



Czech Euroscepticism

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In this paper I would like to stress the importance of history, or to be more precise, the interpretation of history. In order to understand the general direction of Czech foreign policy within the EU one needs to review the deeply seated interpretations of history (traumas, fears and hopes) accepted (“habitualized”) by the Czech elites and public. The way how the Czechs imagine their own past (and the past of Europe), how they see their position vis-a-vis “the Others” and their role in Europe serves as important cognitive and ideational background of contemporary policies of the Czech state.

Thus, while most researchers usually overestimate the role of individuals and individual political parties, I tend to treat them more as vehicles of the above mentioned traumas, fears and hopes. In line with a constructivist approach to social sciences, I assume that the formulation of priorities and policies (by individuals and by political parties) consciously and unconsciously builds upon (and reinvigorates) the images and interpretations deeply embedded in Czech national identity (Czech national “self-image”).

My contribution is an example of a single case study. I have no ambition to compare the Czech case with other new member countries. Thus, the processes and lines of thought and behaviour may but also may not be common to all new member states. The goal of this paper is limited: my aim is to shed some light on the general trails of Czech attitude towards the EU. While the manifestations of contemporary Czech priorities and policies within the EU are well known to the interested observer (who followed the CZ PRES, the speeches and texts of Klaus and Havel), I would like to focus on the historical context of these ideas and positions.

Czech trauma and the stereotype of treacherous powers

The modern Czech nation formed in opposition to “the powerful”. Since the 17th century the Czech lands have been an integral part of Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) Empire. The so called “revival” of the modern Czech nation took place in opposition to this “powerful Other”: the Empire as such and the German element generally.

The sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis “the powers” was typical for the interwar period and the trauma definitely deepened after the Munich crisis in 1938. The Munich agreement (“Munich betrayal”) was univocally interpreted by the Czechoslovak elites and by the public as “betrayal” from the (West-)European allies and this feeling represents a key *modus operandi* of the Czechs towards “the powers” until today. This “Munich syndrome” – i.e. largely negative expectations regarding the intentions and “trustworthiness” of the (not only) Western powers has been well alive during the communist era and survived largely intact until today in the Czech national memory and mythmaking. The phrase “About us, without us” has a strong mobilizing potential and is being constantly (mis)used by politicians of various colour who want to portray the outside powers as treacherous and untrustworthy. While the Czechs believe it may be useful to ally with the powers (for example establish special relationship with the US) in order to check perceived security threat from another power (for example Russia), there is always certain level of mistrust on the Czech side.

The mistrust towards the “true intentions of the powerful” (deeply embedded in the Czech mythology, fairytales or popular rhymes) translates into everyday foreign policy decision-making. Importantly, any new historical event (such as the recent “Prague agreement” between the US and Russia over nuclear disarmament) tends to be perceived by these “cognitive lenses”. Moreover, new actors who have hardly ever in reality “betrayed” the Czechs (the USA, the EU) are subject to the very same stereotype enshrined in the “Munich syndrome”. For its part, the EU is not immune to these stereotypical interpretations and expectations. It may be perceived by some sections of the Czech society either as a club of potentially treacherous powers (France, UK or Germany) or as (just another) new “power centre” (the Brussels) where things are decided “about us, without us”.

Czech exceptionalism and a mission to reform Europe

If we want to grasp the context of the Czech Euroscepticism, we should also take into account another aspect of Czechs’ “self-interpretation”: the belief in progress and Czech exceptionalism. The Czech national revival has been inspired by the ideas of enlightenment. Reason and science were seen as forces emancipating humans from dogmas and from the “enslavement” of the clergy and the establishment (i.e. “the powerful”). The Czech nation often perceives itself as a pioneer in reform processes with far-reaching (European / global) importance. This notion of Czech exceptionality can be traced back to the Husite movement (or the interpretation of thereof). According to the accepted narrative, the (social) reforms

promoted by Hus and his followers were ahead of his time and heralded progressive efforts of other European reformers (Luther) and enlighteners. But during his life, the progressive ideas of Jan Hus were not understood and recognized by the outside world. Jan Hus repressed and then betrayed by “the powerful” (the Church) and burnt at stake in 1415 in Constance where he tried to explain his ideas. The Czech lands have been punished with crusades.

The idea of the Czech nation as an embodiment of enlightenment, humanism and reformation flourished in the interwar Czechoslovakia; these ideals were reinterpreted and accepted even during the communist era and they represent a cognitive background of Czech society until today. At the same time, the notion of “Czech exceptionalism” loomed underneath: the idea that the small Czech nation can (and should) offer the solution to the ills of Europe and the world. One can argue that even the ambitious reform process known as the Prague Spring (introducing socialism with a “human face”) is just another instantiation of this underlying symbolic logic and self-interpretation.

After the Velvet revolution in 1989 Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic found itself in a position of student, catching up on Europe and adopting Western prescriptions and models. But even at that time the notion of some specific Czech contribution or asset (for the outside world) has been alive. Take for example the President Havel who accepted the role of a tough “mentor” (or moralist) in relation to the West. With regard to the transition to democracy and market economy, the Czech Republic often saw herself as a “top of the class” among the post-communist countries.

Before the entrance into the EU the Czech society was well aware of its own shortcomings and largely welcomed “the Western” solutions. The adoption of the *acquis communautaire* into the Czech legal system was quite unproblematic. But in the course of time the Czech Republic gradually flipped the role it was playing. The former “student” and “the one who returns (to Europe)” turned into teacher, mentor or even preacher. As I have already mentioned, the shift in a role was neither sudden nor unforeseen given the role the Czech nation believes to play in Europe. Well ahead the EU entry Václav Klaus warned against Czech sovereignty being dissolved in the EU like sugar in a cup of coffee. Importantly, he also urged the Czechs to be active in the EU.

I treat the so called Czech Euroscepticism (embodied by people like Klaus) as just another reincarnation of Czech exceptionalism, reformatory zeal, “moralizing dissidence” and preachiness. To be sure, the substance of Havel’s visions differs sharply from the arguments made by Klaus and other Eurosceptics. Nevertheless, the underlying rationale and the

conviction that the Czech Republic is entitled (or even obliged) to play a role of a “reformer of European order” remains.

This new form of “moralizing dissidence” can be traced not only in the controversial (“heretical”) speeches of President Klaus, but also in the rather ambitious political priorities of the Czech EU presidency and in the style and rhetoric of Czech political representatives who were keen to “leave a footprint” and offer a solution to what they perceive were the most serious ills of the EU.

There is a strong feeling among the top decision-makers that some kind of (unique) Czech historical experience (with transition to liberal market economy, democratisation, Russian imperialism etc.) puts the Czech Republic in superior position and allows it to play the role of a teacher (preacher).

Two aspects of Czech teaching / preaching towards the EU are worth mentioning. Firstly, Czech “EU-dissidents” and “EU-reformers” like Václav Klaus strongly believe that their arguments are based on “science and realism”. Czech Eurosceptics present their solutions as (the only) rational and logical way to arrange Europe. They refuse the label “Eurosceptics” in favour of “Eurorealists”. Czech “Eurorealists” regularly accuse their opponents (“Eurofiles”) of unwarranted idealism and/or of dogmatism. At the same time, both old (historical) and new (contemporary) Czech “reformers of the European order” are convinced that History is on their side.

Secondly, Czechs (both the elites and the general public) are loyal to the legacy of Enlightenment, but at the same time they are no progressive visionaries. “Reforms” of the European order promoted by Czech elites are conservative in their nature. The Hussite movement was in fact an example of a “conservative revolution” advocating a return to “fundamentals” - “unspoiled roots” (of Christianity). In their contemporary reincarnation, Czech “reformers” promote a return to the “unspoiled roots” of European integration – to the original idea of “four freedoms”. In addition, the visions of Václav Klaus show a touch of utopia when he indicates his belief in the possibility of spontaneous, harmonious, friendly, rational and fruitful cooperation among sovereign nation states. As guardians of (what they see as) the original ideals of the European integration, the Czech Eurosceptics perceive themselves as the only true Europeans.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I wanted to stress that when talking about the Czech Euroscepticism, we should keep in mind the sources of this policy, embedded deeply in the Czech identity – the Czech interpretation of “the Others” and of themselves (their position and role within broader international environment). The historical interpretations and stereotypes about the “Others” (about the powers) tend to reinvigorate. These stereotypes are “social structures” living their own life and serving as “cognitive frameworks” shaping the everyday behaviour of the Czech Republic in the EU.

In particular I highlighted two themes (stereotypes) in Czech nation’s “self-interpretation” as the main culprits of what we describe as “Czech Euroscepticism”. The first one was the notion of vulnerability and the stereotype of potentially treacherous powers. The second one was the notion of exceptionality. In line with the traditional “self-image”, the Czechs gradually abandoned the role of students and turned into teachers, or, to be more precise, into self-appointed “preachers” to the EU. Following their historical tradition of “reform movement” and building upon the conviction about Czech exceptionalism, progressivism and rationalism, the Czech Republic started to “offer” solutions to the EU.