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The Implications of the
Czecho-Slovak Divorce
for EU Enlargement

JACQUES RUPNIK

RSC No. 2000/66

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**ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE
FOR ADVANCED STUDIES**

**The Implications of the Czecho-Slovak Divorce
for EU Enlargement**

JACQUES RUPNIK

CERI

EUI Working Paper **RSC** No. 2000/66

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Czechoslovakia was created on the basis of the principle of the self-determination of nations as part of a new European order shaped by Western powers in 1918. Seventy five years later it disintegrated in the name of the same principle of self-determination, reclaimed by Czechs and Slovaks as part of the post-cold war recasting of the European order. For both Czechs and Slovaks, the “velvet revolution” of November 1989 heralded the exit from communism and a “return to Europe” that became identified with the prospect of joining the European Union. Less than ten years and a “velvet divorce” later, the Czech Republic was included in the first circle for the enlargement of the Union (along with Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Estonia) while Slovakia was not.¹ Hence the first question: was this ‘verdict’ concerning enlargement a consequence of the partition? Without the partition, would Czechs and Slovaks be “in”? Or -- and this is a hypothesis that can not be excluded -- without partition would they be “out”? The first implies the role of Prague as a kind of guarantor of Slovakia’s democratic and Western orientation. The second (and more generally the evolution of Slovakia under Meciar between 1993 and 1998) was implicitly used by the Czech media and the then Prague government as a vindication of the Czecho-Slovak divorce.

“Alone into Europe or together to the Balkans”: This was a headline in the Czech weekly *Respekt* in the Fall of 1992. More generally, the assumption that the integration into Western institutions could be speeded up without Slovakia as a political and economic ‘burden’ was part of the mood among Czech elites at the time. A parallel argument about joining Europe as an independent state had been voiced by prime minister Jan Carnogursky in 1991 and, more forcefully, by his successor Vladimir Meciar in 1992. This raises the question: to what extent was the partition part of a European integration strategy? The argument is not altogether convincing as neither of the main protagonists of the split, Klaus and the ODS party on the Czech side, and Meciar and his HZDS movement in Slovakia, had entry into the European Union as a priority. Klaus, an outspoken critic of the EU, focussed on economic transformation and integration with “the West” in general terms. Meciar’s priority was the consolidation of his power through nation-state building rather than merging with Europe: recognition rather than integration was what he expected from Europe. His ambition of giving Slovakia a “visibility”, distinct from the Czechs, took precedence over any EU agenda. And, in his own way, he has succeeded.

However, the demise in 1998 of Vaclav Klaus and Vladimir Meciar, the two main protagonists of the Czecho-Slovak split who had so clearly dominated the political scene in their respective countries and represented a problematic

¹ The decision announced in July 1997 concerned both the enlargement of the EU and of NATO

relationship with the EU opened a new phase in relations between the two nations. It also prompted a shift in their attitudes and their prospects of integration with Europe.

The Czecho-Slovak split raises issues of broader significance concerning the relationship between patterns of democratic transition, nation-state building and European integration. It will be examined in this paper through exploration of three questions:

- 1) To what extent does the Czecho-Slovak partition point to two models of post-communist transition with two different prospects for European integration?
- 2) What are the contrasting Czech and Slovak perceptions and policies towards the European Union? and
- 3) How does the convergence of the Czech lands after Klaus, and Slovakia after Meciar, help/affect Central European co-operation and the EU enlargement process?

I. The “Velvet Divorce”: Two Modes of Transition and Integration?

The fact that the end of the Czechoslovak federation was, like the end of communism in Czechoslovakia, speedy and non-violent, sometimes gave the deceptive impression that it was of little consequence for the respective developments of both successor countries or for the broader situation in Central Europe. It seems clear that the Czechs and Slovaks pursued markedly different courses after their split at the end of 1992. The Czech republic, like Poland and Hungary, moved from ‘transition’ to ‘consolidation of democracy’, that is, a situation where the constitutional and institutional framework is accepted by all political actors.² In contrast, Slovakia under Vladimir Meciar moved away from the “central European model” of transition towards an increasingly authoritarian and unpredictable system where the very nature of the regime was the major stake in the political game. Between 1993 and 1998 Slovakia drifted closer to a second group of authoritarian post-communist countries (or “electoral democracies”, as Larry Diamond called them) including, among others, Croatia or Bielarus. The systematic disrespect for the rule of law is also what led Fareed Zakaria to include Meciar’s Slovakia among “illiberal democracies”.³ The political wisdom of the 1997 EU decision separating candidates for enlargement

² We refer here to the standard definition of “democratic consolidation” as formulated, among others, by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan in *Problems of Democratic Transitions and Consolidations*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p 3

³ Farid Zakaria, “The rise of illiberal democracies”, *Foreign Affairs*, November- December 1997 (Slovakia found itself in the company of Pakistan, Philippines and Ghana)

into two groups (and ruling out Slovakia on the grounds of its “democratic deficit”) was debatable; but its actual diagnosis about the state of Slovakia’s democratic transition at the time was accurate.

The connection between the two patterns of transition to democracy on one hand and two prospects for European integration should be understood as related to some of its underlying causes. It is not just as a side effect or an unintended consequence of the partition of the country. Four main relevant aspects that should be examined, at least briefly, are:

- 1) political culture and legacies of the past;
- 2) the dynamics of modernisation and the conversion to a market economy;
- 3) the crisis of federalism, constitutional nationalism and the role of post-communist political elites; and
- 4) the international environment.

1) *Political Culture and Legacies of the Past*

After the return of democracy, one of the difficulties faced by Czechs and Slovaks, in re-defining their common state institutions was related to their contrasting perceptions of the relatively brief period of shared history. For a thousand years the two nations had lived side by side but separately. The Czechs had a tradition of statehood (the kingdom of Bohemia) while the Slovaks did not. Under the Habsburgs, Bohemia became the industrial heartland of the empire while Slovakia was a rural part of Hungary. The relative ease with which Czechoslovakia was established in 1918 was deceptive: linguistically the two nations were close but hardly knew each other. Most importantly, the new state was established on the ambiguous concept of a “Czechoslovak nation” which referred to the civic concept of the nation as formulated by the first President, T. G. Masaryk, but which also had a legitimising function (lumping together Czechs and Slovaks who made-up two thirds of the population) vis à vis important German and Hungarian minorities.

Neither the ambiguous definition of the nation nor the state survived the Munich agreement in 1938, and the Czecho-Slovak relationship since then has been a story of mutual disappointments with somewhat different chronologies. Seen from Bratislava, the Czech elites did not fulfil Slovak expectations for autonomy after 1918, or again after 1945, keeping a centralised, Jacobean concept of the state. Seen from Prague, the Slovaks twice gave priority to their separate, national interest over that of Czechoslovak democracy: after Munich in 1938, and again after the Soviet-led invasion of 1968 when the Slovak political

leadership gave precedent to federalisation of the state (even under Soviet auspices) over defence of its democratisation.

The external weakness of the Czechoslovak state revealed tensions in the relationship between the two nations and tended to reinforce Czech centralism, thus frustrating Slovak aspirations of autonomy. Carol Skalnik Leff noted that the Slovaks “compensated for an unequal balance of power within the state by alignments with foreign allies. (...) Slovak nationalism has thus appeared to the Czech opinion, successively, as the cat’s paw of Magyar irredentism, German imperialism and Soviet hegemony: the perception of Slovak opportunism in such cases has put additional stress on the Czecho-Slovak relations”.⁴ The point here, of course, is not to evaluate the accuracy of such a reading of history but take into account the importance of differing perceptions and misperceptions of history. A 1992 poll asked people which period in their history they considered as most positive: the Czech respondents put top of the list the reign of Charles IV (who in the XIVth century made Prague the capital of the Holy Empire) and Masaryk’s First Republic (1918-1938). Slovak respondents put first the period 1948-1989 and second the period of the Slovak state (1939-45).⁵ When asked about favoured historical figures there was again no overlap between Czechs and Slovaks. The striking thing here is the absence of shared political and state symbols. That at the very moment when the future of the Czechoslovak state was being decided, two totalitarian experiences (fascist and communist) that were rejected by Czechs were considered positive by Slovaks, has implications for the understanding of their “divorce” and the difficult emergence of a shared democratic culture.

It is not easy to conceive of a common future with such opposing perceptions of the common past, especially if these perceptions tend to overlap with different political cultures. Professor Miroslav Kusy from the Comenius University in Bratislava summed-up the problem with the following formula: “Slovaks are, in comparison with Czechs or other Central Europeans, more separatist, more nationalistic, more Christian-, Left and Eastward oriented”.⁶ Like many stereotypes, this characterisation contains an element of truth. And it would be tempting indeed to find a correlation between the two attitudes

⁴ Carol Skalnik Leff, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918-1987*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988

⁵ An IVVM poll published in *Rude Pravo* 30 September 1992. Interestingly, a 1977 poll suggests an evolution in the perceptions of history showing an improvement of the image of the First republic in Slovakia (3rd place) and a deterioration of the image of the Slovak state (6th). A result of the Meciar experience? See Z. Butorova (ed.), *Democracy and Discontent in Slovakia: a public opinion profile of a country in transition*, Bratislava, IVO, 1997, p 193

⁶ Miroslav Kusy, “Slovaks are more...” in J. Jensen and F. Miszlivetz (ed.), *East Central Europe: Paradoxes and Perspectives*, Szombathely, Savana UP, 1998, p 53-76

towards the legacies of the past or common statehood, and the two political cultures related to their two modes of post-communist transition. Yet this explanation might just be provide too convenient and misread the dynamics of change which, as the developments since Fall 1998 suggest, challenge established patterns or dominant political cultures. On the Czech side Klaus' neo-conservative, free market liberalism represents a sharp break with the pre-war tradition of Masaryk "democratic humanism with a social conscience", and it simply has no antecedents in Czech political culture. Similarly, in Slovakia, with its strong tradition of political Catholicism, one would have anticipated an important role for Christian-Democracy, which under Carnogursky's leadership has barely won over 10% of the electorate. However it is true, as electoral studies have shown, that Meciar's electoral base matches almost perfectly that of the pre-war People's party; Meciar's national-populism on the Left in the footsteps of Hlinka's national-populism on the Right?

2) *Modernisation and Socio-economic Differences*

A fairly widespread thesis about the Czecho-Slovak split runs like this: For the Slovak post-communist elites, the split represented a political gain and an economic loss. For their Czech counterparts it was the other way around: the political loss related to the demise of Czechoslovakia was to be compensated by anticipated economic gains, as they expected that the road to Europe or to the West would be faster without the Slovak burden. The quest for identity, recognition and nationalist ideology prevailed over economic rationality on the Slovak side. For the Czech governing elite, narrowly defined economic interests (or selfishness) allegedly prevailed over nationalist passions. Perhaps it could be argued that Czech "economic nationalists" in disguise thus joined a familiar club made up of Balts or Slovenes who were eager to leave their respective federations in the East. Or, perhaps in a different context, they were keen to leave Italy's Northern League and Belgium's Flemish nationalism in the West. However this thesis sticks too closely to the then prevailing discourse of Vaclav Klaus's party to be entirely convincing.

The uneven level of development has, of course, been an important factor in the Czecho-Slovak relationship since 1918. The difference was important not just in economic development but also in urbanisation, education (merely 1,4% university students in Hungary at the turn of the century were Slovaks) and secularisation (much more advanced in Bohemia where the harshness of the counter-reformation in the XVIIth century and rapid industrialisation in the XIXth century eroded religious practice, while Slovak society remained marked by traditional Catholicism. However, due to inter-war development, and particularly due to the investment policies of the post-war communist regime,

Slovakia was forced to catch-up.⁷ Paradoxically, the Czecho-Slovak separation took place at the very moment when the economic catching-up (as measured by GNP per capita) was to be completed. Rather than uneven development, it became the two societies' different attitudes towards the market and civil society, attitudes rooted in their different experiences of modernisation, which mattered.

The modernisation of Bohemia took place in the context of a market economy and a civil society going back to late 19th century Austria and the inter-war First Republic. By contrast, the modernisation of Slovakia was mainly carried out in the context of post-war Soviet-style socialism; that is, with the de facto liquidation of the market and of civil society by the state. These contrasting experiences of modernisation account, at least partly, for the different attitudes, within Czech and Slovak societies, to the legacies of the old regime and the introduction of radical market reforms. For the Czechs, the communist period with its emphasis on heavy industry has been one of relative "de-modernisation (dropping from the 7th rank in per capita GNP after World War Two, to the 40th). For Slovakia, it has represented a delayed, accelerated modernisation, with all the accompanying pathologies which Slovak sociologists have described as follows :

"enforced state-paternalist orientation, learned helplessness and social infantilism... [E]xtensive modernisation, in the absence of a civil society, has helped to introduce strong statist and anti-liberal values and codes of behaviour in the population. Nevertheless, this period was not seen by the inhabitants of Slovakia in purely negative terms."⁸

Thus while the introduction of market reforms was perceived by Czech society as a reconnection with Western modernity, it was experienced in Slovakia as another modernisation, imposed from above and outside, this time under the banner of economic liberalism.⁹ Combined with the fact that the social impact of the market reforms was much worse in Slovakia than in the Czech lands, this explains why political elites on both sides were able to exploit economic resentment. In Slovakia they could play on the fear of becoming the "losers" of yet another modernisation imposed from Prague. In the Czech lands they

⁷ the rate of investment was higher in Slovakia see Sharon Wolchik, *Czechoslovakia in Transition: Politics, Economics and Society*, London, Pinter, 1991, 186-195

⁸ Martin Butora and Zora Butorova, "Slovakia: The Identity Challenges of the Newly Born State" in *Social Research* vol 60, n 4 (Winter 1993), p 715

⁹ According to opinion surveys there was, in Czech lands, a strong support for the reform even their for their acceleration (2/3) while there was growing apprehension in Slovakia. See Centrum pro Socialnu Analyzu, *Aktualne Problémy Česko-Slovenska*, Bratislava (January 1992), p 6

recycled the complaint about “ungrateful, subsidised laggards” slowing down the Czech’s bid for rapid integration with the West.

There was no economic fatality in the Czecho-Slovak separation. It was when the divide between the two nations overlapped with the divide between the two societies and the two diverging political orientations that the split became a possibility. To the extent that joining the EU entails accepting the constraints of a “single market” and the interpenetrating of civil societies, these sociological differences, rooted in their different experiences of modernisation, continue to have important implications for the way both societies approach the prospect of European integration.

3) *Federalism, Constitutional Nationalism and Post-communist Elites*

The third legacy of the Czecho-Slovak partition with implications for European integration concerns nation-state-building and the failure of federalism. Federalisation of the state was the only reform of 1968 that was implemented under the Soviet-imposed “normalisation” that followed. It was therefore emptied of its democratic promise and was seen by most Czechs as a Soviet attempt to play the “Slovak card” against the Prague Spring heresy. The Slovaks saw it as merely a revamped version of Prague-centralism. Havel appropriately spoke of “federalised totalitarianism”. As a result the word “federalism” came to represent something as discredited as the “socialism” of the communist experience.

Could federalism be rescued by the return of democracy? There was indeed an opportunity to use the collapse of communism and the consensus it generated as a defining moment for a new federal constitution. For more than two years this constitutional issue dominated the political agenda, with over twenty Czecho-Slovak “summits” held in aid of the vain search for a viable compromise. Indeed, the use and abuse of constitutional nationalism on both sides eventually helped to bring about the partition. The Czech position could be summed up as “federalism from above”: both nations first pledge their commitment to a common state and then proceed to devolve powers to their constituent republics. The Slovak position (as expressed by the Carnogursky government, and later merely radicalised by Meciar) could be described as “confederalism from below”: two distinct political entities adopt a “contract” or a “treaty” concerning matters such as defence or the currency.

Although Meciar’s party (unlike its ally, the Slovak National Party) never overtly advocated separatism, the substance of his political message came very close to it. In fact, as Michael Kraus pointed out, Carnogursky’s approach “blurred the line between his party’s goals and that of the Slovak separatists, for

the only difference between the governing Christian Democratic movement, the separatist opposition and the confederalists led by Meciar now appeared to be one of tempo.”¹⁰ This became the dominant perception on the Czech side, once Meciar opposed all the successive constitutional compromises worked out between Prague and Bratislava (in September 1991 he rejected such an agreement because Slovakia had “an inalienable right to adopt its own constitution”, and again in February 1992). Its electoral programme for the June 1992 election proved decisive for the fate of the federation. This clearly proposed:

1. a Slovak declaration of sovereignty (which was voted for by the Slovak parliament in July 1992);
2. a Slovak Constitution (adopted precisely by those who refused to compromise on a federal constitution);
3. the election of a Slovak President (a farewell to Havel as the symbol of the common state); and
4. Slovakia was to become a “subject of international law” with its own diplomatic representation and its own seat in the UN (and its “own star on the European flag”).

In other words: an independent state within a common state.

At their first meeting after their victory in the election, the new Czech prime minister, Vaclav Klaus, asked his Slovak counterpart, whether the latter stood by all of his electoral programme. When Merciar gave a positive answer, Klaus insisted he would not prevent its implementation. However, he also indicated the necessity to accept the full consequences of this agenda. That is, a speedy and peaceful separation. But by the same token, Klaus had taken away from Meciar one of the main ingredients of his use and abuse of constitutional nationalism.

Meciar’s entire political strategy played on what could be described as the “insatiability of the junior partner”, and this could work only as long as a well tested assumption on which it rested – that is, the much stronger identification by Czechs with the common state. The problem of asymmetrical loyalties vis-à-vis the common state (in this respect, the Slovaks found themselves in a similar situation to that of the Vlams in Belgium or the French-speaking Québécois in Canada) was, in principle, meant to be corrected by federalism. Yet federalism with only two components tends to be confrontational (and in the long run unviable) since any political conflict is seen as a zero-sum game: every “gain”

¹⁰ Michael Kraus, “Returning to Europe, Separately” in Michael Kraus and Ronald D. Liebowitz (eds.) *Russia and Eastern Europe after Communism*, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1996, p 236

made by one side is seen as being made at the expense of the other. In this context the role of political elites acquired a particular importance. Both Meciar's Slovak populist Left led by and Klaus' Czech liberal right used this situation for purposes of polarisation, political mobilisation and (after the split) legitimisation. Both, albeit with very different styles, benefited from the shift of the political centre of gravity from the federal level to the constituent republics, maximising their own power and that of the emergent political elites.

Could the federation have been saved by a "European" solution? A "Czecho-Slovak Maastricht"? This idea was initially floated by Prime Minister Carnogursky and was then revived in the Fall of 1992, when Meciar hinted at the possibility of preserving a common currency and a common defence strategy. Klaus politely declined the offer: how could you have one currency and two divergent economic policies? How could you have one defence strategy and two foreign policies? To accept Meciar's offer would, he argued, be to provide a Czech insurance policy for Slovak irresponsibility.

The days of the Czechoslovak federation are over and it will not be put back together again. Its failure, however, need not imply that there is a fundamental incompatibility of the two protagonists that will be problematic within the broader program of European integration, which itself involves creating a single currency and a common security policy. In this respect, one should distinguish between what Francis Delpérée has called "*federalism by dissociation*" and "*federalism by association*". Federalism by dissociation, as found in the Belgian, Canadian and Czechoslovak federal models, increasingly leads the state to "divest itself from a part of its activities and delegate a part of its responsibility, and thus of its political choices, to new entities",¹¹ so that eventually the federal state is left as just an empty shell. By contrast, "*federalism by association*" involves different subjects jointly establishing the terms and the degree of their co-operation. Leaving the former for the latter is what the newly established Czech and Slovak states are trying to do.

4) *The International Dimension*

The simultaneous break-up of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union has often been presented as part of a broader process of dissolution of federal states inherited from communism. That is, post-communist fragmentation in the East vs. integration of the continent in the West. Even Meciar's predecessor,

¹¹ Professor Delpérée made this argument using the Belgian case as a warning in front of the MP of the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament chaired by A. Dubcek in April 1991 as part of a seminar of the East-West Parliamentary Project. See also his "Le fédéralisme sauvera-t-il la nation belge" (will federalism save the Belgian nation) in J. Rupnik (ed.) *Le déchiement des nations*, Paris, Seuil, 1995 p 123-138

Slovak Prime Minister Carnogursky, stated in July 1991 that “the events in Yugoslavia and in the Soviet Union will find their echoes here, too. The Slovaks have a sense of national solidarity. But the Czechoslovak federation is not a priority for them, on the contrary.”¹²

The comparison with Yugoslavia was particularly tempting since both states were created simultaneously in 1918 as part of the Versailles system, both were dismantled by the Nazis during World War Two, federalised under communism and dissolved in the first phase of the post-communist transition. There were also parallels between the dominant position of the Czechs and the Serbs in their respective states and between the positions of the Slovaks and Croats, the “junior partners” who identified closely with traditional Catholicism and nationalism, and who had experienced short-lived independent statehood under Nazi protection. There are also striking similarities between populist nationalism of Meciar and that of Tadjman, the founding fathers of their new states. And in many respects Meciar’s assessment of the European situation was shared by his Croat counterpart: the idea that the post-cold war realignments in Europe opened a “window of opportunity” which must be seized (despite certain risks) by the new nations in quest of their own statehoods, because such situations occur so rarely. Meciar was fairly clear about that in September 1991:

“Considering the international situation and the efforts of many nations of Central and Eastern Europe to emancipate themselves, the time has come for the Slovak Republic to demand the right of self-determination and achieve sovereignty. Postponing this matter is a grave political mistake that will leave Slovakia outside an integrated Europe.”¹³

However, the simultaneity and parallels between the break-up of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia should not obscure essential differences. Unlike Yugoslavia, those who pressed for independence in Czechoslovakia were neither the most economically prosperous, the most Western oriented nor the most advanced in their transition to democracy. Slovakia was no Slovenia and Havel was no Milosevic -- a major factor in the peacefulness of the divorce. Two other elements also proved to be crucial. First, there was no dispute between Czechs and Slovaks over borders or ethnic minorities. The border is a thousand-year-old dividing line between the Crown of Saint Stephen and the Kingdom of Bohemia, rather than a communist fabrication. And there were almost 300 000 Slovaks living in the Czech Republic who chose to stay there and acquire Czech citizenship after the partition, rather than an “ethnic minority” seeking

¹² Interview with Liberation reprinted in FMZV, *Ceskoslovenska Zahranicni Politika: Dokumenty*, 6a/1991, p 812

¹³ Quoted by Jan Obrman, “Further discussions on the future of the federation”, *RFE*, September 20, 1991p 8-9

separation and attachment to the “mother-nation”. If anything, the Yugoslav break-up was not an “inspiration” but a warning that cautioned even the separatists and engendered resignation in everyone else.

Since its inception in 1918, all the great turning points in Czechoslovak history coincided with, or were determined by, international influences. The foundation of the state in 1918 was associated with Western democracies. In 1938 its demise was the work of Hitler’s *Drang nach Osten*, assisted by Britain and France. The 1948 communist takeover marked the country’s insertion in the Soviet bloc and the beginning of the Cold War. The crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring marked the failure to overcome the partition of Europe. And even the Velvet Revolution of 1989 was part of a chain reaction that swept across the whole Soviet empire in East-Central Europe.

In contrast to this pattern, the peaceful Czecho-Slovak divorce in 1992 was carried out without significant external influence and without foreign policy differences playing a major role. There was a new regional and international environment that loosened the external constraint and allowed local actors a greater margin of manoeuvrability. Russia was retreating from Central Europe, Germany was self-absorbed in the reunification process, and while Poland and Hungary hoped their Czech and Slovak neighbours would stay together, they were not in a position to do much about it. The European Union did point out that “integration rather than disintegration”¹⁴ should be the aim of future candidates but, on the eve of Maastricht, it too had other priorities on its mind. Some analysts called on the EU to make the prospect of integration with Europe explicitly conditional on the preservation of the federation, but these cries were largely ignored.¹⁵ This time, external circumstances cannot be blamed for what Istvan Bibó called “the misery of the small East European states.” It was instead the making and the responsibility of democratically elected Czech and Slovak political elites.

In the Czechoslovak case, just as in the Yugoslav example, federation is now seen as a transition phase between multinational empires and nation states.

¹⁴ Cf. the statement of the then Portuguese presidency of the Commission (Mr Pinheiro) in *Europe* (International press and information agency), Brussels, 22-23 June 1992

¹⁵ Cf. Ralf Dahrendorf’s commentary in *La Republica*, 13.6.1992 reprinted in Slovakia “Evropa, o ktete snil Schumann se rozplyva v Praze” in *Nova Evropa* (1992/ XI) p 2

II. Czech and Slovak Perceptions of and Policies Towards Europe

The prime motives of the Czech and Slovak Republics for European Union membership -- not unlike those of other Central European pretenders -- can be summed up as follows: the identification with European culture and values, the joining of the Western democratic club as a means to make the democratic transition irreversible, the EU as means of access to and sharing in Western modernity and prosperity, and finally, for reasons (though not always clearly formulated reasons) of security and geopolitics.¹⁶

These motives also structure the major themes of Czech and Slovak attitudes and debates on the prospect of the enlargement of the European Union :

- 1) national and European identity ;
- 2) Democracy and sovereignty; and
- 3) security concerns

1) *National and European Identities*

In their 1989 hope of “returning to Europe”, neither Czechs nor Slovaks had the slightest hint of apprehension that there could be a tension or a difficulty in articulating the relationship between their national and European identities. Their separation in 1993 brought to the surface a striking reversal, as two types of anti-EU discourse emerged, emphasising threats to national identity. One was a Czech version of “Thatcherite”, liberal anti-Europeanism. The other was a nationalist/populist Slovak version.

A dominant theme of debates amongst the Czech cultural milieu of the 1980s was the congruence between Czech and European identities, and this was widely reflected in the opinions of ordinary people. The writings of the philosopher Jan Patočka on this subject were an important reference for the dissident community. In line with T. G. Masaryk (at least on this point), he identified the Czech national project with European humanism and with universal democratic values.¹⁷ Vaclav Havel, too, has frequently written about the connection between the partition of the continent, the development of totalitarianism and the crisis of European culture. In 1983, Czech writer Milan Kundera published an essay entitled “The kidnapped West: the tragedy of Central Europe”, and this became a catalyst in the Central European debate.

¹⁶ For a comparison of Czech and French perceptions and motives concerning EU enlargement see J.Rupnik (ed.), *Regards communs sur l'Europe*, Prague, CEFRES, 1998 (proceedings of a Franco-Czech conference on the EU)

¹⁷ Cf. among other writings of Jan Patočka, *L'idée de l'Europe en Bohême*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1991

Europe was not just a “Common Market”, it was a civilisation, a culture, a set of values that were most forcefully defended precisely where they were most directly threatened by Soviet/Eastern totalitarianism. The Czech predicament, and the Central European predicament more generally, was to be “culturally part of the West, politically part of the East, and geographically in the centre.”¹⁸ In other words: the boundaries of civilisations cannot be drawn by tanks. The idea of “Europe” is stronger at its periphery than at the centre, but in fact the periphery *was* the centre!

After the collapse of the Soviet empire there was a shift in the Czech discourse on Europe. At first the theme of the “return” to (Western) Europe eclipsed the identification with Central Europe (as an alternative to the Soviet bloc). Then, simply joining “the West” became increasingly substituted for talk of joining “Europe”. In a shift from the cultural anti-politics of the dissident era to the resurgence of democratic politics, the debate on “Europe” from then on concerned the relationship with the “European Union”. In that new context the discourse of the 1980s became quaintly antiquated. When the Czech ambassador to Britain entitled his contribution to a volume on Europe: “The Czech Republic is an integral part of European civilisation”,¹⁹ the assertion sounds dated and, in a way, self-denying. If the statement were obvious, there would be no need to assert it.

More interestingly, the prospects of European integration raised concerns not only about its desirability, but also about the place of small nations and respect for diversity. Milan Kundera summed up the question as follows: “Is Europe capable or not of protecting itself against the rampant uniformisation of the planet and to create a common home where diversity would be respected as a supreme value? This bet will never be won or lost, since Europe *is* this wager”.²⁰

In the 1990’s, especially under the influence of Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, the idea of “Europe” became increasingly identified with a common economic organisation, but it also conjured notions of a process of integration, which could allegedly threaten the national identity of small nations. Klaus’ favourite rhetorical metaphor is: “Shall we let our identity and sovereignty dissolve in Europe like a lump of sugar in a cup of coffee?”²¹ Since he left the

¹⁸ Milan Kundera, “L’Occident kidnappé: la tragédie de l’Europe Centrale” in *Le Débat* (Paris) November 1983

¹⁹ Karel Kuehnl, “The Czech Republic is an integral part of European civilisation” in William Nicoll and Richard Schoenberg (eds.), *Europe beyond 2000: the enlargement of the European Union towards the East*, London, Whurr, 1998

²⁰ Milan Kundera, “Le pari tchèque”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, (October 1995), p 34

²¹ Klaus has used it several times since 1993; most recently in his television appearance of *Pravo*, 26 January 1999

government and became the speaker of the lower house of Parliament at the end of 1997, government policy has become more favourable towards the EU, but his party's nationalistic and anti-Europe themes became more explicit. Describing himself as a Czech and a "patriot", he sharply criticised President Havel's pro-European stance. He denounced the dangers of European unification, referring to a book by John Laughland entitled *The Undemocratic Origins of the European Idea* that, according to Klaus, contains evidence that the prime goal of Nazi ideologists was a united Europe. "If I were to quote them, you could attribute them to speeches by any of today's proponents of the EU. It makes fascinating reading," he has said.²² The building of a nation-state and the defence of the national interest are presented as distinct from, or even in contradiction with, the European project. Klaus adds: "One of the greatest tragedies of this continent is today's empty Europeaness on which a political organisation is built. I consider this to be a fatal mistake ..., but at the same time know that this process is already so advanced that I do not know what can be done about it."²³ With the failure of their economic promises, Vaclav Klaus and his party have clearly moved from 'free-market' rhetoric to 'defence of the nation', shifting their emphasis from classical liberalism to identity politics; shifting from Milton Freidman as inspiration, to pre-war conservative nationalist leader Vaclav Kramar.

The Slovak variations on the national and/or European identity theme reveal certain differences from the Czechs. Czech intellectual discourse traditionally stressed the "centrality" of the Czech position in Europe (from Jan Hus, the forerunner of the Protestant reformation, to the Prague Spring of 1968, the great impulses of Czech history were part of the mainstream of European history. Each of the famous "eights" of Twentieth Century Czech history were turning points for the continent: 1918, 1938, 1948 and 1968). The Slovak self-definition is, on the whole, more unassuming and ambiguous. A leading Slovak historian, Lubomir Liptak, formulated the thesis of Slovakia as a *frontier rather than a crossroad*:

"[...] our territory almost regularly found itself at the edge of the influence of great empires, civilisations, "worlds" (the Roman border, the Avars, Greater Moravia, the Mongol invasions, the Ottoman empire, the industrial civilisation with its heart in Western Europe, the socialist camp). The territory of Slovakia, however, has not been the target of the main drive, of the most important clashes, the waves of events pass usually to the North or to the South of us. We are on the border, not at a crossroads."²⁴

²² V.Klaus interview "Odmitam zapirat sve vlastenectvi" in *Lidové Noviny*, 3 June, 1999

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lubomir Liptak, "Niektore historické aspekty slovenskej otázky", in Rudolf Chmel (ed.), *Slovenska otazka v 20. storoci*, Bratislava, Kalligram, p 448

The second contrast is that of cultural, religious and even political orientation. Luptak suggests that “Slovakia is the most Western country of Eastern Europe, the Czech lands are the most Eastern country of Western Europe.”²⁵ The proposition has a historical and religious background going back to Cyril and Methodeus’ apostolic mission (863-907) and the rivalry between Byzantine and Latin influences. In the 1990s, the leader of the Slovak Christian Democrats, Jan Carnogursky, liked to stress the importance of the Eastern Churches for Slovak religious identity. If the Czech self-image identified with the idea of a “kidnapped West”, many Slovak Catholics felt closer to the Pope’s vision of a united Christian Europe.

The third difference concerns the implications of the Czecho-Slovak separation. For the Czechs, the split was undoubtedly perceived as a failure. The anticipated acceleration of the Czech entry into “Europe” was seen as compensation, a balm for a bruised national ego. For the Slovaks, the belated completion of a nation-state building process was meant to provide access to a “Europeanness” which would no longer be mediated by Hungarians or Czechs. “Visibility” and recognition is primarily what Slovaks wanted from Europe. And Meciar has played skilfully on this ambivalence vis à vis Europe.

2. *The EU, Democracy and Sovereignty*

The issue of the compatibility of national and European identities in the process of EU enlargement could always be answered by stating the obvious: the EU is not Europe. A similar cop-out, however, is not very plausible on the question of democracy and the rule of law. The EU norm setting in this respect is more difficult to dismiss by would-be candidates, and this is also where the aims of the democratic transition and European integration seem most clearly to overlap.²⁶

Democracy is the first “*acquis communautaire*”. It is naturally the first condition for membership, as established in June 1993 by the Copenhagen summit of the EU. (The “Copenhagen criteria” are: (1) democracy and human rights, (2) economic readiness for the single market, and (3) the capacity to implement EU legislation.) The degree to which the candidates met these conditions was assessed by the EU Commission in the “avis” (“opinions”)

²⁵ Ibid p 454

²⁶ In 1993 both the Czech Republic and Slovakia had to renegotiate a new association agreement with the EU which, unlike the original one in 1991 contained a suspension clause in case of violation of democratic principles and human rights. The Czech government refused the clause (on the grounds it did not feature in equivalent agreements with Poland or Hungary). The EU thus issued a unilateral declaration together with the association agreement cf *Bulletin de l’UE*, supplément n 3/1995 p 15

published as part of Agenda 2000 in July 1997. The Czech Republic was among the five countries recommended for opening negotiations for accession (along with two of Slovakia's other neighbours, namely Poland and Hungary), while Slovakia was the only country explicitly excluded on political grounds. It failed to meet basic democratic criteria. A major foreign policy setback for Slovakia was, therefore, essentially a domestic one:

"A democracy cannot be considered stable," said the Commission statement on Slovakia, "if respective rights and obligations of institutions such as the presidency, the constitutional court, or the central referendum commission can be put into question by the government itself and if the legitimate role of the opposition in parliamentary committees is not accepted."²⁷

Therefore, the meeting of democratic criteria was the clearest contrast between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in this respect. The Czech Republic is in a phase of democratic consolidation, to the extent that basic freedoms are guaranteed, that none of its political actors question the binding nature of the constitutional framework and what is at stake in elections is the future government not the nature of the political regime. In Slovakia, the underlying leitmotiv of political life until Autumn 1998, was precisely the debate over constitutional rules. And, in elections in both 1994 and 1998, it was the nature of the Slovak regime (not just the political colour of the government) that was at stake.

The two main problems in the European Union's assessment of democracy in Slovakia were the rule of law and the treatment of minorities. The violation of the Constitutional order by the Meciar government was obviously a major case in point, and particularly the fact that Slovakia passed the highest proportion of laws in the region that did not conform to the Constitution. More generally, the instability of the political system, the regular calls by Meciar for the resignation of the president and the fact that the opposition was not treated as a legitimate political actor (and was thus barred from adequate representation, even in parliamentary committees), distinguished Slovakia not just from the Czech Republic but from the rest of Central Europe.

A second point of comparison is provided by the EU's concern about citizenship and minority language laws. In the Czech Republic, this referred to 'the Roma question'; in Slovakia it implicated mainly the situation of the Hungarian minority. The two are not quite comparable, if only because the Roma issue (unlike that of the Hungarian minority) does not affect relations with neighbouring states. The Czech citizenship law has been criticised by the EU for

²⁷ Quoted in H.Grabbe and K.Hughes, *Enlarging the EU Eastwards*, London, Royan Institute of International Affairs, 1998, p 46

not being inclusive enough, and it was therefore amended in 1996 and 1997 in order to prevent a Roma from being denied citizenship on the grounds of a criminal record or Slovak origins. The majority of the Roma in the Czech Republic came from Slovakia either in the aftermath of World War Two, when they were encouraged to settle in the Sudetenland (from where the German population had been expelled), or more recently, at the time of the Czecho-Slovak split (when many assumed they would be better off on the Czech side of the divide)

However, the main difference between the situation of the Roma in the Czech lands and in Slovakia concerns neither their numbers,²⁸ nor the xenophobic attitudes of some sections of the population. Rather, it lies in the fact that the latter have been forcefully condemned by the Czech president and the government, and that a special commission was established in early 1998 to deal with the problem. By contrast, the Slovak prime minister until recently openly encouraged xenophobes with statements such as: "If we don't deal with them, they will deal with us."²⁹ Quite apart from its internal importance, it remains notable that for both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Roma issue became a point of contention with certain EU members, particularly Britain and Finland. Faced with Roma immigration from both countries, these members threatened to impose previously abolished visa obligations on the Czech Republic and Slovakia.³⁰ This possibly brought home the message about the EU's sensitivity to Central European xenophobia.³¹ It remains to be seen if such

²⁸ According to the 1991 census there were 75 802 citizens declaring themselves as belonging to the Roma minority in Slovakia. However, according to the city summaries and reports of the municipal offices from 1989 there were 253 943 (4,8%) Romas in Slovakia. A similar figure is now estimated for the Czech Republic. see Michal Vasecka, "Put down in the under-class", *The New Presence*, October 1999, p 12

²⁹ On 6 August 1998 Prime minister Meciar also suggested that the way to solve the unemployment problem among Romas was to provide "intellectually modest work". He added: "Slovaks produce first-rate values, Romanies only themselves ... Meciar's coalition ally Jan Slota, chairman of the Slovak National Party and mayor of Zilina declared in March 1998 : "In no case shall we agree that there is a Romany nationality. That is absolutely rubbish. They are Gypsies, who steal, plunder and loot.", quoted by M.Vasecka, art.cit. p 13

³⁰ Britain was the first EU member to threaten the Czech republic with visa obligations. It imposed visa obligations on the citizens of Slovakia in October 1998. In August 1999 Finland gave a similar warning to Slovakia. Belgium decided to expell over seventy Roma back to Slovakia by a special charter flight, *Le Soir* (Brussels) 6 October 1999

³¹ The building of a wall in the Northern Bohemian town of Usti nad Labem which would separate Czech families from their Gypsy neighbours provoked a sharp rebuff from the head of the European Commission Romano Prodi stating that "Europe will never accept new walls separating European citizens from one another. We have had enough walls in the past." On 13 October 1999 (while the wall was being built) the Czech Parliament rescinded the City Council's decision, declared the action illegal and had the wall demolished. cf "Czechs Wall For Gypsies Stirs Protest Accross Europe", *New York Times*, October 17, 1999

measures are helpful in attempting to overcome xenophobia, or whether they might actually make things worse by turning part of the population against the Roma (and against the EU).

For both the Czech and Slovak societies, the Roma issue is as revealing as social problem as it is an indicator of rampant xenophobia. However, in terms of its relevance to issues of identity, democracy and relations with a neighbouring state, it cannot be compared with the importance of the question of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. In a country of 5,5 million the confrontational attitude adopted by the Meciar government vis à vis the 650 000-strong Hungarian minority was seen by Budapest and the EU as a major weakness in Slovakia's democratic credentials. The passing of a language law in 1996 increased the tensions, with Slovakia ignoring of several recommendations of the EU and of the Constitutional court to amend the legislation. And this only seemed to confirm that the minority issue was an essential part of Meciar's strategy of nationalist mobilisation. His statement, in the face of the Hungarian prime minister, that if the Hungarians in Slovakia were dissatisfied they were free to go (to Hungary), was a clear signal to the Hungarian minority that no compromise would be possible with that government.³² What distinguished Meciar from Tudjman or Milosevic was not his objection to "ethnic cleansing" but the context (war) and the political "feasibility" (that is, the degree of acceptance by the rest of Slovak society).

Independently of these main differences concerning the degree of consolidation of democracy (the rule of law and the question of national minorities), parallels can be drawn between Klaus' and Meciar's stances on sovereignty, as well as between the way the Czech and the Slovak oppositions played the European card. Both contributed to turn the "European question" into one of domestic politics.

In Slovakia, the opposition and representatives of the Hungarian minority increasingly used EU criticisms of Meciar's policies in an attempt to internationalise the democracy issue. Conversely, Meciar denounced the opposition as damaging Slovakia's image abroad and serving foreign interests. The Meciar government dismissed demarches of the EU concerning the violations of democracy (one a year) and resolutions of the European Parliament directly referring to the possibility of exclusion from the enlargement process as misinformed. And it likened them to outside interference in the past (that is,

³² G.Horvathova and K.Wolf "Meciar navrhuje, aby Madari odesli" in *MFDnes* 6 September 1997. Meciar repeated the statement in a public meeting in Bratislava.

“about us without us” in 1938, 1939 or 1968).³³ The comparison between the EU’s democracy warnings and Hitler’s imperialism was revealing of two things: the illegitimacy of such interference in the affairs of a sovereign state, and the siege mentality of those who proclaimed themselves the upholders of sovereignty as a means of insulating their authoritarian power.

Vaclav Klaus’ defence of sovereignty had a different base. He has never missed an occasion to stress how much he owed to Mrs Thatcher in his views on politics and on Europe in particular. There he found a convergence between the critique of Brussels Commission and an ardent defence of national sovereignty. “We have not escaped from the controls of Moscow’s bureaucracy only to replace it by a more civilised version from Brussels” was the substance of his message while he was prime minister. When discussing the IGC institutional reform proposals in 1996, Klaus clearly stated his opposition to the introduction of qualified majority voting since it would imply “a loss of national sovereignty.”³⁴

This defence of the sovereignty of a nation-state under the double threat of supra-national Europe and regionalism has become an even more prominent part of the ODS “ideological” and political platform since it left the government and established a pact with the ruling minority social-democratic government in 1998. At the May 1999 ODS ideological conference the Shadow Minister of Defence, Petr Necas, emphasised that :

“we do not want a Europe of regions, we do not want a European super-state without nation-states, we do not want a supranational structure built from above by a distant federal bureaucracy. The nation-state is and will remain for us a basic building bloc of Europe. We want a Europe of nation-states, a Europe of fatherlands.”³⁵

The polarisation of the European debate on the issue of sovereignty became all the more explicit as both main protagonists (Havel and Klaus) became increasingly outspoken. In a speech before of a joint session of the French

³³ For details on the EU’s unsuccessful democracy dialogue with Meciar’s Slovakia see Alexander Dulaba, “Zahranicno-politicka orientacia a vnutorna politika SR” in S.Szomolanyi (ed.) *Slovensko: problémy konsolidacie demokracie*, Bratislava, Slovenske zdruzenie pre politické vedy, 1997, p 187-203

³⁴ The article published in January 1996 is reprinted in V.Klaus, *Obhajoba zapomenutych myslenek*, Prague, Academia, 1997, o 353 see also on this theme “Ceska republika a myslenka evropske integrace”, *Lidové Noviny*, 22 December 1993 or “Pad komunismu je vyzvou i pro ES”, *Cesky Denik*, 9 June 1993

³⁵ Petr Necas, stinovy ministr obrany na Ideové konferenci ODS, Prague, ODS, 29 May 1999. For a forceful critique of the “European super-state” and a defense of the nation state see the essay of Professor Vaclav Belohradsky, then closely associated with V.Klaus “Proti statu Evropa” in *Literarni Noviny* n 51-52 (18.12.1996) p 1-4.

Parliament in March 1999, Vaclav Havel called for the “parliamentarisation and a federalisation” of an enlarged European Union, and the drafting of a *European Constitution* “not very long, intelligible to all, provided with a preamble describing the meaning and the idea of the Union before defining its institutions, their mutual relations and their competencies.”³⁶ Havel also advocated a bicameral system for the European Parliament, “like in classical federations”. Havel’s “federalist paper” is possibly the first significant statement by a leader of a candidate country actually reflecting upon the purpose of, and making concrete suggestions for, the future institutions of an enlarged Union.

Havel’s call for a European constitution provoked a convergent rebuff from the Parliamentary Speaker, V. Klaus (“I am categorically opposed to the United States of Europe”), and by Prime Minister Milos Zeman. When in opposition, the latter had professed support for the EU as a way of opposing Klaus’ Eurosceptic posture. Once in government, the support became balanced by concerns over excessive interference by the EU: the loss of sovereignty that is implied by integration is resented less on ideological grounds than as a challenge to the government’s practices and ability to carry out necessary reforms.

NATO’s intervention in Kosovo led Havel to further push his arguments in favour of a newly defined international community, built around the notions of human rights and civil society at the expense of the sovereignty of nation-states.³⁷ It also revealed the emergence of a “sovereignist bloc” in Czech politics, where both main parties (the ODS and the Social Democrats) converged in a reluctant posture towards NATO’s intervention in the “internal” affairs of a sovereign state.³⁸ This is also where the issue of sovereignty overlaps with that of security.

3. *Security: Between Europe and the Transatlantic Dimension*

The third dimension of the contrasting Czech and Slovak attitudes towards the European Union concerns the issue of security. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Soviet hegemony in 1989, there was a brief period when President Havel and the then Czechoslovak foreign minister, Jiri Dienstbier, envisaged a Europe re-united through a parallel withering away of the two cold-war military pacts with the CSCE as a possible base for a new European security

³⁶ M.Plichta, “L’Union européenne revue et corrigée par Vaclav Havel”, *Le Monde*, 10 March 1999

³⁷ See in particular Havel’s speech in Ottawa in April 1999 published in V.Havel, *Pour une politique post-moderne*, Paris, Ed. de l’Aube, 1999, p 61-70

³⁸ J.Rupnik, “Na Balkane si sredni Evropa nedovedla vybrat” *MF Dnes*, June 1999

architecture. By the time the last Russian troops had left the country in 1991, the Atlantic Alliance was clearly identified with democratic security in Central Europe. With the Czecho-Slovak split, two quite different approaches to the EU and security appeared. The Czech policy considered joining NATO as a priority over joining the EU. The priorities of Slovak policy were the other way around.

After 1992, Czech foreign policy tried to make virtue out of necessity and claimed that the separation changed its geopolitical situation since the new state no longer had borders with the former Soviet Union (Zielenec) and thus had an allegedly better chance of joining Western institutions, particularly NATO. That orientation prevailed during most of the 1990s, until the country's actual inclusion in the Alliance in March 1999. The Czechs, on the whole, showed little sympathy with those West Europeans who had problems with the primacy of American power in the post-Cold War era, and they emphasised the prospects of a European Defence Identity (either within WEU or as part of a European pillar of NATO). In the debate about the prospects of a Common Foreign and Security Policy ("CFSP") the Czechs (much like the Poles and Hungarians) have been rather 'conservative'. This was partly because, as the war in Bosnia had shown, there was not yet much to speak of in terms of a European CFSP. And it was also partly because, in the discussions concerning NATO's new strategic concept, the Czech position remained sceptical about the "new NATO" with EDI and preferred the "old NATO" whose purpose was "to keep the Russians out, the Americans in and the Germans down."

Seen from Prague, the United States' primacy remained necessary to protect Europe against its own demons. After World War One, the United States had left Europe with disastrous consequences for the continent. After World War Two it stayed, thus helping to preserve peace and democracy for at least the Western half of Europe. The attraction of NATO for the Czechs (as for the Poles or the Hungarians) was related precisely to the fact that it was a US-led institution. In the words of Otto Pick, then Director of the Czech Institute of International Affairs (now Deputy Foreign Minister):

"It is the only organisation that links the United States with Europe. The EU is important to the Czechs, but in the EU the most influential country is Germany. In NATO, it is the United States. So to many people, NATO seems to be a political counterbalance to membership of the EU which many people see as being dominated by Germany".³⁹

³⁹ quoted by S. Vaarakallio, "Learning from history", *Europ* (May 1997) p 86

Hence the suggestion of turning the Czech Republic into a special ally of the United States.⁴⁰ The idea that candidates for NATO and EU membership are primarily seeking to enhance the US role in Europe (a role strongly advocated, particularly for Poland, by Z. Brzezinski) has not always contributed to the strengthening of their "European" credentials.

The problem with Slovakia's "European" credentials in this respect were quite different. Although the Meciar government never explicitly rejected the goal of joining the EU and NATO between 1994 and 1998, it demonstrated itself to be unwilling, in practice, to meet the basic pre-requisites at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy. Three factors played a part in the process: the anti-Western stance of the HDZ coalition partners, the Russian option, and the sabotage of the referendum on NATO for domestic political reasons.

Meciar maintained European integration at least as part of a declaratory government policy. But he also toyed with the idea of a Slovakia open to its Eastern neighbours -- a bridge between East and West. His coalition partners, the ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party and a small crypto-communist Workers' Party were both, for different reasons (nationalism in one case, antipathy to capitalism in the other) hostile to a clearly Western orientation for Slovakia.

As Western criticism of the domestic political conditions became explicit in the mid-1990s, Slovakia looked increasingly openly to Russia as a partner in both economic and security affairs. The Slovak military-industrial complex had suffered from the Prague-inspired ban on arms sales to former clients from the Warsaw Pact days (Syria, Iraq, Libya, etc). New ties with Moscow led eventually to the signing in Bratislava of a five-year agreement on military-technical co-operation in April 1997.⁴¹ The Soviet Ambassador to Bratislava, S. Zotov, clearly indicated that this co-operation "would become problematic in case of Slovakia's entry in NATO."⁴² The Slovak-Russian rapprochement became explicit when, in Bratislava, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, promised support for Slovakia's neutrality (in answer to Slovak concerns about Russian

⁴⁰ A. Vondra "Obcas potrebujeme supermana" in *Respekt* (10-16 March 1997). Mr Vondra, the main foreign policy advisor of President Havel, became deputy foreign minister in 1993 and Ambassador to the USA in 1997. It is interesting to compare this thesis ("sometimes we need a supaman") to a more recent one by the same author: "our national interest[s] are primarily in Europe" cf. A.Vondra "Svoje narodni zajmy mame v prvni rade v Evrope", *Lidové noviny*, 14 August 1999.

⁴¹ *SME* (Bratislava) 2.5.1997 "no party is allowed without prior written agreement of the other party pass on to a third country armament, military technology, documentation concerning its manufacturing aquired in the framework of technical-military cooperation".

⁴² *SME*, 25 April 1997.

guarantees for Slovak neutrality).⁴³ The Chairman of the Russian Duma visiting Bratislava went as far as suggesting to his counterpart that Slovakia should join the Confederation of Independent States. However he admitted the problem that “Slovakia does not have, for the time being, common borders with us.”⁴⁴ For the time being? In other words, if the Ukrainian situation evolved in a direction favourable to Russia, Slovak “neutrality” could acquire a new meaning. Meciar’s Slovakia was gradually becoming part of Russia’s dubious set of allies that ranged from Serbia to Mongolia.⁴⁵

It is in this context that Meciar’s confrontational domestic politics finally sabotaged Slovakia’s European integration project. The decision to hold a referendum in May 1997 on the country’s possible accession to NATO was problematic on two grounds: to the general question on membership another two, rather loaded questions were added concerning the stationing of foreign troops and of nuclear weapons in Slovakia. Most importantly, the referendum was also to include a domestic constitutional question concerning the direct election of the President. Meciar was unwilling to accept the inclusion of last of these questions (despite a decision by the Constitutional court which held that it should be included), did not provide adequate ballots and, eventually, amidst great confusion as to whether this was a domestic- or foreign-policy referendum, less than 10% of voters turned out. The exercise was thus exercise null and void. Two months later Slovakia was ruled out of the first wave of enlargement by NATO (and the EU). But the point of the matter was rather Slovakia’s deliberate self-exclusion from the double enlargement process.

⁴³ quoted in *Pravda* (Bratislava) 30 April 1997.

⁴⁴ *SME* 25 June 1997.

⁴⁵ On Slovakia “in the Russian orbit” see Daniel Butora, “Na obezne draze Ruska”, *Respekt*, 5-11.1997 The author stresses the close economic ties particularly with Gazprom and quotes the statement of a leading HDZ member in Parliament “The defense and securiy of Europe should be ganranteed by Europeans”.

III. Returning to Europe via Central Europe?

A balance sheet drawn five years after the Czecho-Slovak separation would have given a clear, yet somewhat deceptive, picture: two distinct itineraries, two modes of transition (a consolidated democracy in the Czech case, an “illiberal” democracy in Slovakia) leading to contrasting prospects of European integration with the Czechs “in” the first wave of enlargement of both the EU and NATO and the Slovaks in both cases “out”.

The contrast, however, is too neat to be true and the almost simultaneous demise of Klaus in Prague and of Meciar in Bratislava invites a more nuanced assessment that suggests possible new scenarios for the future. Both leaders left the centre stage with poor economic situations and empty state coffers, and both left to their successors the task of picking up the pieces while coping with the legacy of years of official anti-European rhetoric. Both countries found themselves somewhat at a loss: the Czechs after the exhaustion of Klaus’ free market utopia and the Slovaks after the exhaustion of Meciar’s nationalist dream.

The End of Czech “Exceptionalism” and of the Slovak Exception

A largely self-serving argument of the Czech political elite in the aftermath of the split with Slovakia, was based on the notion of Czech exceptionalism that implied a separate EU and NATO integration strategy from its Central European neighbours. In the words of a Czech observer, this prevailing argument was based on the following perms: “the prospect that a post-communist country could join the EU in the foreseeable future was so dim that only a solo effort, rather than a joint, co-ordinated campaign with Budapest and Warsaw, would give any chance of ‘ducking under the gates’.”⁴⁶

There were indeed specific features of the transition in the Czech lands. For the first time in its history, the country became a homogeneous nation-state. The transition was carried out by right-wing liberals while, elsewhere, ex-communist parties were already returning to the fore. No less importantly, Czech Social Democrats (the main opposition force at that time) were not the heirs of the old communist party. After the separation from Slovakia, the Czech Republic no longer had a border with the former Soviet Union and instead shared its longest borders with two EU members -- Germany and Austria. All of these specific features were meant to substantiate a would-be “doctrine” of Czech exceptionalism.

⁴⁶ Adam Cerny, “Prague’s reality Check” in *Transitions*, vol 5 n 4 (April 1998) p53.

This, of course, was making virtue out of necessity and provided a soothing rhetoric to cover the sense of loss. Never has a state been born in a more prosaic atmosphere. In contrast to Masaryk's view of the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 as part of a universal democratic movement, the Czech Republic was born in 1993 out of pragmatic reasons or even by default ("a Czech state founded by the Slovaks", Havel quipped ironically). It tried to compensate for the feeling of failure by cultivating a self-satisfied image of a small, but stable and prosperous, country with little interest in its neighbours. At the beginning of the century the Czechs had made an (admittedly modest) contribution to the dismantling of Austria. At the end of the century they seemed to aspire to nothing more than becoming another Austria.

Not only did this parochial vision of the newly created state not help to shape a "European" ambition, it combined with an ideologically motivated bout of premature Euroscepticism which managed to alienate not only neighbours but also potential allies within the EU. Klaus' approach could be described as Marxism of the Graucho kind ("I would not join a club that would have me as a member"). His clash at the 1996 World Economic Forum in Davos with the European Commissioner in charge of enlargement as to whether it was the candidates or the EU which had to do more reforming, prompted Hans van den Broek to conclude the exchange by reminding the Czech Prime Minister that "it is not the EU who wants to join the Czech Republic but the other way around."

The Czech exceptionalism of the Klaus era faltered on two grounds: ⁴⁷ it misread the geopolitical implications of enlargement (strategically Poland matters more), and it did not have the economic results to match its rhetoric. Voucher-privatisation turned out to be a brilliant political move but produced mediocre economic results: the vouchers were bought-up by investment funds backed by five still state-controlled banks which postponed the restructuring and modernisation of Czech industry. While Poland has had an average growth rate of between 5 - 7% since 1993, Klaus presided over a steady decline that had reached zero growth by the time he left power. The combination of liberal rhetoric and social-democratic practice left the Czech Republic with the lowest rates of unemployment in Europe (only matched by Liechtenstein and Luxembourg) but ill-prepared for the challenges of the European single market and lagging behind other Central European candidates.

From the point of view of future European integration, a related weakness of the Klausian transition was the erosion of the rule of law and of a proper legal and institutional framework for the emerging market economy. This eventually

⁴⁷ On the domestic politics of Czech exceptionalism see J.Rupnik, "Que reste-t-il de l'exception tchèque", *Libération*, 17 June 1996.

backfired in terms of both irregular practices and disaffection by investors, and it was also singled out by the European Union's Agenda 2000 (as well as successive progress reports in 1998 and 1999) as a major weakness in the Czech Republic's preparation for joining the EU. Klaus' emphasis on economic liberalism (the primacy of a rapid conversion to the market) at the expense of political liberalism (the rule of law, decentralisation and civil society) turned out to be counter-productive, especially from the point of view of European integration.

Czech "exceptionalism" was based on an economic strategy that did not succeed. The Slovak exception was essentially political. Between 1993 and 1998 Slovakia departed from the Central European pattern of democratic consolidation towards a nationalist brand of authoritarianism which thrived on an adversarial concept of politics focussing on alleged "enemies": external enemies (Czech, Hungarian) or internal (the opposition) ones. Slovakia's "regression" as, Stefan Hrib has suggested, was related to the fact that -- unlike its Central European neighbours -- it placed nation-state building at the "pinnacle of national life", subordinating economic and geopolitical advantages to that goal.⁴⁸ This Slovak exception was eventually sanctioned by the EU 1997 enlargement decision to leave Slovakia out of the Central European enlargement process.

Both Czech "exceptionalism" and the "Slovak exception" came to a close with the simultaneous departure from the government of the two main protagonists of the Czecho-Slovak divorce and need to come to terms with the failure of the respective visions and priorities that they had represented. The change in leadership was also a necessary pre-requisite for envisaging a new kind of Central European co-operation, and for making up for the "European deficits" (of an admittedly different kind) left behind by Klaus and Meciar.

One of the ironical legacies of the Czecho-Slovak separation is that, in its aftermath, both rediscovered that key to their identity and their European prospects were not Czechs for the Slovaks and vice versa, but their relations with Germany for the Czechs, and relations with Hungarians for the Slovaks. The end of Czechoslovakia meant the return of the German question for the Czechs and the return of the Hungarian question for the Slovaks. In the 19th century, the leading political figure and historian, Frantisek Palacky, wrote that the meaning of Czech history was to be found in its "contact and conflict" with the Germans. What then is supposed to be "the meaning" of Czech history now that its constitutive "other" is gone? Similarly, since the 19th century, "Slovaks have built their history, national consciousness and national identity not only out

⁴⁸ Stefan Hrib, "Being left behind", *Transitions* (April 1998) p 57.

of the Hungarian tradition but also in opposition to that tradition.”⁴⁹ The same could be said of the Czech-German relationship.

There is, of course, a difference between the two relationships in that the German question is now an external problem for the Czechs but remains an internal problem for Slovakia. The Czech republic has become a homogeneous nation-state: no more Germans, no more Jews and freshly separated from the Slovaks. Alone at last! The German question has nevertheless returned, albeit in a new, European context. Prague sees Germany as the main vector of Central Europe’s integration into the European Union. Yet, to the extent that it is identified with the spread of German influence, the prospects of European integration already provoke (according to opinion surveys) a certain apprehension. “In Europe’s name”, of course, to use the title of a study of German Ostpolitik.⁵⁰ As German influence returns to Central Europe, the Czech political elite seems to be in two minds: the dominant view has been to play the “German card” to enhance their prospects of enlargement of the EU, while assuming that the EU is also the best way to balance German influence in Central Europe. In this respect, the EU is seen as a functional equivalent of the Hapsburg Empire. But there is also a more apprehensive current of opinion (of which the Communist and the Republican extreme right are only the most vocal proponents) that is concerned, not just about the imbalance in the Czech-German relationship (Czecho-Slovakia is divided, Germany is reunited), but also about the uses and abuses of the Sudeten German question in the European accession process. The persistent calls by the Sudetendeutsche Landsmanschaft, relayed by the Bavarian CSU (the influential coalition partner in former Chancellor Kohl’s government), for the Czech authorities to satisfy their property claims and their “right to a homeland” (the abolition of the so-called ‘Benes decrees’ of 1945) as a condition for joining the EU, did not help to defuse Czech apprehension; and this was especially the case when an April 1999 resolution of the European Parliament, initiated by German CSU MPs, adopted the same argument.

However, the Czech-German declaration of February 1977, approved by both governments and both Parliaments, did contribute greatly to defusing those fears. The simultaneous coming to power of Social Democrats in Prague and Berlin has removed the Sudeten German issue from the top of the Czech-German agenda and pointed to the potential “Europeanising” role of Western

⁴⁹ Brano Hronec, “Slovak dilemmas with Identity and nationality: the controversy among Slovak intellectuals in the first half of the 19th century” in Charles W. Lowney (ed.) *Identities*, Vienna, IWM, 1998, p 266

⁵⁰ T.Garton Ash, *In Europe’s name*, London, 1994

social-democracy (12 out of 15 governments in the EU) vis à vis their Central European partners.

A parallel, albeit somewhat different argument can be made concerning Slovakia's relations with Hungary, since this is central both to the question of identity and also to the prospect of its entry into the EU. Hungary, in clear contrast with its pre-war revisionist policies (which led it to eventually become Hitler's last ally), adopted a European policy for relations with neighbouring countries with significant Hungarian minorities. "In Europe's name", Hungary seeks both the devaluation of borders, and guarantees of minority rights, in line with provisions advocated by the Council of Europe. And it is significant that, on the opening day of the 1995 European Stability Pact conference in Paris, Hungary and Slovakia signed a bilateral treaty providing for Hungarian recognition of the intangibility of their borders and Slovakia's commitment to implement the cultural and linguistic rights of its Hungarian minority.

Although Prime Minister Meciar did sign the treaty, his government did little to implement its minority provisions. In fact he systematically used the "image of the enemy" that Hungarians represent in the eyes of Slovak nationalists to polarise relations with the minority and with Budapest. The culminating point of that strategy of tension came in August 1997 when Meciar told the Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn (and later repeated his comment during a public meeting with his supporters in Bratislava) that the dissatisfaction of Hungarians from Slovakia could be solved by their transfer to Hungary.⁵¹ Horn later expressed shock at the proposal and at the decision to make it public. The leader of the Slovak minority in Slovakia, Béla Bugár, called it an attempt to introduce a policy of "ethnic cleansing".

With Meciar's departure from power after the nationalists' electoral defeat in September 1998, the new democratic government coalition promptly departed from the previous confrontational policies (vis a vis the Hungarian minority and the Hungarian government as such) in favour of an inclusive policy seen as an essential part of Slovakia's European strategy. The inclusion in the government of representatives of the Hungarian government, the revision of the language law and the solution of the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam issue through European and international court arbitration, are all meant to win Hungary's support for Slovakia's "upgrading" in the first Central European group for EU enlargement. This Central European dimension became increasingly important for Prague and Bratislava in their bilateral relationship and in their EU accession strategy.

⁵¹ G.Horvatova – K.Wolf, "Meciar navrhuje, aby Madari odesli", *MF Dnes*, 6 September, 1997

Among the first casualties of the Czecho-Slovak split was the project of Central European co-operation. Both Klaus's theory of Czech exceptionalism and the Slovak exception under Meciar meant that political co-operation among the Visegrad group was put on ice. The Czechs thought that regional co-operation was a substitute for the "real" goal of "going West". Slovakia, the only country with borders with each of the other three, could hardly reconcile the Visegrad process with its difficult relations with Prague and Budapest. All this changed with the departure from office of Klaus and Meciar, and the ensuing Czech and Slovak policy changes towards EU and NATO enlargement.

The Czechs were made to understand that they had better have good co-operation with Poland, the key strategic partner for the Alliance, if they wanted to join NATO. They also discovered that, given their mediocre economic performance (zero growth) and their lagging behind in terms of preparation for EU accession (see the EU's critical reports of November 1998 and October 1999), they could actually benefit from the positive Central European (rather than Czech) image as the "success story" of the transition. The accession negotiation process itself eventually brought Prague to increasingly openly co-ordinate its strategy with other Central European candidates. And the more advanced the negotiations with the EU, the more obvious it has become to Czech governments that it was in their interest to have Slovakia included in the first Central European enlargement wave. This, as Foreign Minister Jan Kavan pointed out, concerns more specifically the issues of borders ("It is difficult, given our common history, to imagine a standard Schengen border between the Czech Republic and Slovakia") and the customs union with Slovakia (which the Czech wish to keep after accession).⁵² No less importantly, the Czecho-Slovak rapprochement in their EU accession strategy is presented as closely connected with the "rebirth of Visegrad".

This development clearly fits Slovakia's new European strategy. Just as Meciar's prime interest was power rather than a European agenda, the government of Mikulas Dzurinda has established 'accession into the EU' as its priority: the change of attitude towards the rule of law and an inclusive policy towards the Hungarian minority are meant to make up for the inherited democratic deficit. The Slovak case shows that there is no better remedy to the drawbacks of "illiberal" or "electoral" democracies than the electoral process itself. The heterogeneous coalition government in Bratislava is held together largely thanks to a common adversary (Meciar) and a common European goal -- just as the Zeman-Klaus pact in Prague rests on the implicit assumption of not making speedy accession into the EU a top priority. The support of Central

⁵² Jan Kavan, lecture at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), Paris, 24. April, 1999

European neighbours is an essential ingredient of this policy. The increasingly close Czecho-Slovak relationship is also an important part of it, though a part that is deliberately not overplayed. The suggestion that the front-runners in the accession process should put to good use a "special relationship" with their Eastern neighbours in the shape of a would-be "patronage" over their EU and NATO accession (Czechs for Slovaks, Poland for Lithuania, Hungary for Romania) is not endorsed in either Bratislava nor Prague. If somebody is to have a key role, then it is Poland; called a "strategic partner" by the Slovak foreign minister, Poland is clearly a country aspiring to become a spokesman for Central Europe on enlargement issues.⁵³

Slovakia's neighbours understand that it is also in their interests that Slovakia is not excluded from the enlargement process, leaving "a hole in the map" of Central Europe. The introduction of Schengen borders between Slovakia and the other three first wave enlargement candidates would create more problems than it would solve. The meeting of the foreign ministers of the "V4" group in Bratislava in May 1999 clearly marked the return of a Central European approach to enlargement and established a common goal of helping Slovakia "catch up" with the EU enlargement train. The train is moving so slowly that this hope might prove not to be an unrealistic one.

Paradoxically, the least enthusiastic neighbour concerning the enlargement of the EU to include the Czech Republic and Slovakia is Austria. This increasingly explicit reluctance has been formulated in terms of conditionality for EU accession: Austria demands the closure of nuclear plants in Slovakia (Mochovce and Jaslovské Bohunice) and in the Czech Republic (Temelin).⁵⁴ Certain political forces -- Haider openly, the Christian People's Party (ÖVP) more cautiously -- have also raised the Sudeten German question (abolition of the Benes decrees of 1945) as a condition for accession. Where all the parties seem to converge is in expressing the fear that the enlargement would mean the arrival of cheap labour from the neighbouring countries.⁵⁵ An EU-wide

⁵³ It is this broader role that Poland sees for itself that has also brought into the open some differences with both Prague and Bratislava on the question of visa requirements for Ukrainians. Poland insists it wants, for political as well as economic reasons, to keep an open border with the Ukraine. In contrast, Slovakia is coordinating with the Czech Republic the introduction of visa obligations for the Ukraine as part of their EU pre-accession policy. cf. Slovak foreign minister Eduard Kukan statement "Viza pro ukrajince chceme zavest koordinovane s CR" in *Pravo*, 11 November 1999. Slovakia had no visa obligations with Russia, Ukraine, Bielorrussia, Bulgaria, Romania and Cuba, and decided to change its policy for reasons of EU integration, security and immigration.

⁵⁴ Martin Plichta, "Une centrale nucléaire slovaque inquiète les Autrichiens", *Le Monde* 29 May 1998; see also *SME* 30 April 1999.

⁵⁵ Waltraud Baryli, "Les Autrichiens ont peur de l'Est", in *L'Européen* n 7 (6. May 1998) p

⁵⁵ The right wing leader Jörg Haider (27% in the October 1999 elections) declared that the

opinion poll by Eurostat revealed that only 6% of Austrians and 3% of Germans were in favour of the free movement of the labour force from the Eastern neighbour candidate countries.⁵⁶ In the two neighbouring EU countries on whose support Czechs and Slovaks relied in their European strategy, voters are proving to be increasingly cool towards the Eastern enlargement of the Union.

These developments have made it all the more important, for both Czechs and Slovaks, to rely on a co-ordinated Central European accession strategy. In the aftermath of the collapse of the communist regime they chose to go to Europe, separately. Before the end of the decade they both came to the conclusion that their “return to Europe” has to start with their return to Central Europe. And jointly integrating the European Union will also be a way of overcoming the legacy and the traumas of the partition.

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enlargement towards the East would be a “declaration of war” to Austria and requests a referendum on the issue. The chairman of Austria’s Trade Unions, F. Verzetnisch, fears the arrival of “an army of 150 000 to 500 000 people seeking work”. There is little evidence to substantiate such estimates. In the meantime Austria’s exports to Central European candidates increased by 123% between 1989 and 1996. No less importantly: the experience of previous EU enlargements points not to vastly increased labour mobility but mainly to capital mobility.

⁵⁶ Eurostat survey released in Brussels on March 1998; summary provided by CTK agency 16 March 1998.



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