 1930), a large proportion of them German-speaking, Ruzyně is at that time situated seventeen kilometres northwest of Prague. The town's development is exemplary of the urbanisation and industrialisation of Central and Eastern Europe. Thanks to its proximity to Prague, interwar Ruzyně was inhabited by workers, shopkeepers, and white collar commuters. The construction of

Prague's airport in the late 1950s gave the city a new boost. After the territorial reform of 1960, the commune was integrated into Prague and its economic and administrative development depended henceforth on the capital.

- 8 One purpose of the public sphere is to allow different political bodies to debate as if they were socially equal, even if this equality is more ideal than real. The regimes established in post-war Central and Eastern Europe claimed to have accomplished social equality and guaranteed widespread participation in decision-making. Even if in reality this goal was not achieved and inequalities simply shifted elsewhere, these social transformations remodelled the functioning of the public sphere.
- 9 The process of interpenetration of the public and the private and the increase of state interventionism initiated during the nineteenth century was accelerated following the Great Depression, the Second World War and particularly the communist seize of power. Nationalisations and collectivisation led to a massive transfer of property which shifted the boundaries between the public and the private to the detriment of the latter. The socialist community took control over numerous private matters and became much more intrusive in the private life of the individual. How did actors intervening in public adapt to this situation ? In the Czechoslovak People's Democracy, the Communist Party was so closely identified with the state that it was often labelled a "party-state." How did different actors communicate in public with this new political body, and how was the notion of the common good elaborated under these circumstances ? A close examination of these questions should help to better understand whether Soviet-type regimes gave birth to a specific type of public sphere and how it functioned.

New Political Equilibrium

- 10 By the end of the war, Europe's political elites were convinced that the existence of large minorities within national communities was one of the leading cause of political instability. They believed that a better correlation between political and ethno-linguistic frontiers might prevent the escalation of violence. Following the liberation, Central and Eastern Europe underwent significant population transfers, sometimes even more brutal than those during the war. Between 1944 and 1948, about 31 million people were displaced from the areas where they had lived, often for several generations. These transfers were a continuation of the demographic engineering that had begun in Central and Eastern Europe during the war when more than 15.4 million people were transferred temporarily or permanently between 1939 and 1943. If we add the 16.3 million war casualties for military, political or racial reasons, almost 62.4 million Central-Europeans lost their lives or were displaced in the decade following 1939. These demographic changes substantially altered the structure of citizens' communities in the region¹².
- 11 In Czechoslovakia, between 1945 and 1949, the state authorities organised the transfer of almost 3 million Germans and resettled 1.9 million Czechs and Slovaks in liberated territories. These displaced persons had their personal property confiscated, nationalised and partially redistributed to the population. If, in 1930, Germans represented 22.3 % of Czechoslovak population, by 1950, they were fewer than 2 %, relegating to quasi oblivion the professional, social and cultural presence of a group which traditionally formed the core of the region's middle class¹³. A similar process, although on a smaller scale, was organised in South Slovakia, where almost 90,000 Slovak Hungarians were expelled to Hungary in 1946-1948.¹⁴

- 12 Following this population upheaval and the chaotic period of liberation, certain categories of population were deprived access to the public sphere. So-called “unreliable persons” (*nespolehliví* in Czech), a term designating Germans, collaborators and non-residents (*cizinci*, which could also be translated as “those whose origin is unknown”), were among the first targets.¹⁵ If a migrant’s identity had not been fully investigated and his reliability established, his access to the public sphere was restricted. In Czechoslovakia, residency permits – which opened access to the vote and to representative functions – were only granted following a “consecutive stay on the territory of the commune for at least ten years.”¹⁶ This measure automatically excluded from access to public affairs all recent migrants. Similar measures were adopted in other Central European countries¹⁷.
- 13 Political pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe was weak before and during the war, and it was not restored in its aftermath. Traditional right-wing parties compromised by collaboration were prohibited and left-wing parties and, more particularly, the Communist Party and the Social Democrats, found themselves in a very favourable position. In Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Red Army and officers of the Czechoslovak army in the Soviet Union played a decisive role in creating new post-war governance. The old municipal and legal authorities of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the pro-Nazi Slovak Republic were dismissed and replaced by new ones called National Committees (*národní výbory*). On December 4, 1944, from his exile in London, President Beneš legalized these organisations in Czech lands, hoping that their structure would eventually evolve following the first post-war democratic elections.¹⁸ Rapidly, this decision was endorsed on Slovak territory as well.¹⁹ Between 1944 and 1945, 4855 committees were created across the country. The Czechoslovak situation was not exceptional. Similar administrative bodies were created in other countries in the region following the advance of the liberation armies.²⁰ Within these new administrative bodies, the political equilibrium had nothing in common with the wartime or pre-war precedents. In theory, all authorised political parties should have been represented within National Committees. In reality, the communist commissaries who established these new administrative bodies selected the most obedient local political representatives. Usually, the members of the Communist Party, or at least their allies from the Socialist National Party, took the leading positions and almost systematically the chairmanship.²¹ In this way, a large proportion of the traditional political forces were excluded from the public sphere well before the first post-war elections. The situation was even more apparent in areas where the Communist Party had no representation and where the Social Democrats had been weak before 1945. Through National Committees, local public affairs fell into the hands of a new oligarchy of unknown representatives with often no experience in local governance.
- 14 The case of Ruzyně is representative of this process. On 19 May 1945, a public meeting was organised in the town’s main square by four political parties uncompromised during the war : the Communist Party, the Social Democrats, the Socialist National Party, and the People’s Party. After paying tribute to the war’s victims and honouring the Red Army, “liberating our nation from the seven years of suffering that brutal Nazi rule imposed upon us”, representatives of the authorised political parties solemnly pledged to “defend conquered rights and liberties” and to “act according to the tradition of our big brother nation, the Soviet Union”. The meeting elected the Presidium and the Council of the new National Committee. Enthusiasm for the return of peace prevailed over democratic rules :

the vote was public, and the new committee was confirmed by acclamation during the meeting. Unsurprisingly, the Communist Party won eleven seats, the National Socialist Party eight, the Social Democrats seven, and the People's Party four. The chairmanship went to the communist candidate without a single dissenting vote²².

- 15 During Ruzyně's first post-war municipal election, some of the elected representatives had to contend with allegations of collaboration. Antonín Petr (Socialist National Party) was accused of "selling fruit to occupiers and not to Czechs" and Václav Král (Communist Party) was denounced "for the same reason." The city council promised to examine carefully these accusations while inviting the population to "participate collectively, during these difficult times, in the construction of a new foundation for the Czechoslovak state."²³ The majority of accusations were withdrawn in the following weeks, and the public was notified in order to reinforce the new representatives' legitimacy. In September 1945, in order to put an end to the wave of denunciations, local councillors unanimously adopted a resolution stipulating that any person "offending a public representative will be prosecuted judicially and politically," without specifying what "politically" meant.²⁴

Imposition of a New Dominant Political Discourse

- 16 Issues such as equality and social justice gained a dominant position in post-war political discourse. From fall 1947 to February 1948, relations between different political representatives grew acrimonious, uniting Communists and Social Democrats against their political opponents. The Communist Party progressively gained control of the management of public affairs and the funding for the reconstruction. In September 1947, in alliance with the Social Democrats, the Communist Party granted special subsidies to farmers suffering from poor harvests. "Is it not a noble gesture of the Communist Party towards the local community and all its members, especially the juniors?" asked the representative of "the Party," mentioned for the first time without the term "Communist," as if everyone knew henceforth what it meant. A noble gesture, indeed, but in passing, the speaker did not forget to call attention to the amount of the subsidies.²⁵ The Council approved the funding – the urgency of the reconstruction necessitated a helping hand – but almost half of the elected representatives abstained from the vote, well aware of the measure's political significance.²⁶
- 17 During this period, rising antagonism between the Communist Party and other political forces transformed municipal discussions into trench warfare. In December 1947, the apartment of a Communist Party member was inspected by the police following an anonymous denunciation for illegal possession of arms. The communist representative complained to the city council: "The justice was clearly willing to discredit the elected representative of the people defending the public interest!"²⁷ Following a stormy discussion, one of the councillors tried to put minds at rest, stressing that it was necessary to "abandon partisan interests within the city council" and to "work together so that matters advance in peace."²⁸ But this was increasingly difficult to guarantee. While in the immediate aftermath of liberation, the opposition had been able to speak out against the Communist Party, it fell progressively silent through fear, weariness or opportunism.
- 18 People's Democracies considered social inequalities as one of the leading shortcomings of bourgeois societies and claimed to overcome them.²⁹ Equality and broadening access to

the public sphere (mainly for women and the working class) were supposed to reduce social differences and to ensure equal participation in public affairs. Did People's Democracies succeed where bourgeois societies had failed? How did the implementation of the "dictatorship of proletariat," the "abolition of the class struggle," and gender equality affect the public sphere?

- 19 Since the People's Democracies suffered "no contradiction between classes," maintaining political pluralism was no longer necessary.³⁰ In February 1948, only a few weeks after the Czechoslovak Communist Party took power, the opposition was progressively expelled from representative bodies. In Ruzyně, a new city council was elected on 19 March 1948.³¹ Following the National Front's proposal, the "reactionary elements which jeopardised the work of the city council and sabotaged the execution of the Government's program" were ousted or forced to join the Communist Party³². It can easily be imagined that ousting all objectionable representatives was simply not possible on a local level where competency was a rare commodity. Several expelled representatives simply joined the remaining political forces, enabling different political opinions to be voiced within the purged administrations in spite of the challenges. To a certain degree, this helped to preserve certain pluralism within the local public sphere.
- 20 Nevertheless, the predominance of a single political discourse could easily discourage other speakers from expressing themselves. Modern mass communication tools such as the press, radio and later television, under state ownership, helped bring a new political culture to the population. National Committees were also mobilised to disseminate it. In October 1948, as Parliament approved new social legislation, Member of Parliament Anežka Hodinová-Spurná delivered a speech on the radio devoted to the "Solidarity in the past, today and in the future" where she stressed how the new law helped solve "people's social problems in the name of solidarity and mutual help." The speech was broadcast at the opening of the city council's meeting and the President invited local representatives of the council to instil these "new values of solidarity" in their citizens.³³ The campaigns to fulfil the regime's economic goals followed the same principle. In springtime 1952, during a public discussion between representatives and citizens of Ruzyně, the President of the city council encouraged the crowd to participate in the harvest: "I am sure that those who have not yet contribute will join us because the success of the harvest is in the interest of everyone."³⁴ The omnipresence of this majority discourse had an obvious influence on deliberation and decision-making.³⁵ In December 1947, during the aforementioned police inspection of the property of a local communist representative, his colleague, M. Lousa, protested against what he considered an "insult," referring to the "people" who "today enjoy the complete control of the government". He suggested that the deputies send a resolution to the Ministry of Justice. By fifteen to thirteen votes, the proposal was approved.³⁶ It is difficult to determine if this decision resulted from a general consensus or if it testified to the influence of the majority discourse over local deputies. But what is certain is that when pluralism is not guaranteed, minorities can be deprived of speech, and when they do manage to say a word, their voices can fall on deaf ears. In April 1950, a new cooperative was founded in Ruzyně. After a "lively discussion" the city council "decided to form a cooperative" using the land and livestock of the farmer František Turecký. Management of this new organisation was entrusted to comrade Dupáč, of "working-class origins." The former dispossessed owner was not even invited to the deliberation, and the decision was approved by the local representatives "by common consent."³⁷

Mechanisms of Social Stratification and Political Participation

- 21 One of the leading factors that shaped the form political communities took in post-war Central and Eastern Europe was the transfer of property. This was the outcome of long-term processes that became more significant in the 1930s. Following the Great Depression, state interventionism increased, and the nationalisation of certain leading sectors was introduced in many Central and Eastern European countries. The germanization of economies during the war intensified this process, as German capital became a major financier and the industrial capacity of Central European economies was mobilised for the war effort. By the end of the war, about 50 % of the industry of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was under German control, as well as almost all mines and the cement and paper industry. In Slovakia, which became a satellite of the Reich during the war, German capital in industry increased from 4 % in 1938 to 52 % in 1942. This germanization familiarised local economies with the principle of planning and accelerated the transfer of property to the state, and this development intensified with the large-scale nationalisation and collectivisation campaigns of the post-war period.
- 22 In Czechoslovakia, nationalisation began in summer 1945 and by December 1945, 2,900 industrial companies employing almost 60 % of the industrial workforce were already under state control. In Prague, 26,000 private companies existed in 1948 ; six years later, there were no more than 5,700.³⁸ As a result of these consecutive processes, social differences levelled considerably, and wealth became a less important criterion of social differentiation.
- 23 Due to the war and the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe, relatively homogenous national communities were thus created. But at the same time, these new communities remained fragile. Traditional solidarities were deeply shaken, the middle classes decimated, and a significant proportion of local communities comprised recent residents with restricted civil rights. Political representation did not reflect all political opinions, and the public sphere became progressively dominated by a discourse stressing egalitarianism and social justice. While wealth lost its importance as a leading factor of social differentiation, class became progressively more significant. The public sphere gained progressively a more proletarian character, which challenged participation in public discussion.
- 24 In order to defy inherent social inequalities, parliamentary democracies aspire to maintain the separation between political parties and economic, social and cultural institutions. While the first promote political equality and usually operate in public, the second are more dedicated to the private sphere. The development of organisations where individuals were enrolled on the basis of sex, age or socio-professional status led during the late 19th and first half of the 20th century to the interpenetration of state and society and blurred public-private distinction. In Central and Eastern Europe, social and political transformations experienced during the after-war period made this separation even more problematic.
- 25 The very structure of the National Committees confirmed the leading role of the Communist Party. In 1951, the city council of Ruzyně was composed of fourteen representatives of the Communist Party, four representatives of trade unions, five

members of the local cooperative, and three members of the army. The Youth Union, the sport organisation Sokol, and the Popular Party had one member each.³⁹ The representatives of the Women's Union took part to discussions as well. The incorporation of mass organisations into the city council had a decisive impact on the functioning of the local public sphere. The role of these mass organisations was not to represent citizens' political opinions in public but to "defend the interest of the working class," to "gain its confidence," and to supervise it.⁴⁰ The participation of these organisations, more or less voluntary, was based on both political and apolitical criteria, the latter being connected to profession, age or gender. This political representation based on social and professional criteria introduced into the socialist public sphere the structural inequality of status of its members.

- 26 The case of women's representation is exemplary of this process. People's Democracies considered the growth of women's representation as clear evidence of the "democratisation" of politics. On this point, they consolidated the principles which were already in practice in most Central and Eastern European countries. In Russia and in Poland, women had been granted the right to vote in 1918, followed closely by Hungary (1919), Czechoslovakia (1920), and Romania (1921).⁴¹ New civil codes adopted at the beginning of the 1950s reorganised family relations, marriage, and child custody following a fairly progressive Soviet marital model from the 1920s based on the principle of a partnership of equal individuals sharing common interests and mutual affection.⁴² The principle of gender equality was restated in the first socialist constitutions as well.⁴³ On this basis, women's representation in politics did improve after the war. In Czechoslovakia, women represented 12 % of members of Parliament between 1948 and 1954, and this ratio increased to 23 % in the 1980s, while it had never exceeded 5 % before 1939.⁴⁴ In Hungary, women represented 17 % of members of Parliament in 1953.⁴⁵ The growth of female representation in politics was indeed an important step forward, allowing women to better articulate their demands.⁴⁶ A close examination of several women holding ministerial positions – such as members of Parliament Anežka Hodinová-Spurná, Ludmila Jankovcová or Marie Švermová in Czechoslovakia or Anna Ratkó and Valéria Benke in Hungary – would help to better understand women's role in developing legislation and give a better sense for how women's views were incorporated into the political life of the People's Democracies.⁴⁷
- 27 But the representation of women in public must be examined at the local level as well. When it was created in 1945, the National Committee of Ruzyně counted no women councillors. In 1946, three out of thirty members were women and in 1949, they were five (17 %) – a proportion that remained stable throughout the 1950s.⁴⁸ The number of women representatives in city council also increased thanks to three representatives of the Women's Union, bringing the number to eight women for twenty-five men (25 %). In the 1970s, the ratio in local administrations fluctuated from 21 % to 28 % and reached an average 30 % on a departmental and a regional level.⁴⁹
- 28 How was this increase in women's representation perceived in this traditionally masculine public sphere? Reports of municipal deliberations in Ruzyně appear to confirm that it did not generate much noise. But in order to understand if women's voices received the same attention as men's, it would be necessary to go further into the analysis, for example by examining the nuances of tone and gesture that typically accompany speech. While this is rarely possible on a local level, where a full transcript of

deliberations is seldom available, it would be perfectly possible on a national level, where the parliamentary discussions were recorded in extenso.

- 29 In addition, women were recognised as political actors partly on a gender basis. Indeed, while women were numerically better represented during deliberations, Women's Union members were not granted the right to vote. Furthermore, female representatives usually enjoyed higher representation within the commissions handling food supply, health or education, social and cultural affairs. Were they more competent in these matters? Perhaps to a certain extent. But the fact that they were systematically excluded from commissions dealing with budget, planning or industry marginalised them from the regime's high priority areas. In this regard, the inherent difference between men and women was institutionalised in the public sphere.

Imbalance of Decision-Making

- 30 In Czechoslovakia, the transformation of National Committees in accordance with the Soviet model was conducted through several administrative reforms. A new Constitution defined in 1948 National Committees as organs "representing and executing the power of the state on a local, departmental and regional level" and "protecting the rights and the liberties of the people."⁵⁰ Subsequent reforms – the most important in 1948, 1954 and 1960 – followed two contradictory processes : the decentralisation of decision-making and the centralisation of resources.⁵¹
- 31 One effect of these administrative reforms was to considerably enlarge the scope of the National Committees' competencies. National Committees now took charge in areas previously managed by other administrative bodies or ministers : culture and education (excluding higher education) and related services (canteens, kindergartens, student dormitories, etc.), labour protection, public health, social services, local finances, economy and agriculture, construction and collectivisation, the organisation of socialist competition on the local level, etc. The National Committees took charge of the approval of the economic plans and annual budgets of all companies based within their jurisdiction⁵². In 1958, the Ministry of Local Development was dissolved, and its responsibilities transferred to local administrations.
- 32 But despite their broadened competencies, municipalities disposed of few financial resources to put them into practice. Within the planned economy, their budget was allocated by superior authorities such as departmental or regional administrations or ministries.⁵³ In practice, this meant that even if the local city council was competent in the field, superior authorities could interfere in the process of decision-making at any moment through the allocation of resources. In this way, the "dictatorship of proletariat" was transformed into a political bureaucracy where networking and membership in different political organisations gave access to benefits and, consequently, to power.⁵⁴
- 33 If the context of widespread shortage reinforced this decision-making imbalance, successive administrative reforms rendered it irreversible. In Czechoslovakia, the administrative reform of 1960 reduced the number of departments from 270 to 109, and the number of regions from 19 to 10. With a short interlude of 1969-1970, when as part of a federalisation process the regions were abolished, this administrative division remained in place until the partition of Czechoslovakia in 1992.

- 34 This process reinforced the development of parallel decision-making channels. In order to defend local issues, representatives had to bargain with the state and the Communist Party off the beaten track. In October 1952, a Ruzyně councillor comrade Strnad participated in a political education seminar. There, he met a Ministry of Public Health representative with whom he “discussed in detail the situation of the town regarding health care.” He secured a promise that the department would send a replacement for the local doctor, or at least an auxiliary.⁵⁵
- 35 The spectacular expansion of local administrations’ competencies transformed them into a “basis of the power of the people” and a “pillar of the building of socialism.” It also strengthened interactions between local community members. But at the same time, it isolated them. Instead of encouraging the autonomy of local representatives, it displaced power to departments and regions, disconnected from the local context, and to the Communist Party. Collaboration between communities on the same administrative level was entirely organised by the state and was progressively ritualised. Campaigns of emulation between towns are an example of this process. Eventually, the socialist public sphere reinforced the isolation of its members.

The Public-Private Distinction

- 36 In People’s Democracies, the separation between the public and the private was shaped decisively by the transfer of property undertaken through nationalisations and collectivisations before, during, and after the war. In the context of post-war reconstruction, the majority of the population considered nationalisations as an effective weapon against economic crisis. Accordingly, the process met with little criticism. In Czechoslovakia, the trials of collaborators and the resettlement of German-speaking populations, who traditionally formed the core of the middle class, facilitated the transfer of property.⁵⁶
- 37 The population adapted to this new situation. On a local level, discussions concerning nationalisations of industry rarely led to conflict. It never occurred in Ruzyně. On the contrary, the nationalisation of real estate and collectivisation, launched in spring 1949, met strong resistance : both affected personal ownership, fundamentally related to the family. Collectivisation was often imposed by administrative decisions, and farmers were frequently forced to join cooperatives. In Ruzyně, the National Front Action Committee carried out an inspection on the farm of František Turecký. The police, escorted by a member of the city council, “discovered twelve quintals of wheat and one quintal of barley concealed in the basement.” Following this find, the Action Committee proposed nationalising the farm. After a lively discussion concerning whether it was appropriate to keep the former owner in position in order to secure the functioning of the farm, Ruzyně’s representatives decided to endorse the recommendation of the Action Committee and to place the former owner “at the state’s disposal.”⁵⁷
- 38 The population of Ruzyně appealed massively to the authorities to revoke such administrative decisions. But only few appeals succeeded. In February 1950, following numerous demands to restore confiscated property, Ruzyně city council agreed unanimously that a positive response to such demands was “not to be desired anymore.” The seized properties were integrated into communal assets and were reserved for collective use.⁵⁸

- 39 The transfer of property led to an extraordinary interpenetration of the public and the private spheres. And if this process was similar to the one that had occurred earlier in liberal societies, it went much further in communist regimes. In Czechoslovakia, both spheres were still clearly separated at the Liberation. During the public meeting held at Ruzyně in September 1945, one citizen asked about property left behind by the Germans. The Chairman of the newly-elected National Committee declined to discuss in public “questions of private interest” and recalled that “time should not be wasted in trivial pursuits.”⁵⁹ During the nationalisation and collectivisation campaigns, the state took over a considerable range of responsibilities previously held by different private bodies. As a result, private issues infiltrated the public sphere. From 1950, the signing of any lease between individuals had to be formally confirmed by the city council, and every change in private real estate had to be publicly announced.⁶⁰ In September 1952, Ruzyně city council ordered an inventory of the entire commune’s livestock – pigs, cows, goats, and hens – in order to obtain a general idea of all properties held by the population.⁶¹ But state interference in private matters often went well beyond simple record-keeping. When, in August 1950, Ruzyně’s councillors discussed a personal request to build a garage, the debate did not concern the project’s security issues but the “origin of the material” the claimant intended to use in order to accomplish his project.⁶² In August 1953, Ruzyně’s representatives discussed the case of the butcher’s nationalised shop Masna. The shop assistants “should not impose other sorts of meat instead of veal, but should only propose them,” the town councillors specified.⁶³ Private property became a collective issue. Through structures of collective deliberation such as the city council, the socialist community kept an eye on the individual, his property and his behaviour, paving the way for social engineering.
- 40 The population had no choice but to accept this new situation and make a good use of it. The National Committee frequently dealt with requests related to housing or the neighbourhood. In February 1950, Mr Hlavnička complained to the city council that Ms Fridrichová refused tenants in her house despite having “an excessively big house.” The National Committee unanimously decided to “confiscate two rooms of the house” and to offer them for rent.⁶⁴ Inhabitants frequently addressed the city council in order to obtain permits to carry out work in their homes. In April 1953, Ms Bendová demanded “an authorisation to transform the window in her flat” in order to allow her “blind husband to enjoy more sunlight.”⁶⁵ In January 1956, Mr Soukup complained to the city council that Ms Chmelová and her daughter, who lived in a room on the first floor of the house, used the toilets of his flat despite the fact that they had one on their own floor. The dispute was handled within the Security Commission of the city council where “both parties reached an agreement” during a public confrontation.⁶⁶ If the public nature of private conflicts facilitated the arbitration process, these examples show also that the socialist community restricted the autonomy of private individuals through state structures and violated the sense of self-responsibility.
- 41 The vocabulary used during deliberations is extremely revealing in this regard: “summon” the citizen to the city council, “execute” the eviction, “punish” an act. These terms reveal an extremely authoritarian relationship between the community and the individual. To a certain extent, the socialist community disposed of the citizen: it could call him to his duties, inspect his personal situation and even “displace” him, if circumstances should require. In this extremely paternalistic set up, the public sphere

could not guarantee one of its fundamental functions : neutralising inequalities between different actors intervening in public.⁶⁷

Creating a “Common Sphere”

- 42 Nationalisations and collectivisation led to the creation of the communal economy (komunální hospodářství). Situated between the bureaucratic state and the local community, the communal economy was built on the basis of the Soviet model where the state controlled local infrastructures through the centralised allocation of resources and the definition of economic objectives, while local communities were entrusted with everyday management through local administrations.⁶⁸ The progressive expansion of the latter's responsibilities during the 1950s was in line with the People's Democracies' objective to “eliminate the state” and to replace it by the “government of the people.”⁶⁹ In Prague, this reorganisation of the local economy led in 1953 to the creation of 34 large companies of the local economy in charge of producing everyday goods and providing various services to the population (health, transport, water supply, housing, hotels and restaurants, repairs, etc.)⁷⁰ In the USSR, at the beginning of the 1960s, the communal economy already employed 20 % of the workforce. State structures and private institutions merged into a single body that could be designated as a common sphere where the collective interest was closely connected to the individual one. In this sphere, the socialist community protected and educated the individual, a responsibility which was otherwise held by the family and the neighbourhood. The socialist community believed it appropriate to criticise and correct the individual's behaviour in society and to plead in his favour with state authorities.
- 43 The individual actively intervened in this common sphere. Most often, he denounced individual deeds at odds with the collective interest. In April 1953, the city council of Ruzyně received a joint complaint against Ms Květová. Due to her diabetes, she benefited from greater rations of meat “that she doesn't use herself but resells,” according to the complaint.⁷¹ In December 1951, Ms Blachtová protested against the “bad working morals of the chimney sweep Mr Šípa, who often receives advances but hardly ever finishes his work.”⁷² In both cases, the city council opened an investigation. This individual surveillance was a fundamental aspect of the new collective nature of the public sphere in the People's Democracies. The community felt free to interfere in the personal life of the individual if it was considered in his own interest. In February 1949, Ms Zavadilová was “arrested by the police of Prague” following “remarks concerning her disordered life.”⁷³ In the name of the same collective interest, in July 1950, the city council decided to confiscate personal vehicles “which were not used enough” and to allocate rooms in private flats which were considered “excessively big.”⁷⁴ In March 1950, the Public Health Commission showed up unexpectedly at Ms Drncová's home to investigate, probably following a denunciation. Members of the city council's Security Commission accused her of keeping a piglet in her flat at night. She apologised and explained that the pigsty was being repaired so she enclosed the piglet at home “only for security reasons.” Nevertheless, the piglet was confiscated.⁷⁵
- 44 In People's Democracies, the idea of the common good – the public sphere's ultimate objective – went well beyond its traditional meaning which is to reach a consensus about what is best for all. Within the socialist common sphere, the conditions of individual well-being were established by the socialist community, while individual preferences

were not necessarily taken into consideration. The individual was subjected to the state and to the socialist community which expected him to comply with their expectations.

The Impossible Consensus over the Public-Private Distinction

- 45 The boundary between the public and the private was no longer defined according to ownership or wealth, but according to political criteria which were arbitrary and extremely malleable. In February 1950, the Public Health Commission of the Ruzyně city council came to the conclusion that one of the town's houses was not being properly maintained and decided "unanimously to notify the owner that unless he took care of his house correctly, the house would be nationalised."⁷⁶ Councillors as well as inhabitants referred to the idea of "appropriate individual behaviour" on a regular basis. The definition of what "appropriate" meant depended on "obedience to the collective rules." In December 1950, Mr Hašek required an authorisation to build a new beehive in his garden. The city council granted the authorisation "on condition that the claimant will provide his quota of honey."⁷⁷ In January 1950, the Stracha family requested permission to build a kitchen in their house. The Housing Committee endorsed the demand because "as far as the family's behaviour goes, it is fully engaged in the building of socialism" and "there is no objection on a technical level."⁷⁸
- 46 The lack of definition of "appropriate socialist behaviour" placed the individual in a position of uncertainty with catastrophic long-term consequences. A decline in initiative, a disinterest in work, and a denial of personal responsibility are only some aspects of the state-owned economy during this period. The confusion between the public and the private also led to mutual distrust between different actors intervening in public. The "toilets of the school were once again obstructed," noted Ruzyně city council in 1951. The town's representatives considered the incident of utmost importance "because it is a deliberate act against the National Committee."⁷⁹ Consequently, the socialist public sphere could not fulfil one of its leading roles: to pacify and to neutralise conflicts between different actors intervening in public. On the contrary, it strengthened divisions within the socialist society.

A Shift from Discussion to Management

- 47 Consecutive administrative reforms in post-war Czechoslovakia strengthened the participative character of power, especially on a local level. National Committees were designed to be the "organs of popular management" enabling local communities to decide on affairs involving them directly. The idea of the "government of the people," which was supposed to reinforce the alliance between elected representatives and citizens, was an original answer of People's Democracies to the issue of weakened community ties and disinterest in politics experienced both during the interwar period and the Second World War. Its objective was to create a strong political community which could make decisions and form strong public opinion. While visiting Ruzyně in 1950, the regional representative Jaroslav Pachman emphasized the spirit of a recent administrative reform: if access to communal affairs was previously "limited to those who paid taxes and complied with the regime, the working-class movement outdid all

these failings.” Thanks to a progressive expansion of their fields of intervention, National Committees were transformed into “a completely new and fair organ of popular management, one of the pillars on which we will build socialism.”⁸⁰ But how did the relationship between the state and other public actors evolve within these new institutions of people’s power?

- 48 The records of the city council of Ruzyně show that communication between citizens and representatives did not function. Eventually, the information went exclusively one way. The city council organised regular meetings with the population called “discussion with citizens (hovory s občany).” But despite the designation of these rendezvous, the real objective was not to debate local issues but to mobilise the population for different activities organised by the municipality or to inform it about the decisions of the representatives. In April 1952, one of the councillors “enlightened” the citizens on the meaning of the working campaign of “5M.” The comrade Kamen “asked” women to join the harvest and “claimed” that those who let chickens go to the fields would be denounced.⁸¹ The meetings were not often used to hear requests. Certainly, citizens rarely expressed their demands and when they did, they often touched on minor issues related to the neighbourhood. The town’s representatives regretted this situation. “The people should leave this timidity and give their opinions in public,” urged councillor Plešnerová in 1952. But such occasions were often recorded in quite impersonal terms – “it was demanded”; “the citizens formed a request,” etc. – showing that these demands were considered rather formally. If the representatives responded to a question, it was typically evasively. The context of generalised shortage and the limited resources at the Council’s disposal often worked to sweep the topic under the table.
- 49 And consecutive administrative reforms reduced interactions between representatives and electors even further. In order to meet its expanded field of responsibilities, the city council progressively transferred all discussions prior to decision-making from public meetings towards technical commissions from which the population was excluded. Proposals of these technical commissions were then simply presented and confirmed during public plenary meetings.⁸² In April 1956, during a city council public meeting, comrade Bulíčková complained about the paint in her flat peeling off. She was rebuked that representatives were no longer supposed to discuss these kinds of affairs in public.⁸³ The public was consequently ousted from the decision-making process. The public did not intervene in the deliberation anymore, unless members of the technical commissions decided otherwise. During plenary meetings, decisions were taken unanimously, and deliberations became hastier. Henceforth, the National Committees were described as “organs of state power and management,” represented by the elected representatives.⁸⁴ This process was interpreted as a proof of its enhanced efficiency.⁸⁵
- 50 Instead of being a place where opinions about the common good could be discussed, the socialist public sphere became a space of mobilisation and information. If there was any exchange, it became progressively ritualised.⁸⁶ On a local level, National Committees took in charge the organisation of socialist competition and different political events. On May Day or the anniversary of the October Revolution, the local community was mobilised via the town’s radio station.⁸⁷ The city council signed “socialist contracts” with citizens for community service, and the population was informed of its importance through mass organisations whose members sat in local administrations. On certain occasions such as the anniversary of the 1948 Communist coup d’état, city council meetings were

transformed into ritualised celebrations of the regime's values. All these symbolic actions were supposed to consolidate relations between community members.

- 51 In 1966, National Committees were redesigned in order to become "the most important mass organisation" and "the main actor organising socialist society."⁸⁸ The goal was no longer to take decisions, to form political community or to elaborate public opinion, but to mobilise the population. However, the absence of any common communication platform resulted in the population's disinterest in the councillors' work. In November 1952, during a discussion with the population, Ruzyně's municipal hall was half empty despite the fact that the meeting was announced on the town's radio, a notice had been posted in public, and personal invitations had been distributed by schoolchildren.⁸⁹ The city council chairman blamed "citizens' disinterest." Henceforth, movies at the local cinema opened with reminders about municipal meetings. But the situation did not improve and after 1953, "citizens' discussions" were simply removed from the agenda of municipal deliberations. They were replaced by a short fortnightly record, summarizing audience comments that might possibly occur during public meetings.
- 52 And elected representatives deserted the municipal public sphere as well. They attended deliberations less and less frequently, especially plenary sessions and different technical commissions. This absenteeism seemed comprehensible. If plenary sessions simply served to ratify the recommendations of different technical commissions, and if these commissions only confirmed decisions taken elsewhere, within the Communist Party or higher administrations, it made no sense to attend this sham of a public deliberation on the local level. In November 1952, four out of twenty of Ruzyně's council members apologised for their absence and another nine did not even bother to justify their absence.⁹⁰ In certain cases, the chairman was obliged to make decisions alone, which could "give the impression of interventionism."⁹¹
- 53 In order to promote participation, Ruzyně introduced an attendance record in March 1952. Henceforth, the chairman would "reprimand recurring absentees and if their behaviour did not improve, they would be replaced."⁹² These threats were reiterated several times and were eventually successful : in April 1953, all representatives were once again attending the plenary session.⁹³ But despite their presence, deliberations still remained purposeless : their voices counted as little as before.
- 54 From the end of the 1950s, with progressive de-Stalinisation and a certain liberalisation, discussions between representatives and the population seemed to reprise. Even if information remained focused on the work of city council, the population showed a new interest in its actions, and representatives perceived this. In January 1960, the population of Ruzyně demanded the municipality renew the meetings with citizens. The city council accepted, in the first instance, "every three months." Attendance was "considerable" and attendees expressed "deep satisfaction with the program and the tenure of the meeting which allowed better knowledge of the city council's actions."⁹⁴ From the close of the 1950s, National Committees regularly called on citizens to volunteer in local matters, better implicating the population in the development of the common good.⁹⁵ The same principle was applied when dealing with the lack of resources which was the everyday burden of local administrations. In 1956, Ruzyně's school needed a facelift. Due to lack of funding, the refurbishing was approved only for the interiors while the population carried out the work in voluntary working brigades.⁹⁶ The same principle was adopted in 1960 when canalisation was constructed in Karl Marx Street : the city council supplied only the material.⁹⁷

- 55 But this reconciliation between representatives and citizens was essentially the result of circumstances and not choice, and it did not stand the test of time. Contact between representatives and citizens declined progressively in the 1970s, despite declarations about the importance of close cooperation with local populations. A similar development occurred in other Soviet bloc countries. At the beginning of the 1970s, a Soviet representative spent on average 60 % of his working time in meetings and only 5 % with his electors.⁹⁸

Building the Idea of the Common Good

- 56 In Soviet-type regimes, differences in social standing were not officially recognised and the dominant social group, the working class, was largely favoured in public. Considering this situation, how did social groups whose very existence was not recognised in public manage to voice their opinions and to exist as autonomous political bodies ? One solution was to become more involved in structures proposed by the regime and to transform them into forums of discussion where issues relevant to each particular structure could be discussed. Trade unions which were entrusted with new social responsibilities could become places where public discussions concerning social benefits could take place. Working brigades which mobilised the workforce for the plan's fulfilment could become a platform where workers could discuss norms with management.⁹⁹ The Church continued organising the faithful could defend freedom of worship and, by extension, other civil liberties.¹⁰⁰ Dissident intellectuals lived and worked on the margins of artistic structures proposed by the regime whose existence was more or less recognised. But they could address citizens through foreign media such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. They lived and worked on the margins of artistic structures proposed by the regime whose existence was more or less recognised.¹⁰¹ The young, uncomfortable within an excessively formal Youth Union, formed informal groups offering more freedom and space for alternative opinions.¹⁰² They also let their hearts speak through other media such as popular music or fashion.¹⁰³
- 57 In Czechoslovakia, such as diversity of groups and opinions was more and more loudly claimed by sociologists and intellectuals during the 1960s, at the very moment when class antagonism was supposed to definitively vanish. A large debate opened in mass media and academic circles about the necessity to reconsider the classical division of society into three, non-antagonist classes, trying to rehabilitate the role of the intelligentsia and traditional cultural elites.¹⁰⁴ The Communist Party followed these discussions very closely and to a certain degree even encouraged them. And even the Communist Party could be a forum where certain level of criticism was possible, especially during the liberalisation of the 1960s.
- 58 Despite all efforts, socialist societies remained unequal and any social structure where the population lived, worked or entertained could potentially become an alternative public sphere because it was within these structures that the individual interacted with others and with the state. And their development was encouraged by the regime, especially within the working-class. Taking part in these alternative public spheres was not only a way for individuals and groups to elaborate political discourses but also to speak on their own and thus build a distinct social identity. In this way, they participated in maintaining a certain pluralism of cultures and social identities within socialist societies. Without being properly democratic, they could become potentially anti-establishment, and they

would largely play this role during the 1970s and 1980s. It is within these organisations that different protest movements were formed and through isolated initiatives challenged the eroding social structures of the regime.¹⁰⁵

- 59 The main difficulty of the socialist public sphere was that these multiple public discourses and social identities could not find common discursive arenas where they could communicate with each other and contribute to building an idea of the common good. The arenas which could possibly play this role, such as city councils or the mass media, were under the control of a single actor, the Communist Party, and dominated by its discourse. This did not allow enough values and ideas to be discussed freely and to reach a compromise.
- 60 Within the majority public sphere, communication between these groups became progressively more ritualised. On May Day 1952, Ruzyně city council received a postcard from a local school. The representatives were all very pleased and “decided unanimously to address their thanks to the school.” This exchange became a sort of tradition.¹⁰⁶ True exchange and a genuine dialogue vanished from this form of communication. It passed henceforth through a system of signs and symbols which diminished the significance of the message and channelled it towards a single objective, the consolidation of the socialist community. But in the absence of effective communication, members of the socialist community became more and more distant. The extremely normative character of the socialist public sphere strangled the dialogue between social actors and prevented them from building a genuine consensus on the idea of the common good. On the contrary, the socialist public sphere was seeking to impose its majority definition from the top. The lack of discussion did not allow the relationship between the state and the society to evolve, and the regime lost its capacity to adapt to social expectations. If this relationship evolved, it was often in an extremely conflicting way.¹⁰⁷

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- 61 In Czechoslovakia as well as in other Central and East European countries, the public sphere during in the post-war period ceased to be a space for dialogue. Population and property transfers before, during and after the Second World War, along with new logics of social stratification, guaranteed one actor, the party-state, a near-monopoly position in the public sphere. In the process of decision-making, one discourse overcame the others, and this situation favoured a top-down transmission of information instead of securing an exchange of opinions. Nationalisation and collectivisation led to extreme confusion between public and private interest and allowed the socialist community to define collective interest without taking into account the individual's interest. The conflict resulting from this process filled the public sphere with mutual distrust. Communication in public became increasingly ritualised, legitimating the dominant position of the party-state and guaranteeing the dissemination of the regime's new values to the population. The public sphere lost its capacity to serve as sounding board for its members' particular interests.
- 62 Marginalised or just tolerated groups engaged in other spaces where they could develop alternative discourses. But in the absence of a common sphere of discussion, these groups could not effectively communicate and could not develop a collective discourse about the common good. This process progressively isolated the actors intervening in the socialist

public sphere and deprived the political regime of the capacity to stay in touch with social transformations.

- 63 During the post-war period, the public sphere allowed the Czechoslovak People's Democracy to channel the expectations and demands of different political actors. But this unforced channelling transformed rapidly into an imposed one. The familiar forms of a public sphere, such as structures of deliberation or the vote, remained in place. But their significance progressively faded. On the local level, the deliberations of the city council shortened, the unanimous vote became standard, and elected representatives were all expected to join in official celebrations such as May Day. Genuine citizen's engagement was replaced by a simulacrum of public consent. By isolating the individual, the regime destroyed one of the main characteristics of citizens' community which lies in the communication between its members : a capacity to collectively define the idea of the common good.
- 64 Considering that the socialist public sphere did not fulfil the expectations of all its members, it is important to understand why it survived so long. The micro-level analysis demonstrates that under certain conditions, the population adapted to the new situation and even contributed to maintain it. The first was that this form of public sphere provided them with a minimum of social services. Local representatives succeeded in defending the interest of their community in contact with the Communist Party and the state, even if the context of a generalised shortage made it progressively more difficult. The socialist public sphere also provided several safety nets. The regime became progressively more tolerant towards the existence of certain spheres where marginalised groups could voice their opinions and express their discontent, on the condition that they did not aspire to wider social mobilisation. A kind of compromise was progressively reached : the regime knew that it did not stir up enthusiasm and that it was only tolerated while the population knew that they were relatively sheltered from the regime's repressive interference on the condition that they respected pre-defined limits. On this basis, the population developed a certain level of tolerance of the regime, proportional to the fact that the regime was not perceived as systematically oppressive. The socialist public sphere became a theatre where this compromise was negotiated. It did not, however, succeeded in elaborating an idea of the common good.

NOTES

1. This article is based on author's recent book *Réinventer le monde : L'espace et le temps en Tchécoslovaquie communiste* (P. : Publications de la Sorbonne, 2014). It was prepared as part of the LabEx Tepsis project supported by the Pres Hesam (ANR-11-LABX-0067) and the French National Research Agency - Investments d'Avenir - Paris Nouveaux Mondes (ANR-11-IDEX-0006-02). It received generous support from The Aleksanteri Institute of the University of Helsinki, Finland, and from the Centre de recherches internationales (CERI) - Sciences Po. The author would also like to thank Nadège Ragaru and the peer reviewers for their feedback.

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8. In addition to previously cited works, see also Jürgen Habermas, *La Théorie de l'agir communicationnel* (P.: Fayard, 1987).
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22. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 1/15, Schůze pléna MNV, 20.5.1945.
23. Ibid., 19.5.1945.
24. Ibid., 12.9.1945.
25. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 1/17, Schůze pléna MNV, 5.9.1947.
26. Ibid., 30.9.1947.
27. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 1/17, Schůze pléna MNV, Protest [Protestation], 1947.
28. Ibid., 11.12.1947.
29. This statement needs to be qualified. The level of wealth as the leading criterion giving access to the public sphere became less important during the 19th century with the reforms of census and a progressive extension of access to the vote, despite the fact that the most European countries granted the universal suffrage only during the 20th century.
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33. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 1/18, Schůze pléna MNV, 11.10.1948.
34. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 1/25, Zasedání pléna a hovory s občany [Plenary Meetings and Discussions with the Citizens], 19.4.1952.
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37. AHMP, f. OÚ-MNV Ruzyně, 4/46, Zasedání rady MNV [The Meeting of the Board of the City Council] , 25.4.1950.

38. Merta, Pražské národní výbory a jejich úloha, 15.
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ABSTRACTS

The concept of a “public sphere” is generally considered inapplicable to Soviet-type regimes because they neither extended adequate protection to private property nor guaranteed political pluralism. Nevertheless, even under such regimes, people communicated about issues of the common good. This article analyses the mechanisms for public debate on the local level. It is based on a case study of the city council of Ruzyně, a town on the outskirts of Prague, Czechoslovakia, during the 1950s. First, it considers how the Second World War transformed the very nature of a citizens’ community and emphasized its proletarian character. This contributed to a new equilibrium between the public and the private and determined how common and individual interests were negotiated. As the party-state gained a dominant position in the public sphere, communication practices evolved and made the elaboration of the idea of the common good more difficult.

Il est généralement considéré que le concept d'espace public ne s'applique pas aux régimes de type soviétique puisque la propriété privée n'y bénéficiait pas d'une protection suffisante et que le pluralisme politique n'y était pas garanti. Toutefois, même dans ce type de régime, les populations échangeaient sur les sujets d'intérêt général. Cet article analyse les mécanismes de débat public au niveau local. Il s'appuie sur une étude de cas, les délibérations au sein du conseil municipal de Ruzyně, une commune des environs de Prague, dans les années 1950. Il étudie d'abord comment la Seconde Guerre mondiale transforma la nature de la communauté citoyenne et accentua son caractère prolétaire. Ce nouveau contexte contribua à redéfinir l'équilibre entre la sphère privée et la sphère publique et à modifier la façon dont l'intérêt général et l'intérêt personnel se négociaient. Lorsque l'État-parti acquit une position dominante dans l'espace public, les pratiques de communication évoluèrent et rendirent plus difficile l'élaboration de la notion d'intérêt général.

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