Letter from the British Embassy in Prague to Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, describing a conversation with the Czech President on the Communist threat in the country, dated 11 February 1948

SECRET

FROM PRAGUE TO FOREIGN OFFICE

Personal for Secretary of State.

 [1.] The President and Madame Benes asked my wife and me to lunch on 10th February. Others present were Masaryk[[1]](#footnote-1) and the President’s Chancellor. After lunch I had an opportunity for a confidential talk. The President was slow in his speech and somewhat forgetful. He spoke of himself as a sick man owing, he said, to the hard struggle he had had in regaining control of the country in 1945. He said that he was now better in health, but not as well as he needed to be and that he found the slowness in his speech particularly tiresome.

 2. I gave him the personal message in the last paragraph of your letter of 12th January and said that you would like to know his appreciation of the position here. Did he think he would be able to maintain the democratic position of the country? Would the Communists get complete control? I said that you wanted to be told by him frankly what we could do to assist in any way we could, to maintain the freedom of his people and that you would treat anything he told me in absolute confidence.

 3. Benes, who was evidently touched by the warmth and frankness of your message, asked me to convey his best wishes to you and the Prime Minister. He said that he would be glad to tell you frankly his assessment of the position, and that he would send for me from time to time so that I could tell you that his honest opinion was that the democratic position of the country could be held. The country at present was in the grip of election nervousness; the Communists, however, he thought, would not win an absolute majority but on the contrary would emerge from the elections with slightly reduced numbers. When I observed that Communist pressure would continue after the elections he agreed but thought that once the elections were over there would be a feeling of relief and returning confidence. I was to tell you that in any case any possibility of a collapse of democracy could be “absolutely excluded”. He stated this several times.

 4. I asked him whether the Communist drive here would not be strengthened if there was a Communist offensive in Greece, Italy and France in the spring as our information indicated. Both the President and Masaryk brushed this aside saying that conditions were different here. I also said that after talking to many party leaders here, I had the impression that anti-Communist forces were disunited among themselves, many of them were scared, and some of them were under the illusion that collaboration with the Communists was possible. Was there not a real danger that the well organised Communist Party would try and exploit these weaknesses of their opponents? The President admitted these weaknesses; the Democratic Parties were afraid of going too far in case the Communists won and each party was trying to shift the odium of attacking the Communists. He thought that in spite of this the Communists would not win the elections, and that after them the Democratic Parties would be more confident and more united[[2]](#footnote-2).

[TNA, FO 800/450]

Keywords: post-war Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia

1. Masaryk, Jan Garrigue (1886–1948) - Czechoslovak politician. Exiled until 1945, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia (1940 - 1948), died in mysterious circumstances on 10 March 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elections were held in Czechoslovakia on 30 May 1948 after the Czech Coup when non-communist ministers were expelled from the government. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)