

# Prague

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**A short overview is given of the history of Prague (with emphasis on the post-war period). Housing policy and the relationships between residential areas, working places and recreation are discussed, and attention is drawn to the most pressing ecological problems in connection with transport and industry. Changing rules in the city administration considerably affect the future of the city. The core of the article focuses on current problems linked to the present day economic transformation and its impact on the development of the city.**

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Hampl, Václav Gardavský and Karel Kühnl, *Regionální struktura a vývoj systému osídlení ČSR* (Regional structure and development of the settlement system of ČSR), Charles University, Prague, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>Josef Janáček, *Malé dějiny Prahy* (Brief history of Prague), Orbis, Prague, 1983.

<sup>3</sup>E. Vojtová and J. Menclová, 'Územní a demografický vývoj Prahy (The territorial and demographic development of Prague)', in *Staletá Praha*, Panorama, Prague, 1990.

<sup>4</sup>Jaroslav Herout, *Prahou desetiletí* (Prague in the course of ten centuries), Orbis, Prague, 1972.

At the end of the 20th century Prague is a thousand year old city awakening from a bad dream and struggling to remember its past glory as the spiritual crossroad of Europe. Prague was an ancient seat of emperors and kings, was at the heart of Central European unrest, and then declined to become a mere provincial seat of the Austrian Empire. Its visitors are greeted by Gothic and baroque towers reflected in the calm surface of the River Vltava. The long-time cultural centre of Bohemia, Prague now aspires to become a European metropolitan city once again.

From ancient times a settlement in the Prague Basin has been the centre of historical Bohemia. Prague is significant not merely for economic and cultural reasons, and as an important population centre, but by virtue of its central position in the Bohemian Basin. The city is not only the centre of Bohemia and Moravia (the Czech republic). Since 1918 Prague has been the seat of the federal administration of Czechoslovakia. It is one of those capitals that has developed naturally, a place where social and economic development have long been concentrated. According to the last census (March 1991) 1 212 010 people now live in Prague, one-ninth of population of Bohemia and Moravia and one-thirteenth of the whole population of Czechoslovakia. One-seventh of employment opportunities, one-fourth of services and about one-third of research and scientific activity in the Czech republic are concentrated in Prague.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of the continent, Prague is well placed to seek to become once again a cultural, political

and trade crossing point between Western and Eastern countries.

## *Historical background*

The history of Prague began with arrival of the Slavs in the 6th century. They moved their main settlement to the Prague area at the end of the 9th century and built their residence on the site of today's castle on the left bank of the River Vltava (Hradčany); see Figure 1. This area has continued since that time to be the seat of the rulers of Bohemia. One hundred years afterwards the second castle rose on the right bank (Vyšehrad). Permanent roads began to cross the area and marketplaces and merchant settlements appeared (Malá Strana).<sup>2</sup> In the 12th century the first stone bridge across the river was finished and economic life and settlement growth moved to the right river bank (Staré Město). The city expanded most in the 14th century when the carefully planned New Town (Nové Město) was established. With 40 000 inhabitants Prague was at that time the second largest European city after Rome (London's population was only 35 000, Nuremberg's 26 000).<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 16th century there was a recurrence of economic expansion and population increase; at the same time, the number of foreigners (Germans, Italians, Jews) rose considerably. The building boom peaked under Rudolf II, when Prague was for the last time the seat of the Austrian Empire. After the Thirty Years' War and the violent religious division of the country the population declined and Prague became a provincial town for the next 150 years.<sup>4</sup>

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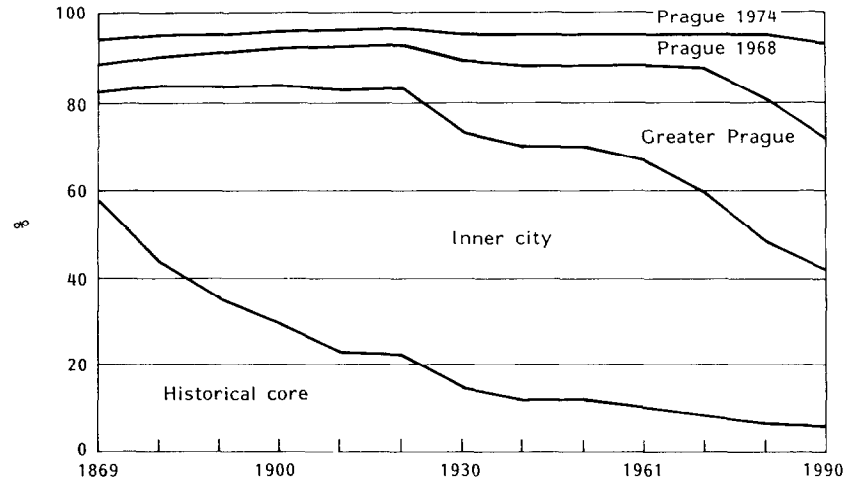
**Figure 1.** Panorama of Prague from the Hradčany.

In 1784 Emperor Josef II decided to unite four historical parts of Prague: the Hradčany, Malá Strana, Staré Město and Nové Město. In 1850 a fifth part (Josefov) was amalgamated. Prague now covered an area of 8 km<sup>2</sup>, with 120 000 inhabitants. In 1866 Prague was proclaimed an 'open city', which led to an expansion of building activity outside the mediaeval fortifications. During the industrial revolution walls were pulled down and the city's territory began to spread rapidly. Prague soon became one of the most important economic centres of the Habsburg monarchy. At the beginning of the 20th century the city occupied 21 km<sup>2</sup> and had 223 000 in-

habitants. The population of the five historical parts stagnated (because of the reconstruction of the former Jewish ghetto Josefov at the beginning of 20th century the number of residents even declined), while the adjoining areas developed quickly. The suburbs and the historical core formed one economic unit.

The origin of the independent Czechoslovak state – with Prague as its capital – brought rapid changes. Based on a law of 1922 so-called 'Greater Prague' was formed (198 km<sup>2</sup> with 677 000 inhabitants). The municipal area expanded more than eight times. The character of contiguous settlements was heterogeneous. On

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**Figure 2.** Share of the total population, 1869–1990.

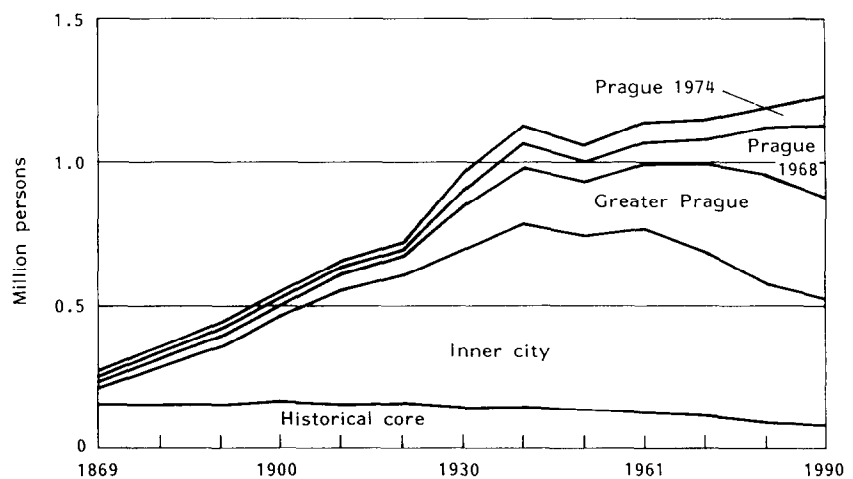
the one hand there were ten towns with industrial functions and a high proportion of built up areas; on the other hand villages with predominantly agricultural functions were also included. The State Regulation Board was set up to plan the city, and in the first half of the 1920s this body was given the task of working out town planning schemes for the individual sectors of Prague; this then served as a basis for the overall plan of city development, which was completed in 1929.<sup>5</sup> Prague's function as a capital city encouraged extensive building activity, especially in the suburbs and garden areas. According to the 1930 census, population growth was concentrated in the newly urbanized parts, while the historical core started to lose its residents. The highest absolute increase in population had been concentrated in the highly urbanized

parts adjoining the centre from the end of the 19th century. However, a greater increase now occurred in the more distant suburbs. A typical process of suburbanization was clearly visible, with urban functions spreading into the adjoining neighbourhoods, a process repeated in many other European cities. The population of the city rose to 985 000 in 1940. As a result of the war and food supply problems many people left for the countryside and the pre-war population level was only regained in 1957. Figures 2 and 3 show the population development of Prague.

From the geographical point of view, the city has developed in concentric zones.<sup>6</sup> The centre was the historical core. Around it predominantly residential areas rose at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries. This created an inner city, directly linked

<sup>5</sup>Blahomír Borovička and Jiří Hruza, *Praha – 1000 let stavby města* (Prague – one thousand years of urban development), Panorama, Prague, 1983.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Hampl, 'Vývoj geografické diferenciacie Prahy z hlediska obyvatelstva (The development of the geographic differentiation of Prague from the point of view of the population)', *Sborník ČSGS*, Vol 87, No 4, 1982, pp 251–262.



**Figure 3.** Population growth 1869–1990 (millions).

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Figure 4. The housing estate built in the 1970s: South Town.

with the historical core. Both the historical core and the inner city are characterized by compact buildings; the space was already totally filled in the 1930s. The edge of Greater Prague has retained its character of relatively separate suburbs and garden cities consisting mostly of family houses. Massive building activity restarted in the 1960s, when large housing estates – New Towns (Figure 4) – were located in newly annexed areas.

### *Housing policy in the socialist city*

The Communist coup started a 'new historical epoch of building a socialist society' in 1948. Most of the tenement houses in the centre were nationalized and the housing market was replaced by a rationing scheme, with controlled and highly subsidized rents. Economic and social market regulation was replaced by codes, strict standards and an interventionist social policy.<sup>7</sup>

Housing construction, run by the state, reacted slowly to the urgent housing shortage of the 1950s; predominantly vacant lots were filled with new houses. Although a new industrial building technology was introduced in the 1960s, the needs of the inhabitants were not satisfied. The loss of older flats through slum clearance, being declared unfit for habitation, or change of use, exceeded half the 60 000 newly built flats. State housing policy, based on the motto 'everybody has the right to a low-rent government apartment' favoured investment in large schemes because 'only large housing complexes could be built in an efficient way'. The egalitarianism of Marxist urban policy also favoured new towns with standardized housing and services which were intended to create a homogeneous, socialist local society.<sup>8</sup> Last but not least, it was easier for the central

<sup>7</sup>Jiří Musil, *Sociologie soudobého města* (Sociology of the contemporary city), Svoboda, Prague, 1967.

<sup>8</sup>György Enyedi, *New Basis for Regional and Urban Policies in East-Central Europe*, Centre for Regional Studies of Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Pécs, 1990.



**Figure 5.** Pedestrian zone in the CBD.

political administration to control the use of budget resources, and so the whole of society, in this way.

The North Town (population 90 000) was the main construction site in the 1960s. The need for continuous, extensive construction required the geographical expansion of the city. A total of 51 surrounding municipalities were incorporated in 1968 and 1974. The city covered 496 km<sup>2</sup>, more than three times the area of Greater Prague in 1922. Ambitious housing projects were situated in newly acquired areas. The building of the South Town (population 100 000) was launched in the 1970s. The underground train, the metro, whose first line was brought in operation in 1974, was intended to serve these new towns.

In the meantime the decay of the inner city became indisputable. The number of flats declined. Demographic changes reduced the average

size of families and the population aged. The opening of the underground enabled a pedestrian zone (Figure 5) to be created in the CBD. The rehabilitation of the most attractive streets and of the Old Town Square in the 1980s improved the physical appearance of houses (Figure 6), but most of the buildings suffered from insufficient maintenance. Crucial financial resources were – in conformity with the Master Plan – channelled to building the South-west Town for 80 000 inhabitants and to expanding the underground system. Despite extensive building the housing shortage gave rise to a black market. Leases to state apartments were illegally 'sold'. Soon after the November 1989 revolution a decision was made to stop building prefabricated blocks of flats. The reintroducing of a housing market should bring more effective utilization of the housing stock, though renova-

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**Figure 6.** Rehabilitation of the mediaeval houses in the Old Town Square.

tion of vacant houses in the centre will offer the largest potential increase in the number of flats.

### *Work, transport and recreation*

Three-quarters of all jobs are concentrated in the inner city. That is why tens of thousands of people commute daily between the outer parts of the city and the centre. Over one-half of those employed spend more than 30 minutes commuting from home to work. The average Prague citizen loses 9–11 hours a week in this way.<sup>9</sup> According to a sociological opinion poll, people use public transport in 61% of cases, 31% of journeys are made on foot and for only 8% of journeys are individual means of transport used.<sup>10</sup>

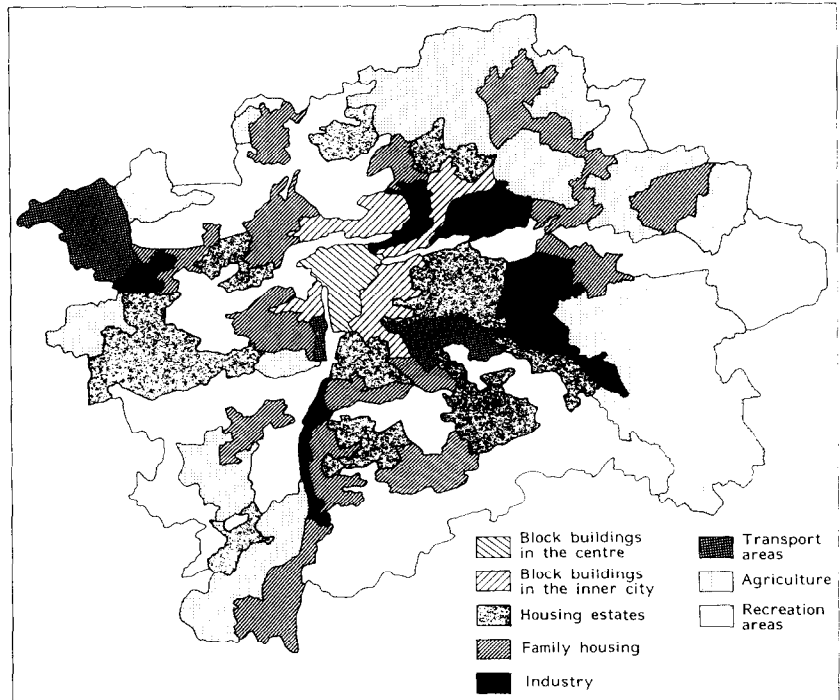
The public transport network consists first of all of three lines of newly constructed underground, and of trams and buses. The underground is a modern and fast means of transport

which is independent of surface traffic. It connects the busiest places in the centre, including four important railway stations and the large housing estates on the edge of Prague. Tram lines cover the rest of the inner city, where the underground has not yet been introduced. Buses provide connections between suburbs and the underground terminals. Each of these three subsystems transports an equal number of passengers (400–500 million in a year).

Prague is a traditional industrial centre; machine industry is its leading sector. Industry (including building industry) employs 36% of the whole labour force. Industrial enterprises founded in the first half of the 19th century on the edge of the city have remained important until now. However, their location in attractive central positions, out of date technology and equipment, and the environmental pollution they produce in the

<sup>9</sup>Jana Mášková and Milan Turba, 'Vývoj obyvatelstva na území Prahy v závislosti na bytové výstavbě (The development of Prague population in dependence on housing policy), in *Nové tendence ve vývoji osídlení Československa v posledních patnácti letech a výhled jejich dalšího vývoje* (New tendencies in the development of Czechoslovak population in the last fifteen years and its next future), VÚVA, Prague, 1986.

<sup>10</sup>*Generel pěšího a cyklistického provozu* (The plan of pedestrian and cycling paths), ÚHA, Prague, 1989.



**Figure 7.** Ecological zones in Prague (1989).

inner city are not favourable to their survival. Most industry, however, is located in industrial zones which were built under socialism. Fortunately, this is located predominantly on the eastern edge of Prague (Figure 7) and does not cause severe pollution in the city as the prevailing winds blow from the west.

Despite the fact that the city on whole has sufficient recreation areas (they cover 17% of Prague), some parts suffer from lack of green space. A great many Prague citizens compensate for this 'green shortage' by having a second house outside the city. This process had started soon after the World War I, but was accelerated especially after 1950. Low prices of land and building materials led to the utilization of the mostly less productive areas surrounding Prague for the construction of small recreational cottages. Second houses have gradually become the prevailing form of accommodation for short stays out of the city at weekends.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Ecological problems*

The rapid industrial and population development of the city since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, on the one hand and the post-war domination

of the Communist regime, which neglected the environment, on the other, have been an unlucky combination for the appearance of Prague. Close to the historical monuments admired by visitors from the whole world stand factories more than a century old, right near the centre. The picturesque panorama of the city from the Hradčany hill (Figure 1) sinks in a yellow smog on calm winter days. Thousands of visitors come to Prague every day on the main highway of the country, which cuts through Wenceslas Square, the very heart of Prague. The silver line of the Vltava River becomes a heavily polluted stream as it leaves the city, the black heritage of the Communist era.

As far as atmospheric pollution – the most important contemporary ecological problem – is concerned sulphur dioxide is mainly responsible (about 50%). The safe daily limit ( $150 \text{ g/m}^3$ ) is very often exceeded, especially in the central and lower parts located along the river. In times of longer inversion the pollution may be as high as  $3000 \text{ g/m}^3$ .<sup>12</sup> This is caused mostly by the smoke from local heating systems which are predominantly based on brown coal with a high percentage of sulphur (the share of natural gas

<sup>11</sup>Václav Gardavský, 'Recreational hinterland of a city', *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Geographica*, No 1, 1969, Prague, pp 3–29.

<sup>12</sup>*Ekologický projekt města* (The ecological project of the city), UHA, Prague, 1989.

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and electrical heating is low), and by the position of the central part of the city in a relatively closed basin.

Car traffic contributes only about 10% air pollution, mostly with nitrogen and carbon oxides. This share does not seem to be very significant; however, this type of pollutant is released at ground level and in some areas it is higher than pollution from stationary sources. The later start of motorization, high petrol prices and a well functioning public transport system have reduced the number of cars in the city, but the non-existence of ring roads and the poor average condition of cars (very few have catalysers) make the situation worse. The built form of the city means that building new communication routes will be costly, so an increase in the share of pollution coming from the car traffic is expected. Probably around the year 2000 – when pollution from stationary sources will be reduced due to a decrease in coal for local heating – the pollution from car traffic will dominate and Prague will become in this respect like other big cities.

Water pollution is the consequence both of the insufficient capacity of the sewage system and of the low quality of the drainage system. Contaminated underground water is less and less utilizable for household supply. Drinking water is delivered from long-distance sources (70%) and from the River Vltava (30%).<sup>13</sup> Drinking water is likely to run short in the near future (in the last decade alone consumption has risen by 20%). This can be solved in two ways: by intensifying the use of existing sources and by making the distribution system more effective. The losses of water from the Prague water supply system are as high as 30–35%, because of out of date facilities. At least one-quarter of all drinking water is consumed by industry, transport and services for technological purposes. At the same time, the drinking water does not meet the required health standards.

## *Current problems in the city administration*

Immediately after November 1989 long debates began about the adminis-

trative organization of the city. The three-level system was viewed as unsuitable. Generally, the individual city parts tend to claim more independence and desire to be self-governing. The Prague Council of Cities and Municipalities (a non-government organization) tried to divide the city into municipalities that would be independent in terms of administration, taxes and prosperity. Prague all of a sudden became an even more attractive city, as it started to shake off the bitter legacy of the decades after 1948 and reintroduce 'all the missing features of the capitalist urban economy'.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the strongest separatist voice came from Malá Strana, an attractive area of the historical core.

Administrative reform based on the separation of state administration and self-government, the tradition of the inter-war model of Greater Prague as a unified municipality of all inhabitants, and – last but not least – strong pressure from the government of the Czech republic, led to the preservation of the city as one unit. The Capital City of Prague Act – approved in October 1990 by the Czech National Council – temporarily solved the problem. The present two-level city administration is based on a territorial division into 56 units, unequal in size and significance. While in the first article of the Prague Act, Prague is defined as a municipality – and the activity of the Town Hall is therefore delimited by the Local Government Act – the more detailed position of the city districts is not specified.

The city districts have their own budgets, but they are only partly allowed to control their own resources. Ninety per cent of the income of city districts in 1991 came from government incomes and subsidies. The ratio between the sum of local budgets and the City Hall budget (29:71) shows clearly where power is concentrated. Not surprisingly – in conditions of such a strong centralization – voices of local representatives are loud; they speak about the 'strong but empty hands of the Town Hall'. The relationship between the city districts and the central Prague administration should soon be resolved by

<sup>13</sup>Ctibor Rybár, *Co je co v Praze* (Key facts about Prague), Pressfoto, Prague, 1989.

<sup>14</sup>Jan Kára, *Prague: The City Growth and its Administration*, The Institute of Geography, Prague, 1991.



the 'Charter of the Capital City of Prague'.

### *The economic reform and city transformation*

The negative features of the homogeneous social-economic environment of the past forty years are clearly visible in the current face of Prague. The equal price levels in both attractive and remote parts of the city, and non-effective use of buildings and land, have created many problems. A high proportion of buildings in the centre are used as warehouses or are even empty. Economic reform has successively brought in the free market conditions under which the population, and public and private firms, must learn to live. Local authorities no longer decide how to utilize non-residential premises. Legal protection against eviction is only guaranteed for social services, health care etc.

One of the first reforms was in land and property ownership. The previous owners, or their heirs, have been given back property confiscated by the Communists in the period after 1948. The restitution process affects 80% of houses in the inner city. State property which is not involved in the restitution process is being sold into private hands. Between January and August 1991 more than 1100 shops, restaurants and smaller enterprises found new owners in this way. The extreme differences between the price paid in the auctions for one square metre in the centre and the outskirts (50:1)<sup>15</sup> show both the value of a central location and the absurdity of the equal prices of land or rents under the socialist system.

In spite of the fact that liberalization has started in many fields – and also in the land market – it is necessary to temporarily regulate the rent level in non-residential premises, and in flats. Local governments may place a maximum on the rents of non-residential premises either by area or according to the location of individual places; in this way they regulate the evolution of the contemporary service and shopping network. However, in the centre of Prague this type of regulation has

not been introduced and rents have increased sharply by up to 50 times their 1989 level. Not only non-effective enterprises and warehouses are pushed out but also basic service facilities as well. Highly specialized luxury shops, travel bureaux and consultancies are replacing them. The rents paid by foreign companies are set purely by market laws and amount to up to 70 DM per square metre monthly (ie more than in Vienna).

Housing is the hot problem of contemporary politics. For the 70% of Prague citizens who live in state owned flats, the ending of the state subsidies and the threefold increase in rents is a serious matter. In housing policy the inertia of the former system fought with requirements of a market economy. Since rents were equal a high percentage of people with low incomes lived in the most attractive places. The federal government has set out a sequence of rent increases and has tried to coordinate this process with local governments to satisfy both municipal and humanitarian interests and the basic philosophy of economic reform.

### *The future of the city*

The sharp increase in newly established private businesses and joint ventures will offer a good basis for local economic development. Significant changes in the structure of city are visible. The decay of traditional industry has been followed by a concentration of activity in trade, services and tourist business. The large increase in the number of visitors is influencing the development of tourist facilities, evidenced first of all in the building of new hotels and private accommodation. The interest of foreign companies is seen not only by foreign banks' local offices but by concrete investments in building. For instance, The World Trade Centre is to be built on an area of 37 hectares close to the city centre. International conferences, various fairs and other events point to future integration with Europe. The increase in international contact has been accompanied by an increase in the number of air and railway connections (the first Eurocity

<sup>15</sup>Jan Kára and Luděk Sýkora, 'Kolik zaplatíme v aukcích? (How much shall we pay in the auctions?)', *Hospodářské noviny*, No 38, February 1991.

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Express started to operate between Prague and Vienna in spring 1991) and by a high press to telephone network (the expansion of its capacity by digitization is being prepared for in the near future). Telefax, computers and other media have become the usual equipment of an ordinary office.

All these changes bring Prague more into line with other developed European cities. Prague is once again at a historical crux. After the political

change in November 1989 radical economic reform was instituted to bring in a market economy. The first reform steps created the necessary conditions for the development of private activity and the more effective utilization of land and houses. The newly established local authorities have learned – after forty years of totalitarianism – how to play their roles and create a real self-governing body.