The Normalisation Choir: Bratislava Catholic Youth Choirs as a Case Study of Youth Activities in Slovakia Under Late Socialism

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Abstract: The article helps fill the gap in the study of activities of the young generation in late socialist Slovakia by presenting the case study of Bratislava Catholic youth choirs, drawing on eight oral interviews conducted by the author. The first part highlights that youth activities in late socialist Slovakia remain understudied. The second part offers an interpretative summary of the phenomenon constituted by four leading Bratislava choirs: Céčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko, and Kufríkovci. It describes their apolitical motivations, activities beyond singing and beyond Bratislava, and their conspirative operation. The third part interprets the case study in light of existing historiography. It highlights the rootedness of choirs in the context of traditional Slovak religiosity, their exemplification of social movements contributing to the revolutionary carnival of the late 1980s, the a-legal nature of their activities, and the likely enduring relevance of categories such as "living in truth" in describing late socialist life in Slovakia.

Keywords: youth activities; popular culture; Catholic church; late socialism; normalisation; Czechoslovakia; Slovakia

Abstrakt: Článek pomáhá zaplnit mezeru ve studiu aktivit mladé generace v pozdně socialistickém Slovensku tím, že představuje případovou studii bratislavských katolických mládežnických sborů, přičemž vychází z osmi ústních rozhovorů vedených autorem. První část vysvětluje, že aktivity mládeže v pozdně socialistickém Slovensku zůstávají nedostatečně prozkoumány. Druhá část nabízí interpretační shrnutí fenoménu, který tvořily čtyři přední bratislavské pěvecké sbory: Céčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko a Kufríkovci. Popisuje jejich apolitické motivace, aktivity mimo zpěv a mimo Bratislavu a jejich konspirativní působení. Třetí část interpretuje případovou studii ve světle dosavadní historiografie. Zdůrazňuje zakořeněnost sborů v kontextu tradiční slovenské religiozity, jejich exemplifikaci sociálních hnutí přispívajících k revolučnímu karnevalu konce 80. let, a-legální povahu jejich aktivit a pravděpodobnou stálou relevanci kategorií jako „život v pravdě" při popisu pozdně socialistického života na Slovensku.

Klíčová slova: aktivity mladé generace; populární kultura; katolická církev; pozdní socialismus; normalizace; Československo; Slovensko

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Introduction

Ever since the student demonstrations in November 1989, it has been clear that the activities of students and young people played an essential role in destabilising the late socialist regime in Czechoslovakia. Historians of late socialist Czechoslovakia have since advanced many accounts regarding the nature and the role of the activities of the young generation. Little attention, however, has been paid to Slovakia as such and hence to differences in the nature and role of youth activities between the Czech and the Slovak context. This article aims to take the first steps towards filling these gaps. The first part of this article summarises the historiographical debates concerning the nature and the role of activities of the young generation in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and the 1980s in order to highlight that the Slovak context has been largely understudied. The second part presents one case study of a hitherto undocumented youth activity in Slovakia: four choirs that spontaneously emerged across the 1970s and 1980s, drew in several hundred (mostly) young Catholics, and made a name for themselves in Bratislava and beyond. The case study is presented as an interpretative summary of key characteristics of this minor phenomenon, drawing on eight oral interviews conducted by the author.

The third part places the case of Bratislava youth choirs in the context of the aforementioned historiographic debates and identifies noteworthy similarities and differences between the Czech and the Slovak contexts. Firstly, given the apolitical, playful, transnational, and vis-a-vis the socialist state somewhat careless nature of the activities of these Catholic choir communities, Bratislava youth choirs constituted a minor yet typical case of the social movements that flourished in Czechoslovakia and across Central Europe and that contributed to what the American historian Padraic Kenney called the revolutionary carnival of the late 1980s. Secondly, Bratislava youth choirs constituted a milieu wherein young people sought deeper meaning under the "bleak" normalisation conditions. This "island of freedom" conditioned by the specific Slovak context of relatively high persisting institutional religiosity partly filled the function played by the folk, underground, or tramp movements in the Czech lands, characterised instead by deinstitutionalised religiosity.

Thirdly, Bratislava youth choirs constituted an example of what the Dutch legal theorist Hans Lindahl calls an a-legal activity: they emerged and flourished precisely because, thanks to the very nature of their activities, they avoided the binarity between legal and illegal. Přemysl Houda recently argued that a-legal activities, a category which Houda in his analysis likens to a creative participation in the authoritative discourse of late socialism and exemplifies on the cases of normalisation folk-festival organisers, challenge the binary distinction between "rare islands of freedom" and "vast seas of unfreedom" (Miroslav Vaněk) or "living in truth" and "living in a lie" (Václav Havel). Houda sees these as entrenched in previous historiographic accounts of everyday life under late socialist Czechoslovakia. The case of Bratislava youth choirs is a phenomenon mostly describable as just another case of "carnivalesque social movement" or "island of freedom" or "living in truth", i.e., involving partici-

pation in the authoritative discourse of late socialism only in minor ways. As such, it does little to disprove Houda's primary thesis about the so-far-overlooked diversity of everyday life under late socialism. Houda entertains a further *hypothesis* that perhaps a-legal activities rather than dissident activities constituted the real spectre for the late socialist regime. The case of Bratislava youth choirs, however, suggests that Houda's further *hypothesis* is perhaps less likely to hold in the Slovak than in the Czech context – as can be anecdotally suggested based on the case of Fr. Štefan Záreczký, who played a conflicted role in both regulating and protecting the normalisation choirs, but vigorously agitated against the Candle Manifestation in March 1988. When explaining the role of the activities of the young generation in the implosion of the late socialist regime in the Slovak context, characterised by a higher level of persisting institutional religiosity and, in turn, a more significant role of the underground church of which the normalisation choirs were a particular a-legal expression, the narrative distinction between living in truth and living in lie arguably remains vital.

Youth Activities Under Late Socialism in Czechoslovakia

A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989 by the American historian Padraic Kenney constitutes the prime explanation of the role of young people in the revolutions of 1989 across Central Europe in foreign historiography. Kenney argues that the revolutionary moment of 1989 – traditionally explained by a trio of causes: "the Gorbachev factor" symbolising reformist political processes at the heart of the Eastern bloc in the Soviet Union, the inevitable collapse of the system of the planned economy due to structural deficiencies, and the role of dissent and its intellectual, cultural, or religious varieties – cannot be explained without a view to the social movements that swept the Eastern bloc since the early 1980s and especially in the latter half of the decade. In short, young people did not march into the streets of Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, Wroclaw, or Warsaw in 1989 because of Gorbachev's popularity, nor because all of them read the writings of dissident intellectuals such as Václav Havel, nor because the economy was crumbling at the moment - in fact, market liberalisation was already successfully experimented with in Central Europe by then. Kenney argues that they marched into the streets because that was what they were already intensively doing in the latter half of the 1980s to support numerous concrete causes ranging from world peace, nuclear disarmament, fears of ecological crisis or restrictions of religious freedom. The older generation of the opposition who remembered the Stalinist period and personally experienced the disappointments of 1956 or 1968 often remained sceptical to hopes of change or focused on theoretical critiques. The younger generation, termed the "konkretny" generation by Kenney, instead focused on "doing" by organising ecological petitions (Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros), religious pilgrimages (Velehrad), or artistic street happenings (Wroclaw), scoring both symbolic and practical concessions from the late socialist state already in the years before 1989. Transnational connections within the Eastern Block or behind the Iron Curtain were

often an invaluable asset for the leaders of the "konkretny generation", first when they de facto domestically enacted a pilot civil society in the underground, and second, when they, thanks to this prior experience, not infrequently rose to prominent social and political roles after 1989. Kenney likens the revolutions of 1989 to a carnival because of the radical variety of social movements involved and because they were fundamentally playful: protests featured theatre plays and music concerts, and the protesters never took themselves or the regime too seriously.[1]

In the Slovak context, Kenney identifies several such significant social movements. Firstly, Kenney repeatedly highlights the role of the underground church, a vast clandestine network of Catholic activists around the secret bishop Ján Korec, as a key instrument of mobilising Christian youth in concrete moments, such as the pilgrimage in Velehrad in 1985, the so-called "Navratil" petition of 1987, and the Candle Manifestation in 1988.[2] Secondly, Kenney recounts the importance of Bratislava Nahlas, the peak of the sustained activities of the Slovak environmentalists in the 1980s. This 62-page report distributed in 4000 copies calling out the environmental degradation in the Slovak capital became the Slovak equivalent of Charta 77 and, in Kenney's words, "the most comprehensive condemnation of developed socialism published anywhere in Central Europe."[3] Between the lines, Kenney illustrates a variety of characteristically pluralist carnivalesque Slovak moments, such as Martin Šimečka's experience of getting soaked during the Candle Manifestation or the notorious trial of the so-called "Bratislavská päťka" involving figures as diverse as Ján Čarnogurský, Miroslav Kusý or Hana Ponická.[4]

Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu, a volume of studies edited by Miroslav Vaněk and published by the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in 2002, presents the most comprehensive domestic historiographic account of the kind of social movements to which Kenney draws his attention. While the transnational scope of Kenney's work necessarily covers only the most famous social movements of the late 1980s in Czechoslovakia, Vaněk's edited publication is more comprehensive and detailed. In this book, Petr Blažek describes the activities of youth devoted to the cause of peace, Jaroslav Cuhra the relationship between the state, the Catholic Church and the youth, Libuše Cuhrová the history of the officially suppressed scouting movement, Pavel Žáček the State Security policy devoted to monitoring youth agenda, while Vaněk contributes two studies on ecological movement and the so-called new wave in music, including the spread of punk music. While highlighting a wide range of causes to which the youth devoted itself in 1980s Czechoslovakia, this volume falls

[1] Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2003, p. 1–16.
[2] Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 36–37.
[3] Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 82–84.
[4] Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, p. 216–217, 288.

short of its ambition to cover the whole of Czechoslovakia.[5] With the noted exception of Jaroslav Cuhra's mention of the greater relative importance of Catholic youth activities in the Slovak part of the federation – the most significant Catholic public activities in the Czech lands drew heavily on Slovak support, as was the case in the Velehrad pilgrimage of 1985 or the Navrátil petition in 1987[6] – this volume tells us little about the differences in the plurality, intensity, and hence relative importance of these social movements between the Czech and Slovak parts of the late socialist federation. Since the early 2000s, Czech historiography has produced specialist literature on some of these and related youth movements such as scouting, tramping, underground or folk music covering much of the 20th century, including the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly to Vaněk's early edited volume, however, they mostly confine their subject to the history of these activities among the Czech youth.[7]

Out of the specialised publications on various youth activities in the period of late socialism, the one that continues to stimulate new interesting historiographical debates about the nature and role of these activities is devoted to the phenomenon of folk music. Akin to the way the scholarship of Michal Pullmann seeks to challenge what Pullman calls the totalitarian-historical narrative in the histories of the late socialist state, a recent monograph by Přemysl Houda – *Normalizační festival: Socialistické paradoxy a postsocialistické korekce* – seeks to challenge a certain kind of narrative bipolarity that has long characterised the discourse surrounding the phenomenon of folk music.[8] In Houda's view, volumes such as Vaněk's on "islands

[5] In the introduction, Vaněk does reflect on the limits of the project, e.g., the failure to answer the question "just how much of Czech youth was engaged in these activities". Yet even this explicit mention of "Czech" rather than "Czechoslovak" youth hints that despite the reference to Czechoslovakia in the volume's heading, it does not reflect on potential differences between the Slovak and Czech contexts. Miroslav Vaněk (ed.), *Ostrůvky svobody: Kulturní a občanské aktivity mladé generace v 80. letech v Československu*, Praha: Votobia and Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR 2022, p. 9.

[6] Jaroslav Cuhra, "Skrytý zápas: Stát, katolická církev a mládež v druhé dekádě normalizačního režimu", in Vaněk (ed.), *Ostrůvky svobody*, p. 126–127, 134. On the Navrátil petition, see also Kenney above.

[7] For more details on the histories of these youth movements in the 1970s and 1980s, see the following literature for an introduction of each movement. On scouting and the related yet distinct phenomenon of "foglaring": Pavel Hošek, *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglara*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2017; Stanislav Balík, "Junák-skaut. Příklad Rudolfa Plajnera, in Lukáš Fasora (ed.), Člověk na Moravě ve druhé polovině 20. *století*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2011. On tramping: Jan Krško, Jan Mareš, Jan Pohunek, Jan Randák and Jan Špringl, *Putování za obzor: Tramping v české společnosti 1918–1989*, Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny 2020. On underground, see the topical journal issue: Zdeněk Nešpor, "Thematic Issue on the Religion of the Czech Underground under Communism: Editorial", *CEJCR* 2 (1–4, 2020): p. 1–4. On folk: Zdeněk Nešpor, *Děkuji za bolest... Náboženské prvky v české folkové hudbě 60.–80. let*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2006; Přemysl Houda, *Intelektuální protest, nebo masová zábava? Folk jako společenský fenomén v době tzv. normalizace*, Praha: Academia 2014.

[8] Michal Pullman, "Sociální dějiny a totalitněhistorické vyprávění", *Soudobé dějiny* 15 (3–4, 2008): p. 703–717. See further discussion of totalitarian-historical narratives below. Přemysl Houda, *Normalizační festival: Socialistické paradoxy a postsocialistické korekce*, Praha: Karolinum 2019.

of freedom" helped to perpetuate a simplifying understanding of life under late socialism, implicitly separating the rare "islands of freedom" from vast "seas of unfreedom". However, the day-to-day reality of how cultural activities among the young generation actually took place remains obscured. With regards to folk music, Houda argues, such discourse does little to help explain how exactly "forbidden" or "persecuted" folk singer-songwriters managed to regularly perform in front of crowds despite their supposed "forbidden" and "persecuted" status. To illustrate the mass nature of folk music happenings when describing everyday life in late state socialism, a metaphor more appropriate than "islands of freedom" is that of a "Möbius band": a circular band with a single side of the surface making the appearance of being double-sided, when in fact one side continually turns into the other. Through the analysis of several case studies of folk singers as well as the hitherto overlooked figures of folk festival organisers, Houda makes the argument that the late socialist phenomenon of folk music as such existed precisely because many of its protagonists did not lead black-and-white lives: the historical reality of the phenomenon of folk music cannot be sufficiently grasped by the dichotomy between "living in truth" and "living in lies".[9]

To explain the mass nature of folk happenings, Houda analyses how its protagonists participated in what Houda refers to as the "authoritative discourse" of the hegemonic late socialist state – they spoke the newspeak with its mottoes of youth and building the future, voted in local party conferences, obtained and sustained membership in senior and junior associations controlled by the socialist state – and they did so in entrepreneurial, creative ways.[10] Houda's analysis is inspired by the landmark study by the American-based cultural historian and social anthropologist of Russian origin, Alexei Yurchak, titled *Everything Was Forever until it was no more: the last soviet generation*. In this work, Yurchak sought to explain the paradox that for the last Soviet generation, while the collapse of the Soviet system seemed "unimaginable before it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened".[11] To explain this paradox, Yurchak describes the "hypernormalization" of the authoritative discourse of Soviet socialism in the epoch after Stalin's death, whereby upholding the form of its key ideological representations became much more important than upholding their

[9] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 12–29.

[10] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 24. Houda defines "authoritative discourse" by implication through Yurchak from Bakhtin on p. 30. See Yurchak's words: "For Bakhtin, authoritative discourse coheres around a strict external idea or dogma (whether religious, political, or otherwise) and occupies a particular position within the discursive regime of a period. It has two main features. First, because of a special 'script' in which it is coded, authoritative discourse is sharply demarcated from all other types of discourse that coexist with it, which means that it does not depend on them, it precedes them, and it cannot be changed by them. Second, all these other types of discourse are organized around it. Their existence depends on being positioned in relation to it, having to refer to it, quote it, praise it, interpret it, apply it, and so forth, but they cannot, for example, interfere with its code and change it. Regardless of whether this demarcated and fixed authoritative discourse is successful in persuading its authors and audiences, they experience it as immutable and therefore unquestionable." Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was forever until it was no more: the last soviet generation*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2005, p. 34–35 (epub).

[11] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 16.

literal meaning. The meaning behind the endlessly repeated ideological symbols began to destabilise and opened itself up to unexpected, new content. Houda argues that in this regard, late Czechoslovak socialism was similar to the Soviet one and that Czechoslovak folk music illustrates the processes of hypernormalisation particularly well.[12] The primary aim of Houda's analysis is to underscore the variety of everyday life under late Czechoslovak socialism and the inability to capture and explain this variety and its paradoxes with the established vocabulary of terms such as: "islands of freedom", "living in truth" or "grey zone".[13] Yurchak's work, as well as the possibilities of transposing his analytical model to the context of late socialist Czechoslovakia, have been both praised and contested in Czech historiography and public debate.[14] While Houda's monograph seeks to defend the usefulness of this model in studying late socialist Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovak folk music, it is silent on the question of what might be the relative merits of his theses when comparing the Czech and Slovak parts of the federation.

Bratislava Youth Choirs as a Case Study: Why and How

Bratislava youth choirs constitute a potentially insightful field for studying the differences in the nature and role of youth activities between the Czech and Slovak contexts because they lie at the intersection of two significant sites of youth activity in late socialist Czechoslovakia: underground church on the one hand and popular (music) culture on the other. According to the rare previous remarks in existing historiography, across the 1970s and 1980s there, four music choirs emerged spontaneously in Bratislava, amounting to several hundred regular and more occasional members in sum, with many more accidental onlookers during performances at liturgical services in Bratislava and beyond. While church choirs devoted to experimenting with modern music sprang up locally across Slovakia frequently in the aftermath of the liturgical reform wrought by the Second Vatican Council, perhaps none attracted as many members and existed as long and thus had as many performances as the four choirs that emerged in the Slovak capital and attained a wide-ranging reputation beyond Bratislava. Ján Šimulčík, a leading historian of the Slovak underground church, recounts the existence of these choirs as one of the several significant external expressions, e.g. alongside samizdat,[15] of the "secret church" or "underground church" defined as "non-official activities of the Catholic Church officially active in Slovakia between 1948 and 1989"[16]. Juraj Lexmann, a leading music theorist and formerly

[12] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 30.
[13] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 172–173.
[14] For an overview, see e.g. the first footnote in Přemysl Houda, Veronika Houdová and Alexei Yurchak, "Nechtěl jsem socialismus ani romantizovat, ani démonizovat: Rozhovor s Alexejem Jurčakem", *Soudobé dějiny* 27 (1, 2020): p. 127–141.
[15] Ján Šimulčík, *Generácia nádeje: Malé kresťanské spoločenstvá, 1969–1989*, Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa 2021, p. 56–57.
[16] Šimulčík, *Generácia nádeje*, p. 13.

the head of the Musical Department at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, recounts that these choirs served as "models worth following and a basis, which set in motion a new trendy current across the whole of Slovakia".[17]

Given the absence of classical archival sources or developed secondary literature documenting the existence of these choirs, this research resorted to oral history methods, which are well suited for this task, given the continuing presence of many potentially relevant narrators. Eight semi-structured interviews with two members of each of the four choirs, known as "Céčko", "Ursus Singers", "Káčko", and "Kufríkovci" were conducted with a view to engage choristers in leading musical and organisational roles, men as well as women.[18] The interviews had a semi-structured form, collecting both an open-ended testimony about the narrators' experience in the choir and answers to specific questions, for example, about the motivation for participation, week-by-week common activities relating to the choir, the kind of music performed, or the interactions with the security bodies of the socialist state. Interviews were recorded with the narrators' permission, and transcripts were produced using specialised software. The collected material contains a large amount of detailed information, allowing for the construction of a first brief chronological history of the phenomenon to be published elsewhere.[19] The following text offers a brief characteristic of this phenomenon through an interpretation of the interviews, proceeding thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on the foremost common themes that arose in the interviews and occasionally complementing the collected material with secondary literature.[20]

This method is not without apparent pitfalls. Oral history material is prone to subjectivity, and testimonies fall prey to the selectivity of human memory. The fact that narrators participated in choirs in the "spring of their lives" as twenty-somethings, one even mostly as a teenager, calls for extra caution. This attempt at formulating a characteristic of the phenomenon is necessarily far from definitive, given these pitfalls and the limited sample of eight narrators. As such, the aim is to take the material for what it is – warm impressions and memories rather than hard facts.

On the one hand, the author avoided excessive verifications in the interviews and their interpretation. On the other hand, the text makes some general conclusions in

[17] Juraj Lexmann, *Teória liturgickej hudby*, Bratislava: vlastným nákladom 2015, p. 275.

[18] See Appendix A for a summary of information on the interviewees. One of the narrators is a relative of this study's author. The inclusion of the narrator in the sample was justified given the fact that the Trizuljak family, along with the Babál family, played an important role in the activities of Ursus Singers, as recounted by other sources beyond the interviewed narrators, e.g. Ivan Šimko (ed.), *Céčko: "Každý ma svoj kúsok pravdy"*, Bratislava: vlastným nákladom 2009, p. 121–122; Lexmann, *Teória liturgickej hudby*, p. 275.

[19] Samuel Trizuljak, "Môžem vám zaspievať...". Pilotné spracovanie orálne-historických materiálov k fenoménu katolíckych speváckych zborov v Bratislave v období normalizácie, accepted and forthcoming in *Pamäť národa*.

[20] The selected method of thematic interpretation of oral interviews draws inspiration from a topically related study: Tomáš Niesner, "Katolický disent na Moravě v období tzv. normalizace", in Miroslav Vaněk (ed.), *Mocní? a Bezmocní? Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace: interpretační studie životopisných interview*, Praha: Prostor 2006, p. 59–104.

cases when the collected material suggested them. Further research into Bratislava youth choirs would benefit from a comparison of the collected oral-historical material mapping the perspective of the choristers against relevant archival materials documenting the perspective of state organs such as the Public Security or State Security, which, however, might prove very difficult to identify.[21] Despite inevitable deficiencies, the pilot analysis will hopefully serve as a first step in directing scholarly attention to topics at the intersection of youth, Catholicism, and popular culture in late socialist Slovakia.

Bratislava Youth Choirs: A Brief Summary Based on the Oral Interviews

Apolitical Motivations

When it comes to the motivations behind involvement in choirs, the narrators all see the choirs as places where the members deepened their faith, where they did so, crucially, as a community, and often for the benefit of others. All this stems from Slovakia's underlying widespread traditional Catholic religiosity.[22] Katarína Horváthová, the long-time musical director of Káčko, says:

> The type of music was secondary. To me, the strongest idea was that of brothers living in unity [...]. It was a strong community in every respect. I was somewhat younger, and I felt that I was moving forward a lot, especially in matters of faith. That we were living the faith, that we could talk about it, that it affected our concrete lives and that it was not just that we ticked off the obligatory random Catholic Mass on Sunday while life itself was on a totally different rail.[23]

Pavol Kaločaj, who founded and led Káčko, reflects on the audience aspect:

> That kind of community of young people was invaluable in those times. We could meet, and we could do something together. This work brings people together, all the more if that something is beautiful music [...]. And then we realised it was a service to the grateful, supportive, fan-like listeners: we received much feedback that we needed to carry on even when it occasionally got more difficult and required sacrifices. We encouraged others in faith and prayed together ourselves.[24]

[21] For example, according to my inquiries, the file that the State Security kept on Vladimír Krčméry was destroyed on December 2, 1989; see the results of a search using the online tools available from Ústav pamäti národa: https://www.upn.gov.sk/projekty/regpro/zobraz/?typ=kraj&kniha=82&strana=17&zaznam=75754. Searches for files regarding other narrators yielded no results.

[22] On the roots of the continuing high levels of traditional religiosity in 20th century Slovakia in contrast to the Czech lands, see e.g. Zdeněk Nešpor, Česká a slovenská religiozita po rozpadu společeného státu: Náboženství Dioskúrů, Praha: Karolinum 2020, first two chapters: Česko-slovenská religiozita jako téma, Společné výchozí body.

[23] Interview with Katarína Horváthová.

[24] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.

František Horváth, the co-founder of Céčko and its long-time musical director, also stresses the reinforcing interplay between the choir and the listeners, growing in faith together through music:

> It was a Christian community, where we lived our faith together actively rather than formally [...]. I understood Céčko as the place where we met and where we felt welcome. Living out our spiritual lives, in our case, was inseparable from the lyrics we composed [...]. It mattered a lot to us that we were there to deliver something to the listeners who would come – and that is what we lived from ourselves. A good song was one with strong lyrics; that was our mode of spiritual expression.[25]

For many narrators, joining the choir as a teenager was a natural extension of an intentional lifestyle pursued by families seeking to preserve the Catholic faith during the communist era. "This is how it has gone in our family since time immemorial. I was simply born into this. Even my parents already had a 'stretko' [a small Christian community convening for the purpose of religious formation, see more below, S. T.] of families. We took it as a given. Yes, we were born under socialism. We lived in socialism, and we lived out our faith this way [...]. My mother was asked to write for a samizdat so in our family, it took various forms. But the essence was the same: we lived our faith in this environment; one got used to wearing the mail shirt, and one wore it and strove to wear it in all situations," shares the long-time Kufríkovci chorister Gabriela Šaturová.[26] Ursus Singers, founded in the 1970s under the leadership of Michal Maco, developed from a children's choir formed originally by a few large Bratislava Catholic families in the freer, pre-normalisation context. "When the political situation grew softer, my mother said: we shall sing at midnight mass. It was something unheard of until then. About 20 children, a half-an-hour programme, Christmas 1967. We were curious to see what would follow. Nothing followed. So we carried on, more kids, better prepared," recalls Pavel Babál, who, along with nine siblings, formed the core of the kids' choir and eventually Ursus Signers.[27] "Our mother and Mrs. Babálová had a shared vision: if I am to raise my children well, I need to include children from other families, meetings of families. It was all born on the basis of a sense of solidarity between large families, and also as Christians," adds Klement Trizuljak, a long-time Ursus Singers chorister involved from the beginning, along with seven of his siblings.[28]

Besides music, faith and community, Trizuljak recalls that what drew people in was a sense of doing something contrarian. "As for motivation, definitely music. But then, the community aspect was very strong. It was, after all, the period of normalisation. And we, normalisation notwithstanding, met as young Christians, and we met in families that had the courage to open the doors for us. Thanks to that, we could

[25] Interview with František Horváth.
[26] Interview with Gabriela Šaturová.
[27] Interview with Pavel Babál.
[28] Interview with Klement Trizuljak.

experience something neither quite allowed nor quite forbidden. We enjoyed the idea that we were staging a provocation against the general atmosphere in society then."[29] A certain kind of religious contrarianism, spreading the Gospel precisely in spite of the times, mattered even more intensively to the founder of Kufríkovci, Vladimír Krčméry: "We were simply annoyed that religion was thought to be a matter of old people, and as such, sentenced to death. This annoyed us, but there was nothing political about it. Our job was to say we are here, and religion is not dead; it is on the rise instead."

The apolitical nature of the choir activities, highlighted by Krčméry, was a shared feature among the choirs. "When we wanted to express ourselves politically, we went to a Jaroslav Hutka concert. But neither I nor Fero [František Horváth, S. T.] took the choir as opposition to the regime. We simply wanted to contribute to our liturgy actively [...] the fact that the regime disliked it made it an adventure, but it was never our intention to bring down the regime in any way,"[30] says Horváth's co-founder in Céčko Ivan Šimko. "It was no rebellion, no activity seeking to push through religious values. I would not attribute any heroism or pathos to this; it was merely a creative expression of religious freedom"[31], says Trizuljak. "We were aware of being on the radar because of our contacts with secret priests, but we did not fight the regime in any way. We sang our things, and we were happy to spend time together" – Kaločaj's summary captures all the aforementioned motivations.[32]

Activities Beyond Singing and Beyond Bratislava

From their founding (Céčko in 1973, Ursus Singers around 1976, Kufríkovci in 1980 and Káčko in 1981) broadly until 1989, the choirs typically performed weekly with a membership between 20 and 40 core stable choristers at a time and dozens of less stable members. Céčko and Káčko derived their names from their stable venues in St. Cyril and Methodius Church and the Capuchin Church in Old Town Bratislava, respectively, while the Ursus Singers and Kufríkovci modus operandi was to perform in a different parish each time, around Bratislava regularly during the year and across Slovakia and sometimes abroad during holidays. While all choirs sang a bit of every kind of Christian music, the modus operandi influenced the repertoire. While Ursus Singers and Kufríkovci relied on guitars and voices, thus focusing, for example, on folk arrangements or African-American spirituals, Káčko and Céčko, benefiting from a stable venue, engaged a greater variety of musical instruments and focused on classical, sacred music or their original productions, respectively.[33]

[29] Interview with Klement Trizuljak.
[30] Interview with Ivan Šimko.
[31] Interview with Klement Trizuljak.
[32] Interview with Pavel Babál. For another concise summary of motivations and the phenomenon of Bratislava youth choirs, see Appendix B: the foreword to an LP produced by all four choirs jointly in 1990, written by the long-time Ursus Singers leader, Michal Maco.
[33] Trizuljak, "Môžem vám zaspievať...".

Characteristically, however, the activities of these choir communities reached beyond regular performances. Káčko became an unofficial platform of semi-professional instruction in the fundamentals of liturgical music thanks to long-term collaboration with the local organist and a leading musical theorist, Juraj Lexmann. "Lexmann was a full-fledged professional in liturgical music. In him, we had a school that no one else had at the time. He taught us what it is to interpret, what liturgy is, and what it is for. We had an education that even formally enrolled seminarians probably lacked," recalls Kaločaj. Šaturová, who sang with Kufríkovci throughout the 1980s and with Káčko in the late 1980s, compares both experiences: "We [Kufríkovci, S. T.] had the feeling that we were, spontaneously, the mainstream of modern church music. But it was somewhat amateurish. What established itself professionally in the post-conciliar era in Slovakia was all brought by Juraj Lexmann."

The extent to which choirs became a platform of religious instruction in the basics of the Catholic faith of the kind that was systematically organised by the clandestine network of small Christian communities varied. These communities were the so-called "stretká" – revolving around people such as Ján Korec or, in the younger generation, František Mikloško. Káčko was something of an exception: its liturgical bent attracted many of those who secretly pursued a religious vocation, and this particular make-up of membership, in turn, affected the atmosphere and activities among the choir members outside performances. "There were among us – often unbeknownst to ourselves – priests, or almost-ordained priests, praying, talking, and sharing experiences of faith with us, which was great and very rare in that age [...]. They gave talks or spiritual exercises, led us in reading the Scriptures regularly [...]. After the revolution, someone counted up to 20 religious vocations among regular choir members – priests, monks and nuns,"[34] recalls Kaločaj. The founders of Céčko, Horváth and Šimko, attended a "stretko" run independently of Korec's network by Šimko's father. However, as regards religious instruction, the key factor in Céčko's atmosphere was the formative ministry of the coincidentally rather charismatic priests running their home church, who personalised the post-conciliar church.[35] As Horváth recalls: "Fr. Doležal immediately 'turned the table' towards the people; he was very faithful to these ideas and very open. We were similarly lucky that afterwards, we got Fr. Homolka and then Fr. Bubák, who stayed the longest."[36]

Krčméry separated choir activities from religious instruction, but since he was also intensively involved in the network of "stretká" alongside his uncle, "whenever someone joined the choir, we asked if he wished to join a 'stretko'," he says. "The response was yes, always. So I gave further directions."[37] Pavel Babál viewed Ursus Singers as constituting the less pious end of the implicit spectrum:

[34] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.
[35] Interview with Ivan Šimko and interview with František Horváth.
[36] Interview with František Horváth.
[37] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

> In contrast to other existing communities that were more prayerful and meditative [...]. We were more open and dynamic. We knew how to enjoy ourselves and have a glass of wine – many were against this. Activity number one was church music and singing. Of course, occasionally, we read or discussed translations of the Gospel or other materials, but it was never strict or conditional: let's pray the rosary, and we will only sing after that.[38]

Finally, Káčko and Céčko influenced Catholic youth beyond Bratislava on a musical and spiritual level, largely because they drew the attention of students who came to the capital for university studies and later left. Ursus Singers and Kufríkovci, on the other hand, pursued choir trips across the whole of Slovakia as a primary modus operandi and often combined performing with tramping style tourism. "We went on trips and sang in parishes. Run downhill to the village, sing and return to the tents. Our main mission was to travel Slovakia and give joy through singing [...]. As far as I recall, there was no region we would not visit. Muráň, Kriváň, Kráľova hoľa, we went to all those places and in the High Tatras and Low Tatras, Eastern Slovakia. Basically everywhere, we partook in liturgy. We had strong connections to a choir, a very strong community, in Banská Bystrica, another centre of the youth movement," recalls Šaturová. In the case of Ursus Singers, Trizuljak recalls one-day trips around Bratislava and weekend trips across Slovakia: "We all became members of a 'telovýchovná jednota' [an official local association for sport/exercise, S. T.)] as a tourist branch. Everybody had a member card and thus railway discounts. Thanks to this, we travelled almost for free to Eastern Slovakia, where we stayed in tourist or parish accommodation." Out of the four choirs, only Ursus Singers travelled and performed abroad. Trizuljak recalls Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Poland.[39] "Perhaps the most important was a performance at Sacrosong in Czestochowa in Poland in the summer 1978, a huge festival of church music – where bishop cardinal Karol Wojtyla sat in the first row", according to Babál.[40]

Conspiracy Without (Much) Confrontation

When asked how the context of long-lasting tensions between the socialist state and the Catholic Church influenced this sort of religious musical activism, the first theme the narrators draw attention to was how the choirs discerned navigating around the so-called "state approvals" policy. To pursue pastoral activities publically, priests had to possess an official state approval, which could be withdrawn by a decision of the local state administration if the given priest committed a criminal offence. In practice, state approvals were frequently withdrawn even in the absence of criminal offences, and during the normalisation period, they became a key tool that the state increas-

[38] Interview with Pavel Babál.
[39] Interview with Klement Trizuljak.
[40] Interview with Pavel Babál.

ingly used to regulate the activities of clergy in Slovakia.[41] The narrators converge in claiming that, indirectly, state approvals became the tool for attempts to regulate the activities of Bratislava youth choirs, too.

Ivan Šimko recalls being invited to a meeting in the spring of 1978 with the dean of the parish, in which the church where Céčko performed was located, Fr. Štefan Záreczký. Fr. Záreczký informed Šimko that officers from the Bratislava headquarters of the State Security were concerned by the choir activities and asked Šimko to scale them down. For a few months after that, Céčko performed monthly rather than weekly. After lengthy internal discussions among choir members about the importance of not giving in to the regime, the choir resumed its weekly activities. "And after we sang two or three weeks in a row, Fr. Doležal's state approval was withdrawn. Though, of course, no one can prove whether it was connected or not."[42]

Kaločaj and Krčméry remember similar dynamics. "Fr. Vojtech [one of the Capuchin friars administering the church, S. T.] had a hearing in which they threatened to withdraw his approval. He did not give a damn and had us continue singing."[43] Krčméry links the very name of his choir with this dynamic, Kufríkovci meaning "those with travelling cases".

> I always carried a travelling case. We could never sing at the same place twice since the priests would get in trouble. We wanted to avoid priests having their state approvals withdrawn. So, we ended up being migratory birds. I always arranged new places with priests I knew through Silvo (his uncle, see appendix A, S. T.), who were not Pacem in Terris members.[44]

While in Šimko's and other members' memories of the early history of Céčko in the mid-1970s, Fr. Záreczký plays a rather negative role,[45] Kaločaj and Krčméry remember him as someone who held a sort of protective hand over the choirs in the 1980s instead.

> While Gejza Navrátil, the dean of the Cathedral parish and the head of Pacem in Terris, was known to ban choirs in the churches of his parish, Štefan Záreczký tolerated the classical choir at the Capuchin Church, singing in Latin, and protected the chaplains in dangerous situations in St. Cyril and Methodius Church.[46]

> He was in Pacem in Terris, but he was supportive. When the meetings of young people started becoming a problem, he told us to go to a park or a cafe instead. Just do not meet

[41] For further details regarding the practice of withdrawing state approvals, see: Jan Pešek and Michal Barnovský, *V zovretí normalizácie: Cirkvi na Slovensku, 1969–1989*, Bratislava: Veda 2004, p. 69–70.
[42] Interview with Ivan Šimko.
[43] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.
[44] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.
[45] Šimko (ed.), *Céčko*, p. 28–30, 93, 199.
[46] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

> for a few weeks to sing. And when things calm down, I will let you know – he said [...] for a time he even let us rehearse in his sacristy in the main parish church.[47]

Secondly, the narrators recall intentionally developing conspiratorial or self-protective practices. Káčko used what Kaločaj calls a "protective mechanism". If someone wished to join the choir, one first had to regularly partake in activities outside of performing, such as outings or socials, which allowed the choir to distinguish serious interest from other intentions. Moreover, as the chief organiser of Káčko's activities, Kaločaj deliberately never kept a list of choir members.[48] The conspiratorial attitude strongly affected the overall atmosphere of Kufríkovci. Krčméry, drawing on a popular dissident manual on avoiding the State Security put together by Ján Čarnogurský, implemented a number of conspiratorial practices such as nicknames for places of meetings and for choir members or scheduling group activities using the Greenwich Mean Time. "When we agreed to meet at seven at Jožo, it meant six at the Jesuit church. Fero stood for the Franciscans, and Karol meant the Capuchins."[49]

Šimko recalls that from the early 1980s onwards, motivation to keep security measures such as only using nicknames and first names within the choir gradually disappeared. Finally, what is arguably most interesting is the ambiguity about the extent to which these worries about state approvals and the need for conspiratorial operation – perceived by the narrators – contributed to the fact that this religious musical activism actually only experienced direct repressive action from the state security organs relatively rarely. Šimko concludes his thoughts about "security measures" revealingly: "We had luck, perhaps, or some kind of a guardian angel. It was clear we were under surveillance, but everyone who regularly attended choir could finish university. Nobody was kicked out of university. And if they were, it was not because of singing."[50]

Both Šaturová and Krčméry agree that conspiratorial practices contributed to the light-hearted mood that characterised the choir. However, both also insist it was not mere youth folly, recalling specific situations when the activities of Kufríkovci were intercepted by law enforcement. These included a skiing trip in the Low Tatras in the mid-1980s or the pilgrimage in Šaštín in 1987, leading to follow-up hearings with numerous choir members.[51] Of the narrators interviewed, Pavel Babál experienced the most intense repressive action personally. After having one performance of Ursus Singers in the countryside outside Bratislava intercepted and reported by a colleague from Comenius University Medical Faculty, who, according to Babál, later turned out to be a State Security collaborator in the rank of captain, he was called up for irregular hearings for weeks, often spontaneously in the middle of the night, sometimes involving blows. "How can you do church music and teach at university at the same time?", he recalls being asked. "I said, fine, well, I do not have to teach. I knew well there was

[47] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.
[48] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.
[49] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.
[50] Interview with Ivan Šimko.
[51] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry and interview with Gabriela Šaturová.

a lack of teachers, and they would never fire me. But they were trying all they could." Babál was never fired, and despite further hassles, he was eventually allowed to leave for an academic exchange to Paris in 1983, even if he only got his back passport just the day before leaving.[52] Neither Babál nor Trizuljak recalls any other similar episodes among Ursus Singers.[53]

The ambiguous dynamic between priests risking state approvals and choristers practising conspiracy, which characterised the regular activities of the choirs without serious repressive interception, is aptly described in a final impression of Kaločaj.

> This is a miracle. I consider it a miracle. They went after all the young people; they hated gatherings of young people. And we were able to get away with it. Of course, with some blisters and scars. In retrospect, I see a certain kind of divine protection that accompanied us even when they sought to break us from the inside. They sent in strange people, but we were able to identify them quickly. And, of course, the local priests supported us. They knew what was going on, and they went to the hearings instead of us; they were that wall.[54]

Bratislava Youth Choirs in Light of the Historiography on Youth Activities in the Period of Late Socialism in Czechoslovakia

What concluding insights, bearing in mind the limits of the presented case study, can be drawn about the similarities or differences in the role of youth activities in the Czech and the Slovak contexts under late socialism? Firstly, as some of the specialist literature on youth movements and related popular cultural phenomena suggests, one plausible explanation for their mass appeal calls attention to the ways in which these movements became – in the specifically Czech context of advanced and widespread deinstitutionalised spirituality – places where religious or spiritual values could be encountered, experienced, or lived out.[55] In contrast, the mass appeal of the secret church among Slovak youth noted by Kenney and Cuhra and confirmed by the narrators interviewed for this study seems consistent with the relatively stronger persistence of institutionalised spirituality in the Slovak part of socialist Czechoslovakia. While Czech youth turned to deinstitutionalised spiritual practices in scouting ("foglaring") and folk or underground music, Slovak youth continued turning to – certainly not solely, but still in a comparatively significant way – institutionalised spiritual practices, and as this case study shows, one such practice, due to internal

[52] Interview with Pavel Babál.
[53] Interview with Pavel Babál and interview with Klement Trizuljak.
[54] Interview with Pavol Kaločaj.
[55] Zdeněk Nešpor, "Religion in the Lyrics of the Czech Underground", *CEJCR* 2 (2, 2020): p. 53–55; Nešpor, *Děkuji za bolest*, p. 36–40; Hošek, *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglara*, p. 55–97; Balík, "Junák-skaut", p. 101.

church processes in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, was modernising church music.

Secondly, as noted by both Cuhra in the Czech context and Pešek and Barnovský in the Slovak context, the conflict between the official Catholic Church and the socialist state grew stronger across the 1970s and 1980s, confounded by factors such as the election of the Polish prelate Karol Wojtyla to the papacy as John Paul II in 1978.[56] While Pešek and Barnovský do not cover youth activities, Cuhra notes that this intensification of conflict coincided with the rise of Catholic youth activities in the Czech lands. The emergence of the Bratislava youth choirs from the mid-1970s onwards, and their consequent growing popularity seems consistent with similar trends in Slovakia. To elaborate on Šimulčík's observation that they constituted an external expression of the underground church, these choirs enriched the diversity of secret church activities in Slovakia: while at one end, there was the serious business of samizdat production and distribution, religious instruction for laity, and even clandestine seminaries for future priests and consecrated, at the other end there was the merry business of youth choirs – not infrequently combined with elements of subcultures more widely popularised in the Czech lands. All four choirs, for example, performed folkish musical arrangements, and two were famed for their frequent tramping-style trips across Slovakia (Kufríkovci) or even across the Eastern Bloc (Ursus Singers).

Thirdly, the minor phenomenon of the Bratislava youth choirs seems to provide another example of the kind of social movements contributing to Kenney's revolutionary carnival in the Slovak context, albeit in a less consequential way than the more famous and significant examples already identified by Kenney. This is well illustrated by Krčméry's story about the experience of the then musical director of the Kufríkovci choir, Jana Kováčová, during the hearings that followed after the group was "deconspired" during the pilgrimage in Šaštín in 1987.

> When asked at the end whether she would like to add anything to the testimony, she said she had nothing to add, but if they insisted, she was willing to sing for them. The policeman, thinking "to sing"' means "to speak" in mafia language, misunderstood her, and after she sang a beautiful song about Our Lady, he trashed the records, threw her out and told her to get gone.[57]

This story illustrates the playful, apolitical and somewhat careless approach typical of the "konkretny generation" when facing law enforcement.

Furthermore, the inspiration from foreign musical genres such as African-American spirituals, folk or nascent gospel music, as well as the occasional performances abroad (Ursus Singers in Czestochowa or Rome[58]), further highlights that social movements of the "konkretny generation" relied on their success in maintaining international connections both within the Eastern Bloc and to the West. Finally,

[56] Cuhra, "Skrytý zápas", p. 118–120; Pešek and Barnovský, *V zovretí normalizácie*, p. 108–122.
[57] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.
[58] Interview with Pavel Babál.

similarly to other social movements of the "konkretny generation", the membership and the activities in the Bratislava youth choirs were primarily apolitically motivated. Nevertheless, it was precisely the context typical of these social movements that coincidentally served as a sort of training ground for future civil society leaders. The choirs were no exception: the co-founder of Céčko Ivan Šimko pursued a political career in the KDH and SDKÚ parties in the 1990s and 2000s, rising to senior governmental posts[59], while the founder of Kufríkovci, Vladimír Krčméry, pursued a career spanning between medicine, higher education, and humanitarian work, rising to an international prominence[60]. Despite their avowed apolitical character, the attraction of choirs for young Catholics in Bratislava seems to have rested on the particular political conditions of late socialist Czechoslovakia in which they emerged. Like other social movements of the "konkretny generation", they too lost their original character or vanished soon after 1989.[61] Overall, Bratislava youth choirs did constitute a minor social movement of the kind identified by Kenney. However, its importance in contributing to the revolutionary carnival is smaller in its scale. Its influence could hardly be compared to the clandestine network of small Christian communities embodied by people like Ján Korec or František Mikloško, the ecological activism of Ján Budaj or the legal activism of Ján Čarnogurský, all already noted by Kenney.

At last, what scope for a Möbius-Band-style analysis of everyday life under late socialism and for challenging the binary narrative does the presented case study open up? On the one hand, as the interviews with the narrators suggest – see, for example, Gabriela Šaturová's comments above about growing up wearing a "mail shirt" – some Slovak Catholics were brought up in a sort of "parallel polis" from a young age. Their participation in the choirs or the "stretká" of the secret church often naturally followed from intentionally nurtured family lifestyles. The phenomenon of the Bratislava youth choirs constitutes an example of a youth activity that involved striving "to live in truth" – even if it did not necessarily mean anything particularly heroic, even if it was far from any dissident-style political activity. All narrators, independently of each other, described one of their primary reasons for joining the choirs was the desire to grow in Christian faith through community life – a kind of meaning or values they could not imagine seeking in the associations and culture sanctioned by the late socialist Czechoslovak state. The ways in which the Catholic Church in Slovakia found itself to be the central pillar of opposition between 1948 and 1989 and the ways this translates into the everyday lives of Slovak Catholic communities, families, and youth over the four decades may justify the prevalence of the totalitarian-historical storytelling typical for the scholarship on the history of Slovak Catholicism in the latter half of the 20th century. This storytelling manifested itself abundantly in the testimonies of the choristers interviewed for this study.[62]

[59] Interview with Ivan Šimko.

[60] Interview with Vladimír Krčméry.

[61] On vanishing of the choirs after 1989 see, Trizuljak, "Môžem vám zaspievať...".

[62] Pullman defines totalitarian-historical storytelling as historical narratives in which the abstract category of the "regime" becomes the key agent, implicitly separating historical actors according

On the other hand, the interviews with narrators reveal that the continued semi-public existence of each of the four choirs was at least partially mediated by persons, institutions, or practices that did not lend themselves to such straightforward black-and-white bipolarities. To facilitate and cover up frequent choir trips across Slovakia, Vladimír Krčméry and Michal Maco had members of their choirs register as members of state-sanctioned youth associations.[63] The ultimate folk music festival organiser in Old Town Bratislava during the 1970s and 1980s, to speak (only partly) analogically to Houda's study, was Fr. Štefan Záreczký, himself a leading member of the pro-regime association of Catholic priests, Pacem in Terris. While the co-founder of Céčko Ivan Šimko, remembers Fr. Záreczký as instrumental in the attempts to limit the activities of Céčko in the mid-1970s, other narrators attest to a non-negligible degree of protection both the activities of Céčko and Káčko enjoyed from Fr. Záreczký throughout the 1980s.[64] As documented by church historian Jozef Haľko in a separate study, Fr. Záreczký was viewed with suspicion by state organs for his support of the activities of youth choirs, illegal religious instruction taking place at the Capuchin Church, and for letting priests lacking state approvals minister in the churches of his parish across the 1980s.[65]

to the black-and-white binarity between a powerful, controlling regime and a powerless, controlled society. Pullman, "Sociální dějiny a totalitněhistorické vyprávění", p. 704–705. While Pullman's theses in recent years provoked substantial debates overflowing the bounds of Czech academia, they have not substantially affected Slovak historiography or public debate. For our purposes here, it suffices to illustrate that the assumption of the "regime" as a key agent also animates much of the professional as well as lay discourse on Slovak Catholicism under communism. See, e.g. "Rather than resorting to judicial trials, the communist regime preferred to spread fear among those partaking [in 'stretká', S. T.]"; Šimulčík, *Generácia nádeje*, p. 69. "It was an activity that the regime did not favour, and that added a flavour of adventure [...]." Interview with Ivan Šimko.

63 Interview with Klement Trizuljak and interview with Vladimír Krčméry. In the interview, Krčméry discussed using the membership in Socialistický zväz mládeže (Socialist Association of Youth), Robotnícke odborové hnutie (Workers Trade-Unionist Movement), and Zväz československo-sovietskeho priateľstva (The Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship Association) in underground church activities but not specifically in relation to the choirs. Since Krčméry suddenly passed away while this research was being completed, Gabriela Šaturová was asked to verify whether this practice applied to Kufríkovci and confirmed it was likely. Email correspondence with Gabriela Šaturová.

64 In addition to the quoted testimonies of Krčméry and Kaločaj, see also the testimony of Fr. Milan Bubák. "In the beginning, I was afraid of Záreczký since that man had a very bad reputation [...]. However, on the other hand, when I got to know him as his chaplain, I began to respect him. I saw his personal battle, which he fought as an old man, likely as a result of certain steps he took in his life. And there, one could very clearly see the desire to make amends in his old age. And thus, it seems to me that Záreczký had the choir's back. Held a protective arm. Over the choir and over other things. For example, secret priests who gathered at the Capuchin church. He knew very well of them. And yet, despite his reputation, he, to a certain extent, made it possible for them to work there. And he acted similarly towards the choir in 'Céčko' [...]. Záreczký knew the atmosphere of those times and had these things, apparently, mapped. That is why he was such a diplomat. It seems to me that he was trying to navigate the confusion of that age. That the choir survived then is partly to the credit of the canon." Šimko (ed.), *Céčko*, p. 110–111.

65 Jozef Haľko, "Spory o Štefana Záreczkého – K postojom a činnosti bratislavského kanonika", *Historický časopis* 52 (4, 2004): p. 684, accessed in March 2023, available online at https://digitalnakniznica.cvtisr.sk/zoom/516/view?page=86&p=separate&tool=info&view=0,0,1698,2466.

The main ambition of Houda's *Normalizačný festival* is to "reinforce the thesis that the late socialist everydayness was such a varied time that it is unsatisfactory to describe it with the use of categories such as 'living in truth' or 'living in a lie'."[66] To the extent that Houda seeks to underscore the various ways in which people gave meaning to their lives by participating in and creatively interpreting the authoritative discourse of late socialism or seeks to explain the actual existence of particular late socialist phenomena, such as folk music festivals, the case of Bratislava youth choirs does not contradict his central thesis in any way. It merely represents another example of "living in truth" at the upper end of the spectrum with its middle-of-the-spectrum folk music festival organiser.

Moreover, the conceptual tools introduced by Houda help explain the phenomenon of normalisation choirs. Rather than, or theologically speaking, besides, owing to the work of a miracle (Kaločaj) or a guardian angel (Šimko), the largely stable and uninterrupted existence of the choirs was plausibly the result of the *a-legal* nature of the choirs' activities. Houda introduces this category at the end of his monograph to describe the activities of normalisation-era folk music festival organisers, and it aptly captures the dynamics of the activities of normalisation-era choirs, too. Drawing on the legal theorist Hans Lindahl, Houda understands "a-legal" activity as one that denies the binary of legal/illegal.

> While illegal activity reinforces the (temporal, spatial, etc.) borders that define the permissibility or impermissibility of a particular activity, a-legal activity challenges these borders. The essence of a-legal action, according to Lindhal, is its indeterminacy. A-legal activity, through its indeterminacy, disorients many people (observers, co-actors), who in turn tend to interpret such activity in terms they understand, and hence they often "criminalise" it (designate it as illegal).[67]

Houda invokes the categories to show how the activities of a folk music festival organiser such as Milan Kaplan could, at a particular point – in this case, when organising the festival "Folkový kolotoč" in 1984 – turn from a-legal to illegal. The normalisation-era folk music festivals were largely allowed to exist thanks to their a-legal nature. However, occasionally, they were assigned an illegal status. Similarly, normalisation choirs largely flourished thanks to their a-legal nature, yet occasionally, they too would assume an illegal status.

In the final lines of the final chapter of the book, Houda entertains, in addition to this central thesis, a further hypothesis, namely that it was "perhaps precisely the innovative (a-systemic or, in Lindhal's terms, a-legal) reading of (any) hegemonic language – rather than the anti-system (dissident) position – which in consequence constitutes, for such hegemonic language and the order founded thereupon, the real

[66] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 175.
[67] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 164.

spectre"[68]. The final argument of this paper takes the form of a hypothesis since, similar to Houda's thesis, it is based on evidence from anecdotal case studies. It is that the specific case of Bratislava youth choirs, its folk music festival organiser, and its context of being one of the external expressions of the secret church movement would suggest that Houda's further hypothesis is less likely to hold water in the Slovak than in the Czech context of the era of late socialism.

Fr. Záreczký might have been the ultimate normalisation-era folk music festival organiser in Old Town Bratislava. However, Houda's hypothesis that an "a-legal reading of hegemonic language" – exemplified perhaps precisely by Fr. Záreczký's mix of activities affecting the choirs, mediated by the long-term Pacem in Terris reputation – contributed to the implosion of the late socialist state more fundamentally than the "anti-system (dissident) position" seems unlikely in the Slovak context, based on the case study presented here. The account of Fr. Záreczký's activities ends with repeated public attempts, including in a lengthy TV address, to dissuade Slovak Catholics from participating in the largest open religious demonstration to be brutally suppressed by Czechoslovak law enforcement bodies and thus one of the most important blows "for the hegemonic language and the order founded thereupon" – the Candle Manifestation in March 1988.[69]

[68] Houda, *Normalizační festival*, p. 165.

[69] For Záreczký's agitation against the Candle Manifestation see Haľko, "Spory o Štefana Záreczkého", p. 687.

Appendix A: List of respondents in the oral interviews.

František Horváth (1955) graduated from the Electrical Engineering Faculty, Slovak University of Technology and pursued a career in the electrical energy industry for over 40 years. A married father of ten children, he co-founded the "Céčko" choir at the Cyril and Methodius Church with Ivan Šimko in 1974, and he has been the leading member of the choir and community that developed around it, directing the choir musically until the late 1990s.

Ivan Šimko (1955) graduated from the Economy Faculty, University of Economics and the Law Faculty, National and Comenius University and started a career as an urban planning economist. After 1989, he pursued a political career, becoming an MP in the National Council of the Slovak Republic, briefly serving as Minister of Justice, Minister of Interior and Minister of Defence for KDH and SDKÚ. A married father of four, he co-founded and co-led the "Céčko" choir between 1974 and 1982, writing lyrics while František Horváth composed music. In 2009, he self-published a memoir collection of 16 interviews with leading choir members *Céčko: "Každý má svoj kúsok pravdy"*.

Pavel Babál (1955) graduated from the Medical Faculty, Comenius University, where he currently serves as a professor after a career in medicine, practising, researching, and teaching, specialising in pathology. A married father of three children and the third child out of ten in the Babál family, which initiated a children's choir on Christmastide in 1968, Babál sang with "Ursus Singers" from its start as it evolved from a children's choir around 1973 when Michal Maco took over the leadership of the choir, and then across the 1970s and early 1980s. Babál played guitar, composed music, and briefly co-led the choir from 1978 to 1979 while Maco was in military service.

Klement Trizuljak (1958) studied architecture at Brno University of Technology and Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava and consequently pursued a career in architecture in a state-owned company before 1989 and an independent studio afterwards. He married in 1982 and is the father of four children. He, along with others among the 8 siblings, sang with the "Ursus Singers" choir (and the preceding children choir formed by Trizuljak, Babál and other families) while travelling in Slovakia and abroad in the Eastern Bloc across the 1970s and until the mid-1980s. During this period, the Trizuljak family house became one of the most common venues for choir practices.

Pavol Kaločaj (1954) graduated from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Comenius University, married in 1983 and is a father of four children. Before retiring recently, he pursued a career in the gas industry and completed two doctorates: from the University of Ostrava in Engineering and Comenius University in Physics. After briefly leading a small choir at the Ursuline church in the late 1970s, he led the "Káčko"

choir at the Capuchin Church in Bratislava, organising its activities and helping to lead it musically from 1981 until the mid-1990s. After a visit to Taizé in the mid-1980s, he initiated regular public Taizé prayers at the Capuchin Church across the second half of the 1980s and thus contributed to the spread of Taizé prayers across Slovakia.

Katarína Horváthová (1964) graduated from the Faculty of Natural Sciences, Comenius University. She married in 1990 and is the mother of three children. She pursued a career in primary and secondary teaching alongside conducting choirs of children, youth and adults from the 1980s until now. From 1982 until 1990, she conducted the "Káčko" choir. When Pavol Kaločaj brought Taizé chants to Slovakia in the mid-1980s, she was instrumental in translating the Taizé chant book into the Slovak language.

Vladimír Krčméry (1960–2022) graduated from the Medical Faculty, Comenius University. He was a medical doctor, researcher, and professor, as well as an expert in the areas of tropical medicine, infectology, and oncology. He was the founder and former rector of the University of St. Elisabeth in Bratislava and the founder of dozens of health, social, and missionary institutions in developing countries. He was the nephew of Silvester Krčméry, a leader of the underground church movement. From 1978 until the mid-1990s, he was the chief organiser of the activities of the "Kufríkovci" choir, named after the suitcase, "kufor", he would always carry around. His future wife, Terézia, with whom he had four children, served as the choir's musical director.

Gabriela Šaturová (1966) graduated from the Pedagogical Faculty, Comenius University and the State Conservatorium in Bratislava. She married in 1990, stayed at home with three children and resumed a career in therapeutic pedagogy, specialising in music therapy in 2007. She sang with the "Kufríkovci" choir in the late 1970s and 1980s. Towards the late 1980s, she also occasionally sang with the "Káčko" choir.

Appendix B: The front and back cover of the LP "Celý svet" by "Bratislavské spevácke zbory", featuring Céčko, Ursus Singers, Káčko, and Kufríkovci published by Pontón in Bratislava in 1990.

Fig. 1: The front cover of the LP "Celý svet" by "Bratislavské spevácke zbory".

Fig. 2: The back cover of the LP "Celý svet" by "Bratislavské spevácke zbory".

Michal Maco's foreword from the back cover summarises the ethos of the choirs:

> The songs that you are about to hear or have just heard were composed in an age when their authors would not have dreamed that they may ever appear on an LP. In that schizophrenic age, many people felt that what was being offered daily from all the official sources did not satisfy them. In this atmosphere, small communities of discontent and seeking Christians emerged. People trying to resist all that and have their own heads on their necks. In their meetings, they debated, enquired, prayed, and sang. They sang with a guitar; they sang songs from songbooks published still in the Sixties. Gradually, new songs appeared as an attempt to express one's inner convictions. Songs with simple melodies, often involving non-theological texts and edgy rhymes, songs sung during trips and in churches. The record presented here is a selection from the repertoire of four Bratislava-based youth choirs, and it presents a documentary of an age, which is, we hope, now definitively behind us [...].

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