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Information about the situation in the People's Republic of Poland in samizdat issues of "Lidové Noviny"

Introduction

Free access to information is one of the fundamental pillars of a democratic society. Thanks to the possibility of free movement of people and information, a number of sources describing a particular topic are now possible. However, during the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, this possibility did not exist. In this article, the author asks to what extent the readers of the samizdat periodical "Lidové Noviny" could at least learn about the real situation in the People's Republic of Poland. The basic criterion of the quantitative analysis is the number of articles directly dealing with the People's Republic of Poland or mentioning it. The resulting number will then be compared with the number of articles about the People's Republic of Germany, therefore we can make a framework comparison of the extent to which the situation in Poland has been reported in comparison to another neighbouring country under communist rule. As part of the qualitative research, the author focuses on identifying significant themes of the articles and seeks to explain why these particular themes played such a prominent role in "Lidové Noviny".

Historical context of Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was largely liberated by the Red Army at the end of World War II, but western Bohemia was liberated by the American Army. After the war, it was therefore unclear which side of the Iron Curtain the country would fall on. This uncertainty did not last long, however, and as early as 1948 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia

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won an election that led to a coup d'état and the suppression of democratic efforts by other parties and individuals [Heimann 2009: 150]. As in other countries, the communist regime consolidated its position through harsh censorship and absolute control over information. During the forty years of Communist rule, not only the editorial offices of newspapers and magazines, but also the publishing and printing houses themselves were destroyed. It is clear from the above that it was virtually impossible to obtain free and truthful information in print. It is important to mention here that it was not only the publication of magazines and newspapers that was banned, but individual authors, both Czechoslovak and foreign, were censored and their works confiscated and destroyed. Censorship in Czechoslovakia thus reached great proportions and can be considered the most severe in comparison with the situation in, for example, the Hungarian and Polish People's Republics. The lack of relevant information not only about the situation in Czechoslovakia itself, but also abroad was unacceptable, especially for the intellectual and religious elite. The only possible way to respond to the situation was to create samizdat periodicals.

Samizdat

The emergence of samizdat periodicals is not connected with the communist regime. The first samizdat periodicals, as we understand them today, can be dated back to the 19th century in present-day Russia. The word samizdat itself also comes from Russian. The word samizdat is an abbreviation of samizdat and can be translated as self-publishing. The word samizdat itself is then not used in all languages in Polish we meet the term *Literatura drugiego obiegu* [Gruntorad 2018: 114]. This term, like the word samizdat in Russian, refers to the fact that it is not a text published by an official publishing house, but a self-published text outside the regime-controlled publishing houses.

The term "samizdat periodicals" in Czechoslovakia was defined by dissident and historian Vilém Prečan:

The term "self-published materials" (samizdat) means all written works of a documentary or literary nature written in Czechoslovakia by individuals or groups of persons and reproduced by them, but which cannot be published or disseminated by the official media in the country of their origin for censorship reasons. [Prečan 1986: 402].

Czechoslovak samizdat was already being produced in the 1950s, but the limited access to printing presses meant that the number of published copies was small and its importance was therefore not significant for society as a whole. The golden age of Czech samizdat came in the 1970s and 1980s [Jedlicka 2018: 39–41]. This period is associated with a wave of discontent among the intellectual public with the events of August 1968 and the increased activity of dissent. The samizdat periodical that was among the most widespread and operated from 1978 until the Velvet Revolution was *Information on Charter 77*. As the name suggests, it was a periodical published by a well-known dissident group, to which the later democratically elected President

Václav Havel belonged. Many of the periodicals were more local in character and reported on issues in a particular region. Many periodicals could not withstand the pressure of the secret police and closed down after a few issues [Přibáň et al. 2018: 68].

It should also be noted that the quality of the copies varied greatly, but they were generally poor quality copies that were often difficult to read. There was no way of comparing samizdat periodicals with the paper newspapers of today.

However, "Lidové Noviny" brought a fundamental change. The change was noticeable from several perspectives. The first was symbolic. The editorial team was a continuation of "Lidové Noviny", which was one of the most respected newspapers in the period before the Second World War. Contributors were considered the intellectual elite of Czechoslovakia at the time and included, for example, Karel Čapek, Ferdinand Peroutka and Karel Poláček, who are understood to have contributed significantly to the development of Czech literature [Pernes 1993: 66]. For the public, therefore, this was an understandable reference to the tradition of quality journalism. The reader of samizdat periodicals must have noticed at first glance the difference in the quality of the individual issues. From the first issue, "Lidové Noviny" was published in a similar format to the classic paper newspapers that are common today. Well-printed texts that were divided into different sections, such as news from home, news from abroad, economy, culture and sports. This form of content was also attractive to the wider public, not just to a small circle of dissidents. Contributors included prominent names in Czechoslovak culture and subsequently politics, such as Václav Havel, Jiří Ruml, Petr Pithart, Jiří Dienstbier and a large number of other authors who became the political elite of free Czechoslovakia after the regime change in 1989 [Posset 1993: 88].

"Lidové Noviny"

"Lidové Noviny" is one of the oldest periodicals published in the Czech Republic. The first published issue dates back to 1893 and the place of publication is Brno. The newly created periodical was popular in Moravia, where it was one of the most read newspapers before the outbreak of the First World War. The first problem for the editorial office arose with the outbreak of the First World War, when some authors were persecuted and the publication was temporarily interrupted. "Lidové Noviny" survived the first test of its existence, however, and continued its activities in the euphoria of the newly established Czechoslovakia. A turning point for the newspaper was the 1920s, when its management sought to transform it from a strong regional daily to one with a national reach. This was achieved in this period mainly thanks to the quality of the newly established editorial office in Prague, which was then followed by editorial offices in other cities of Czechoslovakia and foreign correspondents [Pernes 1993]. During the period known in Czech history as the First Republic, the management and editorial staff managed to create one of the most respected periodicals, where the journalistic elite worked and where the greatest personalities of Czech history contributed. The second disaster not only for the whole world, but also for "Lidové Noviny" was the Second World War. Some of the authors were persecuted for their Jewish origin, others were actively involved in the anti-Nazi resistance,

and the death of Karel Čapek, who was one of the most famous faces of Czech democracy and a contributor to the newspaper, was a very significant event. During the Nazi occupation, there was a change in the newspaper's management, as well as a change in orientation, when "Lidové Noviny" became a vehicle for Nazi propaganda and had nothing to do with the original idea on which it was built. After the Second World War, there was a revival, which is associated with the name of Eduard Peroutka, who is one of the most historically famous Czech journalists. Peroutka brought back the direction of the newspaper, which was characterised by an emphasis on democracy and humanism, which led to conflicts with the Communist press and the Communist Party. After the regime's coup in 1948, we find ourselves in a situation where it was in the interest of the ruling dictatorship to destroy "Lidové Noviny", which was a symbol of democracy. They succeeded in doing so in 1952, when the periodical ceased its activities for more than thirty years [Pernes 1993: 117]. Change came in 1987, when members of the dissent around the editor-in-chief Jiří Ruml published the first two zero issues. These were followed by regular monthly issues in 1988 and 1989. The editorial staff consisted mainly of people directly connected with *Charter 77* who had been severely persecuted for their activities, had been followed by the secret police, had experienced threats from the police, had been forced to change jobs and, above all, many of the dissidents who contributed to "Lidové Noviny" had been imprisoned for anti-state activities [Pernes 1993: 123]. The importance of the journal was further increased by foreign contributors, whose texts were difficult to get to Czechoslovakia and subsequently published. These were not only original texts, but also interviews or texts translated from other foreign newspapers and published in "Lidové Noviny". With regard to the readers of this article, it is worth mentioning in particular the Polish dissidents Zbigniew Bujak, Adam Michnik and the well-known human rights defender Andrei Sakharov. The samizdat "Lidové Noviny" ended with the December 1989 edition, which was already legal, and the editorial staff said goodbye to the underground style of work and complicated information gathering and switched to the format of a classic newspaper published. Iconic is the article by the later president Václav Havel, *Good bye samizdat*, which ends with the words welcome to freedom, welcome to the press, welcome to the new readers. It is the last word that leads to the question of how many copies of samizdat newspapers were published. It has been reported that around 400 copies [Přibáň et al. 2018: 110] were distributed to readers from the illegal printing house, but these were copied in domestic conditions and the final number cannot be determined. Similarly, the number of readers cannot be determined, as it is important to note that one copy was passed on to the next reader after being read by one reader.

"Lidové Noviny" is still in operation today and is one of the most widely read newspapers in the Czech Republic, and its online version is also popular. The most recent blemish on the newspaper's existence is the sale of the media house to billionaire Andrej Babiš in 2013, when the businessman gained considerable media power for his entry into politics, where he later became the country's prime minister.

Cooperation between Czechoslovak and Polish opposition

To understand how free information about the situation in the People's Republic of Poland was able to reach Czechoslovakia, it is necessary to describe the cooperation between the opposition in both countries. The Czech intellectual opposition was mainly gathered around *Charter 77*, which can be described as a very heterogeneous group consisting of personalities belonging to different political trends, from the extreme left to conservative Catholics. *Charter 77* was a 1976 document expressing the collective's disapproval of political developments in Czechoslovakia [Blažek, Kalous 2021: 81]. This document was then signed by other people who expressed their agreement with the text. Although *Charter 77* has gained an international reputation over time, it should be noted that the number of signatories did not exceed 2000 during the years 1976 to 1989 [Machovec 2019: 50]. It was therefore not a massive opposition movement, as was the case with the Solidarity movement. There were several opposition movements in Czechoslovakia, but for the purposes of this text the main focus is on *Charter 77*, given that these people were the main contributors to "Lidové Noviny" and had contacts with the Polish opposition.

The contacts between the Czechoslovak and Polish opposition in the period under review were mainly between *Charter 77* and the intellectual section associated with the KOR group. It was the group around Jacek Kuron and Adam Michnik who were present at the 1978 meeting on Mount Snezka on the border between the two countries, where the group around Václav Havel went from the Czech side [Kaminski, Blažek, Majewski 2017: 112]. In the same year another meeting took place, but the third meeting could not take place because of police interference. During the two meetings, discussions, exchange of printed materials and the establishment of friendships took place. In the following years, the cooperation could not take place at a high level because of the situation in Poland in the early 1980s, but even at this time information from the northern neighbours leaked into Czechoslovakia and, above all, the Solidarity movement was a symbol of hope in Czechoslovakia. In the second half of the 1980s, there was a renewal of contacts and mutual visits, both in the format of two groups at the border and individual visits to the neighbouring country. The uniqueness of the connection between the two dissenting groups is demonstrated by the existence of two samizdat periodicals, which unfortunately could not be published for very long due to police interference. These periodicals were the *Information Bulletin of Czechoslovak-Polish Solidarity* and *Poland and Us* [Kaminski, Blažek, Majewski 2017: 120]. However, both periodicals ceased their activity after two issues were published. Nevertheless, in the context of Czech samizdat, we can speak of a unique situation, when the idea of forming a samizdat periodical that would focus only on the situation in Poland arose out of the impulse to deepen international cooperation, at a time when it was very difficult to publish truthful information about events in the homeland. It is obvious that communication between the dissent in both countries was active and friendly relations were established, which created a positive environment for obtaining information from the other side of the border and created a prerequisite for frequent publications of texts from the People's Republic of Poland.

Quantitative research

In the first part of the research, the author addressed the question of how often “Lidové Noviny” reported on the situation in the People’s Republic of Poland. It is therefore a quantitative analysis. The criterion for including a text in this analysis is either that the entire article is devoted to the situation in the country, or that a significant part of a comprehensive article is devoted to Poland. Interviews with members of the Polish opposition and texts written directly by Polish authors are also included. In order to compare the quantity of texts published in “Lidové Noviny” about events abroad, the author has selected the number of texts about the German People’s Republic. The criteria for inclusion in the analysis remain the same. The research does not include references to the People’s Republic of Poland and the People’s Republic of Germany, for example, in articles on the economic situation, where the country is only mentioned in connection with a given figure, but this is not developed further. The period under study is limited to the zero issue of 1987 to the last issue of 1989. The source of the research was an electronic version of individual samizdat editions of “Lidové Noviny” provided by the Libri prohibiti library of Czech samizdat based in Prague. The Library of Czech Samizdat was founded and is still run by a dissident and *Charter 77* signatory Jiri Gruntorad who is considered a leading expert on Czech samizdat, which he himself distributed before 1989. It presents in table 1.

Table 1. Number of articles about PPR and GDR in 1987, 1988 and 1989

state/year	1987	1988	1989
PPR	3	19	23
GDR	2	4	11

Source: own elaboration based on results of the research.

The results of the quantitative research provide fairly clear conclusions that show that the situation in the People’s Republic of Poland has been more widely reported in “Lidové Noviny”. There is very little difference between the articles on the situation in the Polish People’s Republic and the German People’s Republic in 1987. It is important to recall here again that only two issues of “Lidové Noviny” were published in that year, therefore there was very little room for a larger description of each country. We then see a marked difference in the following year, 1988, when the number of articles on the situation in Poland far exceeds the number of articles on the situation in East Germany. In the last year under review, 1989, the difference is still large in favor of articles on Poland but has decreased compared to the previous year.

In terms of the number of country articles per issue, the research found the following data. In 1987, there were 1.5 articles on Poland and 1 article on East Germany per issue. In 1988, 1.58 articles were on Poland and 0.42 on East Germany. In the last year of research, the values are highest with 1.92 articles on the situation in Poland and 0.92 articles on East Germany. The given conclusion shows that the coverage of

information about the situation in the People's Republic of Poland was at a high level in the samizdat "Lidové Noviny".

These data clearly show that the Czech reader of "Lidové Noviny", who had access to all copies, had a significantly higher awareness of events in the northern neighbors than of the situation in East Germany. The author explains the result of this quantitative research mainly by the relations of the "Lidové Noviny" editorial office with the Polish opposition, where access to information was relatively less complicated than in the case of East Germany, which was mainly targeted by other opposition groups in Czechoslovakia. It is also necessary to mention the phenomenon of the Solidarity movement, which was emphasized in "Lidové Noviny". For the Czechoslovak opposition, the situation in 1989 in particular was significant because it was the first time the communist regime made concessions on such a scale. To provide context, it is necessary to mention that at the time of the first elections in Poland in which the Solidarity movement could participate, in June 1989, it was common for Czech dissidents to be still imprisoned, including the most internationally known of them, Václav Havel, who was imprisoned for the last time in October 1989. Thus, it is logical that the Czechoslovak dissent was interested in the situation in a country already undergoing transformation, and they investigated and commented on this process. In contrast, the German People's Republic could not offer a similar phenomenon and was therefore not covered as much by the samizdat.

Qualitative research

The second part of the research is devoted to the qualitative analysis of the text. Here, the author focuses on topics related to Poland that appeared in "Lidové Noviny". According to the analysis, we can identify three main topics that "Lidové Noviny" wrote about in connection with Poland. These were the economy, culture and history and, above all, the Solidarity movement and the political opposition in general.

In some of its issues "Lidové Noviny" devoted more detailed analysis to the economic situation in the Eastern Bloc countries and their comparison with the West. It is in these texts that one can find references to the very poor state of the Polish economy, both in comparison with other Eastern Bloc countries and, of course, in global comparison. Analyses which included an assessment of the inefficient functioning of the Polish economy, where some of the foodstuffs which were considered basic in Czechoslovakia were in some months in short supply in the People's Republic of Poland, for example meat. As mentioned in the evaluation of the qualitative analysis, the authors of "Lidové Noviny" focused on the political transformation in Poland. This transformation is then linked to the economic transformation. In this context, the authors focused on the high national debt that the People's Republic of Poland has created, given that it has failed to find a suitable concept for a prosperous economy throughout its existence [*Polska cesta?* 1989]. This was significant information for the readers of "Lidové Noviny". Although there was a general perception in society that the Czechoslovak economy was more advanced than the Polish one, the unvarnished information revealing the very poor state of the Polish economy brought new insight

into the issue. In retrospect, it is the issue of the national debt in the context of the transition to a market economy that can be considered quite crucial. Here, the reader could not only learn that a change in Poland's direction could end badly for its economy, but above all the articles made it clear that a change of regime need not and would not automatically mean prosperity similar to, for example, West Germany. Indeed, this obvious fact from today's point of view alluded to the very minimal knowledge of economics and the functioning of the market economy among the population.

Another important topic that often appeared in "Lidové Noviny" was culture and history. The author decided to merge these two topics for better clarity of the text. In the field of culture, "Lidové Noviny" focused mainly on the work of Andrzej Wajda, who was introduced to readers and informed about his works that were critical of the functioning of socialism in Poland, as well as "Lidové Noviny" informed about the awards that the director had received, and about Andrzej Wajda's political career, which showed the Czech dissent that it was quite relevant for artists to be involved in the political process. Also printed is part of an interview Wajda gave to the American version of "Newsweek" in 1988, where he explains how the film industry works in the People's Republic of Poland, or why he still remains in Poland [*Pláč na nesprávném hrobě* 1988]. Not to be forgotten is the mention of the forthcoming documentary on the Katyn massacre. The second cultural topic that appears in "Lidové Noviny" in connection with Poland is the *Festival of Czechoslovak Independent Culture in Wrocław*, which took place at the beginning of November 1989 [*Wrocław 89* 1989]. Only one article about the festival appeared in "Lidové Noviny", which, in the author's opinion, is connected with the fact that it took place less than two weeks before the beginning of the Velvet Revolution. The festival aroused great enthusiasm in Czechoslovak society, as young listeners in particular had the opportunity to listen to a number of anti-regime musicians, among them the musical legend Karel Kryl, who had long lived in West German exile. This mention was important not only because "Lidové Noviny" readers could learn about the course of the event and the relaxed atmosphere of free Poland, but the article was undoubtedly also interesting for the hundreds of young people who were refused entry to Wrocław by Czechoslovak customs officials. The last of the themes that the author has included under this heading is the subject of the Katyn massacre and its settlement. The events of Katyn were first and foremost truthfully described in "Lidové Noviny", but not only that, the authors also followed the reaction of the Soviet side to the suggestions of a part of the Polish political representation, which decided to discuss this topic on the floor of the Polish Sejm and thus reacted to the policy of removing white spots in the history of relations between Poland and the Soviet Union [*Katyn* 1989]. This historical topic was covered by several articles and contributions in the "Lidové Noviny" and received the most space of all foreign historical topics.

The last topic that logically received the most space was the opposition in the People's Republic of Poland. In "Lidové Noviny" there was regular information about the development of the political situation, especially in 1989, when the country was undergoing a political transformation, but as mentioned the relations between the oppositions in both countries had been established much earlier and the readers of

“Lidové Noviny” could also learn about this. The events directly preceding the emergence of the Solidarity movement were also described, especially 1970 and the protests on the Baltic coast and 1976 in connection with the public protests. The emergence of the Solidarity movement was then described in great detail for its time [*Gdaňské memento* 1988].

Among other things, the newspaper introduced the leader of the political opposition in the People's Republic of Poland, Lech Walesa, in one of its texts and then traced his development over time, especially at moments of political transition in Poland. Also significant is the reference in the printed interview with the new US President George Bush, who mentions a meeting with Lech Walesa [*Kandidáti pro bílý dům* 1988].

“Lidové Noviny” printed an article about a meeting of the political opposition from Czechoslovakia and Poland in August 1988, when a group of dissidents from both sides met at the border of the two countries, continuing a tradition from the late 1970s. As part of this meeting, “Lidové Noviny” carried a long interview with Adam Michnik and Zbigniew Bujak, including their profiles. During the interview, both interviewees describe their views on current events in Poland, the personal lives of the two dissidents in the People's Republic of Poland, and the importance of the meeting between the Czechoslovak and Polish opposition [*Vše směřuje k horkému podzimu* 1988].

In 1989, then, we can find in practically every issue an article about political developments in Poland, the situation at the Round Tables, the first semi-free elections, the election results and their significance for Poland, and the election of Tadeusz Mazowiecki as the first Prime Minister [*Nový polský premiér* 1989]. In addition to the texts, one of the issues of *Gazeta Wyborcza* features a graphic with the slogan *Nie ma wolności bez Solidarności* [*Příliš velké vítězství* 1989].

Conclusions

From the above it follows that the reader of “Lidové Noviny”, who had access to all copies, had a very good knowledge of the political opposition in Poland and, above all, received truthful information about the political transformation in the country. In terms of the amount and length of the text, the opposition in Poland was given the most space of any Eastern Bloc country.

On the basis of the research conducted on all 26 issues of the samizdat periodical “Lidové Noviny”, the author concluded that the periodical regularly published a large number of texts on the situation in the People's Republic of Poland, as evidenced by a quantitative analysis, where, compared to the texts on the German Democratic Republic, the number of articles on Poland in 1988 was almost four times higher and in 1989 more than twice as high. Within the qualitative analysis, the author of the research identified three areas of focus in the “Lidové Noviny” texts. These headings can be named as Economy, Culture and History and Solidarity Movement. According to the conclusion of both analyses, the reader who had all the issues of “Lidové Noviny” had the opportunity to learn about the real situation in the country, to find out the view of the Polish opposition and to orient himself on current issues that were censored in the official media in Czechoslovakia.

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Information about the situation in the People's Republic of Poland in samizdat issues of "Lidové Noviny"

Abstract

During the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, strict censorship was present in all media. The recipients of written and spoken information were therefore unable to access genuine free news and were exposed only to the propaganda of the totalitarian regime. One of the illegal ways to obtain uncensored information was to read samizdat periodicals. The creation and sale of samizdat were severely punished, yet there were dissidents who were willing to risk imprisonment and distributed samizdat periodicals. One of the most important periodicals was "Lidové Noviny". This article examines the question of how the "Lidové Noviny" reported on the situation in the PPR.

Keywords: censorship, communist regime, Czechoslovakia, "Lidové Noviny", Poland, samizdat