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## **The collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia in Eastern European context**

*MIREES' open lecture*

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November 25 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. In order to remember this fundamental episode in modern history, the MA MIREES gave the opportunity to its students to follow the lecture of Professor Jan Rychlik who currently teaches at the Charles University in Prague.

Despite the joy of the defeat of Nazism and the restoration of a free Czechoslovak state, old grudges reappeared and negatively marked the coexistence of both nations. In the first half of the 1960s, at the time of a loosening of the political situation in the communist Czechoslovakia, a movement arose again, which demanded the Slovak independence. That claim came as a natural response to the system of a communist state.

This is the starting point and context of the lecture of professor Rychlik. According to him, the communist regime is based on a pyramidal structure, identified with the system of democratic centralism, characterized by an unconditional subordination of the lower parts of the state apparatus. The Slovaks were outraged by being directed from Prague, as they had to be subordinated to the command of the Czech communists. In few days, the movement became a mass phenomenon that ended the communist power, as dominoes were falling as a reaction to the enormous public pressure and changes in other socialist neighbouring countries. What professor Rychlik was underlying and stressing was the Slovak 'clean slate' with the past: they started to identify those responsible for the errors of communism, and finally a new era defined by the non-denial began. He stated that 25 years after the Velvet Revolution, citizens live this anniversary with mixed feelings, feelings that lay between the regained freedom and optimism and the disappointment of dreams and hopes that in all those years still didn't come true.

The second part of the lecture dealt with the main causes and features of the collapse of communism in the country and its end in 1993. Czechoslovakia, in fact, was bound to fail as a state, and communism had only postponed its conclusion, said Rychlik. Czechs and Slovaks shared most

of the past century in one country. Ever since its foundation, though, each nation had a diverse conception of how the country should function, and what their role in it should be. Rychlik affirms that we need to understand what they meant for “common state”, the definition of which diverged between Czechs and Slovaks: it is a very broad term and, for the Slovaks, it did not mean a federation in the existing form, or even a centralized state as in the period between the wars. Analysing this last point, professor Rychlik claimed that the Slovaks were talking about a common state with virtually no responsibility for the central authorities, which would be a boon for Slovaks, but of no use for the Czechs, and that it would have fallen to pieces in any case. Czechoslovakia failed, mainly, because of the lack of a common identity. He made a brief comparison between Czechoslovakia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in order to explain its impossibility to last: *“they did not consider themselves to be Czechoslovak, even the Czechs did not. They said they were Czechoslovaks but they were not; they said Czechoslovak but they meant Czech because the Slovak influence was very small if any”*.

From his own experience as an advisor in the years 1991-92 of Petr Pithart, who at the time was Prime Minister in the Czech government, professor Rychlik gave a brief but complete idea of the political framework in which Czechoslovakia was immersed during the second half of the past century. The enriching journey the students experienced during the lecture, also through photos and Rychlik’s witnessing, started from the idea of communism in the country and ended by explaining its failure, passing through the crucial moment of the Velvet Revolution and the Prague Spring.

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