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STUDIES

Between Mythologization and Deconstruction. Alexander Dubček's Image in Contemporary Audiovisual Production

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Abstract: This study examines the changing representation of Alexander Dubček in contemporary Slovak and Czech audiovisual production, focusing on the tension between the mythologization and deconstruction of his public and historical image. Since the fall of state socialism, Dubček has been frequently represented as an emblematic figure of the Prague Spring, democracy, political reform, and resistance to Soviet domination. His post-1989 image has thus been shaped by a powerful heroic narrative that has contributed to his transformation from a historical political actor into a cultural and national icon. At the same time, contemporary audiovisual works increasingly subject this established image to critical examination, drawing attention to Dubček's political contradictions, limitations, failures, and his involvement in the structures of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. The study analyses selected Slovak and Czech films, television productions, and documentary works that represent Dubček from different perspectives. Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which fiction, archival footage, documentary testimony, dramatization, and historical reconstruction contribute to the construction, revision, or deconstruction of Dubček's image. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary audiovisual production does not constitute a straightforward transition from the mythologized image of Dubček to its critical deconstruction. Rather, different representational strategies coexist and enter into tension with one another, producing competing versions of the historical figure. Dubček therefore emerges as a dynamic and contested cultural figure whose meaning is continually renegotiated through changing interpretations of the Prague Spring, Czechoslovak history, and the political and social contexts of the present.

Keywords:
myth, Alexander Dubček, historical film, intertextuality, deconstruction

Revival of the myth of Alexander Dubček

Alexander Dubček (1921–1992) was one of the most prominent figures in Slovak politics and public life during the 20th century. As the leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and 1969, he is regarded as one of the most internationally recognized Slovaks of the 20th century. Dubček first attracted significant attention from the press, film, and television in early 1968 following his election as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ÚV KSČ), the highest leadership position within the party. He immediately became the central face of the Prague Spring — a social revival process that was interrupted by the occupation of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 and the subsequent normalization.[1] Following his resignation from office in 1969, Dubček became the target of political persecution and did not return to official Czechoslovak political life until 1989, when he was elected Chairman of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly. He died in 1992, but to this day he is one of the popular historical figures who are the object of media interest. In the 2019 public television poll *Najväčší Slovák* [The Greatest Slovak], organized by public broadcaster, Dubček ranked sixth.

Soon after Alexander Dubček's tragic death, memorials were erected in his honour across Slovakia, and streets and schools were named after him. In addition to civic associations, the media, and cultural institutions, politicians — particularly those representing the political left — also played a significant role in promoting Dubček's legacy.[2] During Prime Minister Robert Fico's three governments (2006–2018), Dubček was portrayed as a political inspiration and a model for government policy, particularly in the field of social policy. Official state discourse also reinforced his image as a representative of Slovak national interests and an advocate of a pro-European orientation.

The Slovak historian Juraj Buzalka considers Alexander Dubček — an idealistic nationalist and Marxist who frequently identified with the political legacy of Ľudovít Štúr[3] — to be a successor to the tradition of Romantic leaders in Slovakia. At the

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1 In the history of Czechoslovakia, the term "normalization" generally refers to the period extending from the Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 until the Velvet Revolution of November 1989. It denotes the reversal of the democratization processes associated with the Prague Spring and the restoration of a repressive communist regime. The term *normalization* was apparently first used by Alexander Dubček shortly after his return to Prague from Moscow, where he had signed the so-called Moscow Protocols. By this term, Dubček understood a return to ordinary "day-to-day" work and the stabilization of the political situation. Gustáv Husák, by contrast, preferred the term "consolidation." See MACHÁČEK, M. *Gustáv Husák.* Praha : Vyšehrad, 2017, p. 406.

2 On August 20, 2002, a monument featuring a bronze bust of Alexander Dubček was unveiled in front of the Slovak Parliament on Alexander Dubček Square, which had been established in 2001. In October 2008, the National Council of the Slovak Republic adopted the Act about the merits of Alexander Dubček, which states that "Alexander Dubček made an outstanding contribution to democracy, the freedom of the Slovak nation, and human rights." The Act was introduced by the then governing party SMER — sociálna demokracia (SMER — SD), whose chairman since its foundation has been Robert Fico.

3 Ľudovít Štúr (1815–1856) was the codifier of the Slovak standard language, as well as a politician, aesthetician, educator, poet, and publicist. He is regarded as one of the central figures of Slovak cultural and political life in the mid-nineteenth century.

same time, Buzalka argues that Dubček did not belong to the so-called "conspiratorial" types of leaders but rather embodied a consensual model of leadership more closely associated with liberal democracy. It is evident that Alexander Dubček came to believe in the idealized public image that had emerged during the Prague Spring through the efforts of his supporters and the media, and that he himself largely reinforced this image. This tendency toward self-romanticization is also evident in his personal and political testament, *Hope Dies Last*, a book based on Dubček's recordings in Slovak between 1990 and 1992 and translated into English by the Czech journalist Jiří Hochman. The publication was published for the first time in English in New York in 1993.[4] In the book, Dubček presents a detailed account of his perspective on the origins of the Prague Spring, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, and the suppression of the reform movement that followed. *Hope Dies Last* is, to a large extent, a defence of Dubček's political decisions and actions during his time in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The book contains no critical reflection on his tenure in high Communist Party positions during the 1950s.[5] The entire autobiography is told from the point of view of a convinced Marxist, who remains faithful to the ideals of socialism even in the 1980s.

The self-romanticizing character of Dubček's memoirs stems not only from the fact that they were created on the basis of recordings with an active politician,[6] but also from the fact that their editor Jiří Hochman had a friendly and admiring relationship with Dubček (which he presents in the introductory acknowledgment and in the epilogue), moreover, they were published shortly after his unexpected death. To this day, *Hope Dies Last* remains the most frequently cited source of information on Dubček's life. Most literary and cinematic works on Dubček produced after 1993 have been influenced by this autobiographical account.

Already during the first government of Robert Fico, promoting the support of patriotism, in 2009, the first relevant and at the same time probably the most famous myth-forming novel about Alexander Dubček was published called *Zastavte Dubčeka!* [Stop Dubček!], with the subtitle *Príbeh človeka, ktorý prekážal mocným* [The Story of a Man Who Hindered the Powerful]. It is the work of the writer, playwright, post-1989 politician, and diplomat Jozef Banáš. In the novel, the author constructs

4 The Slovak edition was published in the same year 1993 under the title *Z pamätí – Nádej zomiera posledná* [Hope Dies Last. The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček] by the publishing house Národná obroda, but later.

5 Although Dubček acknowledges that cases of political and economic persecution undoubtedly occurred in the early 1950s, he maintains that he was never aware of them. See DUBČEK, A. *Z pamätí. Nádej zomiera posledná* [Hope Dies Last. The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček]. Bratislava : Národná obroda, 1993, p. 71. In the podcast episode *Přepište dějiny* [Rewrite History] entitled *100 Let Saši Dubčeka* [100 Years of Saša Dubček], its authors, Michal Stehlík and Martin Groman, point out that during Dubček's tenure as Regional Secretary of the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) in Banská Bystrica since 1953, seventy-seven families were forcibly resettled from the Banská Bystrica region for political reasons during "Action K" between 1951 and 1953. [online]. [cit. 16 March 2026]. Available at: https://podcasts.apple.com/cz/podcast/100-let-sa%C5%A1i-dub%C4%8Deka/id1540840694?i=10005429282 96.

6 Dubček was able to read and comment on the first twenty chapters of the book prepared by Hochman (of the final thirty) before his death. See DUBČEK, A. *Z pamätí. Nádej zomiera posledná* [Hope Dies Last. The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček], p. 287.

an idealized and populist portrayal of Dubček as a Slovak national hero admired throughout the world. Even in the Stalinist period of the 1950s, Dubček is portrayed as a jovial and popular functionary. The novel is conceived as a literary docudrama. Some chapters are distinguished by italics and present a pseudo-documentary summary of essential information about a particular historical and social period. Jozef Banáš then situates fictionalized and dialogized episodes from Dubček's life within this framework, many of them inspired by his autobiography *Hope Dies Last*. It is evident, however, that not all the events portrayed in the novel actually happened to Dubček. Some of the episodes Jozef Banáš uses to depict Dubček's period of study in Moscow are taken from Zdeněk Mlynář's autobiography *Mráz přichází z Kremlu* [Frost Comes from the Kremlin].[7]

The portrayal of Alexander Dubček as a unique national hero and martyr is highlighted in Jozef Banáš's novel by exposing the politician's disputes especially with Czech politicians. The novel portrays Václav Havel in a negative light, casting him as Dubček's most prominent opponent in the aftermath of the 1989 revolution, which marked the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia.[8] By dismantling the myths surrounding the most prominent figure of the Czech dissident movement and the November 1989 revolution, Jozef Banáš appeals to a Slovak nationalist, conservative, and anti-liberal readership.

In 2010, the Slovak public-service broadcaster Slovenská televízia [Slovak Televison] produced the 53-minute documentary *Alexander Dubček*, subtitled *Vizionár, reformátor a Európan* [Visionary, Reformer, and European], directed by Ivan Predmerský. The screenplay was written by Ladislav Šoltýs, Ivan Predmerský, and Ivan Laluha, who also provides the documentary's principal commentary. Among the other interviewees discussing Dubček's life and legacy are his friends and former associates, as well as his son, Pavol Dubček. The medium-length film is an exceptionally conservative documentary collage of testimonies by those close to Alexander Dubček, supplemented with archival film footage, photographs, and predominantly subdued pieces of classical music. This explicitly commemorative account, based on the recollections of individuals who were personally and ideologically close to Dubček, provides no substantial insights beyond those already contained in his autobiography *Hope Dies Last*.

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7 These include the motif of an argument among Russian students over whether houses in Czechoslovakia are built of stone, as well as the story of a drunken party official who expelled from school a student for running through the dormitory wearing only his underpants. See BANÁŠ, J. *Zastavte Dubčeka! Príbeh človeka, ktorý prekážal mocným* [Stop Dubček! The Story of a Man Who Hindered the Powerful]. Bratislava : Ikar, 2009, pp. 97–98. These anecdotes can be found in Zdeněk Mlynář's autobiography on pages 22–23. See MLYNÁŘ, Z. *Mráz přichází z Kremlu* [Frost Comes from the Kremlin]. Praha : Mladá fronta, 1990.

8 According to Jozef Banáš, Václav Havel was already in 1969 "a naïve playwright incapable of understanding harsh reality" (BANÁŠ, J. *Zastavte Dubčeka! Príbeh človeka, ktorý prekážal mocným* [Stop Dubček! The Story of a Man Who Hindered the Powerful], p. 259). Banáš also criticizes Havel for leaving Prague on November 17, 1989–the pivotal day of the Velvet Revolution — to spend time at his country cottage with his partner, Jitka Vodňanská. For more see Ibid., p. 316. He further reproaches Havel for refusing to include Dubček in his first official visit to the United States in February 1990 and for failing to fulfil his promise to hand over the presidency to Dubček after the 1990 elections. Ibid., p. 333.

The documentary deliberately avoids a confrontational tone; its participants complement one another in enumerating Dubček's contributions to Slovak and European society. The documentary maintains that, although Dubček was powerless to remedy the injustices of high politics in the 1950s, he was able to help individuals at the regional level. It also refers to his involvement in the rehabilitation process following the cult of personality in the early 1960s, as well as to the accusations of liberalism and nationalism brought against him by his critics during his tenure as head of the Communist Party in Slovakia. Ivan Laluha, mentioned in the credits as a teacher, scientist and friend of Alexander Dubček, describes the period of Dubček's political activity in Slovakia 1963–1967 as the "Bratislava pre-spring."[9] Ivan Laluha also regards the United States' unwillingness to enter a conflict with the Soviet Union in defence of Czechoslovakia as one of the reasons for the 1968 invasion. The documentary does not mention Dubček's signing of the so-called "baton law" in 1969[10] at all. Nor does it address Gustáv Husák, the highest-ranking Communist official and president of Czechoslovakia during the period of Normalization, except for a single reference describing him as a man who knew how to adapt to the new political situation.

From an ideological perspective, the documentary attempts to project a degree of "political neutrality"; ultimately, however, it appeals primarily to supporters of reform socialism and to nationalist and conservative audiences. The documentary also aligns with the ideological position of the then governing party, SMER – SD, by highlighting Dubček's efforts to develop the social democratic movement after November 1989. Moreover, Ivan Laluha describes Dubček in the documentary as a seeker of social justice, a characterization that echoed Robert Fico's widely promoted public image at the time. Like Jozef Banáš's novel, Ivan Predmerský's documentary constructs Dubček as a socially conscious national hero enjoying international respect. The works discussed above represent traditional myth-making tributes to Dubček with an underlying nationalist revivalist message. Although

9 The term is not new; it forms part of the title of a monograph by a team of authors from the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences dealing with the political, economic, and cultural development of Slovakia between 1960 and 1967. See LONDÁK, M. — LONDÁKOVÁ, E. — SIKORA, S. *Predjarie. Politický, ekonomický a kultúrny vývoj na Slovensku v rokoch 1960 – 1967* [Before Spring. Political, Economic, and Cultural Development in Slovakia 1960–1967]. Bratislava : Veda, 2002.

10 The "baton law" (*obuškový zákon*) is the popular designation for Legislative Measure No. 99/1969 Coll. of the Presidium of the Federal Assembly, adopted on August 22, 1969, on certain temporary measures necessary to strengthen and protect public order. This legal measure granted the National Security Corps (Zbor národnej bezpečnosti, ZNB) extraordinary powers to persecute opponents of the communist regime. Citizens were prohibited from participating in activities deemed to disturb "public order." It also provided for the punishment of persons who "refuse to perform the duties arising from their official position or employment, thereby impeding efforts to maintain public order or the uninterrupted functioning of the workplace." Individuals detained under the measure could be tried in expedited proceedings, during which the powers of defence counsel were significantly restricted. In addition, the security authorities were authorized to hold individuals in custody for up to three weeks without formally charging them. See KLUBERT, T. 22. august 1969. Prijatie "obuškového zákona" [August 22, 1969. Adoption of the "baton law"]. In *Ústav pamäti národa*. [online]. [cit. 16 March 2026]. Available at: https://www.upn.gov.sk/sk/22-august-1969- prijatie-obuskoveho-zakona/.

Tomáš Ferenčák's monograph *Dubček — kontroverzná osobnosť* [Dubček — A Controversial Figure], published in Slovakia in 2011, sought to challenge the idealized image of the politician,[11] a more critical portrayal of Dubček did not emerge in audiovisual works until several years later.

The deconstruction of Alexander Dubček's image in the television series *Czech Century* and the novel *Alexander Dubček. A Year Longer than a Century*

Alexander Dubček had already appeared as the protagonist of a television film in 1980, in the British docudrama *Invasion*. Inspired by Zdeněk Mlynář's *Mráz přichází z Kremlu* [Frost Comes from the Kremlin], the film, directed by Leslie Woodhead and written by David Boulton, portrays Dubček in accordance with the idealized image that had become widespread throughout the democratic West after 1968. He is portrayed as a national hero — a deeply tested yet dignified representative of a small country under Soviet domination. Produced during the Cold War by the independent broadcaster Granada Television, *Invasion* constituted an explicit indictment of Soviet imperialism.

Alexander Dubček did not appear as the central character in a Central European feature film until more than three decades later. This occurred in the television series *České století* [Czech Century] (2014), directed by Robert Sedláček. The nine-part television series set out to depict key moments in the history of Czechoslovakia while, to some extent, demythologizing its most prominent historical figures. The Czech film scholar Luboš Ptáček regards the series as the first post-1989 television production devoted to the "grand narratives" of history and compares it to the genre-related series *Gottwald* (5 episodes, 1985–1986) and *Povstalecká história* ([The History of the Uprising], 8 episodes, 1983–1984). Although these television productions of the normalization era were shaped by the dominant ideology of their time, they share with the series by Robert Sedláček and Pavel Kosatík — produced in a markedly different political and social context — a common style and narrative structure, particularly in their temporal segmentation, their presentation of historical figures, their use of documentary elements, and their predominant construction of history through dialogue. Rather than resorting to "non-historical genres" (such as detective stories, comedies, or family dramas), these series seek to present history through the lens of a particular ideological perspective.[12]

Alexander Dubček appears in three episodes of the nine-part television series *Czech Century*, underscoring his significance in the context of Czechoslovak history — at least from the perspective of the series creators. In the final two episodes, *Poslední hurá* [One Last Hooray], which depicts the Velvet Revolution of 1989, and *Ať si jdou* [Let Them Go], which focuses on the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, Dubček plays a less prominent role than other political representatives of this period,

11 FERENČÁK, T. *Dubček — kontroverzná osobnosť* [Dubček — A Controversial Figure]. Bratislava : Kalligram, 2011.

12 PTÁČEK, L. *Umění mezi alegorií a ideologií* [Art between Allegory and Ideology]. Praha : Casablanca, 2019, p. 189.

Václav Havel and Marián Čalfa, or Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus. However, he is the central protagonist of the sixth episode, entitled *Musíme se dohodnout* [We Must Reach an Agreement]. This episode covers the events from the evening of August 20, 1968, until the signing of the so-called Moscow Protocols, August 26, 1968.

It is an intimate historical drama whose first part is set within the premises of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ÚV KSČ), while the second unfolds in the halls of the Kremlin, where negotiations take place between the leadership of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (ÚV KSSZ) and representatives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ÚV KSČ). The juxtaposition of conflicting interpretations of Dubček's role — as a betrayer of his own ideals, humiliated by Brezhnev, on the one hand, and as the statesman who saved the nation from an even bloodier Soviet reprisal, on the other — as well as the divergent assessments of the signing of the so-called Moscow Protocols, reflects the interpretative framework adopted by the creators of the *Czech Century*. Their approach is grounded in a deconstructive reading of history, which seeks to challenge established historical narratives through the coexistence of competing perspectives. Such an approach draws on both dimensions of Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction:[13] it exposes both the established tradition — namely, the genre of the Czech historical television series and its modes of audiovisual representation and the underlying ways of thinking about Czech history.[14] In this respect, Luboš Ptáček's observation that the series, through its artistic deconstruction, avoids imposing an ideological interpretation of history and instead leaves the evaluation of historical events to the viewer is persuasive. Through a distinctive form of artistic stylisation, the series highlights the contradictions inherent in moments of historical triumph that ultimately gave rise to later defeats.[15]

At the end of 2015, the Slovak writer and journalist Ľuboš Jurík published the novel *Alexander Dubček/Rok dlhší ako storočie* [Alexander Dubček. A Year Longer than a Century], which had previously appeared in serial form in the online journal *Slovo* [Word] from June 2014 onwards. As in his earlier novel *Smrť ministra* [The Death of the Minister] (2009), depicting the final days of the Slovak politician Vladimír Clementis (1902–1952) as he awaited execution, Ľuboš Jurík recounts Dubček's life story through a first-person narrative. In the introduction to the novel, Jurík defines his approach as a combination of non-fiction and fictional narrative.[16] The story of the novel takes place in a Prague hospital, where Dubček lies after a car accident (it happened on September 1, 1992) and where he finally succumbs to serious injuries on November 7, 1992. As Dubček's fictional interlocutor, the author creates Samuel Rozman, the head of the traumatology department at Na Homolce Hospital,

13 According to the French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, deconstruction is a mode of analysis that examines inherited structures of meaning until their hidden and suppressed assumptions are revealed.

14 PTÁČEK, L. *Umění mezi alegorií a ideologií* [Art between Allegory and Ideology], p. 206.

15 Ibid., pp. 214–215.

16 JURÍK, Ľ. *Alexander Dubček/Rok dlhší ako storočie* [Alexander Dubček. A Year Longer than a Century]. Martin : Matica slovenská, 2015, p. 7.

who serves as the dying politician's fictitious partner. Samuel Rozman serves not only as Dubček's confidant but also as his critical interlocutor, frequently challenging his views and confronting him with uncomfortable questions. For example, he reproaches Dubček for having been overly naive in 1968 and for underestimating the Soviet Union's ruthless hegemonic policy, which ultimately culminated in the occupation of Czechoslovakia.

The Slovak literary scholar Tibor Žilka regards Ľuboš Jurík's work as an example of the postcolonial novel, arguing that it offers a critical reflection on the Soviet Union's great-power politics. Indeed, *Alexander Dubček. A Year Longer than a Century* constitutes a forceful critique of Soviet colonial policy and Brezhnevism, exposing the USSR's persistent interference in the internal affairs of other states.[17] Together with Ľuboš Jurík's earlier novel *The Death of the Minister*, it represents an example of the documentary-biographical subgenre of the postcolonial novel,[18] employing the previously discussed method of deconstructing history and demythologizing its prominent historical figures.[19]

Compared to Jozef Banáš's novel, Ľuboš Jurík's work places considerably less emphasis on the heroization and martyrdom of its protagonist, while also lacking the explicit anti-Czech and anti-Havel attitude. Although Jurík's novel does reveal certain differences of opinion between Alexander Dubček and Václav Havel, Alexander Dubček, speaking in the first person, repeatedly expresses his support for Václav Havel[20] — both following Havel's election as President and in their shared opposition to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Despite the novel's confrontational tone, Ľuboš Jurík acknowledges in the epilogue his admiration for Dubček. In his view, the contemporary Slovak political scene lacks a politician of Dubček's kind. A closer examination of Jurík's attitude towards Dubček reveals that it closely parallels the perspective of the fictional character Dr. Samuel Rozman.[21]

The critical portrayal of the leader of the Prague Spring in Ľuboš Jurík's novel and in the television series the *Czech Century* testifies to the emergence of a more open and pluralistic approach to history in both literature and audiovisual culture after 2010. In these works, Dubček's image is no longer determined by ideological

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17 ŽILKA, T. Násilná smrť v postkoloniálnej próze [Violent Death in Postcolonial Prose]. In *Wielkie tematy kultury w literaturach słowiańskich 13. Tanatos 2*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 168, p. 344.

18 ŽILKA, T. Postkoloniálny román [Postcolonial Novel]. In *Kultúra a súčasnosť 17*. Nitra : Fakulta stredoeurópskych štúdií Univerzity Konštantína Filozofa, 2018, p. 157.

19 Ľuboš Jurík himself explicitly acknowledged this postmodern demythologization of the well-known historical figure: "That was one of my main objectives — to demythologize him. I did not want to erect another stone monument, but to portray him as a human being (...). He was a rather emotionally fragile person, by no means a heroized figure, but a man of flesh and blood who suffered greatly throughout his life." See JURÍK, Ľ. A. Dubček mal depresie, spochybňoval sám seba [Dubček had depression, he doubted himself]. In *Teraz.sk*, 2 February 2016. [online]. [cit. 12 March 2026]. Available at: https://www.teraz.sk/knihy/l-jurik-a-dubcek-mal-depresie-spo/179656-clanok.html.

20 For example, in Jurík's novel Dubček recalls that in January 1989 he sent a strongly worded letter of protest to Miloš Jakeš and Gustáv Husák condemning the imprisonment of Václav Havel. See JURÍK, Ľ. *Alexander Dubček/Rok dlhší ako storočie*, p. 159.

21 Like Samuel Rozman, Ľuboš Jurík was also registered in the files of the State Security (StS) as a collaborator.

projection but instead becomes an object of cultural reinterpretation. In this sense, one may speak of a shift from myth to discourse — from a heroic mode of representation to a model of critical historical reflection that enables a far more nuanced reading of Slovak political and cultural legacy of the twentieth century.

Parallel to these deconstructive works, audiovisual representations that heroize the leader of the Prague Spring have also emerged. In 2018, Dubček appeared as the protagonist of the Slovak-Czech feature film *Dubček — Krátka jar, dlhá zima* [Dubček — A Short Spring, A Long Winter] (festival title: Dubček), directed by Laco Halama. The screenplay by Viliam Klimáček and Ľuboš Jurík offers a more conventional portrayal of its central historical figure than the sixth episode of the *Czech Century*. Theatre scholar Dagmar Podmaková has criticized both the screenplay and its cinematic adaptation for their lack of historical authenticity and the unconvincing treatment of both dramatized and fictional events.[22] Moreover, Dubček in Halama's film is not portrayed as a controversial figure, nor is he confronted with his own failures, as he is in Jurík's novel *Alexander Dubček. A Year Longer than a Century*, which has occasionally been mistakenly regarded as the source text for the biographical film. Rather than offering a deconstructive interpretation of history, the film seeks to commemorate Alexander Dubček in the year marking the fiftieth anniversary of the occupation of Czechoslovakia. Although it avoids excessive pathos, it likewise makes no attempt to question his commitment to defending the interests of the people of his country.

Deconstruction of Dubček's myth in Slovak documentary films

At the turn of the second and third decades of this millennium, Slovak documentary filmmaking produced three remarkable films commemorating the life and legacy of Alexander Dubček. These works reassess long-established myths surrounding Dubček and place him within new interpretative contexts. Rather than imposing a clear-cut ideological perspective on the renowned politician, they employ strategies of philosophical deconstruction. All three films were made by filmmakers at least two generations younger than Dubček, whose perspectives are not shaped by the period of his greatest political prominence during the Prague Spring of 1968. Moreover, these films were produced in the tense social and political climate that followed the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, and the subsequent political downfall of Prime Minister Robert Fico, who had frequently invoked the Dubček's myth in his political self-presentation. The repeated instrumentalization of Dubček's romanticized image by former communists and nationalist politicians contributed to a decline in his public appeal, particularly among more liberal segments of Slovak society. The Dubček episode of the television series *The Slovak*

22 PODMAKOVÁ, D. Alexander Dubček Twice — an (Un)Known Side of Him. In *Slovenské divadlo*, 2018, Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 242–266. The authoress compares two visual works about Alexander Dubček — the theatrical production *#dubček* and the film *Dubček — Krátka jar, dlhá zima* [Dubček — A Short Spring, a Long Winter] (both released in 2018). She criticizes both works for their illustrative approach to the subject, which, in her view, significantly shaped their final form.

Pantheon, together with Robert Kirchhoff's two documentary films released in 2022 and 2023, seeks to engage not only admirers of Dubček but also critics of the myths.

In 2020, RTVS (Radio and Television of Slovakia) broadcast a 45-minute docudrama about Alexander Dubček as part of the television series *The Slovak Pantheon*. The series itself followed the public television poll *The Greatest Slovak* and sought to present the eleven most popular historical figures in Slovak history through an unconventional audiovisual format. The episode entitled *Alexander Dubček*, written by Tomáš Dušička and directed by Peter Núñez, Kristína Herzegová, Romáš Dušička, Petra Vavrová, and Tomáš Karásek, adopts the form of a docudrama, combining dramatized reconstructions with documentary footage.

The authors sought to present viewers with a documentary grounded in historical fact, a goal further supported by expert commentary from the historians, Czech Michal Macháček and Slovak Stanislav Sikora. Both experts try to interpret Dubček's political career within its historical context and do not shy away from addressing controversial issues. Together with the narrators, they expose Dubček's passivity during the political purges of the 1950s, with the commentary explicitly identifying him as a Stalinist official. One dramatized scene depicts what is presented as a crucial political miscalculation by Dubček: even eight days before the occupation of Czechoslovakia, he remained convinced that he would be able to manage the political measures being prepared by Moscow, despite Leonid Brezhnev's warnings about them. A transcript of this dramatized conversation was made publicly available from the Russian Presidential Archive in April 1994 and was also published in Tomáš Ferenčák's monograph *Dubček — A Controversial Figure*.[23] In the docudrama, the historians also examine the circumstances surrounding Dubček's signing of the so-called "baton law," an act that significantly damaged his popularity in Czechoslovakia. At the same time, the dramatized documentary highlights his courage during the Slovak National Uprising (1944) and explains the reasons for his widespread popularity in Czechoslovakia and abroad in 1968. The episode from *The Slovak Pantheon* series represents a visually engaging educational documentary aimed at a broad audience, although it is primarily intended for a younger, media-literate generation.

Following the outbreak of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, public attention also returned to memories of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. In this context, Dubček's resistance to Soviet imperial policy once again attracted the attention of the Slovak public, and his story began to resonate with younger audiences as well.

In November 2022, the Slovak public broadcaster RTVS premiered the documentary *Anatomy of a Leap into the Void*, directed by Robert Kirchhoff. Through the director's narration, interviews with eyewitnesses, and archival footage, the film traces Alexander Dubček's life from his childhood in a utopian commune Interhelpo[24] in Kyrgyzstan, through his popularity in 1968 and subsequent years as a dis-

23 FERENČÁK, T. *Dubček — kontroverzná osobnosť* [Dubček — A Controversial Figure], pp. 102–104.

24 Interhelpo was a 20th-century Czechoslovak industrial cooperative that travelled to Soviet Kyrgyzstan in 1925 to help

sident, to his return to high politics in 1989. Combining a compilation documentary with elements of the essay film, it explores several previously underrepresented aspects of Dubček's life, including his relationship with religion and the Church, as well as the reception of his pro-democratic legacy in the Soviet Union. A prominent theme of the film is the evolution and enduring influence of Russian imperial policy in Central Europe. Kirchhoff's documentary also examines Dubček's contemporary legacy in Slovak and Czech society and politics.

Robert Kirchhoff's subsequent feature-length documentary, *All Men Become Brothers* (2023), likewise focuses on the turning points in Dubček's life and his influence on both the politics of his own era and contemporary Slovak politics. This time, however, the film dispenses with authorial narration and makes more limited use of well-known archival materials. It once again presents an ambivalent portrait of the prominent politician. While it acknowledges Dubček's personal integrity and human qualities, eyewitnesses also characterize him as a utopian, a coward, and a communist devoted to party discipline. In comparison with *Anatomy of a Leap into the Void*, the motif of Russian, or more broadly Soviet, imperialism is less prominent. One of the film's central themes is the mythologization and appropriation of Alexander Dubček's legacy by various, often antagonistic, interest groups. The recurring motif of Dubček's bust serves as a petrified symbol of the celebrated politician, whose veneration in Slovakia at times assumes an almost sacred dimension. Director Robert Kirchhoff explicitly rejects such idealization of Dubček: "Unlike the Czechs, who are born heretics, we have become accustomed to avoiding polemics. We feel that once we approach something critically, we ourselves become targets of attack. As a result, we have complacently allowed hagiographic works about Dubček to emerge, portraying him almost as a saint. I do not think he deserves such an approach."[25]

The documentary *All Men Become Brothers*, produced with a relatively generous budget,[26] succeeded in provoking considerable public debate. In her review of Kirchhoff's film, the critic Viera Langerová observed that although its structure is diffuse and stylistically uneven, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the source material, it nevertheless demonstrates that the interpretation of both Dubček's historical significance and his political trajectory remain a highly contested and confrontational subject.[27]

The three Slovak documentary films discussed above make a significant contribution to the reassessment of established patterns of historical memory and

build a socialist economy. Over one thousand Czechs, Slovaks, and other European volunteers settled in Pishpek (now Bishkek), laying the foundation for local industry and infrastructure before falling victim to Stalinist purges.

25 KIRCHHOFF, R. — KÚDELOVÁ, K. Dubček bol ako Kennedy či Martin Luther King. Žiaľ, nikdy to nepochopil. [Alexander Dubček shares a parallel with John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. Unfortunately, he never realized it.] [Interview]. In *Sme.sk*, 14 September 2023. [online]. [cit. 12 February 2026]. Available at: https://kultura.sme.sk/c/23216045/robert-kirchhoff-dubcek-rozhovor.html.

26 According to https://sfu.sk/filmy/vsetci-ludia-budu-bratia/, the film was produced with a budget of €348,217.

27 LANGEROVÁ, V. Všetci ľudia budú bratia. [All Men Become Brothers]. In *Filmpress.sk*. 20 September 2023. [online]. Available at: https://www.filmpress.sk/recenzie2/recenzie-2023/9539-vsetci-ludia-budu-bratia-all-men-become-brothers?hitcount=0.

underscore the need for an open cultural debate on modern history of Slovakia. Their common denominator is an emphasis on the plurality of perspectives, a critical re-evaluation of romanticized national narratives, and an effort to interpret Alexander Dubček not as an infallible icon but as a historical figure with complex personal and political characteristics.

The demythologizing portrayal of Dubček in Czech cinema

In the Czech cultural and social context, the image of Alexander Dubček has differed markedly from its Slovak counterpart since the 1990s. Whereas Slovak public discourse continues to portray him predominantly as a national hero and a symbol of democratic and humanistic values, Czech scholars and artists have approached his legacy with greater critical distance. According to the historian Oldřich Tůma, contemporary Czech society regards Dubček largely without strong emotions — as a figure belonging to Czech history, but not one of whom Czechs would necessarily feel particularly proud.[28] He further argues that this reflects the broader Czech approach to history: one characterized by a degree of scepticism and detachment, rather than by the enthusiasm and emotional engagement that shaped the attitudes of previous generations.[29]

Among Czech documentary filmmakers, Alexander Dubček received the most sustained attention from Karel Vachek,[30] a leading representative of the Czechoslovak New Wave, particularly in films dealing with the Prague Spring and the period immediately following the Velvet Revolution of 1989. In contemporary Czech historical fiction cinema, however, Dubček is not a frequently depicted protagonist. When Robert Sedláček directed *Jan Palach* (2018), a film portraying Palach's life from the summer of 1967 until his self-immolation in January 1969 and capturing the atmosphere of the Prague Spring and the subsequent occupation of Czechoslovakia, Dubček appeared only indirectly — through archival television footage and posters expressing public support for him displayed in the streets of Prague. In the film, the reform movement is represented more prominently by Josef Smrkovský, Chairman of the National Assembly, who is portrayed as willing to engage in dialogue even with the more radical university students.

Alexander Dubček emerged as a major and pivotal character in *Havel* (2020), directed by Slávek Horák, who co-wrote the screenplay together with Rudolf Suchánek. At the beginning of the film, the first Slovak leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia is portrayed as Václav Havel's great role model during the Prague Spring. Nine years later, however, when Havel and the actor Pavel Landovský ask Dubček to sign Charter 77, he refuses to do so. Havel perceives this decision as

28 TŮMA, O. Alexander Dubček — československý politik [Alexander Dubček — A Czechoslovak Politician]. In *Soudobé dějiny*, 2018, Vol. 25, No. 3–4, p. 399.

29 Ibid.

30 Dubček appears in Vachek's documentary *Spříznění volbou* [Kindred by Choice] (1968), as well as in the films *Nový hyperion aneb Volnost, rovnost, bratrství* [The New Hyperion, or Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] (1992) and *Komunismus a síť aneb Konec zastupitelské demokracie* [Communism and the Net, or the End of Representative Democracy] (2019).

a betrayal of Dubček's own ideals and is unable to forgive him for it, even in 1989, when Dubček decides to run for the presidency. In the film, Havel is portrayed not only as the winner in the contest for the office of President of Czechoslovakia but also as the clear moral victor, possessing a more authentic experience of resistance against the totalitarian regime. Although Slávek Horák's film also incorporates elements that demythologize Václav Havel,[31] ideologically it ultimately presents a view of Havel that is conventional in the Czech context: as the central leader of the democratization of Czechoslovak society. Dubček, portrayed once again by Adrián Jastraban — much as in *Dubček — A Short Spring, a Long Winter*, with an almost identical appearance and performance — is depicted here as a cautious politician who betrays his own ideals. The film reflects a recurring tendency in Czech cinema to portray Alexander Dubček primarily as a figure of the pre-November 1989 era and as an unremarkable politician, or party official, who has little of relevance to offer contemporary audiences.

In 2023, two films premiered in the Czech Republic commemorating the life of the communist politician František Kriegel, the only member of the Czechoslovak delegation who refused to sign the so-called Moscow Protocols. The first was the documentary *Sám proti Moskvě* [A Lonely Voice against Moscow] (festival title), directed by Martin Šmídmajer and Miloslav Šmídmajer. The second was the international co-production *Muž, který stál v cestě* [The Man Who Stood in the Way] (Czech Republic/Ukraine/Lithuania), directed by Petr Nikolaev. Both films tend to present František Kriegel's uncompromising response to the occupation of Czechoslovakia as more principled and morally justified than Dubček's capitulation to Brezhnev's diktat. In particular, Nikolaev's feature film, based on a screenplay by Ivan Fíla, uses the dramatic story of its protagonist to construct a powerful allegory of resistance to Moscow's imperial policy. Within the film, František Kriegel's antagonists are not only Leonid Brezhnev but also Gustáv Husák. According to the film's interpretation, Kriegel and Husák shared a close friendship dating back to Husák's imprisonment in the 1950s, although historical sources do not substantiate the existence of such a relationship. Gustáv Husák, played by Adrian Jastraban, is compellingly depicted as an opportunist and political manipulator who rises to power through collaboration with Moscow. Alexander Dubček, played by Daniel Heriban, is initially presented as a natural leader and František Kriegel's ally. Following the occupation of Czechoslovakia, however, he appears devastated and disoriented, unable to adopt a clear political stance. The film later portrays him as emotionally fragile, suggesting that he is able to deliver his well-known address to the nation after returning from Moscow (August 27, 1968) only after receiving a stimulant injection. He subsequently yields to pressure from the Husák-led Communist Party leadership and votes in favour of František Kriegel's expulsion from the Party.

31 The demythologization of Havel is manifested primarily through the portrayal of his promiscuity and his troubled relationship with his wife, Olga, as well as through the inclusion of unusually naturalistic scenes (e.g., Havel and Dubček urinating together behind a theatre building).

The Man Who Stood in the Way reflects a contemporary Czech interpretation of the Prague Spring in which Dubček is seen as having failed the hopes of the pro-democratic public. Within this interpretive framework, Gustáv Husák emerges as the unequivocal gravedigger of the reform process. In Slovakia, by contrast, such a critical portrayal of the country's most prominent post-war Czechoslovak political leaders remains relatively rare.[32]

Contrary to this demythologizing trend, Alexander Dubček appeared in the Czech-Slovak co-production *Vlny* [*Waves*] (2024) as a charismatic leader and a symbol of the democratic transformation of Czechoslovakia in 1967 and 1968. In his film about the struggle of Československý rozhlas (Czechoslovak Radio) journalists to defend and consolidate democracy, the Czech screenwriter and director Jiří Mádl draws on the traditional and widely accepted myth that presents Dubček as the principal architect and foremost representative of the Prague Spring. In *Waves*, it is precisely Dubček and his pro-democratic stance that inspire the protagonist, Tomáš Havlík, as well as other journalists, to risk their careers and personal freedom in order to preserve independent radio broadcasting. Jiří Mádl makes use not only of authentic archival footage of Dubček from 1968, portraying him as a leader enjoying widespread public support, but also constructs fictional and mythologizing scenes involving the politician that are at odds with the historical record.

According to the film's interpretation, one of the principal reasons for Dubček's popularity as early as 1967 was the support he received from the media, including the journalists of Czechoslovak Radio. Pavel, the younger brother of the film's protagonist in *Waves*, distributes posters bearing Dubček's portrait and the slogan "Freedom of Speech" together with fellow students even before the end of 1967 — that is, at a time when Dubček was in Prague still a relatively little-known member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ÚV KSČ).[33] During the occupation of Czechoslovak Radio by Warsaw Pact troops on August 21, 1968, the film depicts Dubček as giving the courageous radio journalists permission by telephone to begin illegal radio broadcasting. This scene, however, contradicts the historical record, as Dubček himself states in his memoirs that at the time he was under the control of Soviet soldiers and had no access to telephone communication.[34]

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32 Even his Slovak critics acknowledge Gustáv Husák's contribution to the establishment of the Czecho-Slovak Federation. Similarly, Dubček's political mistakes in 1968 and 1969 are often justified primarily by his efforts to promote Slovak economic and political advancement.

33 Dubček was an unknown face, especially for the Czech public, after he took up the position of First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Czechoslovakia. "Dubček was not one of the most famous and most photographed personalities," states Jiří Vančura, adding that the photograph of Dubček published by the newspapers on January 6, 1968, was several years old. Dubček did not draw much attention to himself, and his personal views were unknown to the public. VANČURA, J. *Naděje a zklamání: Pražské jaro 1968*. [Hope and Disappointment: The Prague Spring of 1968]. Praha : Mladá fronta, 1990, p. 21.

34 In his memoirs, Alexander Dubček describes the occupation of his office by Soviet paratroopers at dawn on August 21, 1968 in the following words: "Instinctively, I reached for the telephone, but one of the soldiers aimed his submachine gun at me, seized the telephone, and tore out the cord." DUBČEK, A. *Z pamäti. Nádej zomiera poslednú* [Hope Dies Last. The Autobiography of Alexander Dubček], p. 202.

Jiří Mádl is well aware that Alexander Dubček is still a living concept among a part of the audience outside our region. He therefore employs Dubček not only as a symbol of Czechoslovak pro-democratic politics but also as a synecdoche for the democratic aspirations of the Czech and Slovak people.[35] This invites a comparison with the British docudrama *Invasion*, in which Alexander Dubček is similarly employed as a symbol of the Czech and Slovak people's struggle for democracy and of resistance to Soviet — today often framed as "Russian" — imperialism, albeit at the expense of a simplified, and in some respects historically inaccurate, interpretation of history.

Jiří Mádl has acknowledged that his intention was not to produce a historically faithful reconstruction of events but rather to create an emotionally compelling and audience-oriented film.[36] *Waves* indeed achieved extraordinary commercial success. Less than a year after its premiere, it had attracted nearly one million viewers in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, it became one of the most successful Czech films — or, more precisely, films with a Czech majority production — released since 1993. At the same time, however, the film's overtly thesis-driven narrative and political engagement, often at the expense of historical accuracy, made it the target of considerable criticism in both countries. The Czech literary critic Jiří Chuchma identified in the film a schematic and idealized portrayal of the members of the Redakce mezinárodního života Československého rozhlasu [Foreign Broadcast Department of the Czechoslovak Radio].[37] He also observed that the film deliberately evokes associations with the present, particularly in relation to the censorship of public service media in Slovakia.[38]

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35 The absolute predominance of Dubček's name in Jiří Mádl's representation of the Czechoslovak political leadership is also evident in the radio announcement reporting the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops. The broadcaster informs listeners that the invasion took place "without the knowledge of the President of the Republic and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the ÚV KSČ, Alexander Dubček."

36 "My aim is for young audiences to see the film as well. Those who are only beginning to learn about the events of 1968. I want them to understand those events and to gain a better grasp of their broader context: what came before and what followed. At the same time, I do not want *Waves* to be ‚Wikipedia'. I want to make a film that appeals to audiences, potentially even a box-office success, with pace, dynamism, and compelling human stories set against the backdrop of major historical events." MÁDL, J. — HLOUŠKOVÁ, L. Vlny? Chci, aby na ně šli i mladí diváci. Nedělám Wikipedii. [Waves? My aim is for young audiences to see the film as well. I do not want *Waves* to be ‚Wikipedia']. [Interview]. In *Novinky.cz*, 18 June 2023. [online]. [cit. 12 February 2026]. Available at: https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/kultura-filmy-serialy-jiri-madl-vlny-chci-aby-na-ne-sli-i-mladi-divaci-nedelam-wikipedii-40433937.

37 Josef Chuchma commented on the portrayal of the members of the editorial staff as follows: "The film makes them look like dissidents, whereas in reality they were members of the establishment. Anyone holding a position connected with foreign affairs — especially with the West — was under the close scrutiny of the State Security." See CHUCHMA, J. — BUMBA, J. — ERHART, M. Ve filmu Vlny se zdá, že členové zahraniční redakce byli disidenti. Byli to ale prominenti [The film makes them look like dissidents, whereas in reality they were members of the establishment]. [Interview]. In *Irozhlas.cz*, 21 August 2024. [online]. [cit. 15 February 2026]. Available at: https://www.irozhlas.cz/kultura/film/kritik-film-vlny-disidenti-prominenti-komunismus_2408211913_epo. Although *Waves* received seven Czech Lion Awards from fifteen nominations for 2024, it failed to win any of its three nominations at the Czech Film Critics' Awards that same year. As a Czech–Slovak co-production, the film was also nominated for fourteen The Sun in a Net Awards in Slovakia in 2025, winning nine of them.

38 Ibid.

Within contemporary Czech cinema, Jiří Mádl's *Waves* represents a rare return to the myth of Alexander Dubček as a champion of democracy, freedom of expression, and Czechoslovak independence — a myth that originated as early as 1968 and was not rooted solely in domestic propaganda.[39] The film's remarkable public reception demonstrates that this myth remains both vibrant and compelling not only in Slovak but also in Czech audiovisual culture.

Conclusion

The analysis of contemporary Czech and Slovak audiovisual production confirms that the image of Alexander Dubček has undergone a profound transformation in the 21th century — from an iconic national hero (particularly in the Slovak context) and a symbol of the democratization of Czechoslovakia to a reflective symbol of historical experience. The process of demythologization, especially evident after 2010, represents both an expression of cultural self-reflection and also an evidence of the emancipation of historical discourse from political ideology.

This study identifies a pronounced trend toward a deconstructive approach to the representation of history. The Dubček episodes from the television series *We Must Reach an Agreement* and *The Slovak Pantheon*, together with Robert Kirchhoff's documentaries *Anatomy of a Leap into the Void* and *All Men Become Brothers*, constitute some of the most significant audiovisual works challenging various manifestations of the Dubček myth. These works offer viewers a more complex, and often contradictory, perspective on historical events, encouraging them to form their own judgments on the basis of personal experience as well as a broader understanding of the socio-political context. Such audiovisual artefacts have the potential not only to generate new historical narratives but also to preserve and transmit cultural and social traditions in distinctive ways. The increasing number of artistic works on historical themes that offer subversive readings of the past can be attributed to several factors. These include the decline of censorship following the collapse of major political empires and ideologies, as well as the influence of globalization and popular culture, which deliberately engages diverse and often contradictory audiences, merges local and global themes, and juxtaposes pathetic and parodic perspectives within a single historical narrative.

Despite the deconstructive trend outlined above, the past decade has also witnessed the production of works characterized by more conventional and ideologically inflected narratives. Such works typically serve the cultural and political interests

39 From the perspective of Western Europe and North America, Dubček's appointment to the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was interpreted as an expression of the Czechoslovak people's desire for democracy, emancipation, and closer ties to the Western world. On April 5, 1968 — the very day the Communist Party's reformist Action Plan was adopted — Dubček's portrait appeared on the cover of the popular American weekly *Time*. Inside the issue, it was noted that "Dubček, more than anyone else in Czechoslovakia, planned and pushed for sweeping changes that promise to alter the mood and quality of Czechoslovak life, and perhaps even the nature of communism in the rest of Eastern Europe." See Czechoslovakia: Into Unexplored Terrain. In *Time*, 5 April 1968. [online]. [cit. 15 March, 2026]. Available at: https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,900048,00.html.

of the nation or state that supports their production, whether fully or through co-financing. In the present study, this tendency is exemplified by the historical films *Dubček* (*— A Short Spring, A Long Winter*), *Havel*, *The Man Who Stood in the Way*, and the highly successful *Waves*.

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