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*But they're threatening and cursing us!*  
 A study of the complaints and notices sent in by Czechoslovak citizens during Czechoslovakia's perestroika

The following study represents the first results of a research project entitled *The Moving Frontiers of Dictatorship in the Light of Complaints and Anonymous Letters from Czechoslovak Citizens between 1948 and 1989*,<sup>1</sup> which conceives of complaints not merely as a “soft” stabilizer of dictatorial domination,<sup>2</sup> but a remarkable and in fact the most intensive interaction between the organs of state power and its citizens, which gradually grew into a culture of complaint, a culture which – according to the British historian Mary Fulbrook – can be characterised by the acquisition of a specific language and discursive competences, allowing the use of official ideological promises to advance their own interests.<sup>3</sup> This area of research, upon which the author has been working for some time and the result of which is currently being processed, is becoming increasingly relevant, as it offers a number of suggestions for analysis of the winding path through the communist dictatorship of Czechoslovakia/The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (Československá socialistická republika, ČSSR), about which the sociologist Karel Hrubý<sup>4</sup> recently wrote so concisely.

The changing political situation caused by Mikhail Gorbachev's appointment as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1985, coupled with increasing economic, environmental and social problems, led not only to a gradual awakening from lethargy in society, but also forced the Czechoslovak leadership to begin its own process of perestroika – restructuring the country's political and economic system while naturally maintaining the leading role of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ). In an effort to mitigate the growing signs of an acute crisis of legitimacy, the KSČ leadership paid increased attention to complaints and notices sent in by citizens, the content and form of which show that this *barometer of social deficits*, as it

1 This study was created as part of a research project of the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (GA 19-02794S).

2 ELSNER, Steffen H.: Flankierende Stabilisierungsmechanismen diktatorischer Herrschaft. Das Eingabenwesen in der DDR. In: BOYER, Christoph – SKYBA, Peter: *Repression und Wohlstandsversprechen. Zur Stabilisierung von Parteiherrschaft in der DDR und der ČSSR*. Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, Dresden 1999, pp. 75–86.

3 FULBROOK, Mary: *The People's State. East German Society from Hitler to Honecker*. Yale University Press, New Haven – London 2008, pp. 283–284.

4 HRUBÝ, Karel: *Cesty komunistickou diktaturou. Kritické studie a eseje* (Journeys through the Communist Dictatorship. Critical Studies and Essays). Argo – ÚSD AV ČR, Prague 2018.

was characterised in September 1988 by the Czech National Council (Česká Národní rada, ČNR) deputy Olga Koukalová, a rapporteur on the ČNR's constitutional law committee, augured a period of great turbulence in Czechoslovak society.<sup>5</sup> This work is based on the results of primary research conducted in the National Archives, the Archive of the Office of the President of the Republic, the Archive of the Chamber of Deputies, the All-Union Archive, the Archive of Czech Television and last but not least the Security Services Archive, as well as expert literature and period publications (newspaper *Rudé právo*).

### Citizens' complaints as a "soft" stabiliser of power and an overflowing well of information

Before 1989, the right to "constructive criticism" was repeatedly highlighted as an integral part of the socialist democratic system. The organs of the state and financial administrations were required to receive and ensure the correct and timely handling of complaints and notices from all workers without the threat of either direct or indirect sanction, and the Government Decree of October 1958, which was applied throughout the period of "normalisation", explicitly prohibited (§ 7, letter 4) a complaint being examined or resolved by the organisation against which it was directed.<sup>6</sup> Last but not least, according to the Communist Party's own statutes, each member was obliged and entitled to apply and develop criticism of the Party, to fight against its suppression and to draw attention to shortcomings that damaged Party and state interests.<sup>7</sup> In practice, however, this process was substantially removed from the legal amendment, and neither did the constitutionally enshrined right to *petition councils and state bodies with proposals, suggestions and complaints*<sup>8</sup> do anything to change this. Recurring calls for citizens to report to the authorities those who were damaging the national economy, whether through widespread theft of socialist property, non-

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- 5 *Archiv Poslanecké sněmovny* (Archive of the Chamber of Deputies, hereafter referred to as APS), Fund (hereafter referred to as F.) ČNR, Ústavně právní výbor (Constitutional law committee, hereafter referred to as ÚPV), inv. j. (Inventory unit) 123, Zápis z 25. schůze ústavně právního výboru ČNR konané 6. 9. 1988 (Minutes of the 25th meeting of the ČNR's constitutional law committee held on September 6, 1988), p. 3.
- 6 Vládní vyhláška č. 150/1958 Úředního listu (hereafter referred to as Ú. l.) z 11. 10. 1958, o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů pracujících (Government Decree No. 150/1958 of the Official Gazette) from October 11, 1958 on the handling of complaints, comments and suggestions of workers.
- 7 Stanovy Komunistické strany Československa schválené XII. sjezdem KSČ dne 8. prosince 1962, doplněné a upravené XIII. sjezdem KSČ dne 4. června 1966, XIV. sjezdem KSČ dne 29. května 1971 (Statutes of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia approved at the Twelfth Congress of the KSČ on December 8, 1962, supplemented and modified by the Thirteenth Congress of the KSČ on June 4, 1966 and the Fourteenth Congress of the KSČ on May 29, 1971). *XIV. sjezd Komunistické strany Československa* (The Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia). Svoboda, Prague 1971, pp. 631–632.
- 8 Článek 29, Ústavní zákon ze dne 11. července 1960 č. 100/1960 Sb., Ústava Československé socialistické republiky (Article 29, Constitutional Act of July 11, 1960 No. 100/1960 Coll., Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic) – see [https://www.psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution\\_1960.html](https://www.psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution_1960.html) (quoted version dated 24. 4. 2020).

-observance of working hours, or “fulfilling the Five Year Plan in pencil only”, was greeted with a certain public response, but it fell far short of the regime’s expectations. On the contrary, the growing number of complaints and notices, of which a significant number were anonymous, shows that the Party leadership failed to adequately respond to what was frequently constructive criticism; in other words, it was chronically incapable of removing the causes that led to these manifestations of the regime’s dysfunction – about which so many people complained so vociferously.

In the eyes of the Party leadership, the complaints were supposed to fulfil several functions, the first of which became topical during the period of perestroika, which received considerable media attention. Referring to the conclusions of the Seventeenth Communist Party Congress of March 1986, which emphasised initiative and activity of workers in the process of accelerating economic and social development, complaints were to encourage workers’ participation in the management of the national economy and contribute to their involvement leading to the elimination of criticised shortcomings and the improvement of work in all areas of social life.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, the increase of complaints was largely welcomed as a manifestation of the citizenry’s rising confidence in the state authorities and their willingness to participate in the implementation of KSČ policy. Not only on the pages of *Rudé právo* were complaints presented as a tool of permanent and immediate connection with the masses.<sup>10</sup> Many complainants indeed highlighted social inconveniences and problems, but the majority promoted their own personal interest and commented on the social situation only when it pertained to this interest. In areas where criticism was entirely justified – supply of goods, the environment, housing – correspondents soon began reaching the limits of what was possible in a centrally planned economy, something which substantially deviated from a public barometer of citizens’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction to the detriment of the regime.<sup>11</sup>

The fateful mistake of the Party leadership was that it raised expectations in people that it could not hope to satisfy. The aforementioned British historian has pointed out that it was precisely an attempt to rule not just against, but through society that brought the East German dictatorship to its knees.<sup>12</sup> The situation was similar in Czechoslovakia, where in the second half of the 1980s the potential for criticism in society grew significantly, and the originally stabilising function of complaints,

9 *Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky* (Archive of the Office of the President of the Republic, hereafter referred to as AKPR), f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky (Office of the President of the Republic, hereafter referred to as KPR) – nezpracováno (unprocessed), protokol (protocol) 600,000, č. j. (Ref. No.) 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1988), p. 1.

10 (RP): Kolik podnětů, kolik zkušeností! (How Many Suggestions, How Much Experience!). *Rudé právo*, 8. 6. 1987, p. 1.

11 (RP): Veřejný barometr (A Public Barometer). *Rudé právo*, 17. 11. 1986, p. 1.

12 FULBROOK, Mary: Methodische Überlegungen zu einer Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR. In: BESSEL, Richard – JESSE, Ralph: *Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1996, pp. 274–297, here p. 292.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

which for many years had served as a kind of pressure valve, ultimately contributed to the destabilisation of the regime. The official media repeatedly presented the complaints as *a mirror of the mood of the people*.<sup>13</sup> The Party leadership, it seems, were not very pleased at what they saw. In this respect, a speech by the General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee Miloš Jakeš at a meeting of the presidium of the Federal Assembly (Federální shromáždění, FS) in early November 1988, which discussed analysis of the complaints and notices made throughout 1987, was significant. After a rather pessimistic speech by František Ondříček, Chairman of the People's Control Committee (Výbor lidové kontroly, VLK), who admitted among other things that more than four thousand repeated complaints, 30 % of which were legitimate, represented a serious problem, Vladimír Vedra, Chairman of the Federal Assembly's House of the People (Sněmovna lidu, SL) took to the microphone to complain that the media were focusing too heavily on complaints of shortcomings and weaknesses in the economy, which he said could confuse people. This was followed by the Communist Party leader Miloš Jakeš with the following words: *Yes, there are shortcomings, but we cannot make this a fundamental question, thus forcing on people the idea that socialism is worthless. They're not complaining; we're forcing them to complain. [...] [It is] full of [positive] things, but they're hardly mentioned, everything is painted black. In this sense, we will have to act and explain to the media the need to adopt a fair attitude.*<sup>14</sup>

However, the complaints also fulfilled a certain "signalling and informative function" and constituted an "inexhaustible pool of information" both of which were to be used by both Party and state authorities to address the country's most pressing problems. It should be added that a number of socio-political measures were indeed carried out to meet the demands of the complainants. Nevertheless, all the analysis from the period points to numerous shortcomings in attempts to rectify the complaints; the actions taken often took into account only specific cases and did not address the broader aspect of the phenomena under criticism, leading to frequent recurrence of complaints about the same set of issues. In their analysis of complaints sent in from citizens of the Czech Socialist Republic (Česká socialistická republika, ČSR) in 1986, the authors pointed to *permanent shortcomings*, due, among other things, to the frequent staff turnover and overformal approach of many officials. In general, complaints were only evaluated after a long period of time, which made it impossible to use the complaints operatively to influence the undesirable situation and thus prevent its recurrence.<sup>15</sup> In justifying the insufficient use of complaints to remedy the criticised phenomena, one often comes across the same effort to "objec-

13 (RP): Pozornost oprávněným připomínkám (Attention to Justified Comments). *Rudé právo*, 22. 1. 1986, p. 1.

14 APS, f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno (Federal Assembly – fifth electoral term – unprocessed), 17. schůze Předsednictva FS (17th meeting of the FS Presidium), 9. 11. 1988, pp. 45–46.

15 Ibid., f. ČNR – V. volební období (Czech National Council – fifth electoral term), inv. j. 115, Závěry z rozboru o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů orgány a organizacemi České socialistické republiky v roce 1986, červen 1987 (Conclusions from the analysis of complaints, notices and suggestions of citizens by the authorities and organisations of the Czech Socialist Republic in 1986, June 1987), not dated further, p. 4.

tify the causes” – a strategy adopted by the late socialist managers of Czechoslovak state enterprises to explain their failure to meet the targets of the Plan. According to the Interior Minister of the Czech Republic Josef Jung, this led to the fact that *the adopted measures often do not aim to eliminate the root causes of justified criticism, but only to modify or mitigate their harmful consequences*.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the media presentation of the complaints system as a means of protecting the guaranteed rights and interests of citizens, in practice they were viewed more as *a means of monitoring the work of the state and economic authorities and organisations*, which would help to eliminate negative phenomena in society and thereby increase the workers’ participation in management and administration.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the complaints and notices from the late 1980s indicate that the regime was not very successful in its attempt to use the complaints as yet another link in the control chain, or rather it was unable to exploit the suggestions that were being made. For the complainants, the procedure was often the last and relatively safe way of defending their interests; a means of expressing, often anonymously, disillusionment with the reality of day-to-day life in late socialist Czechoslovakia. In analysing the complaints filed by East German citizens, the American historian Jonathan Zatin came to the conclusion that *the petition system failed as an instrument of political control*, partly due to *the maze of administrative inertia and bureaucratic recalcitrance*, which often sorely tested complainants’ nerves and patience.<sup>18</sup> *We have employees of the L[ocal]N[ational]C[ommittee]* (Místní Národní Výbor, MNV), as one woman from Staňkovice in the Louny region complained to the General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Central Committee in June 1989 for example, *who never fail to take out their irritation on frightened citizens*.<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubt that the slow speed with which the complaints were answered *shook people’s confidence in the socialist community*.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, criticism of delays, incomplete responses, failure to comply with the measures taken, “efforts to avoid conflict”

16 Ibid., inv. j. 175, Zpráva o hlavních poznatcích z vyřízených stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů národními výbory a jimi řízenými vybranými organizacemi v roce 1986, květen 1987 (Report on the main findings from the handling of complaints, notices and suggestions from citizens by national committees and selected organisations managed by them in 1986, May 1987), not dated further, p. 10.

17 Ibid., inv. j. 108, Podklad pro zpravodajskou zprávu ke zprávě o hlavních poznatcích ze stížností, podnětů a oznámení občanů a organizací došlých České národní radě v roce 1986 (Basis for the report on the main findings of complaints, suggestions and notices of citizens and organisations received by the Czech National Council in 1986), 22. 4. 1987.

18 ZATLIN, Jonathan R.: *The currency of socialism. Money and political culture in East Germany*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 289 and 297.

19 *Národní archiv* (The National Archives, hereafter referred to as NA), f. KSČ – Ústřední výbor 1945–1989, předsednictvo 1986–1989 (KSČ – Central Committee 1945–1989, Presidium 1986–1989, hereafter referred to as KSČ-ÚV-02/1), sv. (Vol.) P 125/89, k informaci (info) 7, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 30. června 1989, červenec 1989 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the General Secretary of the KSČ Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from June 1 to June 30, 1989, July 1989), not dated further, p. 5.

20 KRAKOVSKÝ, Roman: *State and society in communist Czechoslovakia. Transforming the everyday from World War II to the fall of the Berlin Wall*. I. B. Tauris, London – New York 2018, p. 128.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

and officials' attempts to pass the complaint on to a different department run right through most of the analysis of complaints and notices during the period covered. Moreover, the documents show that even in the issue of determining the justifiability of complaints, the state authorities often found themselves unsure as how to answer. For example, in October 1986, Federal Assembly Chairman Alois Indra admitted that *the data on justified complaints may not be quite accurate either, because we still do not have a reliable way of measuring the objectivity of investigations conducted by lower authorities, and many complaints rejected as unjustified might in fact be justified, but we find ourselves unable to untangle the ball of string that gets tangled around these things.*<sup>21</sup> In fact, often the responsible official was fully aware that the complainant had made entirely legitimate demands – on the supply of goods, the environment, housing, public transport – but could not give a satisfactory response due to the unfavourable economic situation and, in addition, had to choose extremely prudent or meaningless language in justifying the decision to reject the complaint. A question remains as to the extent of official nervousness at the increasing criticism and openness of complaints made by workers of various Party, state and trade union bodies. However, when in March 1988 the President of the Republic himself was forced to intervene directly to obtain a telephone line for a disabled pensioner who had applied for it more than twenty years previously, socialism was unlikely to be viewed with great confidence by the official concerned.<sup>22</sup> Some letters to the General Secretary of the Central Committee suggest that a certain disillusionment was undoubtedly spreading amongst ordinary members of the Communist Party. *We have to admit*, as an Ostrava member of the Communist Party wrote to Miloš Jakeš in April 1989, *that we have long since lost the moral right to lead our society and our people.*<sup>23</sup>

In the light of the evolution of complaints and notices, it is unsurprising that in the second half of the 1980s significant steps were taken to improve the handling of complaints and submissions, which the competent authorities hoped would not only reduce the overall number – especially of anonymous submissions – but also better use the information gained to rectify at least the gravest shortcomings. In an effort to streamline the work of complaints in the field of trade union bodies, for example, in January 1988 the Secretariat of the Central Trade Union Council (Ústřední rada odborů, ÚRO) discussed a proposal for a sociological survey aimed at deeper analysis of the content of individual comments and simultaneously to reflect the more general context of their causes. The authors were following up on a similar survey from

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- 21 APS, f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 3. schůze Předsednictva FS (3rd meeting of the FS Presidium), 14. 10. 1986, p. 99.
- 22 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600000, č. j. 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988, únor 1989 (Report on evaluation of complaints and other letters received by the President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Office of the President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in 1988, February 1989), not dated further, p. 47.
- 23 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 116/89, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 30. dubna 1989, květen 1989 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the General Secretary of the KSČ Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from April 1 to April 30, 1989, May 1989), not dated further, p. 10.

1983, which focused mainly on procedural and technical/organisational work with complaints. Ideologically, the new intent was conceived as an answer to the strategy of accelerating socio-economic development following the Seventeenth Congress of the Communist Party (March 1986), which decided that deepening socialist democracy and increasing public initiatives were imperative. In this context, processing the suggestions of workers had according to the strategy acquired *a new dimension*, as they had become an important indicator of the ability of trade union bodies to *develop and support the dialectically related processes of intensifying and democratizing our society, with the aim of maximizing its subjective actors*.<sup>24</sup> The aim was on one hand to discover to what extent the complaints and suggestions reflected various social problems, whilst on the other to identify their political, economic, social and cultural causes and, last but not least, to assess the quality of the work of the trade union bodies with the comments they received. It proved that numerous shortcomings persisted, and that there was a failure to distinguish between mere criticism of certain phenomena – wage conditions, the principle of merit, the working environment – and efforts to actively contribute towards remedying them. Thus, two ways of dealing with complaints and suggestions persisted within the trade union bodies. In the first case, the suggestions were accepted and officials often showed an informal interest in the complainant's needs. But there were still a considerable number of trade union workers who overlooked them, postponed their solutions, and did not allow them to be adequately used in the work of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement (Revoluční odborové hnutí, ROH).<sup>25</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, the calls for a new legal framework to govern the issue of complaints and suggestions were increasing, as the Government Decree from October 1958 was deemed by many to be outdated and not meeting the requirements of perestroika. In May 1988, the VLK ČSSR began sketching out the outline of a political-legal analysis of an act on citizens' proposals, initiatives and complaints, which would respond adequately to the need to involve citizens in the process of enacting far-reaching social change. The authors welcomed the fact that in the period between 1981 and 1987, more than 950,000 complaints, notices and submissions were handled in Czechoslovakia. Perestroika, however, required that the constitutional right of citizens to turn to various state authorities be developed in a "socially desirable direction" and to contribute as far as possible to the protection of their rights and legitimate interests, as well as to the consolidation of good discipline and socialist lawfulness. However, this objective could only be achieved by extending and improving citizens' awareness of issues related to their life and work, including knowledge

24 *Všedoborový archiv* (All-Union Archive), f. Sekretariát Ústřední rady odborů (Secretariat of the Central Trade Union Council, hereafter referred to as S-ÚRO), inv. j. 658/2010, Návrh dotazníku sociologického výzkumu „Způsob, úroveň a účinnost práce s připomínkami pracujících v odborových orgánech a její odraz v názorech, postojích a aktivitě členů ROH“, Příloha IIa – Ideové pojetí výzkumu (Draft sociological research questionnaire “Method, level and efficiency of work with comments of workers in trade union bodies and its reflection in opinions, attitudes and activities of ROH members”, Annex IIa – Ideological concept of research), undated, p. 7.

25 *Ibid.*, Příloha I – Informační zpráva (Annex I – Information report), p. 3.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

of the relevant legislation. In addition, it was necessary to create a social atmosphere in which people could express themselves openly to all problems, without it creating negative consequences for them. The aforementioned decree of October 1958, according to the authors of the outline, had proved its worth in the previous period, but in the current conditions it no longer fulfilled its mission because it lacked legal force and concentrated mainly on the procedural side of complaint handling, which failed to adequately take into account the aim of creating a situation, in which the rights of citizens would also serve to consolidate and develop socialist society. In addition, it did not (according to the VLK) contribute to increasing the efficiency of complaints, as it forced economic and state authorities to investigate and respond to those initiatives, whose implementation did not bring society the desired effect.<sup>26</sup>

The outline was subsequently discussed and regularly added to, as can be seen for example from an operational consultation with the main inspectors of the VLK ČSSR in February 1989, where it was stated, among other things, that the political-legal analysis of the need to issue a complaints law still lacked wider political, material and factual justification that would present a complaint as an important tool for the development of socialist democracy. The proposals made by the participants reveal a clear effort to streamline the complaints system into a politically desirable direction, but they also contain tendencies towards liberalisation, repeatedly highlighting *the need to protect the complainant* from any reprisal taken by those facing criticism and to take account of each citizen's point of view. The new legislation was presented primarily as a necessary prerequisite for strengthening the people's confidence in the Communist Party's policies and the authorities of the socialist state. At the same time, the public was supposed to be informed that *the majority of the complaints are directed against the violation of socialist lawfulness, pointing to manifestations of inefficiency, damage to socialist property and various forms of theft [...] that citizens are making extensive use of the complaints to raise awareness of shortcomings in the supply of goods, the work of commercial bodies, health care, the environment and working conditions, transport, culture and other areas.*<sup>27</sup>

In May 1989, the VLK discussed a new "Outline for a political and legal analysis of the need for an Act on Proposals, Initiatives and Complaints of Citizens and Voluntary Social Organisations", which – according to the author Dr Vítězslav Pýš – represented an *institute of complaints*, from the citizen's point of view *an informal means of defence, disagreement and comment*, and from society's point of view *an important signalling element that draws attention to existing, increasing or, on the contrary, decreasing negative phenomena and problems.*<sup>28</sup> Following the previous debate, the document also stated

26 NA, f. Výbor lidové kontroly ČSSR (ČSSR People's Control Committee, hereafter referred to as VLK ČSSR) 1203, k. (Box) 31, Politicko-právní analýza potřeby vydání zákona o návrzích, podnětech a stížnostech občanů a dobrovolných společenských organizací (A political and legal analysis of the need for an Act on Proposals, Initiatives and Complaints of Citizens and Voluntary Social Organisations), 12. 5. 1988.

27 Ibid., k. 32, Závěry č. 5 z operativní porady s hlavními kontrolory Výboru lidové kontroly ČSSR konané dne 24. 2. 1989 (Conclusions No. 5 from an operative meeting with the main inspectors of the People's Control Committee held on February 24, 1989), pp. 2–3.

28 Ibid., k. 33, Nástin politicko-právní analýzy vydání zákona o stížnostech, oznámeních a podnětech



the Government Decree of 1958 did not meet the needs of the times, as it did not create suitable space for citizens' initiatives and activity and, above all, did not ensure the permanent rectification of justified complaints. But this was also negatively influenced by the *deformation of practice*, whereby frequent delays caused shortcomings in management and control work. The ongoing societal changes required the achievement of a *higher cross-societal function of law*, which could not happen without improving citizens' awareness of important legislation. In this way, informed complainants would contact the competent authority, thus reducing both the administrative burden of the investigation and the number of unjustified complaints. Once again, the importance of a favourable climate for the open expression of criticism as the most effective defence against anonymous complaints was highlighted, and the need to prevent mass complaints by timely responses and a consistent solution to the causes of complaints was also mentioned. In order to improve the quality of the complaint filing and handing process, the outline recommended, among other things, the elimination of elements of bureaucracy, a reluctance towards self-criticism, a haughty attitude and excessive formalism when dealing with complaints, whereas in principle it should be based on the use of a specific initiative as a signal for state measures of a fundamental nature to effectively address deficiencies in the area. *The principle of cost-effectiveness* was also not forgotten, as a result of which it would no longer be necessary to acknowledge receipt of a complaint, while continuing in the practice of automatically deferring "derogatory and defamatory" complaints.<sup>29</sup>

The hectic events of 1989 may have somewhat overshadowed the issue of complaints and submissions, but a Draft Act on Complaints and Proposals by Citizens and their Organizations (the Act on the Right to Petition) was discussed at a regular meeting of the key inspectors of the VLK ČSSR on December 15, 1989. An explanatory memorandum identified citizens' right to appeal to authorities with proposals, requests or complaints as a constitutional right and freedom which had not yet been legally guaranteed to a sufficient extent. *There have been several attempts to do so in the past*, the authors said, *but owing to concerns amongst the governing circles that the position of citizens towards the bureaucratic apparatus should not be strengthened, initial work has always been stopped*. People were also allowed to participate in the implementation of state policy, while in the future it was conceived mainly as a way of *uniting societal and personal interest in the intention of further socialist development free of errors and inaccuracies*.<sup>30</sup> In the end, developments progressed in a different direction and the right to petition was enshrined (Article 18) in the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of February 1991, which later became part of the constitutional order of the Czech Republic. The Government Decree of October 1958 expired only as late as 2005.<sup>31</sup>

občanů a dobrovolných organizací (Outline of a political and legal analysis of the need for an Act on Proposals, Initiatives and Complaints of Citizens and Voluntary Social Organisations), 6. 5. 1989, p. 3.

29 Ibid., pp. 9–13.

30 NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Důvodová zpráva k návrhu zákona o stížnostech a návrzích občanů a jejich organizací (Explanatory memorandum on the bill on complaints and proposals from citizens and their organisations), 13. 12. 1989, p. 2.

31 Nařízení vlády č. 370/2005 Sb., kterým se zrušuje vládní vyhláška č. 150/1958 Ú. I. o vyřizování

### A society of grumblers? The number and focus of complaints and notices

There were truly manifold reasons for dissatisfaction in late-period socialist Czechoslovakia. As early as the 1970s, the dissident, philosopher and literary critic Milan Šimečka (in his brilliant analysis of Czechoslovak society in the era of normalisation) pointed out that every day, millions of citizens were forced into the role of critics as they waited for a late bus to arrive, crammed themselves into packed trams or faced the numerous manifestations of an economy of shortages.<sup>32</sup> Most of them complained about the situation but few considered it either necessary or worthwhile to turn to the Communist Party, state or trade union bodies to make a complaint or suggestion. Perhaps an accurate characterisation of Czechoslovakia in this period would be the “society of grumblers” that the American historian Andrew I. Port used to describe East German society of the same era.<sup>33</sup> Communist East Germany witnessed a similar torrent of written submissions (Eingaben), which the German historian Ilko Sascha Kowalczyk described as one of the most active forms of defence against the system as well as a popular “hobby” in the spirit of the slogan: *Do something legal, yet at the same time oppose the system.*<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in mid-October 1986, the Chairman of the Federal Assembly, Alois Indra, admitted that the total number of complaints received did not correspond to the real level of worker dissatisfaction with the prevailing shortcomings. *Unfortunately*, he complained at the time, *apparently it's higher, as a number of people don't bother writing at all because they think it's pointless; it's like howling at the wind, it won't make any difference.*<sup>35</sup>

Czechoslovak citizens made extensive use of their right to address various Party, state and trade union bodies with complaints and notices. The numbers gradually decreased in the first half of the 1980s, but from 1985 onwards they increased significantly, culminating in 1987 when for the first time the total exceeded 100,000 per year. The subsequent decline was undoubtedly a pleasant surprise for Party leaders, but the reason for the decline was still being described as unclear by the First Deputy Chairman of the People's Control Committee Pavel Skalný as late as October 1989, though it could well have been related to the fact that people had begun to express their dissatisfaction more publicly.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, the aggregate data for 1989 is not

stížností, oznámení a podnětů pracujících (Government regulation No. 370/2005 Coll., repealing Government Decree No. 150/1958 Ú. l. on the handling of complaints, notices and complaints of workers). Cf. SÁVELJEV, Jaroslav – VAVERA, Frantisek: Stížnosti: jak dál? (Complaints: What Next?) *Veřejná správa*, 2008, Vol. 6, No. 9 – see: [www.mvcr.cz/clanek/stiznosti-jak-dal.aspx](http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/stiznosti-jak-dal.aspx) (quoted version dated 24. 4. 2020).

32 ŠIMEČKA, Milan: *Obnovení pořádku. Příspěvek k typologii reálného socialismu* (Restoring Order. A Contribution to the Typology of Real Socialism). Index, Cologne 1979, p. 170.

33 PORT, Andrew I.: *Die rätselhafte Stabilität der DDR. Arbeit und Alltag im sozialistischen Deutschland*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 2010, p. 149.

34 KOWALCZYK, Ilko Sascha: Artikulationsformen und Zielsetzungen von widerständigem Verhalten in verschiedenen Bereichen der Gesellschaft. In: *Materialien der Enquetekommission „Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland“ (12. Wahlperiode des Deutschen Bundestag)*. Band VII. Deutscher Bundestag, Baden-Baden 1995, pp. 1203–1284, here p. 1249.

35 APS, f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 3. schůze Předsednictva FS, 14. 10. 1986, pp. 99–100.

36 *Ibid.*, 25. schůze Předsednictva FS (25th session of the FS), 23. 10. 1989, pp. 81–82.

available, and it is therefore unclear whether the decline in 1988 was an exception or part of a new trend – a trend that did not however affect the Communist Party Central Committee, which received a total of 13,210 complaints in 1988 – an increase of more than four thousand on the previous year.<sup>37</sup>

The significant reduction in the number of complaints was also in part due to a change in the methodology of reporting records in the so-called “books of wishes and complaints”, as illustrated by the May 1989 report on the analysis of complaints for the previous year, according to which 4,000 of them were not included in the records. Although the following table illustrates a significant number of complaints and notices, it appears that in reality the number was even higher. The data is based on the surviving annual analyses produced by the People’s Control Committee, whose task was to summarise incoming complaints and notices according to the Government Decree of October 1958. The last surviving analysis for 1988 shows that these nationwide statistics did not include complaints sent to the Office of the President of the Republic (Kancelář prezidenta republiky, KPR), the Constitutional and Legal Committees of the two national parliaments, the Czech National Council (Česká národní rada, ČNR) and the Slovak National Council (Slovenská národní rada, SNR), higher trade union bodies, nor the Central Committee of the National Front (Národní fronta, NF), whose total membership numbered almost 23,000 by 1988.<sup>38</sup> The overall VLK analyses take into account the complaints received at all levels of the national committees, which form the overwhelming majority, as well as those received by the republic and federal bodies of the state administration – ministries and authorities. It seems, therefore, that the overall analyses did not even include complaints sent in by citizens to the Communist Party Central Committee, the average number of which between 1985 and 1988 approached 9,700 per year. Taking into account the three largest recipients of complaints not included in the VLK records – the Office of the President of the Republic, the Communist Party Central Committee and the higher trade union bodies – the total number of complaints listed in the table increases by an average of almost 32,000 a year.<sup>39</sup>

37 NA, f. KSČ – ústřední výbor 1945–1989, sekretariát 1986–1989 (KSČ – Central Committee 1945–1989, Secretariat 1986–1989, hereafter referred to as KSČ-ÚV-02/4), sv. S 95/89, k informaci 1, Zpráva o vyřizování dopisů pracujících postoupených Ústřední kontrolní a revizní komisi (ÚKRK) KSČ v roce 1988, 7. 4. 1989 – Příloha – Tabulka č. 2: Přehled o obsahovém zaměření, počtu vyřízených a oprávněných dopisů došlých ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1988 ve srovnání s rokem 1987 (Report on the handling of letters of workers referred to the KSČ Central Control and Auditing Commission /ÚKRK/ in 1988, April 7, 1989 – Annex – Table No. 2: An overview of the content, number of processed and justified letters received by the ÚKRK KSČ in 1988 in comparison to 1987).

38 NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Rozbor hlavních poznatků z vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů podaných občany státním a hospodářským orgánům a organizacím v ČSSR v roce 1988 (Analysis of the main findings from the handling of complaints, notices and suggestions submitted by citizens to state and economic authorities and organisations in Czechoslovakia in 1988), 11. 5. 1989, p. 2.

39 Calculated on the basis of annual analyses of relevant institutions cf. e.g. *Všeodborový archiv*, f. S-ÚRO, inv. j. 1987/75, Zpráva o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů pracujících ve vyšších odborových orgánech za rok 1986 (Report on the handling of complaints, notices and complaints of workers in

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

Number of complaints and notices submitted by Czechoslovak citizens between 1984 and 1988<sup>40</sup>

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988
Total number of complaints and notices (according to VLK ČSSR)	126,175	130,953	146,128	152,639	126,307
Legitimacy (%)	46.2	46.5	46.7	46.7	44.6
Thematic focus:					
Supply of goods, problems of trade and services	33,628	34,534	38,823	39,051	32,163
Conditions in bodies and organisations	24,825	24,646	27,245	28,641	25,112
Housing management and maintenance of housing stock	14,898	17,447	18,787	22,615	16,043
Work organisation and wages	8,592	9,271	11,182	11,907	9,387
Transport and communication	7,251	8,410	9,501	9,888	11,593
Environment	2,597	2,647	3,614	4,030	3,582
Social security	3,209	3,785	3,798	3,695	3,596
Healthcare	2,892	3,075	3,456	3,710	3,178

higher trade union bodies for 1986), 27. 3. 1987; NA, f. KSC-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 25/87, k informaci 1, Tabulka č. 1 - Přehled o dopisech pracujících zaslaných ÚV KSC v letech 1981 až 1986 (Table 1 - Overview of the letters by workers sent to the KSC Central Committee from 1981 to 1986), 8. 4. 1987; AKPR, f. KPR - nezpracováno, protokol 600000, č. j. 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988, únor 1989 (Report on the evaluation of complaints about other letters sent by workers to the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1988, February 1989), not dated further, p. 9.

- 40 The tables refer to statistics from the People's Control Committee taken from the fund of the KSC Central Committee and the VLK ČSSR. They include: NA, f. KSC-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 42/87, bod (Point) 8, Tabulka č. 1 - Přehled o počtu a věcném zaměření stížností, oznámení a podnětů vyřízených v ČSSR v období 1982-1986 (Table 1 - Overview of the number and subject matter of complaints, notices and suggestions handled in Czechoslovakia in the period 1982-1986), 17. 8. 1987; Ibid., sv. P 79/88, Příloha IV/1 b - Přehled o počtu, věcném zaměření a oprávněnosti stížností a oznámení vyřízených v ČSSR v roce 1987 (ve srovnání s rokem 1986) (Annex IV/1b - Overview of the number, subject matter and legitimacy of complaints and notices handled in Czechoslovakia in 1987 /compared to 1986/), 18. 7. 1988; NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Příloha III/1c - Přehled o počtu, věcném zaměření a oprávněnosti stížností a oznámení vyřízených v ČSR, SSR a federálních orgánech v r. 1988 ve srovnání s r. 1987 (Annex III/1c - Overview of the number, subject matter and legitimacy of complaints and notices handled in the Czech Socialist Republic, the Slovak Socialist Republic and federal bodies in 1988 compared to 1987), 11. 5. 1989.

Throughout the period of normalisation, complaints about goods shortages, interruptions in the internal trade system and unsatisfactory services represented the largest number of grievances, accounting for more than a quarter of all complaints and submissions received in the second half of the 1980s. Every second complaint in this category was deemed to be justified and in the case of spare parts for cars, washing machines and televisions, the level of justifiability exceeded 80 %.<sup>41</sup> Criticism was aimed at the levels of service, the supply of food and the quality of industrial goods, where people were particularly irritated by the absence of products in the lower price category. The VLK registered persistent shortages in the supply of low-calorie foods, fresh bread and pastry, meat products and some fruits and vegetables. Traditional items on the swelling list of hard-to-find goods included washing machines and refrigerators, bicycles, cars and motorcycles, colour televisions, sports equipment, some types of footwear, linen and stationery. At the end of March 1988, the secretariat of the Communist Party Central Committee discussed a document addressing possible solutions to the justified deficiencies in meeting the needs of the population, in which the authors listed 130 types of goods which were in chronic short supply, which included not only toilet paper and other hygiene items, but also an artificial sweetener for diabetics named Sorbit, which was not due to reach its planned domestic production target until 1995!<sup>42</sup> The complainants did not hesitate to contact the General Secretary of the Central Committee himself, scolding him for shortages in sanitary pads and spare parts for cars. In May 1989, Miloš Jakeš received several requests from citizens for assistance in purchasing cars, bicycles or central heating boilers, as can be seen, among others, in a letter penned by a man from Louny, who pointed out that he had been trying in vain to get hold of a gas boiler for the past three years, despite making a complaint to the Czechoslovak Ministry of Trade that had been found to be justified.<sup>43</sup>

A frequent target of criticism was the indiscriminate behaviour of shop managers, the widespread concealment of goods, and the consequent “under-the-counter” sales. Complainants also criticised the poor quality of products, repair of which often took huge amounts of time due to a lack of spare parts. Between 1985 and 1988, the inspection bodies dealt with an average of 5,100 complaints a year about poor quality products, while in 1988, losses from poor-quality production were estimated at more than 880 million Czechoslovak crowns.<sup>44</sup> The gravity of the situation is illustrated by

41 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 42/87, Rozbor hlavních poznatků z vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů podaných občany státním a hospodářským orgánům a organizacím v roce 1986 (Analysis of the main findings from the handling of complaints, notices and suggestions submitted by citizens to state and economic authorities and organisations in 1986), 17. 8. 1987, p. 6.

42 Ibid., sv. S 52/88, bod 3, Příloha III – Náměty k řešení některých nedostatků v uspokojování oprávněných potřeb občanů (Annex III – Suggestions to address some shortcomings in meeting the legitimate needs of citizens), 31. 3. 1988, pp. 11 and 15.

43 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 121/89, k informaci 5, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 31. května 1989, červen 1989 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the General Secretary of the KSČ Central Committee of the Communist Party Comrade M. Jakeš, from May 1 to 31, 1989, June 1989), not dated further, p. 3.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

the following comments by Alois Huml, a member of the Chamber of the People of the Federal Assembly (Sněmovna lidu Federálního shromáždění, SL FS), who shared his personal experience of buying a new TV during a meeting of the FS presidium in October 1986. *I myself happen to have the misfortune of buying a colour television set, and in the space of one month I had to take it back and have it replaced three times, the non-party MP complained. The TV cost 15,000 [Kčs], now it's actually 16,500, because it's a new version. It's not very amusing for a worker to get out his wallet, pay for a new TV, and two days later it blows up at home. He takes it back, but then the new one they give him also blows up.*<sup>45</sup>

In October 1987, the chairman of the VLK, František Ondřích, pointed out that despite the increasing *beefiness* (sic) in the *multitude of inspections*, this had not produced the desired effect, something which, in his opinion, was chiefly the responsibility of senior economic managers who did not sufficiently adopt the maxim – *he who manages, checks*.<sup>46</sup> Although the Communist Party leadership tried to address the shortcomings in the supply and quality of goods, all the way up until November 1989 it failed to satisfy the growing consumer demands of Czechoslovak citizens, who by the late 1980s had more and more opportunities to compare domestically-produced products with Western goods. It turns out that the patience of citizens, these *supervisors of shortcomings*<sup>47</sup>, equipped with various contacts or access to goods that could be exchanged for others or offered for a corresponding counter-service, was by the late 1980s clearly exhausted, as seen, among other things, by a greater urgency and openness in many of the complaints.

When, in the middle of January 1987, an article by the ČNR Chairman Josef Kempný on the importance of the human factor in accelerating socio-economic development was published in *Rudé právo*<sup>48</sup>, in which the Communist Party Central Committee member glorified the benefits of self-finance for enterprises, he quickly received a response from a 44-year-old worker from Prague. He assured Kempný that he had nothing against people earning money for themselves, but at the same time he warned him that *not the slightest conditions* for such a system existed in Czechoslovakia, because the socialist system of work and especially remuneration did not allow adequate reward for those who cared about quality. *The truth is*, summed up the man, who did not hesitate to sign his name, *that someone who just bodes something together is paid more money and is mainly on the look out to make as many of the goods as possible, but a labourer who might do ever so slightly less work but does good work [...] and his work is more*

44 NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Obsahové zaměření stížností a hlavní zdroje příčin jejich vzniku v roce 1988 (Content orientation of complaints and the main sources of their causes in 1988), 11. 5. 1989, p. 3.

45 APS, f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 3. schůze Předsednictva FS, 14. 10. 1986, p. 98.

46 Ibid., 8. schůze Předsednictva FS (8th meeting of the FS Presidium), 19. 10. 1987, p. 79; VILÍMEK, Tomáš: „Kdo řídí – kontroluje!“ Podnikový management a úskalí „socialistické kontroly“ v československých podnicích v osmdesátých letech 20. století (“He Who Manages – Checks!” Corporate management and the Pitfalls of “Socialist Inspections” in Czechoslovak companies in the 1980s). *Soudobé dějiny*, 2017, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 361–388.

47 WOLLE, Stefan: *Die heile Welt der Diktatur. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 1999, p. 213.

48 KEMPŇÝ, Josef: Lidský činitel (The Human Factor). *Rudé právo*, 15. 1. 1987, p. 3.

sellable, is not paid better than the person who bodes something together.<sup>49</sup> In February 1987, he received the meaningless reply that Comrade Kempný appreciated some of the comments he made, but could not agree with many of his views. However, this was not the end of the matter, as in September of that year the same person paid a visit to the Office of the ČNR, where in an *inappropriate and grossly insulting manner*, he made clear that he did not consider the answer to have been good enough.<sup>50</sup>

The second most numerous group consisted of complaints and notices concerning the situation in institutions and economic organisations. Their legitimacy hovered around 49 percent on average, with nearly half of them reporting misconduct by senior managers and functionaries. The complainants pointed to poor organisation of work, circumvention of technological processes, misuse of company vehicles, fictitious reporting of economic results, theft and other negative phenomena that the Communist Party Central Committee had listed in its February 1983 letter to Party bodies and organisations, calling for such shortcomings to be revealed and eradicated in a bid to increase the struggle against the violation of socialist legality, morality and discipline, which remained a form of fundamental policy document for the Communist Party in its fight against social inequality and widespread economic crime right up until 1989.<sup>51</sup> This letter was published in *Rudé právo* with a delay of more than three years.<sup>52</sup> According to a VLK survey of June 1988, the number of complaints made in the spirit of the letter rose from 2,395 in 1983 to 3,083 four years later, with an average legitimacy of 35.7 percent.<sup>53</sup>

A great deal of complaints about conditions in institutions and economic organisations were anonymous. While in 1985, state and economic bodies received less than six thousand such anonymous complaints, in 1987 the number exceeded seven and a half thousand. According to the authors of a July 1988 study of anonymous complaints, the increase was proof that company employees found themselves unable to openly criticise shortcomings, and therefore turned to the highest state authori-

49 APS, f. Stížnosti 1987 – nezpracováno (1987 complaints – unprocessed), č. j. 645/87, Podání, kterým pisatel reagoval na otištěný článek předsedy ČNR v *Rudém Právu* z 15. 1. 1987, březen 1987 (submission in which the correspondent responded to the publication of an article by the Chairman of the Czech National Council in *Rudé Právo* dated January 15, 1987, March 1987), not dated further.

50 Ibid., č. j. 645/87, Záznam (Minutes), 23. 9. 1987.

51 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV, Dopisy a dálnopisy ÚV KSČ (Letters and telexes sent to the ÚV KSČ), č. j. ÚV 4/83, Dopis předsednictva ÚV KSČ stranickým orgánům a organizacím k prohloubení účinnosti boje proti porušování zásad socialistické zákonnosti, morálky a disciplíny, únor 1983 (Letter from the Presidium of the Communist Party Central Committee to Party bodies and organisations on deepening the effectiveness of the fight against violations of the principles of socialist legality, morality and discipline, February 1983), not dated further.

52 Dopis předsednictva ÚV KSČ stranickým orgánům a organizacím k prohloubení účinnosti boje proti porušování zásad socialistické zákonnosti, morálky a disciplíny (Letter from the Presidium of the Communist Party Central Committee to Party bodies and organisations on deepening the effectiveness of the fight against violations of the principles of socialist legality, morality and discipline). *Rudé právo*, 19. 4. 1986, p. 3.

53 APS, f. ČNR – V. volební období, inv. j. 123, Závěry z rozboru o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů orgány a organizací České socialistické republiky v roce 1987, červen 1988 (Conclusions from the Analysis of the Complaints, Notices and Suggestions of Citizens by the Bodies and Organizations of the Czech Socialist Republic in 1987, June 1988), not dated further, p. 6.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

ties in the hope of finding remedy. For example, in January 1988, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee Miloš Jakeš received several letters criticising the widespread *cronyism* and tolerance of social discord that was deeply rooted in Party, state and economic spheres. According to the correspondents, an effective fight against such ills was hampered by the existence of a *red nobility* and various *power clans* inside local, district and regional authorities.<sup>54</sup> The complainants chose to remain anonymous mainly out of fear of direct or indirect sanctions by the powerful local officials they were criticising. Indeed, even those who signed their letters, often referring to the Government Decree of October 1958<sup>55</sup>, did not wish their name to be made public, because they assumed they would be subject to bullying and harassment in the workplace. Senior officials of the late socialist period were not known for showing tolerance of criticism, whether constructive or not. *The findings of the inspectorate authorities confirm*, the authors of the above-mentioned analysis pointed out, *that senior managers of organisations being investigated after anonymous complaints often show more interest in information that would enable them to identify the author of the complaint than the legitimacy and seriousness of the complaint itself*.<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, the VLK deputy chairman Karel Skála in a February 1988 debate for *Rudé právo* did not rule out that those who made complaints were being punished for them, for instance in unpaid bonuses. However according to Ivan Marušinec, a machine fitter at the Heavy Machinery Works (Závody těžkého strojířství, ZŤS) in Dubnica nad Váhom, the level of bullying of complainants was significantly higher than the other participants in the debate, including the Czechoslovak Prosecutor General Jaroslav Krupauer, were willing to admit. Marušinec identified as a major problem the inconsistencies in personnel consequences following a complaint, whereby “retaliatory measures” were being taken against complainants by those who – although they themselves had contributed to the shortcomings – did not have to leave the company.<sup>57</sup> During a discussion of the report on complaints and suggestions by Czechoslovak citizens for 1987, the parliamentary deputy Olga Koukalová highlighted the fact that of the 10,000 complaints about negative phenomena in economic organisations, one in ten were anonymous, which – she believed – was a clear indication of the nega-

54 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 57/88, k informaci 7, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 28. ledna 1988, únor 1988 (Information on the content of letters received by the Communist Party Central Committee and the General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš, from January 1 to 28, 1988, February 1988), not dated further, p. 2.

55 According to § 7, sub-section 5 of the Government Decree on the handling of the complaints, notices and suggestions of workers from October 11, 1958, the complainant could request that, when investigating his or her complaint, a copy of the complaint be sent to the responsible authorities without giving his or her name.

56 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 79/88, bod 7, Analýza anonymních stížností a podání a návrh dalšího postupu v této věci (An analysis of anonymous complaints and submissions and a proposal for further action in this case), 11. 7. 1988, p. 8.

57 KRÍŽ, Luboš – PERGL, Václav – WALTER, Karel (prepared): Důsledně dodržovat socialistickou zákonost, morálku a disciplínu (Consistently Adhere to Socialist Legality, Morality and Discipline). *Rudé právo*, 27. 2. 1988, p. 3.



Tomáš Vilímek

tive climate in society, where people were worried about the consequences of making criticism public. She also expressed alarm that a third of the anonymous complaints were legitimate, and at the same time advocated serious consequences for *gambling with people's trust* and the persisting formalism in dealing with workers' complaints.<sup>58</sup>

An anonymous warning of problems at the South Moravian Poultry Farm in Velké Pavlovice, received in June 1985 by the Office of the President of the Republic, is a good example of this type of complaint. Employing factual and erudite language, the author – who signed the letter “*A rebel*” – described the situation inside the company, which had not seen significant investment for decades. The result was, in his opinion, technological obsolescence and inefficient operation which none of the farm's management had any intention of rectifying, because they were afraid of taking responsibility for it. Instead, the managers concentrated on cultivating good relations with the local committee of the Communist Party in Břeclav and regularly bribing inspectors to turn a blind eye with gifts of eggs or poultry. While ordinary employees had to add their names to special lists to occasionally get the opportunity to buy discounted chicken, at the end of each week company cars from all over the South Moravian Region arrived at the factory farm to pick up their rich rewards. *And people say there's no corruption or bribery in Czechoslovakia...* wrote the author, adding that people were not blind, and it was therefore unsurprising that others began saying – *if the bigwigs can steal, why can't we? From the outside, we appear to be a model factory whose managers present distorted information in the media and speak of nothing but success. I am unable to add my name to this letter because I'm afraid of being thrown overboard*, he concludes, explaining that he was writing to Prague because it was pointless trying to complain to the local or regional authorities and what's more, he feared the letter would eventually end up at a local or regional level anyway, where everyone knows each other and covers each other's backs.<sup>59</sup> It should be added that the author of the final inspection report, which subsequently took place in the factory, found many of the complaints in the anonymous letter to be justified, although somewhat smoothed the edges and objectified the causes of a number of shortcomings.<sup>60</sup>

Apartment block management and maintenance of the housing stock was the third most important thematic group of complaints and submissions and was characterised not only by their explosive potential, but also by the limited remedies available to the socialist economy. This too was mentioned during an April 1989 debate in the Czech National Council, where the parliamentary deputy Koukalová pointed out that while many complaints about housing policy were justified, they could not

58 APS, f. ČNR – V. volební období, inv. j. 123, Zápis z 25. schůze ústavně právního výboru ČNR konané 6. 9. 1988, p. 3.

59 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600 000, č. j. 616.524/85, Anonymní upozornění na poměry v Jihomoravských drůbežářských závodech (Anonymous warning of conditions at the South Moravian Poultry Farm), 20. 6. 1985.

60 Ibid., č. j. 620.546/85, Zpráva o výsledku prošetření anonymního oznámení na nedostatky v řízení a organizační činnosti vedoucích pracovníků závodu Velké Pavlovice (Report on the outcome of the investigation of anonymous notice of deficiencies in the management and organisational activities of plant managers in Velké Pavlovice), 19. 8. 1985.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

possibly be resolved, as they exceeded the current possibilities of a socialist society.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the development of housing construction in the still unfinished eighth Five Year Plan (1986–1990) showed considerable imbalances, which resulted in a fall in the number of planned apartments being delivered, which in early 1989 climbed to more than 26,000 units. The worst situation was in Prague, where almost 3,500 flats were not handed over to tenants.<sup>62</sup> According to the February 1989 Analysis of the Economy of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the rate of housing construction dropped significantly to an average of 80,000 flats per year, which was 40,000 fewer than in the previous decade.<sup>63</sup> Although the economic historian Václav Průcha pointed out that the 1980s saw the construction of larger apartments,<sup>64</sup> for many complainants the priority was living in an apartment that was not actually hazardous to human health.

From the early 1980s onwards, there was a steady increase in the number of complaints and submissions on housing management and maintenance, an increase which culminated in 1987. The number of justified complaints exceeded 50 percent; at the level of national committees (Národní výbor, NV) the figure even approached 60 percent. Interestingly, housing issues made up the single largest number of complaints received in the 1980s by the Office of the President of the Republic, whereas their share in the overall agenda increased from 33 to nearly 39 percent between 1983 and 1988. In their report assessing the complaints for 1986, the authors noted that there were 350,000 pending requests for an apartment in Czechoslovakia, at a time when the various national committees had received almost no newly-built flats and were therefore dependent only on natural fluctuations within their region. For example, in 1986 there were 4,500 eligible applicants registered on the waiting list held by the České Budějovice Municipal National Committee (Městský národní výbor, MNV), but only 220 apartments had been allocated under the entire Five Year Plan, so the city was still processing applications submitted in 1964!<sup>65</sup> Two years later, the number of apartment applications in Czechoslovakia had climbed to 400,000, with a particularly desperate situation in Prague and Bratislava. The waiting peri-

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- 61 APS, f. ČNR – V. volební období, inv. j. 132, Podklad pro zpravodajskou zprávu ke zprávě o hlavních poznatcích ze stížností, podnětů a oznámení občanů a organizací došlých České národní radě v roce 1988 (Material for the report on the main findings of complaints, suggestions and notices of citizens and organisations received by the Czech National Council in 1988), 19. 4. 1988, p. 4.
- 62 NA, f. KSC-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 107/89, bod k informací (point for information) 1, Zpráva o vývoji národního hospodářství a plnění plánu ČSSR za rok 1988, únor 1989 (Report on the development of the national economy and implementation of the Plan for the ČSSR for 1988, February 1989), not dated further, pp. 4 and 18.
- 63 *Analýza ekonomiky ČSSR* (Analysis of the economy of the ČSSR). Úřad předsednictva vlády ČSSR, Prague únor (February) 1989, p. 16 (from the author's archive).
- 64 PRŮCHA, Václav et al.: *Hospodářské a sociální dějiny Československa 1918–1992, 2. díl, Období 1945–1992* (An Economic and Social History of Czechoslovakia 1918–1992, Volume 2, Period 1945–1992). Doplněk, Brno 2009, p. 925.
- 65 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600000, č. j. 606.516/87, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1986, duben 1987 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1986, April 1987), not dated further, p. 10.

Tomáš Vilímek

od for a cooperative apartment in the Czech Lands was around twenty years.<sup>66</sup> This situation naturally favoured corruption, where, for a bribe or counter-service, it was possible among other things to earn extra points for civic engagement and thus jump to the top of the housing cooperative's waiting list. Most people were well aware of the fact that they would find the dreamt-of apartment much quicker and more easily by paying a bribe than writing complaints.

In May 1989 the VLK pointed out that the issue of apartments was extremely sensitive and was becoming the subject of justified and ever-growing criticism. Complainants were apparently not hesitating to draw attention to long-vacant apartments, which were becoming the subject of speculation, or multi-room apartments with only one occupant, something which often alarmed district housing associations, lacking as they did a proper overview of the current housing situation.<sup>67</sup> Citizens also turned directly to the Communist Party Central Committee with housing questions; housing policy represented the second largest group of complaints, after cadre questions. In 1987, almost nine hundred complainants turned to the Central Committee to criticise the work of national committees, question the benefits of housing cooperative construction projects and point out that many people were being forced to live in a shared flat even after divorce, something which made child rearing difficult and put a great strain on human relations. Some also expressed frustration with the long delays in the allocation of flats that had previously belonged to émigrés or the deceased, as well as the tendency of grandparents to hold on to their flats for their grandchildren.<sup>68</sup> A year later, the Central Committee received a record 1,159 complaints about housing issues, placing at the top of the complaints agenda, followed by social security (1,156) and opinions on Communist Party policies (922).<sup>69</sup>

People complained not only about the shortages in housing, but also about the lack of maintenance as well as the indifference of the responsible authorities, who played a kind of *blind-man's bluff* with them, in the words of a headline from *Rudé právo* in January 1989, in an article describing the protracted dispute between tenants of an apartment building in Česká Třebová and the local District Housing Management Company (Obvodní podnik bytového hospodářství, OPBH) in Ústí nad Orlicí.

66 Ibid., č. j. 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988, únor 1989 (Report on the evaluation of complaints about other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1988, February 1989), not dated further, pp. 10–12.

67 NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Obsahové zaměření stížností a hlavní zdroje příčin jejich vzniku v roce 1988, 11. 5. 1989, pp. 5–6.

68 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 65/88, k informaci 2, Zpráva o vyřízení dopisů pracujících zaslaných ÚV KSČ a ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1987 (Report on the processing of workers' letters sent to the Central Committee of the the Communist Party and the ÚKRK in 1987), 11. 7. 1988, p. 21.

69 Ibid., sv. S 95/89, k informaci 1, Zpráva o vyřizování dopisů pracujících postoupených Ústřední kontrolní a revizní komisi KSČ v roce 1988, 7. 4. 1989 – Příloha – Tabulka č. 2: Přehled o obsahovém zaměření, počtu vyřízených a oprávněných dopisů došlých ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1988 ve srovnání s rokem 1987 (Report on the handling of letters sent by workers transferred to the Central Control and Auditing Commission of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1988, April 7, 1989 – Annex – Table No. 2: Overview of the content, number of processed and justified letters received by the ÚKRK KSČ in 1988 compared to 1987).

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

The building had suffered from a leaky roof for ten years, but the responsible authorities argued that there was neither the *material nor capacity* to fix it. After *Rudé právo's* intervention, the residents were at least given a promise that repairs would take place in 1990, but reading the article, it is difficult to escape the impression that not even its author believed it.<sup>70</sup> A whole host of documents contain references to a growing disproportion between the financial and logistical capacity of the state and the need to maintain the housing stock, which had undoubtedly undergone a number of positive changes over the previous forty years. In the late 1980s, the average age of the housing stock was around 35 years, while a quarter of the flats still belonged to the III. or IV. category. A quarter of the dwellings in the Czech half of Czechoslovakia had been built before 1920.<sup>71</sup> Dwindling resources were concentrated on the construction of new apartments, while the repair of dilapidated buildings – especially in larger towns and cities – was neglected. Prague, the North Bohemian Region and the North Moravian Region were particularly affected, with the latter producing the highest number of complaints about the unsatisfactory state of housing stock maintenance. In 1986, for example, national committees in the Czech Socialist Republic received over 6,500 complaints of this type, of which more than a third pertained to buildings in Prague and 16 percent in the North Bohemian Region. More than two-thirds of the complaints were justified, and the authors of the report stated that the OPBH in Prague was limited not only by the number of craftsmen, but also by a lack of equipment, inflexibility and inefficient and therefore uneconomical utilisation of the repair capacity.<sup>72</sup>

Many Czechoslovak citizens were prompted to write a complaint by dissatisfaction with facilities in the workplace or late payment of wages. The number of such complaints almost doubled between 1982 and 1987, approaching 12,000 with an average justifiability rate of 40 %. In addition, citizens also turned to the trade unions with their complaints in this area, with criticism of inadequate remuneration for work making up the single largest number of grievances, averaging around 1,200 per year over the reporting period. According to the 1986 complaints handling report, over 40 % of the grievances were deemed to be legitimate, most frequently because the rules for the payment of bonuses and extra payments for risky work or overtime had not been sufficiently explained to them.<sup>73</sup> Dissatisfaction with salaries can be seen not only

70 DOBROVOLNÝ, Marek: Hra na slepou bábu (Blind Man's Buff). *Rudé právo*, 6. 1. 1989, p. 3.

71 *Analýza ekonomiky ČSSR*, p. 15 and AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600000, č. j. 606.516/87, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1986, duben 1987 (Report on the evaluation of complaints about other letters by workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1986, April 1987), not dated further, p. 9.

72 APS, f. ČNR – V. volební období, inv. j. 115, Závěry z rozboru o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů orgány a organizacemi České socialistické republiky v roce 1986, červen 1987 (Conclusions from the analysis of complaints, notices and suggestions from citizens to the authorities and organizations of the Czech Socialist Republic in 1986, June 1987), not dated further, p. 8.

73 *Všeodborový archiv*, f. S-ÚRO, inv. j. 1987/75, Zpráva o vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů pracujících ve vyšších odborových orgánech za rok 1986 (Report on the handling of complaints, notices and suggestions of workers in higher trade union bodies for the year 1986), 27. 3. 1987, p. 14.

Tomáš Vilímek

in successive opinion polls, which recorded an increase in dissatisfaction from 32 percent in 1973 to 58 percent in 1989<sup>74</sup>, but also by various jokes that circulated amongst the people. One joke asked the rhetorical question – *What's the relationship between wages and work under socialism?* The answer – *Under socialism, wages are used to punish workers for their work.* Complainants also sought assistance in seeking to terminate employment contracts, or with appeals against the results of comprehensive assessments which resulted in their being removed from office or transferred to less well-paid positions. In April 1988, a certain *Mr Viktor* from Prague 3 contacted the Federal Assembly with a complaint about his wages, but connected it to a range of thorny issues relating to transport and road conditions, complaints that had seen a continuous increase from 7,251 in 1984 to 11,593 in 1988, with an average justifiability level of more than 53 percent. Everybody's talking about a new way of thinking and the need to increase labour productivity, *but for the past 40 years us Praguers have been forced to travel to work like cattle, packed in to overcrowded buses and trams every day! Obviously,* continued the man in question, who was both a professional musician and a manual worker, *the working class cannot contribute towards new thinking or satisfaction under such conditions. It's a result of the poor wage policy over the past 40 years, where the senior officials have carved out nice salaries for themselves, but somehow they've forgotten about the bus or tram drivers.*<sup>75</sup> Indeed, when discussing the VLK ČSSR report on complaints for 1985, Alois Indra pointed out that *terrible things* were happening in Prague's public transport system, which only played into the hands of those who criticised socialism.<sup>76</sup>

Another group of complaints and notices – which might not have been the most significant in terms of numbers but still represented a serious problem for the Communist regime – concerned environmental issues. In the late 1980s, nearly six million Czechoslovak citizens were living in areas where the permissible air pollution limits were regularly exceeded.<sup>77</sup> According to the above-mentioned analysis by the Office of the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic carried out in February 1989, Czechoslovakia, together with the then East Germany (Die Deutsche Demokratische Republik – DDR) and Poland (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa – PRL), was among the three countries with the most devastated natural environment in Europe, something caused by the *long-term underestimation and ignorance of the results of rapid economic development...*<sup>78</sup> The environment protests of 1989, the growing numbers of petitions and,

74 Český sociálněvědní datový archiv Sociologického ústavu AV ČR, v.v.i., Federální statistický úřad, Ústav pro výzkum veřejného mínění (Czech Social Science Data Archive Institute of Sociology Academy of Science ČR, Federal Statistical Bureau, Institute for Public Opinion Research), Názory občanů na vybrané problémy životní úrovně v ČSSR, identifikační č. CSDA89-3, duben 1989 (Citizens' opinions on selected problems of living standards in the ČSSR, identification No. CSDA89-3, April 1989), not dated furthered, p. 55 – see <http://nesstar.soc.cas.cz/webview/> (quoted version dated 24. 4. 2020).

75 APS, f. Spisy orgánů (Organ files), inv. j. 384, Občanské záležitosti, Stížnost Federálnímu shromáždění Republiky Československé, Praha (Civil Affairs, Complaint to the Federal Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic, Prague), 26. 4. 1988, p. 2.

76 Ibid., f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 3. schůze Předsednictva FS, 14. 10. 1986, p. 99.

77 MOLDAN, Bedřich: *Životní prostředí České republiky. Vývoj a stav do konce roku 1989* (The Environment of the Czech Republic. Development and State until the end of 1989). Academia, Prague 1990, p. 253.

78 *Analýza ekonomiky ČSSR*, p. 24.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

last but not least, the escalating criticism of this area in complaints, support historian Miroslav Vaněk's assertion that *the environmental crisis at the end of 1989 was even more menacing than the economic crisis*.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, as early as March 1985, Prime Minister Lubomir Štrougal, in his talks in Prague with his East German counterpart Willi Stoph, pointed out that *the environmental issue is not just an economic issue, but also an explicitly political issue that is directly related to people's health and the overall social situation*.<sup>80</sup>

Although investment in environmental protection had been steadily increasing since the early 1980s, successful implementation of environmental measures lacked not only the necessary financial resources, but also the technical equipment and a meaningful concept that would not be subject to political pressures from the powers-that-be. Resources in excess of CZK 17 billion were earmarked for the eight five-year plan, which the Party leadership hoped would improve air and water quality in the worst affected areas. *The tasks of investment construction focused on environmental protection*, stated the authors of a report on the development of the national economy in February 1989, *have not been fulfilled, and a tendency continues towards pushing back these projects to the final years of the Five Year Plan*.<sup>81</sup> The VLK ČSSR pointed out that of the 55 construction projects planned for 1989, in May of that year more than half of them were still not ready to begin, and there were major problems in ensuring technical and construction work in nearly 90 projects that had got underway.<sup>82</sup> When, in May 1989, deputies of the Czech National Council asked František Martinec, a head of department at the Ministry of the Interior and the Environment, about the reasons for the increasing number of complaints under his authority during a hearing of the education and science committee, Martinec replied that the chief problem lies not only in the failure to comply with the state environment plan, but in the fact that *until recently, protecting the environment has been perceived as something of a luxury*.<sup>83</sup> It is hard to disagree with him.

By the second half of the 1980s, the average number of environmental complaints and submissions was approaching 3,500 per year, showing a record justification level of almost 65 %. The numbers increased right up until 1987; the decrease in 1988 was related to the overall decline in complaints of that year. Only the Communist Party Central Committee saw an increase in environmental complaints in 1988; the num-

79 VANĚK, Miroslav: *Nedalo se tady dýchat. Ekologie v českých zemích v letech 1968 až 1989* (It Was Impossible to Breathe here. Ecology in the Czech Lands from 1968 to 1989). Maxdorf, Prague 1996, p. 15.

80 *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv Berlin* (SAPMO-BArch), f. DY 30/5140, Bericht über das Treffen des Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates der DDR, Genossen Willi Stoph, mit dem Vorsitzenden der Regierung der ČSSR, Genossen Lubomír Štrougal, vom 20. bis 22. 3. 1985 in der ČSSR, p. 155.

81 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 107/89, bod k informaci 1, Zpráva o vývoji národního hospodářství a plnění plánu ČSSR za rok 1988, únor 1989, p. 17.

82 NA, f. VLK ČSSR 1203, k. 33, Obsahové zaměření stížností a hlavní zdroje příčin jejich vzniku v roce 1988, 11. 5. 1989, p. 7.

83 APS, f. ČNR - V. volební období, inv. j. 456, Zápis z 33. schůze výboru České národní rady pro školství a vědu konané dne 16. a 17. 5. 1989 (Minutes of the 33rd meeting of the Czech National Council's education and science committee held on May 16 and 17, 1989), p. 6.

bers more than doubled between 1983 and 1988.<sup>84</sup> The level of justifiability of environmental complaints received by the Central Committee reached a record 95 percent in 1987, and a third of them was pointing to the rising air pollution levels and water contamination caused by factories.<sup>85</sup> Data from the constitutional law committee of the Czech National Council for the year 1989 suggest that there was a noticeable increase in environmental complaints in that year.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, at a Federal Assembly Presidium meeting in late October 1989, during which deputies commented on the main findings of the analysis of complaints filed in 1988, it was said that environmental protection was becoming an increasingly important issue for many citizens, something confirmed by the VLK ČSSR deputy chairman Pavel Skalný, who told deputies that ecology was at the very centre of public interest in 1989. At the same time, Skalný reported that an inspection of 169 construction projects from the environmental investment fund had not produced very positive results; only 46 projects were running with no problems. However, Skalný reassured deputies that it had proved possible to resolve three quarters of the shortcomings more or less on the spot.<sup>87</sup>

People were most concerned about water and air pollution by industrial and agricultural businesses, but they also criticised the destruction of urban greenery, illegal landfills and rising emissions from exhaust fumes due to the growing number of vehicles. There was also criticism of excessive crop-spraying and the loss of forests and fertile soil. Citizens also highlighted the discharge of household wastewater into village streams, something of which the relevant national committees were well aware but did not make much effort to address. Only after complaints about such conduct in the village of Hředle in the Beroun region, did the Rakovník VLK ONV carry out an investigation in 1986; they established that both residents and the local United Agricultural Cooperative (Jednotné zemědělské družstvo, JZD) were indeed discharging raw sewage directly into local ponds and streams and that the dried-up wells were being used as pits by the local mining enterprise.<sup>88</sup>

84 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 25/87, k informaci 1, Zpráva o vyřizování náměrů, připomínek a stížností podaných ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1986, 8. 4. 1987 - Tabulka č. 1 - Přehled o dopisech pracujících zaslaných ÚV KSČ v letech 1981 až 1986 (Report on the handling of ideas, comments and complaints filed to the ÚKRK KSČ in 1986, April 8, 1987 - Table No. 1 - Overview of the letters sent by workers to the KSČ Central Committee from 1981 to 1986); *Ibid.*, sv. S 95/89, k informaci 1, Zpráva o vyřizování dopisů pracujících postoupených ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1988, 7. 4. 1989 - Příloha - Tabulka č. 4 - Přehled o dopisech pracujících zaslaných ÚV KSČ v letech 1983 až 1988 (Report on the processing of letters sent by workers to the ÚKRK KSČ in 1988, 7. 4. 1989 - Annex - Table 4 - Overview of the letters sent by workers to the KSČ Central Committee from 1983 to 1988).

85 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 65/88, k informaci 2, Zpráva o vyřízení dopisů pracujících zaslaných ÚV KSČ a ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1987 (Report on the processing of letters sent by workers to the KSČ Central Committee and the ÚKRK KSČ in 1987), 11. 7. 1988, p. 16.

86 APS, f. ČNR - V. volební období, inv. j. 85, Zpráva o hlavních poznatcích ze stížností, podnětů a oznámení občanů a organizací došlých České národní radě v roce 1989 (Report on the main findings from complaints, suggestions and notices by citizens and organisations received by the Czech National Council in 1989), 17. 4. 1990, p. 1.

87 APS, f. FS - V. volební období - nepracováno, 25. schůze Předsednictva FS (25th meeting of the FS Assembly Presidium), 23. 10. 1989, p. 92.

88 APS, f. ČNR - V. volební období, inv. j. 108, Zpráva o hlavních poznatcích ze stížností, podnětů a oznámení občanů a organizací došlých České národní radě v roce 1986 (Report on the main findings

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

Many citizens also objected to construction works in their place of permanent or temporary residence, which, in their opinion, damaged the surrounding environment and also reduced the value of their property. In August 1986 for example, the President of the Republic was approached by a resident of Prague's Lesser Town, who, along with his fellow tenants, felt aggrieved by renovation of the building housing the Czech National Council. He pointed out that despite protests, changing cabins for workers had been installed in the courtyard of their building, and the construction work had damaged both the historic cellars and the greenery they had themselves planted. *Many citizens with workers' brigades badges for hard work*, said the complainant, who had rich experience of writing letters to the President on various subjects dating back to 1961, *say that today no-one would be able to persuade them to do such work again when they see all their hard labour has come to nothing*.<sup>89</sup>

A number of complaints were also raised by the concealment of information following the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in April 1986 or a fire at a fertilizer warehouse in Kyjov-Boršov in January 1988, when the children of local Party officials were evacuated the same night, but the rest of the local population were only informed – and in very brief terms – the following morning. *While the unsuspecting residents of Kyjov were leaving for work and doing their shopping*, wrote a M. Vaněk, describing the bizarre situation, *soldiers and civil defence personnel were wandering about in gas masks*.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, complainants also turned to the Czechoslovak media; Czechoslovak Television received thirteen anonymous letters criticising the fake news being broadcast about the Chernobyl disaster in May 1986 alone.<sup>91</sup>

From the regime's point of view, the discovery that the increasing complaints about the deteriorating environment were not only being made repeatedly but also submitted collectively was extremely serious. In 1987, for example, a group of citizens from Ostrava asked the President of the Republic to investigate the destruction of a park for the construction of the Tesla Lanškroun factory. The subsequent investigation found that the company had been given a choice of three sites, and had decided to build the factory in a wooded park because the other two sites had people living in them, and they would have to build new apartments for them.<sup>92</sup> In September 1989,

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of complaints, suggestions and notices of citizens and organisations received by the Czech National Council in 1986), 20. 3. 1987, pp. 13–14.

89 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600 000, č. j. 621.446/86, Stížnost pana V. P. (Complaint from Mr. V. P.), Prague, 16. 8. 1986, p. 1.

90 VANĚK, Miroslav: *Nedalo se tady dýchat*, p. 95. It should be added that in 1988 the constitutional and legal committee of the Czech National Council received a complaint about the wholly inadequate measures taken by the Municipal National Committee (Městský národní výbor, MNV) in Kyjov in dealing with a chemical fire. Cf. APS, f. ČNR – V. volební období, inv. j. 132, Zpráva o hlavních poznatcích ze stížností, podnětů a oznámení občanů a organizací došlých České národní radě v roce 1988 (Report on the main findings of complaints, suggestions and notices of citizens and organisations received by the Czech National Council in 1988), 10. 3. 1989, pp. 12–13.

91 *Archiv České televize* (Czech Television Archive), k. 241, ref. No. 1386, Rozbor anonymních dopisů došlých do OD (Oddělení dopisů) ČST v květnu 1988 (Analysis of anonymous letters received by the Letters Department of Czechoslovak Television /ČST/ in May 1988), 18. 6. 1986, p. 1.

92 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600 000, č. j. 607.128/88, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1987,



the office of the General Secretary of the Central Committee received a letter from a woman in Prague's second district expressing her disagreement with the planned Pěčín waterworks in the Orlické Mountains Protected Area, signed by nearly six hundred like-minded fellow citizens.<sup>93</sup> In September of the same year, the chairman of the VLK, Jan Motl, also pointed to an increase in collective complaints signed by hundreds to thousands of people, and he was not even referring to the Charta 77 (Charter 77, the strongest, and most influential dissident group in ČSSR) petition *A Few Sentences (Několik vět)*<sup>94</sup>, which by November 1989 had been signed by some forty thousand people.<sup>95</sup>

Compared to the environment, the following two groups of complaints represented a counterpart in terms of justification. However, the Party, state and trade union authorities paid considerable attention to them, as they concerned areas that were officially presented as the basic pillars of socialist social policy. Between 1984 and 1988, state and Party authorities registered an average of 3,600 complaints and submissions regarding social security, in which the correspondents were either expressing their dissatisfaction with their old-age pension, seeking a full disability pension, or expressing disappointment that they had not been granted a personal pension, which in the second half of the 1980s exceeded the average old-age pension by more than a thousand crowns. Although the number of such pensions more than doubled between 1984 and 1989 and reached nineteen thousand crowns per year, many recipients referred to a lifetime of sacrifice to the Communist Party and their contribution towards building socialism and were not satisfied with the amount.<sup>96</sup> The authors of the report on complaints received by the Communist Party Central Committee in 1987 pointed out that managers often led their subordinates to believe that receiving a personal pension was a kind of automatic bonus for holding previous positions in the Party or constituted a natural component of state or departmen-

březen 1988 (Report on the evaluation of complaints about other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1987, March 1988), not dated further, p. 40.

93 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 135/89, k informaci 5, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 30. září 1989, říjen 1989 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the Central Committee General Secretary Comrade M. Jakeš, from September 1 to 30, 1989, October 1989), not dated further, p. 3.

94 The petition was published by Radio Free Europe and other foreign media on June 29, 1989. It was conceived and written by Václav Havel, Jiří Křížan, Alexander Vondra and Stanislav Devátý. It contained a total of seven points and its authors advocated a fundamental transformation of the social climate, for which it would be necessary to stop restricting the freedom of assembly and to stop criminalising and persecuting independent initiatives. They also demanded artistic freedom of expression, religious freedom and an open debate on the 1950s and the reforms of the 1968 Prague Spring.

95 APS, f. Česká národní rada – V. volební období, inv. j. 136, Zápis z 38. schůze ústavně právního výboru České národní rady, která se konala 13. a 14. 9. 1989 (Minutes of the 38th meeting of the Constitutional and Legal Committee of the Czech National Council, held on September 13 and 14, 1989), p. 17.

96 More on the topic see VILÍMEK, Tomáš: *Nástroj mocenské legitimizace v Československu. Sociální politika a její uplatnění v důchodovém zabezpečení v Československu a NDR (1970–1989)* (An Instrument of Power Legitimation in Czechoslovakia. Social Policy and its Application in Pension Security in Czechoslovakia and the GDR /1970–1989/). *Soudobé dějiny*, 2013, Vol. 20, No. 1–2, pp. 89–119, quoted here from pp. 103 and 114.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

tal service medals.<sup>97</sup> Many did not hesitate to contact the General Secretary of the Central Committee, who was subsequently informed that many Communist Party district committees and local Party organisations did not understand the personal pension allocation system and had made irresponsible promises to those concerned, causing considerable disappointment when they did not receive them.<sup>98</sup>

Most of the complaints about social security, justifiability level of which fell from 14.4 % to 11.6 % between 1985 and 1988, concerned retirement pensions. Retirement brought about a decrease in the standard of living, as the average old-age pension was less than half of the average salary. The ratio was even worse for the so-called "old pensioners", whose pension had failed to keep in line with the growth in wages from which the retirement pension was later calculated. This led to a situation where citizens who retired at the beginning of the period of normalization received on average 25 percent less than those who entered retirement at the end of the 1980s, even though they had performed the same job.<sup>99</sup> Adjustments to social security in 1987 and 1988 only partially rectified the situation, something which was reflected in an increased number of complaints of this type. *Many letters expressing irritation have come from pensioners who fought for the goals of the Party from the early post-war period and who were not taken into account by the planned adjustments in the pension scheme*, wrote the authors of a report on letters received by the General Secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee in August 1988.<sup>100</sup>

As early as in June 1987, for example, a complainant turned to the Office of the ČNR with a letter criticising the *apartheid of old pensioners* in Czechoslovakia, many of whom, unlike the *new pensioners*, had experienced unemployment and war. The correspondent described the Party leadership as *communist capitalists*, adding that for obvious reasons the letter would remain anonymous. Freedom of expression without impunity was only possible in democratic states, the writer went on, which was definitely not the case of Czechoslovakia, which had been under occupation by a *colonising empire for all time*<sup>101</sup> ever since the Soviet invasion of August 1968. Such offensive complaints usually ended up in the hands of the State security (Státní bezpečnost, StB), although no further action was taken with this particular one, and as such it remained unanswered. Most correspondents preferred to point out their difficult life

97 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 65/88, k informaci 2, Zpráva o vyřízení dopisů pracujících zaslanych ÚV KSČ a ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1987 (Report on the handling of workers' letters sent to the Central Committee and the ÚKRK in 1987), 11. 7. 1988, pp. 22–23.

98 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 92/88, k informaci 3, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 31. října 1988, listopad 1988 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the General Secretary of the Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from October 1 to 31, 1988, November 1988), not dated further, p. 5.

99 VILÍMEK, Tomáš: *Nástroj mocenské legitimizace v Československu*, pp. 113–114.

100 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 85/88, k informaci 5, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSČ a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSČ s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 31. srpna 1988, září 1988 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSČ Central Committee and the General Secretary of the Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from August 1 to 31, 1988, September 1988), not dated further, p. 2.

101 APS, f. Stížnosti 1987 – nezpracováno, č. j. 1439/87, Anonymní podání ve věci svobody projevu a tisku a postavení důchodců, červen 1987 (Anonymous submission on freedom of expression and the press and the status of pensioners, June 1987), not dated further.

Tomáš Vilímek

situations, and for many people, the complaints were a *cry for help*<sup>102</sup>, increasingly addressed to the President of the Republic. Social security formed the second largest thematic group for complaints addressed to the president; from 1983 to 1988 he received on average 2,163 letters per year. For example, in 1988 he received a letter from a bedridden 70-year-old woman from Košice, who received a pension of just 355 crowns – five times less than the average at that time. Her request for help was granted by the President's Office. In addition to an increase, she was also granted a backdated allowance for dietary food, and her husband was henceforth allowed to take his meals in an old-age people's facility.<sup>103</sup>

Dissatisfaction with medical care, drug shortages, bribes and requests to arrange medical care in the Soviet Union or the West were among the second largest group of complaints and submissions with the lowest justification, averaging around 23 percent in the second half of the 1980s. The number regularly approached the 3,000 threshold, and the authorities paid considerable attention to them, as free universal health care was another key achievement of socialist society. Historian Lenka Kalinová has pointed out that there was a significant progress in the number of beds and doctors per thousand inhabitants in the period of normalization, and that Czechoslovakia ranked among the leading countries in Europe. The problem, as she saw it, however, was that these indicators were not decisive in assessing the level of health care, *since the lack of medical equipment actually prolonged the diagnostic and treatment procedures and placed greater demands on the number of beds and medical staff*.<sup>104</sup>

The lack of medicines was tackled with mixed success, and so people with heart conditions or diabetics in particular faced difficulties, something which, for example, a woman from Prague 10 highlighted in October 1988 in a letter to the Secretary General of the Communist Party Central Committee.<sup>105</sup> Some correspondents acknowledged progress in health care, but pointed out problems experienced by groups of people who, in their opinion, did not receive the deserved support and attention. *The state can't do everything*, wrote one woman from Trusnov in the Pardubice region to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in March 1989, *but I think the relevant persons who have done so much in the area of social policy for pensioners, mothers with children and others should think about the problem of families with disabled children*.<sup>106</sup>

102 FITZPATRICK, Sheila: *Tear off the masks! Identity and imposture in twentieth-century Russia*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 2005, p. 159.

103 AKPR, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600000, č. j. 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988, únor 1989 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1988, February 1989), not dated further, p. 17.

104 KALINOVÁ, Lenka: *K sociálním dějinám Československa v letech 1969–1989* (About the Social History of Czechoslovakia 1969–1989). VŠE, Prague 1999, p. 66.

105 NA, f. KSC-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 97/88, k informaci 2, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSC a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSC s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 30. listopadu 1988, prosinec 1988 (Information on the content of letters received by the KSC General Secretary of the Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from November 1 to 30, 1988, December 1988), not dated further, p. 5.

106 Ibid., sv. P 112/89, k informaci 11, Informace o obsahu dopisů došlých ÚV KSC a generálnímu tajemníkovi ÚV KSC s. M. Jakešovi od 1. do 30. března 1989, duben 1989 (Information on the content

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

As in the case of social security, the relatively low level of complaints' and submissions' justifiability in the healthcare was partly a result of the lack of awareness and exaggerated expectations of many correspondents who, in the case of the behaviour of healthcare staff and the care provided, showed a natural tendency to express a subjective point of view. Some, therefore, made repeated appeals to various Party and state bodies and refused to accept the rejection of their complaint. Investigation of such cases lasted for many months and was very demanding in terms of administration, as seen, for example, by the case of a complainant from Olomouc, who in March 1987 had written to the President of the Republic, the Central Trade Union Council, *Rudé právo* newspaper, the VLK ČSR and the Federal Assembly to describe the care she had received. In September 1987, officials at the Czechoslovak Ministry of Health finally created a Central Expert Commission, which found there had been no error in her case, to which the woman responded by filing a complaint against the decision of the Commission, which was ignored.<sup>107</sup> Sometimes, however, there were really no other avenues left to complainants, and if they chose the right argument and the correct method of communication, the complaint would sometimes bear fruit. Following the direct intervention of the Office of the President in 1985, for example, a crane operator at the Tube and Iron Rolling Mills in Chomutov was finally granted an operation in Prague, after she had complained about the repeated postponement of the procedure – saying she could not carry out her work without it.<sup>108</sup>

Complaints and submissions covered a wide variety of life in communist Czechoslovakia. For example, more than a thousand parents turned to various official bodies each year to appeal the decision not to admit their child to the university of their choice, rarely hesitating to use the argument of civic engagement, working class origin or exam results at secondary school or grammar school, which, however, had proved insufficient to succeed in the admissions test. Between 1985 and 1988, the Office of the President recorded on average over three hundred such requests each year, and a similar number were sent to the Communist Party Central Committee. *Applicants and their parents are not sufficiently aware*, in the words of the authors of a report on complaints received by the Office of the President in 1986, *that the main criterion for admission to study at university is compliance with the needs of society, as expressed in the binding plan for the number of places at each type of university*. While the Faculty of Metallurgy of the Mining University in Ostrava was only able to fill a quarter of available places in 1986, in the same year the Faculty of Medicine at Charles University received 2.2 applications for each free place, Prague's Faculty of Law received 4.3 applications

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of letters received by the General Secretary of the Central Committee Comrade M. Jakeš from March 1 to 30, 1989, April 1989), not dated further, p. 3.

107 *Všeodborový archiv*, f. S-ÚRO, inv. j. 659/2017, Návrh na uzavření stížnosti s. J. J. (Suggestion for closure of complaint by comrade J. J.), 18. 3. 1987, p. 1.

108 *AKPR*, f. KPR – nezpracováno, protokol 600 000, č. j. 608.990/86, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1985, březen 1986 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1985, March 1986), not dated further, p. 28.

for each place and the School of Applied Arts received some 10 applications.<sup>109</sup> Two years later, the authors of a similar report stated that the situation remained largely unchanged, only that the study of psychology was now in first place – there were thirteen candidates for each available place at the faculty.<sup>110</sup>

The second half of the 1980s saw a noticeable increase in complaints with a political context. Correspondents criticised, amongst other things, the slow pace of perestroika in Czechoslovak society, arbitrary decisions from officials in permitting trips to the West, the negative impact of the rigid cadre system, and increasingly they began drawing a link between the country's economic, social and environmental problems and the erroneous policies of the governing Communist Party. Shortly before the May 1986 elections, a complainant from Radkovice in the Pilsen region asked the Czech National Council whether he should cast his vote with a feeling of self-denial. He described himself as a politically unorganised and religious man who watched the work of the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev with admiration. He admitted that he had not voted in 1981, because in Czechoslovakia voting meant to *cast one's vote without reservation*, yet he still had such reservations and had been unable to get rid of them. *Even though I attended a pre-election meeting*, wrote the former miner, *and even though I can't say I have reservations about individual deputies, I do have reservations about politics and conditions in society that have been in place for years and with which I cannot agree or support. [...] I regret the lack of solidarity, the lack of understanding and actions that are in contrast to words. Everywhere people are calling for better quality, and I too want to be able to cast my vote for real and true socialism, or no socialism at all.*<sup>111</sup> In October 1988, a pensioner from Rožnov pod Radhoštěm wrote to *Rudé právo* and Czechoslovak Television, saying that he too welcomed the activities of Mikhail Gorbachev, but at the same time expressed the view that *it would take a long time for "glasnost" to pass into people's hearts and minds, which have been made timorous by the outdated methods and nepotistic, corrupt and bureaucratic practices of the last twenty years*. He also lamented the decline of the trade unions, which were frequently ordered about by company directors while expressing doubt as to whether the over-representation of women in the workplace was really proof of their equality in society.<sup>112</sup>

109 Ibid., č. j. 606.516/87, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1986, duben 1987 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1986, April 1987), not dated further, p. 26.

110 Ibid., č. j. 602.914/89, Zpráva o vyhodnocení stížností a ostatních dopisů pracujících došlých prezidentu ČSSR a Kanceláři prezidenta ČSSR v roce 1988, únor 1989 (Report on the evaluation of complaints and other letters from workers received by the President of the ČSSR and the Office of the President of the ČSSR in 1988, February 1989), not dated further, p. 36.

111 APS, f. Stížnosti 1986 – nezpracováno (Complaints 1986 – unprocessed), č. j. 971/86, Podání v souvislosti s volbami do zastupitelských sborů, květen 1986 (Submissions in connection with the elections to the representative councils, May 1986), not dated further, p. 3.

112 *Archiv České televize*, k. 241, inv. j. 1386, Věc: Připomínky občana – Dopis pana V. R. (místo neuvedeno), říjen 1988 (Subject: a citizen's comments – a letter from Mr V. R. /place not specified/, October 1988), not dated further, p. 2.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

Not only the content, but also the form of many complaints of the period suggest that citizens were losing patience and gradually losing their fear too. Some contacted foreign embassies with requests for help with emigrating from Czechoslovakia, something illustrated by a letter from a 42-year-old official from the Včela (Bee) consumer cooperative in Prague in late September 1989, informing the chairman of the ČNR about the rejection of his request to the Passport and Visa Administration, and explaining that he had decided to emigrate to the United States of America because he could not find a suitable job and did not see any future for himself in Czechoslovakia. The case was finally resolved in his favour, and he was legally allowed to emigrate shortly before November 17, 1989.<sup>113</sup>

The violent suppression of the demonstrations in January 1989 during the so-called Palach Week and the subsequent conviction of Václav Havel not only prompted many Czechoslovak citizens to write the slogan *Free Havel – Long Live Charter 77*<sup>114</sup> on the walls of public buildings, but also to directly address various Party and state authorities. At the end of February 1989, a citizen of Prague 1 asked Federal Assembly chairman Alois Indra *to use his position to support the quashing of convictions handed down to participants of the January demonstrations in Prague*, and also warned him that *any attempt to deceive and intimidate the public will be condemned to failure and will cast a strange light indeed on all those sincere efforts at perestroika, democratisation, dialogue, etc. Contrary to their intentions, they will only succeed in strengthening opposition tendencies in society*.<sup>115</sup> In a similar letter from January 1989, a correspondent from Brno said he personally refused to distance himself from the Prague demonstrations, which he would have happily attended if he had lived a little closer. *You know as well as we do that the end of Communist rule is coming and there's nothing you can do to stop it*, he wrote, castigating the deputies for their lack of conscience: *If people in our country ever come to despise anyone, it will – apart from Gestapo informers – above all be you, the footmen of this monstrous system, who, for their own advantage, hunger for power and material security have thrown a nation, once so highly valued throughout the world, into a moral, economic and environmental abyss*.<sup>116</sup>

### Complaints without a return address – the phenomenon of anonymous complaints

Anonymous complaints and submissions represented a somewhat ambivalent phenomenon for the Communist regime. On the one hand, they served as a highly useful

113 APS, f. Stížnosti 1989 – nezpracováno (Complaints 1989 – unprocessed), č. j. 2653/89, Stížnost na zamítnutí žádosti o vydání vystěhovaleckého pasu (Complaint on rejected application for the issuance of an emigrant passport), Prague, 26. 9. 1989.

114 For more on slogans and leaflets of this type, cf. VILÍMEK, Tomáš: Dvojí způsob života. Studie o Chartě 77 a československé společnosti (1977–2000) (A Dual Way of Life. A Study of Charter 77 and Czechoslovak Society /1977–2000/). In: SUK, Jiří – KOPEČEK, Michal – ANDĚLOVÁ, Kristina – VILÍMEK, Tomáš – HERMANN, Tomáš – ZAHRADNÍČEK, Tomáš: *Šest kapitol o disentu* (Six Chapters On Dissent). ÚSD AV ČR, Prague 2017, pp. 79–158, quoted here from pp. 106–123.

115 APS, f. Spisy orgánů, inv. j. 429, Politické záležitosti, Dopis pana P. H. (Political Affairs, letter from Mr P. H.), Prague, 28. 2. 1989.

116 Ibid., Dopis pana A. B. (Letter from Mr A. B.), Brno, 31. 1. 1989.

Tomáš Vilímek

source of information on burning social problems, various forms of economic crime and abuse of office. On the other, such complaints were used to castigate leading economic and Party functionaries, and their authors made little effort to tone down their criticism, which could easily be condemned as “anti-state baiting”. The Party leadership distinguished between anonymous letters that contained false data, slandered various officials and served as a means of settling personal scores, and those whose authors were drawing attention to serious shortcomings but lacked the courage to *have skin in the game*.<sup>117</sup> In the 1980s, their number continued to grow and in 1987 it exceeded 19,000 – representing 13 percent of all complaints received. The overall decline in complaints in 1988 was reflected in the number of anonymous complaints, but this was due primarily to a campaign against anonymous complaints, which, according to the authors of a number of articles in *Rudé právo*, allegedly contradicted the process of perestroika and as such had no place in socialist society, as they were *in contravention of its morals*.<sup>118</sup> On average, Czechoslovakia’s Communist Party and state authorities received almost 15,400 anonymous complaints per year between 1981 and 1988, with roughly one in three being assessed as legitimate. As with the signed complaints, anonymous complaints showed considerable differences in the level of legitimacy, as the table below shows.

#### Legitimacy of anonymous complaints and notices by subject<sup>119</sup>

10 to 40 %	41 to 50 %	above 50 %
Social security, health, education and transport	Relations in economic bodies and organisations, housing management and maintenance, development of science and technology	Environment, supply and trade, setting of and compliance with prices

At the same time, the attitude of Party and state authorities to anonymous letters illustrates not only the regime’s limits on the use of citizens’ complaints, but also the considerable degree of politicisation of this issue, which was in a way proportional to the increase in anonymous complaints. Their record number in 1987 prompted the powers-that-be to react, and in July 1988, the Presidium of the Communist Party Central Committee discussed the aforementioned *Analysis of anonymous complaints and submissions and a proposal for further action in this area*, submitted by František Ondříč, Chairman of the VLK ČSSR. In addition to a number of statistical data, the report

117 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/4, sv. S 65/88, k informaci 2, Zpráva o vyřízení dopisů pracujících zaslanych ÚV KSČ a ÚKRK KSČ v roce 1987 (Report on the handling of letters sent by workers to the KSČ Central Committee and the ÚKRK KSČ in 1987), 11. 7. 1988, p. 32.

118 JANOUŠKOVEC, Jiří: O dopisech bez zpáteční adresy (On Letters With No Return Address). *Rudé právo*, 2. 4. 1988, p. 3.

119 NA, f. KSČ-ÚV-02/1, sv. P 79/88, bod 7, Analýza anonymních stížností a podání a návrh dalšího postupu v této věci (Analysis of anonymous complaints and submissions and a proposal for further action in this area), 11. 7. 1988, p. 6.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

also contained several important observations. The first, for example, was the finding that anonymous complaints were mostly about societal problems, something that fundamentally set them apart from signed complaints, in which complainants usually pursued personal interests. The majority of anonymous complaints pointed to negative phenomena in the national economy, while the amount of so-called hate mail slandering senior managers was, at least according to the analysis, negligible. In addition, the alarming increase in unsigned complaints suggested that on the individual levels of the state authority, an appropriate climate for open criticism had still not been created, as workers were still at a greater risk of bullying at work if they complained about their superiors.

At the close of the analysis, the authors suggested two possible procedures for dealing with anonymous complaints. Under the first proposed procedure, only those complaints that contained substantive and concrete criticism should be investigated, which would help to promote the interests of society. The need to maintain the *ethics of control*; not disclosing names or partial results before the end of the case under investigation, was highlighted. The second option was not investigating anonymous complaints at all, which the authors did not recommend, as this would exclude an important source of information about serious problems and would in no way contribute to the *climate of open criticism*.<sup>120</sup> The Party leadership eventually opted for the first option, and in August, the Czechoslovak government adopted Resolution 228 on the analysis of anonymous complaints and submissions, requiring deputy prime ministers, ministers and heads of central federal authorities *to investigate in future only anonymous submissions on violations of laws and other legal regulations, abuse of positions and functions, violation of state discipline and other potential deficiencies in the activities of authorities, organisations and individuals*.<sup>121</sup> Anonymous complaints that pointed to the deeper systemic context of existing problems, criticised human rights violations, or questioned the Communist Party's policies, were automatically filed away without investigation and met the same fate as those which included any mention of Charter 77 or dissidents. When someone filed an anonymous complaint at the Eleventh All-Union Congress in April 1987 with a general criticism of the discrepancies between words and the real situation at different levels of society, it was *filed away without discussion*.<sup>122</sup>

In the second half of the 1980s, the issue of anonymous complaints repeatedly became the subject of discussion at the highest representative bodies. *We keep telling each other and convincing each other in the opinion pages*, deputy Milan Dohnal ended his speech to the Czech National Council national committee and nationalities committee meeting in May 1987, *that anonymous complaints should have no place in a socialist*

120 Ibid., pp. 7–11.

121 APS, f. FS – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 17. schůze Předsednictva FS, 9. 11. 1988, Usnesení vlády ČSSR ze dne 22. 8. 1988 č. 228 o analýze anonymních stížností a podání a dalším postupu (Resolution of the government of the ČSSR No. 228 passed on August 22, 1988 on an analysis of anonymous complaints and submissions and further steps).

122 Všeodborový archiv, f. S-ÚRO, inv. j. 658/2010, Zpráva o řešení stížností, oznámení a podnětů pracujících adresovaných XI. všeodborovému sjezdu (Report on the handling of complaints, notices and submissions from workers addressed to the Eleventh All-Union Congress), 27. 12. 1987, p. 4.



society. However, we all know full well that these complaints are often not just a personal reason to tarnish or slander another citizen or co-worker. Often, correspondents resort to anonymous complaints for fear of being silenced by their superiors, as they are often pointing out shortcomings in their own organisations, shortcomings which they find they can no longer tolerate. Many anonymous complaints, in his opinion, had revealed serious negligence in the economy and therefore needed to be addressed.<sup>123</sup>

Deputies had few illusions about the *level of comradeship* and the *principled approach to criticism* in state enterprises, but in the discussions they nevertheless agreed that anonymous complaints should be treated with great caution, because the benefits of legitimate complaints did not outweigh that of the defamatory ones.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, even during a meeting of the Czech National Council in May 1988, deputies voiced the idea that anonymous complaints should not be resolved at all, because it would allegedly be undignified. They were regarded as a kind of widespread discord that was not worthy of support. The Czech National Council chairman Josef Kempný admitted that anonymous complaints represented a serious problem, which had already been discussed by the Central Committee. It was generally agreed that most anonymous complaints would not be investigated at all. He also used the occasion to raise the problem of repeated complaints, whose authors refused to acknowledge that they were wrong. *Things have gone so far*, he complained, *that they're even threatening and cursing us*.<sup>125</sup> In March 1989, the Chairman of the House of the People Jan Janík also spoke out against the idea of treating anonymous complaints seriously during a session of the Federal Assembly, arguing not only that socialist democracy was becoming ever more deeply entrenched, something that allowed *everyone to openly criticise and suggest solutions to problems*, but above all, *unsigned complaints often have a derogatory anti-socialist and anti-state focus, presenting the thinking of dissidents and the like, aimed at disturbing peace and order in our homeland*.<sup>126</sup>

Both the Communist Party and state authorities showed a clear tendency to present anonymous complaints as incompatible with the perestroika process, which was

123 APS, f. Česká národní rada – V. volební období, inv. j. 175, Podklad pro zpravodajskou zprávu posl. Milana Dohnala ke zprávě o hlavních poznátkách z vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů národními výbory a jimi řízenými vybranými organizacemi v roce 1986 v 9. schůzi výboru ČNR pro národní výbory a národnosti, květen 1987 (Material for rapporteur's report by Deputy Milan Dohnal on the report on the main findings of the handling of citizens' complaints, notices and submissions by the national committees and selected organisations managed by them in 1986 at the ninth meeting of the ČNR national committee and nationalities committee meeting, May 1987), not dated further, pp. 4–5.

124 Ibid., inv. j. 155, Podklad pro zprávu ke zprávě Výboru lidové kontroly ČSR o hlavních poznátkách z vyřizování stížností, oznámení a podnětů občanů orgány a organizacemi ČSR v roce 1986 (Material for report on the report to the committee meeting of the People's Control Committee on the main findings from the handling of complaints, notices and suggestions from citizens to the authorities and organizations of Czechoslovakia in 1986), 8. 10. 1987, p. 3.

125 Ibid., inv. j. 48, Stenografický zápis z 21. schůze předsednictva České národní rady konané dne 24. 5. 1988 (Stenographic minutes of the 21st session of the Presidium of the Czech National Council held on May 24, 1988), p. 95.

126 APS, f. Federální shromáždění – V. volební období – nezpracováno, 21. schůze Předsednictva FS (21st session of the Presidium of the FS), 20. 3. 1989, p. 73.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

supposed to be characterised by deepening public awareness and socialist democracy, which gives every honest citizen the opportunity to speak out openly and to comment on any social phenomenon.<sup>127</sup> Those who sent in anonymous complaints clearly did not expect much from the much-vaunted “democratisation” and did not want to risk either conflict with the criticised authorities or expose themselves to the risk of being prosecuted for “defamation” or “incitement”, all the more so because the boundary between justified and unjustified criticism had not been well defined, and largely depended on the prominence of the “class struggle” over a given period of time. Although the scope for critical expression increased considerably in the late 1980s, for many citizens the fear of criminal repression remained paramount.

*I am not signing this*, wrote the author of a letter to Czechoslovak Television in February 1986, because if I did I would go to prison or at least end up in court. That's what freedom means in this country. Just words and words. He was writing to complain about what was on television, which instead of offering entertainment forced on viewers a stream of war, work, and awareness which everyone is heartily sick of by now.<sup>128</sup> In mid-March 1989, the Federal Assembly received an anonymous letter, whose author expressed his regret that he could not add his signature as he would have been able to do in the West. He described himself as a veteran Party member, who was ashamed of the Czechoslovak state after forty years of Communist rule. *I live the life of a normal Czechoslovak citizen, and recently I've started listening to foreign radio*, he wrote, *because our public media offers only biased information whose sole aim is to comply with the political establishment that has governed this country in particular since 1968*. He said he had no knowledge of Václav Havel or other dissidents, but that it was not right that for twelve years on, not a single text by Charter 77 had been officially published. He also wondered why statues of the “President-Liberator” (Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk) had disappeared from the streets and warned the reader: *No dictatorship in history has been allowed to rule for long! The people must have freedom*.<sup>129</sup>

The fact remains that even in the second half of the 1980s, a number of anonymous complaints ended up in the hands of the State Security, which handled about four hundred such letters per year between 1985 and 1989, with their number rising to 645 in the first nine months of 1989, more than double the number from 1985.<sup>130</sup> This increase was undoubtedly partly due to the beatings handed out by riot police during the so-called Palach Week in January 1989 in Prague. Indeed, in connection

127 Ibid., 13. schůze Předsednictva FS (13th session of the Presidium of the FS), 18. 4. 1989, p. 7.

128 *Archiv České televize*, k. 241, inv. j. 1386, Anonym (místo neuvedeno), únor 1986 (Anonymous letter /place not specified/, February 1986), not dated further, pp. 2–4.

129 APS, f. FS, spisy S (S files), č. 429, Politické záležitosti (Political affairs), k. 237, Anonym z Doudleb, březen 1989 (Anonymous letter from Doudleby, March 1989), not dated further.

130 For the total number of anti-regime missives – leaflets, graffiti and anonymous letters – between 1969 and 1989, cf. VILÍMEK, Tomáš: *Projevy rezistenčního chování v Československu v letech 1969 až 1989* (Manifestations of Resistance Behaviour in Czechoslovakia from 1969 to 1989). In: VILÍMEK, Tomáš – TŮMA, Oldřich: *Projevy a podoby protirežimní rezistence v komunistickém Československu 1948–1989* (Manifestations and forms of anti-regime resistance in communist Czechoslovakia 1948–1989). ÚSD AV ČR, Prague 2018, pp. 111–265, quoted here from p. 145.

Tomáš Vilímek

with the security authorities' crackdown on the January demonstrations, state and Party institutions received over three hundred anonymous letters, which were subsequently handed over to state security bodies. The table below shows that their authors turned mainly to the federal government and the Communist Party Central Committee, expressing support for political prisoners (92), criticising the economic situation (43), and commenting on Charter 77 and human rights in Czechoslovakia (41).

Number of anonymous letters responding to the suppression of anti-regime demonstrations in January 1989 in Prague<sup>131</sup>

Government	Communist Party Central Committee	Federal Prime Minister	Communist Party General Secretary	Czechoslovak Television (ČST) and Czechoslovak News Agency (ČTK)
122	51	36	20	17
Rudé právo newspaper	National Front	Federal Ministry of Interior (FMV)		Other
13	8	7		26

In one of these anonymous letters, addressed to Miloš Jakeš, an unknown woman expressed her fury, saying that some people had been beaten by police in January simply because they happened to be in the centre of Prague at the time. She said she had been monitoring developments in Czechoslovakia for a long time, and it seemed to her to be *a major step towards decline*. She criticised the Communist Party General Secretary for lying to the people in claiming that perestroika was a way towards a better future. At the end of the letter, she expressed regret over the fact that she had lived her entire life in fear and all she had to look forward to was the prospect of a *miserable pension*.<sup>132</sup>

### In conclusion

Authors of various studies on the ruling hierarchy of real socialism consider that *socialist complaints* do not present a very flattering picture of Czechoslovak society, as they were often manifestations of envy or an attempt to please.<sup>133</sup> In many respects,

131 *Archiv bezpečnostních složek* (Security Services Archive), f. Správa kontrarozvědky – II. správa – I. díl (A 34/1) (Counterintelligence Directorate – Second Directorate – Part I /A 34/1/), inv. j. 1573, Přehled výskytu anonymních a anonyrních výhrůžných dopisů v lednu 1989, z nichž některé reagují na události na Václavském náměstí ve dnech 15.–20. 1. 1989 (Overview of the occurrence of anonymous letters and anonymous threatening letters in January 1989, some of which in response to the events on Wenceslas Square between January 15 and January 20, 1989), Prague, 14. 2. 1989, pp. 1, 3.

132 *Ibid.*, inv. j. 1570, Pane Jakeš (Mr Jakeš), Prague, 17. 1. 1989.

133 KABELÉ, Jiří – HÁJEK, Martin: *Jak vládli? Průvodce hierarchiemi reálného socialismu* (How did they Govern? A Guide to the Hierarchies of Real Socialism). Doplněk, Brno 2008, p. 102.

## But they're threatening and cursing us!

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the surviving documents confirm this, as evidenced by the complaints whose authors did not hesitate to draw attention to those who, in their opinion, enjoyed socialist achievements more than they did. However, the complaints represent, above all, a remarkable and authentic reflection of contemporary individual and societal problems, which the writers considered to be so important and acute that it prompted them to communicate in writing with Communist Party, state or trade union bodies. However, the complaints can also be seen as a symptom of a society-wide crisis and the manifestation of the purely consumer orientation of the majority of the society, and their volume and potentially destabilising effect were probably better understood by their addressees than the authors themselves. Due to the changing international situation and the deepening economic and environmental problems of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the number of complaints and notices increased in the second half of the 1980s, a period when their authors were seeking in particular improvements in their own standards of living, but simultaneously they were becoming increasingly critical and open and there was a widening circle of people with skin in the game. In this respect, the complaints provide valuable evidence of the interaction between the different levels of the late socialist establishment and Czechoslovak citizens seeking, sometimes quite resolutely, the fulfilment of the regime's promises. Although for many years, the complaints also played a role as a safety valve or an instrument for reconciling conflicts between the powerful and the seemingly powerless, it appears that in the period of perestroika the potential for conflict rose sharply as a result of the long-term failure to resolve the country's problems, a potential which the powers-that-be were no longer able to cope with.