

Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Eastern Europe: An Inquiry

*by Václav Benda, Milan Šimečka, Ivan M. Jirous, Jiří Dienstbier, Václav Havel,
Ladislav Hejránek and Jan Šimsa*

Ladislav Hejránek

1. The terms "independent activity," "independent community," and "independent society" are in common use in both the West and the East, but of course the meanings are different. In societies under so-called "real socialism", where everything citizens do in the political sphere (in the widest sense) is centrally organized, directed, and monitored, the term "independent" suggests an enterprise that is undertaken with no inducement from "above," that has not been officially approved and for which no official or functionary bears any "responsibility" to the state or the party. This is also why the representatives of such "independent" communities or groups are dealt with exclusively by the police.

At first sight it is obvious that the word comes from the sphere of political jargon, but also that no one understands "independence" literally. And rightly so: no individual or group or community is, or can be, literally "independent," that is, in the absolute sense of the word. It is always necessary to define that "independence" more closely, that is, to determine from whom or from what a given individual or group feels itself, or desires itself, to be independent.

With this, it becomes clearer just how regrettably negative the actual content of the word "independent" is. "Free" is a far more appropriate word, because it faces both ways: we may ask what someone is free of or from, but we may also ask what we are free *for*. This is a matter of fundamental importance. We may free ourselves from some of the things that bind us, but our "liberation from" must be justified by our aims, the things for which we tried to and in fact were compelled to liberate ourselves.

It is significant that, especially in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there is a broad consensus about what we don't want and what we wish to free ourselves from, what we wish to be finally independent of. Very few, however, remember not only that freedom and independence cost something, but especially that every instance of independence and freedom must be justified by accepting higher obligations.

2. When we speak not merely of independent activities or communities but of an independent society, this has another context and another background. Perhaps very few people are still aware of this—particularly in our country—but part of the democratic tradition is the belief—a rather theoretical and abstract belief—that the state has been created by society for organizing and structuring its various interests and activities. In this view, the state is the creation of society and not society's master. Historically, however, as we well know, greater and greater amounts of

social power have become concentrated in the state, both in its military and policing components, and in its bureaucratic structures as well. The state separates itself from society and ultimately, by attempting to control it in its own way, it ends up opposing society.

A program for an "independent society" means an effort on the part of society to win back all its rights and freedoms, so that society, once again, will decide what its state will be like, and not the other way around, with the state regulating society and its life. In practical terms, society can achieve this by imposing certain limits on the state and its bureaucrats, beyond which any intervention by the state in society would not merely be considered outside its competence but actually illegal. Of course, if the law is to be respected by the state and its organs, society has to be able to establish these limits directly, without the intervention and influence of the state organs themselves (in free elections), but it must also be able to monitor the state's regard for those laws and prosecute any contravention of them (in free courts of law). It is traditional, in this sense, to talk about the separation of powers. Although the whole problem has not to this day been solved, either theoretically or practically, democratic societies already function more or less in this sense, even though at times this functioning (or rather dysfunctioning) has called forth more than one wave of protest. But protests by the citizens and their organizations are precisely one of the means whereby society protects or renews its independence from the illegitimate demands of the state and its organs.

The call for independence in societies in the Soviet sphere of influence, in contrast to democratic societies, would seem to be entirely unreal, even Utopian.

Nevertheless, these societies began with the conception of a limitation, even a suppression, of the role of the state that derived from the democratic conviction that the state exists for society and not the other way around. The party was supposed to ensure that the aspirations of the state to power did not overwhelm its positive function, and it was to have been a guardian of the freedom (and therefore of the independence) of society. In practice, of course, not only was the state bureaucracy not limited, it grew larger and blended with the newly created party bureaucracy, so that the notion of any social control of the state became quite illusory. In Czechoslovakia, there is a further anomaly that represents an extreme situation even in the conditions of real socialism: after the intervention of 1968, the new party leadership became so dependent on the Kremlin that it lost touch not only with the mass of its own members (a large proportion of whom it purged, altogether to the detriment of the party) but even with a majority of middle- and upper-echelon bureaucrats and with the party apparatus.

It would seem, therefore, that the call for an "independent society" in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe means a demand that society be given back its rights, and at the same time that the demands of the party and the state be limited. Practically, this means a gradual democratization of society, accompanied by a more vigilant formulation of the laws, one that does not allow an arbitrary

interpretation of them that is usually hidden behind the mask of a "party-mindedness" in the way they are applied. Above all, this guarantees a constant expansion of the room available for free initiatives and activities, the importance of which in the development of society decreases with increasing state and party regulation. A society that would be independent of the state and the party must be able to live in its own way, and that means a pluralism of culture, opinion, and intellectual and spiritual life.

3. Under existing conditions, independent activity (and in time, perhaps even organizations) can be directed toward only very limited and therefore transitional, temporary goals. This is why Charter 77 did not formulate any long-term social goals, and in particular, why it did not declare itself to be a political opposition. It made use of the exceptional fact that our government, because it depends on its alliance with the Soviet Union (like the other countries in our bloc), accepted the obligations of the Helsinki Accord, which gave such initiatives a vitally important legal justification. Our state undertook to protect human rights and freedoms, and, by ratifying them, it also enshrined in its own laws the two international covenants on human rights. Charter 77, through its first spokesmen, welcomed this and at the same time pointed out that (1) *pacta sunt servanda*, that is, every state, or more particularly every government, is bound to obey its own laws, just as every citizen is (it often happened, of course, that many civil servants not only did not keep to these laws, but frequently broke them, sometimes without being aware of it, because they did not know them and were guided instead by what they called their "class instincts"); and (2) all the existing laws must be interpreted from here on in a manner that will not be in conflict with the new Law No. 120/76, and should this prove impossible in some cases, then the old wording of a law must be changed and brought up to date, something the Czechoslovak state also undertook to do when it ratified the two pacts. It must be admitted that Charter 77 has not registered any major concrete victories in this regard, for so far no law has been revised because it has not conformed with Law No. 120, nor has any court case been won by basing arguments on this statute.

Moreover, since the ratification of the pacts, new laws have been passed that contradict them both in the spirit and in the letter (for example, the law pertaining to universities). Still, one thing is obvious to anyone with eyes to see: the situation has slowly but obviously changed, and some things that were unthinkable before 1977 have, thanks to the activities of Charter 77, VONS, and several other groups, been realized and sustained, and it can even be said that to a certain extent the officials have become used to this. Of course, the movement toward a genuine (and not just declared) normalization is extremely slow and many are dissatisfied by this slowness. It can only be hoped that today, at a time when the party and state leadership is going through a period of uncertainty, developments in the right direction will accelerate somewhat.

The most immediate aim of independent activity in this country is, in addition to those mentioned above, the continual, gradual growth and development of the widest variety of initiatives and activities on the part of individuals and groups, for which the ratification of the pacts on human rights provides both the moral basis and the legal justification. The more individuals and small groups take this responsibility and risk upon themselves, the more people here will be prepared for more substantial and far-reaching responsibilities, including political responsibility.

4. Those with the greatest interest in applying the pacts on human rights today belong to the humanistic intelligentsia: artists, scholars in the humanities, journalists, lawyers, philosophers, translators, editors, those who work in publishing houses, etc. They represent a small percentage of the population, although their importance is not insignificant. To this must be added members of the church and religious groups, which are, unfortunately, more significant in quantity than in quality. These two groups, or rather parts of society, are of unequal size and, alas, are not very close to each other. It may even be said that they often mistrust each other.

This is because the intelligentsia, to a considerable extent, has abandoned its general social mission and become a victim of its own specialization. The wide masses of the population have once again lost respect for intellectuals because they have been frequently let down by them, and they turn to them only in technical matters. I think it might fairly be said that had it not been for the "crisis of the intelligentsia" or the *trahison des clercs*, the cultural catastrophe that has marked our national history for at least several decades might never have happened.

I would say, therefore, that all independent activity should, as a long-range goal, look for ways to contribute to the regeneration of our cultural and intellectual life. Because such a regeneration is possible only in the form of free initiatives undertaken by individuals and small groups who are willing to sacrifice something in the interest of higher aims and values. especially in the name of truth, it may be said that the short-term and long-term goals and aims of free, independent activities, and ultimately of an independent society, need not stand in contradiction or be in conflict, but rather can support each other and give one another greater strength.

Ultimately, independence makes sense only as independence from lies and violence, injustice and lawlessness—and this in the name of truth, law, and justice. Independence in and of itself quickly becomes vacuous and meaningless. Independence and attempts to establish it must therefore be sustained by an idea, a positive idea, a program. Freedom makes sense only if we release it from the enslavement of meaningless matters, so that we can devote ourselves entirely to something supreme, important, and decisive. The main problem facing independent activities and an independent society is defining the aims of such freedom and independence. The beginning of all independence is taking our lives seriously,

deciding for something that is worth taking responsibility for, being prepared to devote our energy, our work, and our lives to something of value, or, more appropriately, to someone rather than something. Independence (and freedom as well) is not a condition or a beginning but a consequence and an end for someone who dedicates his entire life to the service of others or the service of something humanly significant. Therefore it seems to me that the main long-range goal of independent initiatives and activities should be a renewal of the general awareness that there are far more important things than personal or group advantage. Above all, truth, justice, and law must be respected—and then freedom and independence will follow as a direct consequence.

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