

Back to Europe? – Czechia and its European integration after 1989

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Together with another seven central and east European countries as well as Malta and Cyprus, the Czech Republic joined the EU on May 1, 2004. Five years later, there should be reason enough to celebrate: two decades ago, the communist regime in what was then Czechoslovakia was ousted, giving the country a chance to turn to Europe and the West once again. But the one-time euphoria for the West has blown away, and Europe's attractiveness has paled for many Czechs.

From the same year 2004 onwards, Czech eurosceptics repeatedly hit the headlines and put a strain on the integration process. Czechia's president, Václav Klaus, refuses to this day to put his signature to the treaty of Lisbon and thus bring its ratification process to a conclusion. Similarly fraught with difficulty, the country's presidency of the European Council in the first half of 2009 was further overshadowed by the overthrow of Prime Minister Topolánek in March. Indeed, Czechia is regarded as a feisty EU partner.

But what are the causes of our eastern neighbour's apparently deeply-rooted scepticism towards the EU? After the disintegration of Soviet rule in 1989, Czechoslovakia had been pro-European at first. It wanted to join the EU, and this wish was well-founded.

There were cultural as well as idealistic reasons: even under communist rule, the Czechs always thought of themselves as central Europeans and avowed their European roots. People wanted to get away from the Russians and move towards Europe or even the United States. Robert Schuster reminds us that Prague was the capital of the Holy Roman Empire in the time of Charles IV, and that Bohemia and Moravia formed a middle-European centre of culture and industry under the Habsburgs. Perceiving themselves as Europeans, people wanted to abolish their artificial borders at long last. And there were political reasons, too: after 1989, the reformers wanted to democratize the country. Moreover, they were looking towards the West where the EU was regarded as an anchor for the country's stabilization. Lastly, there were economic reasons: it was hoped that the economy would benefit from the accession to the EU, and that a sound market-economy system could be set up. When conflicts with the Slovakian part of the country arose over the transformation of the economy, Czechia and Slovakia peacefully separated in 1992. From then on, the Czechs worked even harder at joining the EU and NATO. However, many of them only gradually became aware that changing the system and integrating with the West called for sacrifices and might take longer than expected.

After the division of Czechoslovakia, Czechia and the EU signed a new association agreement which, coming into force at the beginning of 1995, provided for accession to the EU in 2004. But the association process proved lengthy, threatening the country with a loss of economic competences while the economy was booming. Thus, the Czechs praised the economic advantages of accession while they complained about the overbearing attitude of Brussels in questions of their national identity.

The last-named argument is particularly easy to follow because Czechia had to translate all parts of the *aquis communautaire* into national law. The Czechs are still conscious of previous occasions when the country lost its sovereignty: under the Habsburg monarchy there was no question of Czechia being independent, the German occupation was traumatic, and the injuries of the Soviet era have not yet healed by a long shot. Being a small country, Czechia is afraid of 'going under' in a large organization.

Even in his time as prime minister, Václav Klaus emphasized that the country had not escaped the control of Moscow's bureaucracy merely to 'replace it by a more civilized Brussels version'. Apparently, he was articulating the fears that exercised many Czechs, enhanced by a lack of adequate information. The impact of the future president's words was great, while most positive comments on the EU project went unheard.

Another cause for concern was the precarious relationship with Germany, a neighbour that swiftly became the country's most important trading partner and appeared to be threatening to take over numerous Czech enterprises. In a nation of eleven million souls, fear of a Germany that had been strengthened by its reunification and numbered 80 million people may well have played a part.

Thus it happened that the negotiations about accession were dominated not by common cultural roots but by hard national interests. Among the population, too, the attractiveness of joining the EU was fading quickly. Politicians described the process as a demeaning procedure involving many tests and the sacrifice of sovereign national competences. There was even talk of 'dictates from Brussels'.

Today, Czechia is part of the Union, and the enlargement process is generally seen as a 'success of unglamorous work of epoch-making significance'. The Czechs do recognize that the consequences of the process initiated an economic boom in their country. In political terms, however, the small country and its representatives find it hard to make their own input. Initiatives and ideas for the intra-European dialogue need time to grow.

As far as the debate about the EU constitution is concerned, opinions diverge widely within Czechia, as evidenced by the attitudes of the country's two best-known representatives: president Václav Klaus emphatically thinks that the nation state is the unit on which all international relations should be based, and he regards the growing depth of the EU process as a threat to Czechia's sovereignty. His predecessor, Václav Havel, demands that the Union be given a federal structure that emphasizes common values and promotes a European civil society, not least to lay the ghost of nationalism. This split is reflected in Czechia's party landscape: while eurosceptic parties like the ODS and the KSČM argue for the 'nation-state' line, others, including the ČSSD, the KDU-ČSL, and the Greens endorse sharing sovereignty on a supranational foundation and fight for the 'national-federative' side. Although the Prague government has recently declared its intention to accede to the treaty of Lisbon, the head of state keeps rejecting the document and refuses to sign it. Does Mr Klaus want to exclude his country from further integration with the EU?

When Czechia took over the presidency of the Council, it faced the task of presenting its own visions and proving itself capable of furnishing the Union with substantial impulses. Anxious to meet Europe's expectations, the country was all the more sorely disappointed when the government was overthrown shortly before a series of crucial EU summits and only a few days before Barack Obama's visit to Prague. Its management of the presidency, which had been successful so far, was shattered to bits although the players that were responsible refused to see it that way. While Mr Klaus talked the matter down, saying that the Council presidency was nothing more than a formal thing in the smaller states of the Union, EU members began to regard what was happening in the small country with growing displeasure.

In contrast to their leading politicians, Czechia's citizens called the incident 'disastrous' and 'embarrassing', and a growing number of them began to reject the incessant blockading of European processes by certain leaders in Prague. To be sure, the Topolánek government handled the European question quite successfully in the first few months, and his successor, Mr Fischer, did very well, too. But the overthrow of the government at this particular time gave rise to the question of how mature the leaders in Prague were in matters of European policy and/or how seriously they took the EU in the first place.

Czechia's euphoria of 1989 is history now. It was followed by disappointments, doubts, and anxieties, particularly for the loss of the country's national identity. However, instead of enlightening the Czechs about the price and the advantages of EU membership, the president as well as certain parts of the ODS kept criticizing Europe vehemently. And yet a majority of Czechia's citizens welcome the integration process today, appreciating the

sense of responsibility shown during the Council presidency and knowing that economic cooperation is as advantageous as the freedom to travel.

How Czechia's elite is going to take advantage of its opportunities within the Union remains to be seen. There are many areas for engagement: first, it is important for the country to present ideas and initiatives of its own at the EU level instead of merely reacting to proposals made by others. That it is able to do so became evident during its Council presidency. Second, Czechia should be seeking partners for specific issues, fellow stakeholders for identifying key targets for the future, instead of expending all its energy on policy debates. Third, it is essential to begin a forward-looking exchange with its neighbours, Germany, Austria, and Slovakia, to solicit support for Czechia's own ideas at the EU level. Fourth, particular attention should be paid to stabilizing the domestic situation in Czechia so that it no longer obstructs the political process. Fifth, reports about the EU should be more detailed and objective in the future. And sixth, the reputation acquired by the country under Václav Havel of being a mouthpiece of human rights deserves being revived and cultivated.

If Czechia wishes to be regarded within in the Community as a constructive and reliable partner, its politicians should take advantage of the opportunities that are available so that the Czechs can at last fulfil their wish and come back to Europe.

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