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THE CZECH CONTRIBUTION

ESSAYS

Abstract

This essay is about the political, economic and social transformation of the Czech society that followed the fall of the Communist regime.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, The Czech Republic, Czechia, transformation

In sufficient time has passed since the memorable November Prague “Revolution of 1989” to allow for an adequate assessment of the development of the modern Czech state, as it is still not possible to say which events and political decisions had a crucial influence upon the life of Czech society. A period of thirty-five years is simply too short and so neither the mere chronicle of events, nor the memories of contemporaries can guide us. Only future generations will be able to judge the vicissitudes of these times and judge them in hindsight.

As some political decisions more than others have determined the direction of the new republic now increasingly referred to as Czechia, we may speculate about their impact. The collapse of the Czechoslovak totalitarian regime and the restoration of standard democracy after more than four decades was a part of the overall breakup of the Soviet empire in central Europe. Neighbouring countries, namely Poland and Hungary shared similar development unlike the liberated countries of the Balkans or Romania that had no organised internal opposition. The Communist rulers of Central Europe, abandoned by Moscow’s ruler Mikhail Gorbachev, came to an agreement with their dissidents on a peaceful transfer of power. In Czechia, the

members of the Charter 77 group around their uncrowned leader, the playwright Václav Havel, hailed the collapse of the regime as “The Velvet Revolution.”

They quickly formed a new government but were prevented from banning the Communist Party or dismissing Communist judges and high-ranking military personnel. The peaceful transformation of the regime was not the only reason. In a country, which relative to its size had the largest number of the communist party members in the world, for after the war, the Party took power in more or less free elections, it was not possible to eliminate them from every public post. A feeble attempt to placate non-Communists’ call for justice was made and an act was passed to ostracize the secret police collaborators. Nevertheless pardoning the perpetrators of political crimes had a somewhat negative impact on the emerging democracy. Justice has clearly not been served.

In Czechoslovakia, the last judicial murder was committed in 1960 and the crimes of the Stalinist period may have been from a purely legal point of view time-barred. Still, since 1969, the post-soviet occupation regime had imprisoned several hundred people, murdered a dozen, and some hundreds of thousands lost their jobs and many who refused to conform were exiled. It was only in 2011 that a right-wing government slightly compensated the undervalued pensions of the dissidents. The political compromise with the communists had an unpleasant aftermath, as it allowed the *nomenklatura* managers of large state companies to take advantage of their position and launch business on the free-market. To the outrage of most people, some of them became dizzyingly rich. Surprisingly, after twenty years, few people still minded as the rise of the oligarch Andrej Babiš clearly shows. A Slovak with murky Communist past, a likely informer, and a poor Czech speaker was elected a prime minister.

Unlike today’s old whiners, I consider the economic and, to some extent, also the political development of those years an undeniable success in the context of Czech history. The standard of living has risen sharply over the years and people now live longer. The average life expectancy has increased in 35 years by 9 years (76.2) for men and by 7 years (82.1) for women. However, the cultural and intellectual development of Czech society has followed the decline of the West. Although the nation has shaken off Communist stagnation and general malaise, and Czech society has become relatively content with the life in the democratic state, which is again part of the West, it has gradually lost its entrepreneurial spirit and cultural ambition.

I returned home from the exile in England almost immediately after the collapse of the regime in December 1989. As a diligent reader of the Czech dissident samizdat which along with the Polish equivalent of the uncensored publications was part of my research assignment at the Keston College in England, a so-called Sovietological Institute, where I worked in the 1970s and 1980s, I harboured no illusions about the centrally planned economy and the damage it wrought on Czech industry. Unlike the cultural and psychological distortions of life under tyranny, the economic devastation was visible at every turn. Dirty, grey facades of houses, falling plaster, broken pavements, the ubiquitous potholes, inhospitable, dingy and half-empty shops, the passageways and alleyways full of rubbish... Even the corridors of the newer apartment blocks emanated a strange musty smell. A thick smog rolled through the streets in wintertime, and when the Prague Vinohrady Theatre turned on the heating, the yellow sulphurous smoke prevented me from seeing the opposite side of the street from my flat. And those dingy, smoky pubs, or as they were called in my youth, third or fourth-class restaurants! Like an English tourist, I would stare incredulously at the cheap eateries or butcher's shops crowded with people standing in a greasy haze and stuffing themselves with pork knuckle or large chunks of hot meat. Consumption of vegetables was remarkably absent. I also had flashbacks of the smelly public toilets – symbolic of the declining level of civilisation. It was depressing to see prematurely aged women in their fifties in comparison with the elegant English middle-class ladies.

It seemed to me as if time stood still during my twenty-three years of absence. The general stagnation had affected every aspect of society's life. Bookshops offered classics and the suspect works of subservient writers. In the ghostly glow of the poorly lit streets, posters advertised the classic box office hits of my youth, such as Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, or Verdi's *Nabucco*. And, just as during the summer before my departure after the Soviet invasion in September 1968, both the trilling tenor of ageing Karel Gott, and the nerve-racking screech of the singer Helena Vondráčková, were rising from the radio.

Outdated industry operated based on technology long obsolete in the West, domestic financial capital was almost nil, and the business skills of managers ignorant of English and the market dynamics were poor. For them, the export market was a so-called Third World, and in most cases, it was based on barter. Often it was subservient to the political preferences of the Soviet rulers. Czechoslovakia was unique in that unlike the rest of the Soviet bloc, it nationalized every retail

enterprise, however small, like hairdressers, pubs, bookshops or flower shops, and thus killed every bit of private initiative. And yet it became soon evident that this could be quickly restored and flourish. However, what about the inefficient industry? A huge export-oriented economy would desperately strive for a return to the market-oriented economy and to compete with the West.

As a witness and supporter of the Thatcherite privatization with employee pre-emption rights and cheap shares in public owned utilities in a functioning state with the rule of the law, I could not imagine how a crazy level of corruption, the theft of funds (an opportunity of the century!), inflation and poverty could be prevented. How would Communist judges be able to distinguish between business failure and economic misconduct!? And how about the psychological dependence of the majority who were used to security, however meagre, offered by the Socialist welfare state? Will the Czechs find the courage to risk their small savings? And how could people without an entrepreneurial spirit endure the hardships of employment under the ruthlessly or crudely behaving nouveau-riche capitalists or rentiers who have lost the old money culture? Will the political representation ever be able to find the consensus so desperately needed for the restitution of stolen property and the privatization of state-owned companies? The end of regulated rents would bring hardship to many, the law of supply and demand would drastically increase the gap between luxurious locations and the periphery. Retired people and families with children would not be able to pay the market rents. Perhaps millions would lose their faith in capitalism. Would there be a reasonable way out of the stagnation economy of the Communist years?

It turned out that, in spite of the idealists of the 1968 Prague Spring who believed in the third way between socialism and capitalism, and of Havel's idea of "non-political politics," the newly formed government with the finance minister and future prime minister Václav Klaus managed successfully to unleash liberal reforms, free foreign trade, as well as establish floating currency and market prices. The political acceptance of the advent of capitalism was triggered by the sale, or rather the giving away, of state property under the name of 'voucher privatization' (*kuponová privatizace*). This was supposed to secure new shareholders of state-owned businesses in a cashless society. Czechs were delighted, as they were offered one voucher per person for 1,000 crowns to buy shares. The older or impatient people sometimes made a small fortune by selling immediately and usually got ten times the price they paid or more. Those waiting for increase in the value of their portfolio



were mostly disappointed. Most shares were bought up by smart entrepreneurs, who after reaching a critical share of the company, often as low as 25 percent, had a chance to embezzle the small shareholders and siphon off the capital. The law did not protect the minority shareholders, and the enemy takeover of a company usually led to bankruptcy. The new Czech word ‘tunnelling’ made a worldwide career.

People could not have suspected such a result and cheered the government because they considered this project to be a pathway to Western prosperity, which in a way it was. Then came the partial restitution of property. Surprisingly, the macroeconomic equilibrium was sustained. I remember the massive financial losses of some people who sold their houses and flats but distrusted the future value of the Czech currency. They would sell their newly acquired assets only for Deutschmarks or US Dollars. And even when they were losing as the crown steadily increased in value, they were holding onto their depreciating acquisition in the unshakeable belief that the foreign currency must eventually win over the Czech one. This led to a temporary paradise for black market money changers.

When shops and small businesses were offered for sale, an unheard-of opportunity for shysters was created as law enforcement was practically non-existent. As a private publisher, I won six court cases against fraudulent managers of state printing works, and not only did I not get a single penny back, but the fraudsters were not even punished. However, few people understood back then that reforming the judicial system as well as finding new judges, was a two-generation process,

Prague city (Old Town, Malá Strana, Hradčany and Strahov) seen from Vitkov Hill.
Photo: Franciszek Dąbrowski, 2019

while simply introducing the destructive invisible hand of the free market would ruthlessly eliminate incompetent entrepreneurs, and the prospective businesses would be replaced with new, and perhaps more adept management, either foreign owners or competent entrepreneurs. Those times were as wild as those of the Klondike gold rush. As a new successful publisher, I frequented one luxury wine bar where I met many new businessmen and often wondered at their fate. These former heads of state-owned companies, who even if they managed to acquire a good firm, like the Prague evening daily (*Večerní Praha*) for instance, and made a lot of money, either did not know how to run it or were unable to navigate the dizzyingly fast-changing market trends. For entirely unknown reasons, people stopped buying this evening paper. I also remember one businessman who was the first one to import several dozen tons of second-hand clothes from Germany and made millions. He bought a villa, a luxury car, and acquired a new wife. After about a year, however, there was a second-hand shop on every second corner, his shop was closed, and the wife disappeared.

Yet, true capitalists have mostly not emerged, except for the well-known billionaires, who in the wild maelstrom of privatisation managed – quite unhindered – to acquire public utilities, especially water, gas, coal, electricity, and then later after the accession (2004) agricultural businesses subsidised by the European Union (EU). If one still speaks today of how the industrial republic was ransacked back then, one must remember how antediluvian the technology of state run industry was. Without foreign capital for innovation, without experienced management and especially a distribution network abroad, production, and particularly export, could not have been saved. Fortunately, the West seized a great opportunity and invested massively in the Czech economy. We had better infrastructure than our post-Communist neighbours, a favourable geographical location, and an attractive capital city to boot. Thus, foreign investment raised the standard of living, though not for everyone. Pensioners, families with several children and single mothers were the main victims of the rapid transition. The birth rate decreased. Many young people left for the West. The freedom of enterprise is certainly not egalitarian, but the emergence of billionaires like the oligarchs in Russia should have been prevented. Fortunately, there are not many of them. For about ten years, the Czech Republic became the economically most successful country of Central Europe. Sadly, after this booming decade of entrepreneurship, the growing bureaucracy completely squandered the country's potential. The state administration became oversized,

even the smallest villages have established their own municipal offices, and there are half a million civil servants employed by the state (not including teachers and doctors). For some unfathomable reason, the number of police and firefighters has increased dramatically too, even though there has been no increase in crimes or fires. Not even the later social-democratic governments managed to reduce VAT on groceries, as they had solemnly promised many times before the elections, although such a measure would have been the most effective social policy. Yet the growth of small and medium-sized businesses is still vehemently hampered by the introduction of pointless bureaucratic controls and regulations, which partially originate in the EU. The formerly much poorer Slovaks, and Hungarians have virtually caught up with the Czech economy and Poland has achieved the highest GDP growth in Europe for years.

The first signs of economic difficulties emerged in 2009 as part of the global credit crisis. The general public (that was previously enthusiastic about the promise of reaching the Western standard of living,) was disappointed by the economic slump and the government's restrictive fiscal policy, and its tolerance of privatization corruption had run out. After it came to light that the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS – *Občanská demokratická strana*) had been financed in secret by dubious sponsors, people began to perceive politicians as businessmen with state assets, and the fragile party system lacking firm roots began gradually to disintegrate. While the biggest privatization scandal of the left-wing government – the sale of the North Bohemian mines – has not yet been resolved, the corruption scandals almost destroyed all of the right-wing parties within a decade, namely ODS and *Unie svobody* (The Union of Liberty). At the same time, the incoherent, non-programmatic, anti-corruption parties like *Věci veřejné* (Public Matters) or *Hnutí Ano* (“Yes” Movement) of the agrarian tycoon Andrej Babiš emerged, greatly damaging the political culture. Corruption is undoubtedly the biggest obstacle to economic development, as the ranking of countries by Transparency International's clearly illustrates. The persistent resistance of the citizens, transparent public administration (see e.g., the Czech highway-building fiasco), independent courts and uncorrupted judiciary can only prevent it. We will probably never achieve the level of honesty of northern Europe, but we are neither the East, nor Sicily. The trouble with anti-corruption parties that have eventually stopped large-scale corruption is that they have been profligate in other ways. Although we will never get rid of incompetent people trying to make a living out of politics, an

optimistic attitude and belief in democracy should not be discarded. Without often-absurd subsidies from the European Union, the level of corruption would become now quite tolerable.

Apart from the democratic and economic transformation of the state, a very thorny political problem turned out to be the coexistence of Czechs and Slovaks. The century-old struggle of Slovaks for independence was given an unprecedented opportunity. They had never had a chance even for limited autonomy under Hungarian rule, and after World War I, union with the Czechs seemed to them a pragmatic solution in a troubled Europe full of dictatorial predators, even though it meant subservience to Prague and an onslaught of second-rate Czech officials sent to Slovakia. It was the peaceful breakdown of the Soviet Union, as well as peace and democracy in the West, which guaranteed Slovaks a possibility of gaining independence, and the Czechs could not be an obstacle; after all, they had never succumbed to Serbian-like expansionism. Political haggling inevitably ensued, since the Slovak representation in the federal parliament was unable to clearly articulate their will of leaving the federation – perhaps because they feared backlash as most Slovaks were not in favour of the breakup. As a result, for three years Czech politicians were unnecessarily tormented by unreasonable Slovak fiscal demands, as the federal government practically lost its sovereignty over decisions made in Bratislava. After the separation of the two nations, unresolved problems how to divide state property and the payment of pensions persisted for some time, but relations between the two countries were soon settled and are among the most cordial.

The Czechs profited hugely from the division of the state by allowing Slovaks to study free of charge at Czech universities. One third of Slovak graduates do not return home after their studies to the great advantage of Czech society with a terminally low birth rate. That was made possible by language proximity and the fact that the Slovaks know Czech pretty well since their childhood by watching Czech cartoons and films without subtitles. Also, thanks to a larger Czech book market they are used to reading non-fiction books in Czech that not available in their mother tongue. The understanding of the Slovak language in Czechia on the other hand is being gradually lost.

After the collapse of the Communist regime, the life of the Catholic church was restored and as the church represented the only institution that has gained moral standing during the time of oppression, it was hoped that a religious revival had begun. The visit of the 'Polish' Pope John Paul II almost immediately upon the new dawn (April 1990) was

welcomed by a cheering multitude, and the Czechs seemed to have forgotten their historic animosity to the Catholic church. However, the past is unrelenting. The wave of new converts subsided after a few years and traditional anti-Catholic animosity returned. The vilification of priests looks like a Czech substitute for anti-Semitism. Consumerism, including sexual voluntarism, has spread and risen to the level of Western Europe. The decline in birth rates has also affected Catholics, though to a much lower degree than the rest of the population.

Upon my return from exile, I have been often asked by the journalists how I perceive this transformation of society, and whether the Czech Republic is finding itself at some kind of imaginary crossroads of history. It is difficult to speculate about future given the unexpected events such as the Russian aggression against Ukraine or the mass immigration of Muslims in the West. Assuming *ceteris paribus*, it is clear that after more than thirty years of democracy, opinion polls and sociological data show that we have become in most attitudes similar to our Western neighbours, particularly Austria and Germany. Naturally, we do not share their war complex, and the older generation, who remembers Communist ideological futurism, are sceptical of the EU's planning ideology. I would say that in comparison to the 1990s, most of our young people are quite happy with what they have (apart from a shortage of affordable housing). Half of them prolong their studies as long as possible, and are, like their counterparts in the West, studying useless humanities affected by progressivist ideology. Unlike their parents, a large proportion has no ambition to become entrepreneurs or to excel in their subjects. They are in no hurry to start a family (30% of young men under thirty-five live with their parents, usually with their divorced mother). Young people like to travel, and if they are not attracted by political non-profit organizations and activism, they will settle for a cosy job in the civil service. They take life easy and many are overweight. Not only is their lack of ambition and the wasted formative years a recipe for an unhappy life, but it is society that pays the price exacerbated by the emigration of the most able.

However, in comparison with other Central Europeans, more Czechs remain in their own country or return after a time of living abroad. The young generation is cosmopolitan, and whenever I mention exile, they seem confused, not understanding patriotism. They find it difficult to comprehend why I took the trouble to publish banned Czech writers in London in the original language to such a small émigré public. The cultural perceptions have changed dramatically. In the 1960s we had great writers like Škvorecký, Kundera, Hrabal, Havel, Klíma,

Holub, or Holan, but now after three decades you cannot find a single contemporary Czech writer worth mentioning. When freedom and democracy returned, the banned authors living in internal or external exile flooded the market with their books. For instance, during one year in 1990, I published nine titles that sold more than one million copies. Maybe the public consumed banned literary works out of curiosity, keen to be reminded of the struggle against Communism. However, a bygone era does not address contemporary life, and the flood of outdated literature perhaps dampened the appetite of artists for dealing with contemporary problems. Be it as it may, the dawn of liberated individual, even before the onset of the internet, atomised society and made reflection of the collective redundant. Nation is a spiritual entity, and has no future when its elites are no longer concerned about its moral well-being. Now we face a new phenomenon of declining reading ability as the lamentations of schoolteachers indicate. Children who do not read, think poorly and those who think poorly act badly. They spend too much time with their iPads and social networks. The art of the novel is declining and it seems that fictional representation of society has been replaced by political science.

The Czechs are very lucky that they are not dying out, as they successfully absorb a significant number of immigrants from related Slavic nations – Slovaks, Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, and to a small extent even Poles (17,730) and since the national liberation the population of Czechia has grown from about 9 to almost 11 million people.

However, the society has lost its intergenerational cohesion and national ethos, which like religion in the past, used to form and cement a community. Today, even in a crowded subway or in a railway compartment, people behave as if they were an island and verbally untouchable. Strangers do not speak to each other, and couples feel free to kiss each other in a crowded compartment as if they were completely isolated from other passengers. What a contrast to Warsaw where you can address anyone without embarrassment, beginning the conversation with a neutral comment about the weather, which could open the way to a more serious conversation and sometimes even friendship. In an atomised society lacking comradeship, social capital and politics collapse. The Czechs have belonged to Western civilization since the Great Schism (1054), but their merger with the contemporary West after 40 years of isolation was no return to the pre-war national democracy. Very few people realized that joining the integrationist European Union meant the loss of independence.

Brussels unelected mandarins are stifling the European economy with thousands of subsidies and regulations and recently have enacted a grandiose plan to reduce the standard of living of Europeans to mitigate global warming. Notwithstanding whether carbon dioxide emissions are the chief culprit of climate change, it is mind-boggling when you know that the whole of Europe accounts for only 6 per cent of global emissions and so has no impact on the world. Czechia, the most industrialised country in the Union, has been ordered to close down its coal and gas fired power stations by 2035, and since it cannot produce sufficient and inexpensive amounts of green electricity, the state will be forced to subsidise its energy sector and pay huge emission fines. A decline in production and living standards will follow.

The Czechs of course had no idea how the West had been transformed when they joined the European Union in 2004. People liked the idea of unhindered borderless travel and the common market, which they thought, would lead to a higher standard of living. Nobody then realized what profound changes under the influence of a peculiar American ideology of identity would be directed from above. This new concept of social justice is supposed to be achieved by the abolition of various traditional restrictions, of which the state borders are the most visible as this allows millions of migrants to change the cohesive indigenous society. There have been attempts to give legal status to bizarre sexual unions which are part of the denial that binary sex and marriage is the only fundamental basis of a functioning society. The most perturbing aspect is probably the concept of a fluid sexual identity for it undermines the mores and etiquette of courting couples as they may assume that one day they could change their gender. A new war is raging in America today reminiscent of the Communist insistence on equality over the principle of merit-based hierarchy, which, if practised, would lead to certain economic decline. However, since the second election of Donald Trump as the US president, there have been hopeful signs that this 'progressive' ideology is in retreat.

The experience of egalitarianism under the declining totalitarian state, made young Czechs in the 1990s liberal and right-wing. The new generation of students or rather activists has imbibed the radical political religion coming from the West. The idealist youth without a religious anchor easily loses the common sense still common in central Europe. However, this raises the question of how to turn a defensive conservative reflex into active politics? It requires a clear political philosophy based upon the freedom of rational discourse, the ability to differentiate between political religion (ideology) and reason, and the acknowledgement

of human potential for transcendence. We should be aware that civil rights (freedoms) and human rights (often mere entitlements without responsibilities) are not the same thing, and not be fooled by the anti-discrimination ideology of sexual voluntarism or the view of traditional marriage as a mere social construct. It is imperative to attack those who promote pornography or teach promiscuity in sexual education. Morality is a given. In addition, the censorship of 'political correctness' is an attempt to destroy the biblical view that the humans cannot become "like God and know (i.e. decide) what is right and wrong" without dire consequences. Have they not tried so many times since Rousseau and the French Jacobins? We cannot invent a new ethics or accept absolute tolerance of evil without destroying our civilization. There must be limits against the contemporary cult of unbridled individualism. It is symbolic that the EU invented the concept of a multicultural society of disparate ethnic minorities, which would eventually destroy the cohesion of a nation state, the only basis of democracy.

In every European country today, we can observe a widening gap between the 'liberal' globalist establishment and the somewhat illiterate national conservative parties, which often behave in a crude and self-destructive manner. It is laudable that they are defending national state, tradition and common sense, but in their fury seem unnecessarily provocative and without a comprehensive political program acceptable to the majority. Then, there are of course extremist mini-parties springing up from both the left and the right riding on the wave of general discontent.

The mainstream together with the European unionists are slowly but surely losing their former legitimacy. The Czechs are anxiously watching the West where the critical mass of Muslim immigrants is already having a negative political influence upon the state and society. The most glaring example is the new breakout of antisemitism and the impact European Muslims have on the foreign policy vis-a-vis Israel. Unfortunately, the national conservative parties in the European Parliament are deeply divided and yet unable to change the direction of the EU. What can a small Czech state do in these turbulent times?

Out of geopolitical necessity, although most people do not see Russia expanding beyond Ukraine, they want to remain an active member of NATO and introduce compulsory conscription just in case. We will get poorer, but this would surely benefit the spoiled youth with hardly any physical education. The state should support families with more children, but the problem is not money but hedonism and secular outlook. If you are an atheist, you want to enjoy life, and children are

a hindrance. The state should regain its former patriotic vision and the teaching of national history should celebrate independence, national heroes and common destiny. Restoration of moderate nationalism could perhaps reverse a bit the declining birth rate. It is also imperative to stop subsidising the non-profit political organizations (NGOs) and prevent their activists preaching to the young in schools.

The Czechs are more and more aware of the EU declining utopia and do not see any need to rebel. They are a very cautious people. By a large margin, they believe that the 'Green Deal' will eventually implode. In Czechia there is no prospect of a conservative revolution like the one germinating now in Britain. However, as the West declines, they will increasingly look for allies among their Central European neighbours. They have much in common with them and together can weather the vicissitudes of these times. A lot will depend on Poland retaining its traditional role of defending the West.

Recommended reading*

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* Recommended reading was assembled by editorial board.