

RESEARCH REPORT IREX/IARO 2000-2001

Scholar's name: Petr Pavlinek

Title: Associate Professor

Host country: Czech Republic

Grant period: 1/1/01-5/1/01; 4 months

Topic of research

My research in the Czech Republic sought to investigate the implications of the post-1989 transformation in regard to the quality of the physical environment in the country. This is a complex issue, as I believe that the environmental management, environmental quality and environmental change are the outcome of a particular politico-economic formation in a given country. Since the end of 1989, the Czech Republic has been undergoing a political and economic transformation from the state socialist system, based upon one party political regime and the centrally planned economy, towards the capitalist one, with a pluralistic democracy and a market-based economy. My goal was to situate the environment within these complex changes both in terms of its role during this transformation and the effects of the transformation on environmental quality and environmental management.

Relevance and contribution to the field

The Czech Republic has been a major source of greenhouse gases that are believed to contribute to the global climate change. In this way, excessive air pollution from Czech coal-based power plants and manufacturing plants influences the global environment and can have an eventual impact on environmental quality in the United States. A good knowledge of environmental trends in the Czech Republic is useful during negotiations of global or multinational environmental treaties. Environmental security of Central and Eastern Europe significantly contributes to political and economic stability of Europe as a whole, which is one of the major objectives of U.S. foreign policy.

This research contributes to understanding the role environmental considerations play during the transformation in CEE and the consequences of this transformation for the local quality of the environment. The project attempts to unravel the complexity of environmental change that has so far resulted in concrete improvements in the quality and management of the environment while, at the same time, serious questions remain about the future sustainability of many of these improvements. Moreover, my research has shown that transformation policies are introducing significant new environmental problems such as increased urban pollution from rapidly growing car traffic, plastic packaging and increased domestic waste introduced by Western consumerism, increased exports of natural resources, and the danger of environmental degradation associated with foreign direct investment, attracted by low environmental standards and weak enforcement.

My research challenges and undermines two extreme positions on this issue: one that considers the transformation to be a boon for the environment and the second one that views the transformation as a failure in terms of its environmental outcomes. It also challenges the one-sided (Western) view of state socialist environmental policies and

management. My interviews and collected material show the complexity of state socialist approaches toward the environment and will allow me to map the pre-1989 environmental management from a critical perspective and in much greater detail than anything published so far in English on Czech environmental management before 1989.

Research methodology

I have employed several different research methodologies in this research: in-depth interviews of key informants; content analysis of newspapers and written documents; and collection and analysis of statistical data.

I have conducted 19 in-depth interviews, some of which took three to four sessions to completed. The key informants included:

- (a) Officials at the Ministry of the Environment.
- (b) Officials at other state environmental institutions, such as the Czech Environmental Inspection.
- (c) Officials at pre-1989 institutions with environmental agenda, such as the former Ministry of Forestry and Water Resources.
- (d) Environmental activists from non-governmental organizations such as the Children of the Earth, the Rainbow Movement, and the Prague Mothers.
- (e) Academics engaged in the environmental research.

Library and archive searches included research in libraries that contain environmental information from both the pre-1989 and post-1989 periods. These libraries included: the library at the Czech Ministry of Environment, the library of the Czech Ecological Institute, the Libri Prohibiti library, the Charles University Geographical Library, the library of the Czech Hydrometeorological Institute, and the Library of Children of the Earth. I have also collected statistical information from the Czech Statistical Office and the Czech Ministry of Environment. Most of my research was done in Prague. I did visit northern Bohemia (Most, Teplice, Chomutov, Ústí nad Labem) and northern Moravia (Ostrava)...

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

- It is important to view environmental management, environmental policies and the entire issue of environmental protection in the Czech Republic in the context of long-term development. It is impossible to understand the 1990s without comprehending the previous state socialist system of environmental management. In this context, the evolutionary perspective is much more valuable than perspectives emphasizing the break with the past system.
- In contrast to common Western views of state socialism completely ignoring environmental protection, the reality of state socialist environmental protection was much more complex. It is important to understand the environmental issues and management before 1989 in the context of political economy of state socialism. The Czech Communist government tried to deal with the issues of excessive environmental degradation in the 1980s but its efforts came too late and were limited by rigidities of the existing system.
- The worsening environmental quality became a political problem in the mid- and late-1980s; it increased the popular desire for political change and further undermined the Communist Party position in Czech society.

- The period between November 1989 and June 1992 was crucial for the nature of new environmental management in the 1990s and beyond; the Ministry of Environment was established and most of the new environmental legislation was prepared and approved by the Parliament during this period.
- The environment has been losing its priority since 1992 and there has been strong pressure from economic ministries and some (right-wing) political parties to take some competencies away from the Ministry of Environment and to undermine the environmental legislation passed before 1992.
- The environmental policies of the second part of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century have been largely driven by accession requirements of the European Union.
- While the quality of the environment improved dramatically after 1989, new environmental problems were introduced after 1989, and it is questionable whether long-term improvement is sustainable. The improvement resulted from a number of factors including the virtual collapse of heavy industry, policies of the Czech government (desulphurization of coal-based power plants), and mild winters. In many cases, however, we have witnessed the cleanup by default rather than anything else.
- New environmental problems introduced after 1989 include, among others, the uncontrolled development of car transportation leading to rapidly worsening urban air quality, rapidly increasing waste production by households, the break up of established systems of land use control and water management leading, for example, to uncontrolled urban development on precious agricultural land.

Suggestions for future research agendas in the environmental field in CEE

- It is important to conduct similar in-depth studies of pre-1989 and post-1989 environmental management in other countries of CEE. Such studies would allow comparative approaches to be developed.
- I recommend moving beyond the national scale, in looking at environmental management, to the regional and local scale where detailed case studies of concrete regions and concrete localities can be conducted. This will necessarily lead to a much better understanding of the entire system of environmental management than often quite general nation-wide studies can offer.

Policy recommendations

- The United States and the international community should further support the environmental cleanup in the Czech Republic and the whole of CEE that began in the 1990s.
- It is important to make sure that when and if the economies of these countries recover from their post-1989 collapse it will not be done at the expense of the environmental quality and gains achieved in the 1990s. Therefore, it is important to keep pressure on the CEE countries to further introduce and enforce efficient environmental legislation.
- The United States should support the development of an independent civil society in CEE, including the environmental NGOs, that will function as environmental

watchdogs, keeping check on governmental environmental policies and environmental management.