

Are we our own worst Enemy?

Czech Provincialism

Jiří Pehe

Outsiders view the Czech Republic as a liberal and democratic nation by nature. As a rule, these characteristics may, to a certain extent, be responsible for our relative successes in the political and economic transformation of our country. At the same time, these same observers note that the stubbornness, sobriety, and earthiness that have stood us in good stead many times in the past, may too often mask a simply uninspired attitude to the world around us. As a result, they conclude that we are the most provincial nation in Central and Eastern Europe.

Provincialism is generally defined as an attitude of focusing too intensely on one's own problems. It is a narrow intellectual focus on domestic issues, one that excludes or relativizes the potential interests of others; it represents a meanness, a narrow-mindedness, an ignorance of or disinterest in the broader perspective. Such characteristics profit when daily experiences are not placed into a broader, more universal, cultural and intellectual context.

The fact that the Czech Republic is seen as provincial may be understandable. After all, the Czech nation has spent centuries being ruled by foreign powers: first as a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then as a protectorate of Nazi Germany, and finally as a peripheral possession of the Soviet empire. It was only natural then, that we learned to mind our own business, and shut ourselves into a Czech microworld, leaving cosmopolitan aspirations to more powerful nations, whose defeated or vic-

torious armies regularly swept across our land from West to East and East to West.

Under such conditions, a self-centered attitude was not merely a requirement of survival. It also represented a philosophical stance against overwhelmingly powerful forces whose ambitions often appeared to be foreign and even ridiculous in the eyes of the small Czech nation.

The collapse of Soviet-style communism has placed us in a new and unusual position. For the first time in a long while, Czechs can once again freely make decisions on their own fate, without the threatening geopolitical climate that dogged Czechoslovakia's interwar years of independence. The true decision-making center no longer lies in Vienna, Berlin, or Moscow, but in Prague. Furthermore, following the Holocaust, the postwar expulsion of Sudeten Germans, and the break-up of Czechoslovakia we are now almost completely alone in our state; we can no longer blame our problems on other ethnic or national groups living within our borders.

If we look at our behaviour since the fall of communism, first in a common state with the Slovaks, and then in an almost purely Czech state, it's hard not to notice that, while we quickly made use of our traditional characteristics, such as an enterprising nature, pragmatism, and adaptability, we are still vexed by our traditional provincialism. This, despite the fact that over the past six years a storm of multifarious cultural influences have swept across the Czech lands. Pro-

vincialism has become a certain way of perceiving the world, something that is, and will apparently remain for some time, an individual and internal problem of Czech society.

How does provincialism manifest itself in current Czech life? For one, it shows up in a sort of exaggerated pragmatism, a superpragmatism. This is reflected in an uninspired attitude toward the outside world, a mistrust of values that go beyond the framework of our day-to-day lives and the borders of our little Czech Republic. It also manifests itself in our taste for petty political disputes. Of course, this could also be a natural reaction to 40 years of living in a society suffocating under one ideology; to a certain extent, however, it is also a deeper, almost genetically encoded attitude.

Czech media

In practice, provincialism manifests itself in an inability to seriously concern ourselves with events

that do not directly affect the daily life of Czech society. Almost all of us are absorbed by domestic politics. Indeed, one could say that Czech society is overpoliticized, that it is literally being devoured by itself and its own problems. As in the past, all of this occurs without heed to the Central European, European, or global context.

As an example of this trend, one need look no further than the Czech media. Questions of global significance often receive very little attention due to extensive coverage accorded to petty local affairs. International stories are often shunted off to the back pages of newspapers or to the end of television news broadcasts. In addition, international events are often covered as if they could never affect our little island of momentary stability, as if there is no connection between us and them.

This is a very strange attitude, since Czechs have so often been victimized by events that at first seemed to be playing themselves

out somewhere beyond the country's immediate horizon. This does not mean that some domestic events do not deserve more attention in the local media than international events; people all over the world are primarily interested in their own backyard. The problem is not in this normal preference for domestic news, but rather in the fact that our unusual interest in local events often focuses on reports that are more suitable for the back pages, or for tabloids.

This characteristic is, to a certain extent, reflected in Czech foreign policy. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism, some Czech political figures attempted to enrich the Velvet Revolution with a grander vision, a greater clarity, and a wider context. However, the country's provincialism, overcautiousness, self-centered attitude, and its rejection of a wider moral context quickly pushed their attempts into the background.

Václav Havel

Perhaps the best way of gauging the provincialism of some of our politicians is to note their attitudes toward President Václav Havel. The repeated and often hateful attacks that have been launched against Havel are essentially attacks on a cosmopolitan view of the world. Havel has often been criticized, or even personally attacked, because he is a symbol of everything that is unacceptable to Czech provincialism - broader moral context, universal humanism, vision, scope, and a rejection of parochial politics. Havel is the antithesis of the Czech fascination with a partisan politics that is incapable of raising itself above narrow interests and personal ambitions.

There is no need to address the manner in which far-right extremists in the Republican Party or the unreformed Communists have expressed their hatred toward Havel; these parties and Havel are as different as fire and water. However, the strongest party on the Czech political spectrum - the Civic Dem-

ocratic Party - has often opposed Havel's views, and its members hesitated to vote for him in 1995.

An even subtler manifestation of the conflicts between Havel as a symbol of anti-provincialism and the short-sighted views of some government politicians can be found in foreign policy disputes. No one is infallible and Havel himself would probably formulate many of his earlier opinions a little differently today. Yet, when some politicians criticized Havel for his invitations to the Dalai Lama, Salman Rushdie, and Yasser Arafat, or for his opinions on possible solutions to the Bosnian conflict and the recognition of Taiwan, they were not just indicating that he had overstepped the constitutional boundaries of his role as president. Above all, their criticisms represented a provincial, overcautious view of our role in the world while criticizing a figure who is not afraid to call a spade a spade and who is able to see the Czech Republic in a broader, more philosophical, context.

European integration

It's true that the Czech people and their political representatives have been relatively successful in reconstructing the country's economic system. They have not shied away from opening up the Czech economy to the world. But this simply represents the most pragmatic and useful approach to the situation - something that, thanks to our traditions, we can very easily understand. Furthermore, economic integration has been a part of the Czech reality since the days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Despite these successes, Czech political provincialism is still strong. On the one hand, it may be true that the Czech Republic is purposefully heading toward its goal of integration with Europe through practical political steps. But on the other, when it comes to truly understanding what it means to be European and in opening up to European val-

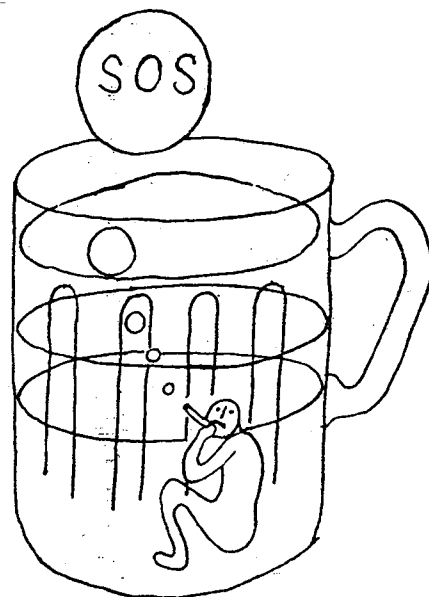
ues, Czech society thus far has only taken a few furtive peeks at the world beyond its western border. This is especially true of its politicians.

Today, we are witness to the political and public rebirth of the slogan: "Czech things are beautiful things." The prime minister claims that he is in favor of integration with Europe, but at the same time warns us that through integration we may lose our national identity. Closer cooperation with the other Central European postcommunist countries is rejected by arguments that, stripped of their diplomatic veneer, have one thing in common: the feeling that we Czechs are exceptional. At times this feeling is expressed with a dose of arrogance strong enough to be seen through any diplomatic cover. We are simply, as Bohumil Hrabal says, "the world champions of indoor tennis courts." Are we? Or is this form of arrogance really a manifestation of our insecurity, lack of scope, and inability to see things in their global context?

The country's potential integration into the European Union isn't viewed as a chance to take on the infamous EU bureaucracy and influence European affairs from within, but rather as a threat that the Czech lands will become a remote province of the EU, and therefore of Germany. Perhaps this fear of losing our identity and our current geopolitical status as a non-aligned nation is simply another manifestation of our provincialism, weakness, and insecurity. The Czech Republic, with its regional reputation for individualism, resembles a proud kid from a small village school who constantly shows off his report card full of As, but who at the same time isn't sure of himself because he knows that when he reaches that prestigious big town high school he may suddenly find himself at the back of the class.

The fear of a more decentralized government that some Czech politicians display, and their overcau-

tious attitude toward the concept of Euroregions is, in a certain sense, a manifestation of provincialism. It is as if Czech politicians are afraid that the Euroregions could contaminate their little Czech sandbox, despite the fact that from an objective standpoint, it is Western countries that should be afraid of the Czech sandbox. After all, we were the ones who lived in a sick society for 40 years, not them. Perhaps it is understandable that many Czech politicians and the public at large fear that the European influence



which would enter our country would in fact be mainly a German one. Our inability to see Germany as a modern democratic state and as the engine of Europe, which we are so eager to enter, is also a manifestation of a certain type of provincialism.

The Sudeten Question

Perhaps the most penetrating example of this type of provincialism is specifically tied to Germans and Germany - the Sudeten German question. The main issue here isn't in finding a solution to this 50-year-old problem, but rather in the Czech attitude towards it. Despite the fact that the Sudeten German question is stuck like a boulder

under the imaginary carpet of Czech-German relations, Czech politicians seem incapable of sincerely addressing this problem. As long as we continue to shut our eyes to the world around us, that boulder will remain buried. Our provincial attitudes have taken to completely rejecting not only any attempts to seriously address this issue but, in many cases, even to recognize its existence. The general opinion is that this issue is historically closed. Whenever someone rejects this attitude, our reaction is to stick our heads in the sand. People seem to be waiting for the issue to resolve itself. In the best case scenario, they hope it will disappear with the help of some kind of political declaration. Perhaps the Poles - a nation that is often underestimated by Czech politicians and even the wider Czech public - could teach us something about relating to Germans. Even though their relations with Germany have been at least as traumatic and complicated as ours, they have been able to deal with their western neighbor in a satisfactory way. Could they be less weighed down by provincial attitudes than we are?

It is inevitable that the gradual process of forging links with western Europe and the country's willing or unwilling integration into the EU's economic and political structures will eventually do away with some of the afflictions associated with Czech provincialism. At the same time, it is also clear that this provincialism will survive in some form, just as similar attitudes have survived in Austria or Bavaria. This does not necessarily have to be a negative trend, as long as this provincialism manages to tie itself to the emerging concept of politics in a united Europe. However, as our politicians continue to assert that a return to Europe will be easy for us, our provincialism has become a sort of mental and political brake for further development. ■

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