Experience of Czech identity

The concept of the Czech nation as a community sharing the same language and culture, crystallized during the national revival in the nineteenth century, but Czechs consider this community to be a natural entity that has existed since “the dawn of history”. Czech history is considered to be discontinuous because for centuries it has been “interrupted” by various forms of foreign oppression, by various forms of “foreign” decisions concerning the Czech future. “For many Czechs, the future is not just uncharted territory but out and out enemy territory - we (Czechs) do not believe in the future because, for a long time, it did not belong to us. Many of us see the future as an untrustworthy - if not treacherous - thing, which someone has somehow prepared for us.”

Czechs sometimes describe their history by referring to periods of darkness which started in 1620 and repeated itself in 1938, 1948 and yet again in 1968. It is since then that the Czech identity has acquired characteristics such as defeatism, lack of self-confidence, inner conflict between what one feels is right and what one reasons to be prudent, a feeling of being abandoned, a tendency to leave things unfinished, “as if only an approach to situations, a desire to cocoon and blot out unpleasant reality instead of facing it and changing it, and the fear of being found out.” (Kuras, 1999: 133). The periods of darkness in Czech history are, however, fortunately discontinuous and are usually interrupted by some historical moments at which Czechs reassure themselves of their own identity and from which they gather new hopes and strengths.

The Czech return to Europe – 1989-92

One such historical moment was November 1989, when the atmosphere in the Czech lands resembled October 1918 (when the First Czechoslovak republic was established). The fall of communism was characterized by a tremendous enthusiasm, a number of illusions and expectations but also a willingness to continue in the democratic tradition of the First Republic.
Post-communist, Czech(oslovak) identity has been therefore constructed as the identity of a democratic, civilized, well-educated, and cultured nation, i.e. a nation that has always belonged to Europe, that has always been European and also a nation that has detested being classified as Eastern European, that has claimed to be a part of Central Europe, lying geographically in-between Western and Eastern Europe, “itself seen as a traditional cross-roads of the political, religious and cultural movements of the Continent” (Holý, 1996: 129) The figurative slogan “The Return to Europe”, to which media and some politicians referred to in 1990, has epitomized “a return to the normal order of things” for Czechs. It was a return to a Europe to which they have always felt they belonged, and with which they have always claimed to have had strong cultural and historical ties.

The year 1990 was characterized by a tremendous relaxation in all spheres of Czech life, it was a moment of Czech identity re-awakening and re-realizing. “After 40 years of domination of two superpowers, Czechs started finding their identity again. They started rediscovering their role of full-fledged subjects in European events.” (Dientsbier, 06/1991: 604) The Czech identity aimed to be anything but what it used to be during Communism and Czech democracy aimed to be anything but totalitarianism. In other words, the concept of democracy was employed rather rhetorically, it was defined (and understood) in terms of “freedoms from” rather than responsibilities and “freedoms for” and this definition had some anarchic connotations. On the other hand, Czech identity started constituting itself as an open identity both inside and out (excepting the identification with the Soviet Empire as one of its most significant). The identity pendulum swiftly moved away from the Soviet, communist, and past foreign impulses and tried to reach a completely opposite position that would be as far away as possible from the previous one.

The streets, squares and cinemas were renamed and red stars were removed almost overnight but the actual mind-set, the discrepancy between what one was willing to be identified with and what one actually was identified with, the actual change in the attitudes of the political community, the actual content of democracy, proved to be difficult to adjust in one decade. As Václav Havel described it in his first presidential New Year’s address to the Nation: “The worst thing is that we live in a contaminated moral environment. We fell morally ill because we became used to saying something different from what we thought. We learned not to believe in anything, to ignore one another, to care only for ourselves. Concepts such as love, friendship, compassion, humility or forgiveness lost their depth and dimension, and for many of us they represented only psychological peculiarities or they resembled gone-astray greetings from ancient times.”

Communism left Czech society tremendously atomized, with almost no horizontal social relationships that are so vital for
the construction of identity. Building up areas of communal activities has been therefore quite problematic, because under communism, people trusted only themselves, close relatives and friends. In the first few years which followed the Velvet Revolution, Czechs and Slovaks became “inpatient, nervous, somewhat confused from their freedom and surprised by the amount of problems and tasks they were facing.” (Havel, 06/1991: 421) “Surprisingly, freedom has given vent to a number of bad feelings.... in an atmosphere of general impatience, nervousness, disappointment and doubt, elements of malice, suspicion, mistrust and mutual accusation were insinuating themselves into public life.” Czechs “had defeated the monolithic, visible and obvious enemy and now - driven by their dissatisfaction and by the need to find a living culprit - they were searching for enemies in each other.” (Havel, 1991 - New Year’s Address to the Nation)

The majority of expectations vested into the political change in 1990 were hardly achievable but these were the expectations from “those in authority”, from the particular change of political system, and/or other Czechs rather than expectations of individuals from themselves. It was in 1990 when the Czech identity again disclosed its typical feature: “messianism” (as it did in 1918 and 1948), the Czech capacity to accept (or turn to) something almost unquestionably, believing that it will bring something better, a tendency to be prone to easy solutions, a tendency not to rely on oneself or one’s own potential. This identity feature is related to the belief (caused by a certain inertia after forty years of communism) that the political process is an alien process, that it is not worth trying to change because “those in authority” decide about it by themselves anyway; a belief that politics is accessible only during elections. In 1991 Czechs still felt themselves distanced from the political elite and party politics that had traditionally been very personalized. Messianism and relying on others besides oneself is advantageous when it comes to responsibility for some mistakes. Czechs can very easily lay blame on others, point a finger at others, they “manage unproblematically to preserve their belief in a democratic tradition as characteristic of their nation because all the past collapses of the democratic form of government can be seen as catastrophes imposed on them by others: by the Nazis in 1939, in a coup d´état inspired by Moscow in 1948, and by the Soviets in 1968.”

One of the posters which appeared after the first free elections in June 1990 simply said: “Havel=Democracy”. Václav Havel was seen as a messianic figure, “bearing the cross of the oppressed nation”, as Holý put it, and even though he was almost unknown to the majority of Czechs and Slovaks at the end of 1989, many hopes of the revolution were vested in him and his new presidential role. The overthrow of socialism as such took the form of national liberation and the role of President Havel was analogous to the role of President Masaryk in 1918 when he made the old dream of the Czech Lands to administrate their own affairs come true and liberated Czechs
from what had been seen as the oppression of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Václav Havel also represented a certain moral model for the Czech nation at the beginning of the 1990s, he was a determinant of the way Czechs perceived themselves and the way they thought they were perceived by the West. He was understood as a guarantee that Czechoslovakia is not going to experience any resurgence of communism. He was somebody with whom the entire Czechoslovak nation felt identified (as well as represented by) and especially to be identified with his ideals, morality, understanding of Czech history and appeal to the first Czechoslovak president.

Transition from communism to plural democracy, from state planned economy to market economy, from “subject” (totalitarian) to “participatory” (democratic) political culture made it imperative for the Czech identity itself to be in transition and the question still remained, to what? Czechs started defining their region, their identity, and their history as something that had been in a constant transformation, constantly questioned, developing discontinuously, as something incoherent, something that had been suffering from continuous incompleteness and a lack of finality. In the first three years after the fall of the iron curtain, Czechoslovakia found itself in “a dramatic phase of searching for its political identity and was looking for an optimal form of its state and constitutional principals.” (Havel, 06/1991: 420)

The transformation of the Czech(oslovak) identity came very soon in 1992 when the split of Czechoslovakia was negotiated at the level of the political elite and represented another historical top-down (imposed) political change, re-illustrated in the Czech(oslovak) tradition of state dominated politics, as well as a gap between the individual and the state.

Velvet divorce – 1992-93

The Slovak nation did not have a historical experience of statehood similar to that of the Czech nation and “when the totalitarian framework was dismantled and the conditions for universal democratic development began to emerge, it was clear, that beside other formally suppressed problems the question of Slovak national revival is going to be raised with all relevance. Nobody, however, was able to predict its edge, intensity and strength with which it stood up.” (Čalfa, 06/1991: 539)

As Milan Znoj pointed out, Czechoslovak identity was a political construction. The constitution of 1918 declared the Czechoslovak language the official language of the republic, but in reality, there were two, separate Czech and Slovak languages (and also a German language, since 25% of the population used it as their first language). State sovereignty was granted to a “Czechoslovak nation”, but a nation cannot exist without its language and from the linguistic point of view, the word
“Czechoslovak” has always been a compound of two words - Czech and Slovak. “The idea of the Czechoslovak nation had emerged from an organic conception of the nation - it was an ethnic conception of Gemeinschaft (national community).”

Nevertheless, the majority of Czechs felt themselves to be Czechoslovak and the creation of two independent states (in 1993) in place of the Czechoslovak federation was something they had never wanted. “Unfortunately, the most conspicuous conflict, one inherited from the past and put aside for decades, was the Czech-Slovak conflict, which marked - although we in the Czech Republic did not wish so - the first three years of our freedom.” (Klaus, 01/1993: 17) For many Czechs, Czechoslovakia was synonymous for “their” state. The Czechoslovak Republic was seen as the revival of Czech historical statehood, i.e. the continuation of the Bohemian kingdom, and was created artificially on the basis of pragmatic considerations of the particular time. From this point of view the creation of two independent states (the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic) in 1993 was very similar, artificial, decided exclusively on the level of the political elite, but also as a result of the Czechoslovak elections in 1992 which decided about Czecho-Slovak relations at the time. Also thanks to political rhetoric, the split of Czechoslovakia was interpreted as a result of spontaneous historical development, as something natural and inevitable.

Czechoslovak identity was more Czech than Slovak, “the Czechoslovak nation was made up of Czechs and Slovaks, who were said to have a common founding figure in the legendary Father Czech.” Another reason for the domination of Czech features in Czechoslovak identity was the historical fact that it had “outlived” the second World War on the Czech territory, because Czechoslovakia was split in 1938 by the Nazi invasion into Bohemia and Moravia. Slovakia’s role during the war was similar to “Vichy France”.

What happened in 1992 was thus a birth of two “new” identities - Czech and Slovak - and whereas Slovak identity was, historically, really new, it was not problematic for the majority of Czechs to define their identity, because it had been synonymous with the Czechoslovak one (for 67 years). Czechs, in this case, did not try to “draw a thick line under their history” as they did under every historical discontinuity (and especially under Communism); the Czech identity merely began to understand Slovak identity as one of its significant Others, it started comparing itself with it and (in some cases) even defining itself as opposed to it. In many Czechs' consciousness, Slovakia has belonged politically, economically and even geographically, to Eastern Europe since 1993.

A little bit of optimism – 1993-95

The border with Slovakia was a new historical experience that interestingly made Czechs subconsciously identify themselves
with the western part of Europe with a greater intensity. "The length of Czech border with Western European states (Austria, Germany) is, in comparison with the rest of the border, far longer. This means that we (Czechs) are much more pushed towards the West. We have lost the immediate contact with the Danube area...we do not have the immediate contact with the territory of former Soviet Union." (Zieleniec, 05/1993: 396)

The Czech nation was standing at the crossroads again and had to start establishing and reforming its new state. This was happening in the atmosphere of sober optimism. Czechs were overly self-confident, the majority of the Czech society had not ceased to identify itself with the fundamental philosophy of the reforms and, very soon after the split of Czechoslovakia, Czechs began to believe that in terms of the success of transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, from communist to democratic political arrangement, their country was standing in the front row among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The ambition was clear: to establish a “standard, democratic, Western-European state with efficient economy of Western-European style” (Zieleniec, 05/1994: 412), an advanced, prosperous state that would become a member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization but, as Josef Zieleniec rightfully emphasized, no state can be accepted among the advanced and prosperous countries, it has to become one.

Thinking about the actual form of new Czech statehood, about the concrete reforms, was going on consecutively with thinking about the future Czech membership in the European structures, as well as with thinking about the future form of European integration. The Czech prime minister at the time, Václav Klaus, pointed out that Czechs found themselves in a process of reformulation of their state and national interests and were facing a double task: “to find their own identity, and not to lose it straight away on their road to Europe.” (05/1994, 361) Václav Klaus emphasized that “we (Czechs) should admit the legitimacy of national feelings (and not be ashamed of it), we should not accept the misleading and false idea that something called Europe must be great, strong, united, prefabricated and controlled from above to survive in the current economic, political and military competition in the world.” (05/1994: 363)

Václav Havel, on the other hand, was rather in favour of “an integration based on the principle of civic society” than in favour of “the return to particular national interests” and emphasized that he understood “the European integration as a certain reflection of all the past dangers caused by the existence of states which were based on the national principle.” (05/1994, 327) Josef Zieleniec seemed to be supportive of this argument: “The idea of Europe is a chance, unprecedented for centuries, to break up with the historical routines and mechanisms which represented a curse for Europe and which has
Crisis of expectations – 1996-97

Six years after the fall of communism, and four years after the division of Czechoslovakia into two independent and sovereign states, many Czechs began to feel that not all of their expectations vested into the political change they experienced in 1989 had been fulfilled. This “crisis of expectations” resulted in a greater political apathy and into a certain “crisis of confidence” in politics and success of the economic transformation as such. Financial scandals in the political parties, lack of consensual politics during the coalition government’s term of office in 1996 and 1997 and division of opinions or political ambitions between different members of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) only fostered the climate of the “crisis of expectations” (which President Havel called “a bad mood”). It can be argued that this climate was just a historical continuum of politics with low consensual capacity, inconsolable or little politics which has its origin in geographical littleness of the Czech lands, as well as in some characteristics which are often considered to be typical only for Czechs.

Characteristics of the Czech identity

The concept of littleness is interestingly sometimes regarded as the fundamental feature of Czech identity. It embraces tendency to accept any changes in messianic fashion, passively obeying something one is strongly dissatisfied with, something that Václav Klaus called a Czech tendency to, here and there, cower in history, a certain carelessness, cowardliness, preferring definite to the uncertain, blaming others for one’s own faults, expecting something from others, but not from oneself, disclaiming responsibility.

Czech littleness is a constant immaturity, caused mainly by numerous historical discontinuities and by the fact that Czechs did not have too much historical space to “grow up” politically, i.e. it has been somebody else deciding about them or/and instead of them. Littleness also refers to a limited scope (perspective), to a limited horizon of some Czechs who are comfortable enough not to see behind the mountains surrounding the Czech basin or even behind the borders of their district town. “Close ourselves between our mountains, let the world currents flow along, go out of our way and we are going to be sitting in our little garden.” (Havel, 2000: LN: 18 October)

The word “comfort” in Czech understanding (pohoda) refers to much more than just a physical comfort. Benjamin Kuras pointed out that it also means hominess, coziness, harmony, self-satisfaction, easy-going relationship, rewarding and not too strenuous activity, pleasant overall atmosphere, and absence of strife, effort of pain, and an undisturbed pastoral idyll. “It means a state of affairs which involves no need to take risks or
face challenge, be disturbed by new or unfamiliar things, have to deal with dangers or shortages.”

The littleness is hence also about unwillingness to achieve something that seems to be less achievable, that demands the taking of a little risk, doing something with a little bit of effort. It is a notion that I, as an individual, cannot change anything and with which I float through time in the same sense as the popular Czech literary character, Good Soldier Schweik. Schweik is an epitome of the “little Czech man” (malý český člověk), an individual member of the Czech nation, whereas the term covers all the negative traits a Czech sees in other Czechs, but not himself: cowardice, cantakerousness, sycophancy, lack of self-esteem covered by know-it-all habits, anxiety to make a good impression, and hypocrisy. (Kuras, 1999: 38) Czechs have learnt to be extremely creative and innovative in hiding the real state of affairs, and in finding ways of eluding the rules and regulations. The reason can be found in their historical experience of finding the best way of surviving under foreign domination and also their continuous experience of finding the best way of preventing other Czechs from envying to them.

Envy is unfortunately among the most often mentioned characteristics of the Czech nation. “If I think seriously about various dangers, then these are purely domestic dangers. Czech envy is a terribly, terribly bad thing.” (Klaus, 06/1995: 405)

This characteristic of the Czech identity escalated especially with the fall of Communism, when some people were in a position to benefit from the situation and hence the “nouveau riches” emerged soon after 1989. It is true that some people got rich quick, but there were many people who welcomed the transition to democracy as a great opportunity, as a challenge to conduct business, to (re)gain private property of their own, or their ancestors, and revive it. Yet many Czechs are still mistrustful of anyone who is doing even a notch better and profoundly suspicious of anyone’s success (usually not reached by the above-mentioned comfort). They know now to be very critical and almost neurotically dissatisfied with everything, they have great wants but also a tremendous capacity to adapt and “a tremendous capacity to present themselves to the outside world in a much better light that they see themselves” (Kuras, 1999: 17).

Czechs do not celebrate their national heroes and victories as much as their martyrs (e.g. St. Wenceslas, John Huss) and suffering, as a nation. “The strength of the (Czech) nation is not in its moral victories, but in its ability to survive three hundred years of Habsburg oppression, six years of German occupation, and forty-three years of Communism through pretended loyalty and tacit or explicit collaboration.”

The historical discontinuities were partially redefining the Czech identity but they were outlived thanks to the main features of Czechness and have paradoxically forged and reassure these features. Czechs have simply lived through all the
historical discontinuities thanks to their love of comfort, to their ability to laugh at the most serious situations satirically, to make fun of authority and to disclaim responsibility; thanks to their language, music, sense of humour, literature and their notion of themselves as being as inherently democratic, well-educated and highly cultured nation.

Czechs are diligent, friendly, cultured, and skillful. They have the ability and capacity to learn and they often remember what they have learnt. They are vulpine, highly adaptable to changing circumstances and are also “spineless flexible twigs that bent down under pressure, only to lash back when least expected...they have a bounce-back, pick-up, and dust-off power which seems to emerge out of nowhere to everyone’s surprise each time it does.” (Kuras, 1999: 15) They are determined to better themselves materially, intellectually, culturally, under every circumstance and are doing so methodically and with a certain orderliness (almost as the Germans with whom they have much more in common, more than most of them are willing to acknowledge - in terms of taste, architecture and history). Czechs do not forget that the Czech lands represented two-thirds of the industrial strength of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century and “their aim is simply nothing less than being at the very top of the European league where they feel they have always belonged.” (Kuras, 1999: 37)

National identity is not purely constructed on negative self-reflection; we do not define ourselves only vis-a-vis others but also on the basis of what is good in our identity and points to the future. And this is where a supranational identity should gather its defining features; this is where any supranational identity should be more than an artificial set consisting of several subsets of national identities. In this respect, the European identity in the Czech public discourse, is a “transforming identity.”

The concept of homeland

The word “homeland” has a very strong national undertone for Czechs, because vlast (homeland) is related to vlastní (own), as opposed to cizina (foreign country/ies) derived from cizí (foreign). As one Czech expressed it, “A homeland is an environment in which everything is familiar to me and I do not have to learn new ways of doing things, in which I can live without fear of the unknown, in which I know what is proper and improper to say and do.” (Holý, 1996: 186) Up until this day, this definition of homeland has not become synonymous for Czechs’ feeling of belonging to Europe and it depends on the future political, economic, and social reproduction of Czech national identity as to whether a similar understanding of homeland is going to be extended to Europe (EU).
Approaching the European Union 1998-2004

Czech identity is still being experienced in a rather autonomous fashion. Czechs remain very conservative in terms of habituation of living their identity. The way they are living their identity is still very individualized and the global redefinition of social identity supports this. As Christopher Pierson expressed it, here we are a name on a page; there we are a web-site address; elsewhere we are a National Insurance number in a government computer. “Our relationship to modern society - our social identity - has become unglued from the context, communities and expectations that once circumscribed my (and your) knowledge of who I am and how I live. Today, I am responsible and liable for my own identity.” Yet Czechs do not feel that they are responsible for their own identity, they tend to feel it is just inevitably and naturally formed, constructed, that it is often imposed by “the others”. The Czech identity is constructed as something given, hardly changeable by the Czechs themselves, yet very well changeable from the outside.

Czechs tend to feel that their identity within the European Union has been somehow pre-arranged for them, prepared by somebody else. The majority of Czechs do not doubt the historical necessity of and opportunity for the Czech Republic’s entry into the European Union but they question their role in it. If there was a public discourse in the Czech lands on European identity and prospective Czech membership in the EU in the 90s, it was about the question “What can we offer to Europe?” In this respect, Václav Klaus interpreted Czech European-ness as “an obligation to safeguard and preserve Czech distinctive features” because, as he believes, “they are exactly what Czechs can offer to Europe.” (Klaus, 01/1995: 31)

The question of a Czech offer to Europe is being asked with certain complexity, it is an expression of Czech littleness, persisting for centuries, something that Lubomír Mlčoch called “a complex of national inferiority.” (2000: LN 13-07) The more important issue is how Czechs shall contribute to the discussion about the future of European integration. The more important issue (and offer to Europe) is Czech historical experience with socialism, with different kinds of forced integration, and Czech culturalness. Czech history has often made Czechs defend and fight for their freedom, and therefore they are very sensitive and cautious about losing it.

The question of Czech national identity in public discourse has been mostly addressed by Václav Havel and Václav Klaus, both of whom have a strong relationship with the Czech nation and Czech statehood. The issue of Czech identity with respect to membership in the European Union is accentuated by both of them from different perspectives, but neither of them constructs national identity in opposition to the European one. Both Havel and Klaus place Czech national identity in the
European background, but whereas Václav Havel tends to address features of national identity that are negative and are disturbing for the future Czech membership in the EU, Václav Klaus sometimes tends to point at some discrepancies and artificial contours in the European background that are disturbing for Czech membership.

The current Czech public discourse about European identity is largely centered around Václav Klaus’s notion of a “nation state as a building block of the European integration process”, his declension of “our national interest” and, more crucially, his statement: “It is in our national interest to enter the European Union so that it is in our interest and not in the interest of somebody else.” Many Czechs answer to this, they do prefer to enter the European Union but “to be themselves”. In other words, they can imagine unification tendencies in Europe only if their national sovereignty and identity is to be preserved, only if it is not going to be dissolved in Europe. Václav Havel thinks that the Czechs are afraid of a new space that is going to open to them at the time of their entry into the European Union. He claims that this is “a legacy of slippers tradition from the times when Czechs were living in comfort, without any necessity to make some effort, when life was flowing sweetly.” (2000: LN 01-12)

Václav Klaus, on the other hand, points at the discrepancy between the interests of the European bureaucrats and “ordinary citizens of Europe.” It seems to him that “it is a pure mistake to create all-European entity…there is the interest of the group of European bureaucrats, people who, as I smilingly say, are having breakfast in Venice, lunch in Paris, and supper in Copenhagen. They need the single currency to be able to do it. They need the overbureaucratized institutions for such a kind of European integration. What stands against this is the interest of almost three hundred million Europeans who are unable to organize themselves.” (Klaus, 1999: LN 03-06) Václav Klaus sees Europe standing at a very confusing (blind) crossroads where it is difficult to turn (2000: LN 24-11) and Václav Havel seems to understand this crossroads as an era of self-reflection, “which means that Europe wants to define itself vis-a-vis the others, and also to search itself for that which is good in it; that which has proved beneficial; and that which points to the future.”

Václav Klaus is afraid of “hurray-Europeanness” and claims that we are living in the moment of “crucial questioning of nation states, or their sovereignty, through emphasizing external views above the internal ones.” The extent of this emphasis is determined, according to Havel, primarily by us. The more important question is a question of co-existence of various, diverse identities. “Nowadays, any identity can truly live and flourish only if it breathes the free air of the world; if it defines itself against a background of a lasting and living neighbourly relationship with other identities; and, if it confronts, in a dignified manner, the adverse winds that blow across the world today.” (Havel, 2000: www.hrad.cz - 28-10)
A newly-emerged apathy and even carelessness nowadays unfortunately characterize Czech identity. Many Czechs remain profoundly conservative, with a whatever-comes-might-be-worse attitude. This attitude has not been engendered by the communist past, so much as by the past few years because not all the expectations vested into the change of political and economic system have been fulfilled. Communism depoliticized Czech society but since the fall of the Communist regime Czechs have been active in building up areas of communal activities, intermediary institutions and various associations, which are so vital for the actual content of democracy.

The experience of EU membership has a potential to reproduce Czech democratic tradition and speed up the habituation of substantive (i.e. attitudinal) democracy and participatory political culture, including the civic aspects of democracy as such. It has a potential to extend the space for making the most of Czech identity. Membership in the European Union represents, above all, a unique Czech historical opportunity for national self-realization. The Czech nation should not be, in this respect, constituted as a defensive one. Czech national consciousness should be conceptualized on the basis of belonging to Europe, on the basis of identification with all the democratic nations of Europe; on the basis of partnership, peaceful co-existence and constant interaction of various European national identities.

Czech dissatisfaction really manages to dissolve itself. As Karl Schwarzenberg put it: “We (Czechs) have our greatest enemy - ourselves, we always spoil things. Every time we have been all right we have spoiled it ourselves.” One hopes that history is not going to repeat itself this time, because Czechs have one tremendous deposit beside the above-mentioned experience of historical discontinuities - the ability to assimilate culturally, the ability to adopt the characteristics and influences of the nations which it stands in-between geographically and transform them into something typically and uniquely Czech. Czechs have the ability to recognize when it is worth fighting for something and therefore they should be active in the discussion about the future of Europe.

European identity cannot be correlated to the Czech identity according to the “them” vs. “us” formula. Czech identity is an intrinsic part of this identity and the Czech identity’s defining features are profoundly European. Czech identity is an instrument without which the European orchestra would not be complete and would sound somewhat reduced. This instrument expresses various moods and sometimes it is more audible and sometimes less audible than “the others”. The Czech tone should be creative, it should not be out of tune, and should be heard at the right moments. Czech flagellation will also play its role in this repertory but let us hope that the Czechs will not attempt to be more European than the Europeans.
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