

Anna Vomackova, Petra Novotna, Ondrej Kolinsky and Vojtech Pojar from the Czech Republic worked on this contribution. They describe how the accident was reported in the newspaper “Rudé Právo and Svobodne slovo” from the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1986.

**Rudé Právo and Svobodne slovo (29<sup>th</sup> April 1986):**

RED LAW AND FREE WORD - THE FIRST ARTICLE APPEARED

Rudé právo (the Red law) was an official daily newspaper of the communist party and it always and strictly toed the party's political line.

The first article, which appeared in the newspaper and informed about the accident was a short notice (65 words) on the left margin of the page 7, which was published on the 29th of April, when the Czech Press Agency (ČTK) was informed about the catastrophe.



**USSR: Reactor accident**

*(Moscow, ČTK) The board of ministers of the USSR announced on Monday that in the Ukrainian nuclear power plant in Chernobyl had been an accident, in which one of the reactors had been damaged. According to the TASS report, the steps are being taken in order to remove the consequences and the affected people are provided with help. A governmental commission has been created. Similar accidents already occurred many a time in the world. According to the TASS, the Chernobyl accident is a first accident of this kind in the Soviet Union.*

This short message was printed in almost identical manner in other major newspapers, like Svobodne slovo (Free Word). In Svobodne slovo the short message was completed by mention of "other similar incidents":

*Similar incidents have occurred on several occasions in other countries too. According to data of the Critical Mass association, among others 2300 accidents, malfunctions and other incidents were reported during year 1979 in the U.S. only.*

*(two last sentences translated only, Svobodne slovo, April 29th, 1986) EXPERTS SUPPORTING THE OFFICIAL STATEMENT*



“No need to worry about health“ (Prague, ČTK)

To support the official statement of the communist government, main hygienist of the former Czechoslovakia Dana Zusková gave an interview to the media more than a week after the accident. It's for the first time when she admits the increase of radioactive levels, but at the same time she rejects that it would concern an abnormal condition which could be harmful to health. *"Nothing will happen to the people, if they adhere to the basic hygienic standards and wash the vegetables and fruits,"* she assured.

*"The people must trust us"* she said at the end of the interview.

#### THE ACCIDENT IN THE CZECH CONTEXT

It is also important to mention that Chernobyl accident happened five days before May 1st which was considered among the most important holidays in Eastern Block (Labour Day). Mass celebrations of Labour Day were to show and support the official view that nothing overly important has happened. Notice appearing on 1st May in Rude pravo was clearly meant to avoid any unwanted disruptions to the celebrations by calming people and telling them that they can join the street marches with no worries.



"Announcement by the CSSR Government"

"No need to take special precaution" (Prague, ČTK) As it had been already announced in relation to the Chernobyl NPP accident in the Soviet Union, the competent Czechoslovak authorities, technical establishments of the Czechoslovak Commission for Nuclear Energy, Meteorological Office, technical services of Czechoslovakian NPPs and other establishments in the respective regions continue to measure radioactivity. The evaluation by the Czech and Slovak Ministries of Health of the reported measurements show that public health is not in danger and therefore there is no need to take special precaution in the territory of Czechoslovakia." (Rude pravo, May 1st, 1986)

Measuring of radioactivity in relation to accident, however, started only a day before and the Prime Minister L. Strougal issued the notice without actually knowing the results.

Chernobyl accident was "competing for attention" with serious contenders - May elections and also floods. There has not been any larger article concerning the accident on the first page until Gorbatshev's speech, which appeared in the 15th of May issue, which was followed on the next day by a column, which explained the speech and accused "the Americans and their lackeys" of exaggerating the number of casualties and of provoking hysteria. It also mentioned the American nuclear program...

On the first page have however (a few days before the Gorbatshev's speech) appeared two 5-line notices, which informed the citizens that there is no "need to take any special measures" and no "need to worry and the milk is definitely not harmful".

#### OTHER ARTICLES

The rest of the articles which appeared in the Red Law in the period of half a month after the accident was also published on the penultimate page. The first articles claimed that is

absolutely no need to worry, that there are just two casualties, "people in Kiev are drinking water without fear", "harvest continues", "foreign students refusing to leave Kiev" etc. A photo showing a part of the building (the unaffected part) has appeared, with a caption "as you can see, nothing has happened there are no huge damages and open fires, as some western media services claim". Almost every single article started "The situation has been stabilized" But as the time progressed (not before 10th of May), the newspapers -step by step- started admitting (but only implicitly) that it's a catastrophe of an exceptional scale, that there are tens of thousands of evacuated people etc.

#### PUBLIC OPINION

Despite the critical lack of information, the people did realize the media and the government were marginalizing the extent of the disaster or even lying. Sometimes the "facts" obviously didn't fit together. For example one day it was announced by the Hygienic office that there was no increased radiation in Czechoslovakia, yet a few days later, the same office stated that the level of radiation was decreasing back to its usual level (*see the article "No need to worry about health"*). Also, the truth soaked from foreign sources - apart from media, there were also Austrian Greenpeace activists distributing fliers about the catastrophe and recommended precautions mainly in Southern Bohemia.

According to the contemporary Public Opinion Research Institute, 18% respondents *feared* for their health, 55% *slightly worried* and only 27% *didn't worry* at all. The problem was that the national media and officials didn't provide any information how to behave in order to minimize the impact of radioactivity (as there was *none*). This led people to follow foreign media – i.e. not only Western ones + Radio Free Europe but also Polish or East German ones which are said to have been more open than the Czechoslovak ones. The mentioned research claims that nearly half of the people changed their habits according to foreign media recommendations.

It was not unknown that the Czechoslovak media manipulated the truth in many cases but this crisis was different as the disinformation may have directly threatened people's lives or health (if it didn't it was thanks to the direction of wind and other coincidences). Therefore, it may have been one of the moments when the regime lost last pieces of its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

How can we finish this short analysis? Maybe by quoting the article "Responsibility of the media and their role", which was published in May 1986 in the same newspaper and which shows the uttermost cynical character of the communist propaganda of the time.

*...they (media) mustn't serve such people, who would like to obscure the most actual problems with phrases, their alibism, their bureaucraticism and their unwillingness to pursuit the real progress. Poignancy, argumentation, concrete points, boldness and responsibility in following of the socialist interests and in the criticism of everything, which stands in the way of the programme of the XVII. rally of the Czechoslovak Communist Party must characterize the work of the media"*

This coverage clearly shows how the communist government tried to prevent people from realizing the scale of the catastrophe, the strong influence of the censorship and the cooperation of the newspaper reporters with the regime (despite of the on the "glasnost" announced in 1985).