



## Reinvention of Europe Project

### The Czech conundrum – post-communist, Central European and small

By Petr Drulak

In recent years the Czech Republic has gained a reputation as a reluctant European. It waited until the last moment before ratifying the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, did not join last year's Euro Plus Pact, and stayed away from the EU fiscal compact. This seems puzzling. Although not alone in dragging their feet or staying away from some European projects, this is unusual for relatively poor new members who view the EU as guarantor of democracy and prosperity.

Just as it fired the euro-enthusiasm of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy, material benefit helps explain the interest of new EU members in joining the euro zone. It also motivates the Czech Republic, although it is often overruled by other factors. Three categorisations are particularly useful for explaining Czech calculations: it can be seen as small, post-communist and Central European. Each accounts for some political and societal tendencies that provide an insight into Czech behaviour within the EU.

#### One reluctant yes and two no's

The Czech Republic was the last EU member to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. Its then government, including both moderate eurosceptics and supporters of the EU, was more or less happy with it and, unlike the UK or Poland, did not demand any opt-outs. Public opinion was either indifferent to or mildly supportive. The greatest ratification challenge was not from a referendum, the parliament (it gave the Treaty solid backing), or the Constitutional Court (it found no fault). Instead, the greatest challenge came from President Václav Klaus.

President Klaus began campaigning against the earlier Constitutional Treaty, seeing it as a blueprint for a European 'super state' usurping of national sovereignty, then continued campaigning against the Lisbon Treaty. His position was not shared by other political actors, nor by public opinion, and he became isolated. He broke out of this isolation in late 2009, by arguing that the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights could entitle Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1945 to reclaim property. Although not supported by any legal authority this argument won significant popularity. The Czech government was forced to ask the European Council for an opt-out from the Charter as a condition for ratifying the Treaty.

While the Czech ratification was necessary for the legal validity of the Lisbon Treaty, Czech participation is not decisive for the future of the Euro Plus Pact or the fiscal compact. The neoliberal

Czech government approves of much in both (including fiscal austerity), but it also emphasises that the Czech Republic does not want to join the eurozone (the primary target of these measures) any time soon. On the contrary, it suggests a referendum on joining, despite the Czech Republic committing to it in the EU Accession Treaty.

The government also claimed that the Euro Plus Pact could transfer taxation competency to the EU level (although this would be resisted by several other signatories). The prime minister also argued that the fiscal compact's provisions on state debt are too soft, and that the President would not ratify it anyway. Paradoxically, the neoliberal government's decision not to join the neoliberal compact was criticised by both the Social Democrat opposition and members of a junior coalition partner. The government may reconsider its abstention, especially as Václav Klaus' presidential term ends next year.

## Being post-communist

Very few Czech officials would agree with labelling the country as post-communist, and most believe they have overcome any communist legacy. However this is only partly true. For example, the ideologies of the main political parties come from various post-communist peculiarities. Three of these are especially important for Czech perceptions of the EU.

Firstly, faith in free markets and the ideology neoliberalism have taken deep roots in the Czech Republic, filling in the ideological vacuum which arose after communism was discredited. The global triumph of neoliberalism in the 1990s was particularly strong in post-communist countries. In the Czech Republic it co-opted many intellectuals. In politics it was represented most strongly by the Civic Democratic Party of Václav Klaus, which remains the strongest political party on the right wing of Czech politics. This party has traditionally close links to the British Conservatives, and both parties sit in the same European Parliament faction after splitting from the European People's Party.

The Czech neoliberal perspective on the EU is ambiguous. Although the current neoliberal government understands the Union in terms of the single market and defines its goals as keeping and deepening the single market, the EU also has a tradition of regulation, market interference and some redistribution.

Moreover, the EU has developed important political competencies. Czech right-wingers compare European integration with central planning and warn against Brussels encroaching on the Czech Republic's individual liberty. The current financial and economic crisis is blamed on flaws in the institutional design of the common currency, and state interference in markets.

Secondly, Czech politics has a dissident tradition, portraying politics as a clash between good and evil, following the well-established discursive model of the clash between dissidents and the communist regime. In this dissident perspective, the EU is seen as too pragmatic, materially oriented and without a moral spine. Václav Havel, pro-European though he was, saw more common ground with George W. Bush than with anyone in Brussels. This pro-European but critical tradition remains with small, centrist or right-centrist parties and has also influenced journalists and intellectuals.

Finally, the communist experience still instils a distrust towards left-wing policies in the Czech Republic. Any political force defending solidarity, equality, trade unions, and political control over markets runs the risk of being attacked as neo-communist: an important challenge to social democrats. In response, the Czech Social Democrat Party has not based its identity on any particularly leftist positions, instead deriving legitimacy from being unambiguously pro-European while cultivating contacts with Western European centre-left parties. This European component differentiates it from neoliberals who see the EU as too socialist, and unreformed communists who see it as too capitalist.

This unambiguous pro-EU stance was important during the country's accession to the Union, but prevented the Czech Social Democrats from developing a more critical vision of European integration. In consequence the EU-friendly left wing of Czech politics has found it difficult intellectually to engage with the arguments of the more eurosceptic neoliberals.

### Being in Central Europe

The 'Central Europe' label is much less contested than 'post-communist', but not uncontroversial. In the 1990s it was warmly welcomed by Czechs keen to distinguish themselves from (allegedly less developed) Eastern Europeans. However it also distinguished them from being from Western Europe, which represented what they aspired to. EU accession ameliorated most of these fears, and the current Central European condition suggests a geopolitics whose principal components are the Russia, Germany and the US.

The Czech image of Russia is tainted by both the Soviet past and current features, ranging from undemocratic practices to meddling in neighbours' domestic affairs and great power interests in Central Europe. Although rarely considered a direct threat, a significant part of right-leaning public opinion is afraid of Russia's possible future Westward expansion. The EU is often seen as a geopolitical shelter against this, and Prime Minister Topolánek argued in 2009 that 'no to Lisbon means yes to Moscow'. The same argument has been implicitly used by civil activists who organised a petition in favour of the fiscal compact. However, doubts remain that the EU is a credible shelter from Russian expansionism, thanks to weak institutions and attempts by larger members to establish cordial relations with Moscow. The perceived friendship between Germany and Russia is seen as particularly concerning, although Germany also plays its own important role in Czech mental geopolitics.

Germany is generally seen as a benevolent economic hegemon. Its market is vital for Czech exports; German investment has been essential for economic modernisation; and German politics has usually supported Czech ambitions in the EU (for example EU accession and the Czech presidency). Czech-German relations have successfully developed on many levels, ranging from local issues to top level politics. These positive aspects are generally acknowledged and appreciated across Czech political boundaries.

On the other hand, the memory of German abuses of Czechoslovakia remains an undercurrent in Czech thinking about Germany. This usually surfaces over Czech fears of property claims by Germans expelled in 1945, hence the wide resonance of President Klaus' arguments over the Lisbon Treaty.

This ambiguity over Czech perceptions of Germany leads to an ambiguity over perceptions of an EU where Germany holds such power.

The concerns about Russia's future trajectory and ambiguous feelings about Germany is the backdrop against which the image of the US is constructed. In the eyes of Czech Atlanticists the US embodies the virtues which the EU lacks: they have sufficient moral spine to fight for liberal values and contain hostile expansionism, backed up by the capabilities to do so. Moreover, unlike Russia or Germany, the US has never been a threat to Czechs or other Central Europeans, and is not expected to be one in the future. Atlanticists see the US as the Czech's main partner in high politics (including security and political values), whereas EU membership is purely about economic matters. The only perceived threat to Central Europe would be through a lack of American interest. This concern led to several Central European leaders (including Václav Havel and the Czech foreign and defence ministers) sending an open letter to President Obama in 2009, bemoaning the decline in American interest in Central Europe and in the American commitment to the global promotion of liberal values.

## Being small

The idea that the Czech Republic is small is contested. Czech officials prefer to see their country as medium-sized. However, a practical distinction between large and small countries relevant to EU politics puts the Czech Republic in with countries the size of Portugal and Greece, along with others that are even smaller.

Being small in the EU brings about two opposing tendencies. First, small countries are more heavily exposed to the European and international environment than the others. Larger portions of their GDP depend on international trade and investment, and their security depends on larger allies. In short, their dependence on others is greater than those others' dependence on them. Small countries then use European and international institutions to mitigate this asymmetrical interdependence. This helps explain why EU accession was supported by even eurosceptic elements of the Czech political elite.

Second, small countries have limited resources and fewer options that would allow them to influence anything beyond their borders. Unlike great powers, they can afford not to have a position on most international issues. For example, the Czech abstention from the fiscal compact has no effect upon anyone but the Czech Republic itself. Even a well defined position is unlikely to matter much. The first tendency makes small countries highly interested in international and European issues, keen to punch above their weight and look for niches to shape. The second tendency, though, deprives them of any real interest in those issues, leaving them to flow with the mainstream or use the pretence of deviation to score points at home.

Which of these drives prevails depends upon several factors, including the weight of the external threats the country believes itself to be facing, the political traditions involved and the political ideas which circulate in political discourse. Perhaps it is the absence of immediate threats that makes the second tendency so powerful in the Czech Republic. Few Czech political actors take the EU, and foreign policy, seriously, using the EU largely to score domestic political points. For example, abstaining from the fiscal compact is the price paid by the Czech government for good relations with

the president. The parties do not need to take the EU preferences of voters seriously, as the voters do not take them seriously themselves. While most supporters of the right-wing euro sceptic Civic Democratic Party support the EU, Social Democratic supporters are at best lukewarm about integration.

Finally, there is another essential tendency to consider. In small countries the market for political ideas is small and uncompetitive, but once ideas are established their longevity is considerable. The arguments levelled against further European integration are basically the same as those levelled against the Maastricht Treaty, with little consideration of changes in Europe or the world. Similarly, supporters of integration continue with arguments similar to those used in favour of accession. Such a limited market is more easily shaped by a clever political entrepreneur. Václav Klaus is a case in point. He sees the fight against European political integration as his mission, and he has defined the terms of the Czech debate about the EU through consistent application of his political skills.

## Conclusions

Czech reluctance over EU integration stands out among both the newer and the poorer member states. It comes from an idiosyncratic combination of factors related to the Czech Republic being post-communist, Central European and small. Czech post-communism gave rise to a domestic politics where prominent actors criticise the EU for not being free-market enough and failing to defend liberal values abroad. Meanwhile, pro-EU forces have not developed their own vision of the EU which they could promote and defend in public debate. The resulting ambiguity about the EU is deepened by the Czech Republic's specific interpretation of the Central European condition, involving anxiety over Russia, support for the US and uncertainty about Germany. Finally, the country's small size and the absence of immediate threats explain its lack of interest in anything beyond the Czech borders, the intellectual paucity of the political debate, and the disproportional influence of such political entrepreneurs as Václav Klaus.

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*March 2012*

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