

THE FEDERAL TRUST

Enlightening the Debate on Good Governance

**Do Czechs
really
want
Democracy?**

Martin Stransky

European Essay No. 11

A Definition of Federalism

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(New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought)

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Introduction

Enlargement is the greatest challenge currently facing the European Union. It demands adaptation by the present member states, reforming the decision-making processes of the Union and engaging imaginatively with the constitutional prospect of membership by up to a dozen more states. It also demands adaptation by all the applicants, not only improved public administration and legislative adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*, but relearning the practical skills of democracy and strengthening civic society.

Martin Stransky's essay addresses this latter issue as regards the Czech Republic. He looks behind the myths of the Velvet Revolution to confront underlying problems both of attitude and of practice which indicate what he considers serious shortcomings in Czech approaches to democracy.

His trenchant criticisms will not find favour with those who always insist the glass is at least half full. He puts his finger in some old wounds and is not afraid of rubbing them sore. But his comments will be welcomed by those who value honest debate and want to make enlargement of the European Union a thorough success. Joining a club implies wholehearted commitment to shared values and a shared understanding of what really matters. In this context little matters more than the practice of real democracy in our diverse European societies.

Martyn Bond
Director of the Federal Trust
October 2000

About the Author

Martin Jan Stransky was trained as a neurologist in the UK and the USA where he lived for some years. He is professionally engaged in medicine both in America and the Czech Republic, where he is an advisor to the Ministry of Health and to the Senate. He is also a Charter signatory and first Director of *Impulse 99 initiative* and publisher of *Pfitomnost*, *The New Presence* and *Cesky dialog* in Prague. As a political and cultural commentator he appears regularly on radio and television in the Czech Republic and in numerous national and international publications.

DO CZECHS REALLY WANT DEMOCRACY?

In the Czech Republic, one frequently hears the phrase ‘Why are things still the same?’ Although reactions like this are heard frequently from Western visitors as well as local intellectuals, according to the latest public opinion survey by the Institute of Public Opinion (IVVM), only 40% of Czechs feel satisfied with the current state of democracy and affairs in their country.

What then, is the true state of affairs concerning democracy in the Czech Republic? What has changed, what hasn’t, and why? To answer these questions let’s explore ten popular myths heard in daily conversation. For many people they form the basis of their opinion about the current state of affairs in the Czech Republic.

Myth No.1: ‘In 1989, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary were on the same starting line.’

Not true. In Poland, communism was undermined by the Catholic church from its outset. In a country of ardent believers, the Church, even though suppressed, never relinquished its

position as an institution ‘above’ communism. In the Polish political field, communism began to be seriously undermined in the early 1970s - the same time that Czechoslovakia was experiencing the brutal ‘normalisation’ period that followed the aborted Prague Spring of 1968. The Solidarity movement, which recruited millions of Poles into its ranks, entered into a synergistic relationship with the Catholic Church, thus becoming the main catalyst for the downfall of communism not just in Poland, but along the entire Iron Curtain.

In Hungary, communism began to be undermined even earlier, from the 1960s, shortly after the suppressed Hungarian uprising in 1956, via a system of officially tolerated liberal economic reforms’ of the market place. This system, which introduced capitalist economics and thinking, was significant not just economically, but socially as well, since it taught people that a different way of thinking and doing, other than official communist ideology, was associated with greater reward. Czechoslovakia’s battle with communism peaked in the Prague Spring of 1968. In the ensuing period of normalisation, virtually all independent and democratic-thinking persons and institutions were snuffed out. For the Czech nation, this underestimated period resulted in the brutal devastation of Czech society and its norms. In the words of political analyst Jirí Pehe, following normalisation, Czech society was hollowed out to its core.’

Myth No. 2: *‘History has always been against us.’*

True. During the Hussite era in the early 1600s, the Czech nation stood on the side of reformers who appealed for a renewal of morals and religious freedoms. The resultant defeat

of the Hussites was not just a military one, but one that drove deep into Czech character. In the words of French historian Ernest Denis, the Czechs ‘never were able to accept the (negative) consequences of their own heroism.’

From the Hussite events to the 20th century, Czechs continued to suffer defeat after defeat. In many cases, they were not even allowed to fight. In 1938, Czechoslovakia was given to Hitler in the Munich agreement. In 1968 Warsaw Pact forces led by Russian tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia to quash the Prague spring of 1968. Instead of celebrating victory, the nation was forced to celebrate martyrdom. One only needs to look at major national holidays and anniversaries: Saint Wenceslas, Jan Hus, and recent martyrs of communism, Milada Horáková and Jan Palach. In 1895, before he became Czechoslovakia’s first president, Tomáš G. Masaryk called this a ‘celebration of false martyrdom.’ Celebration of defeat rarely leads to positive change.

Such endless defeats inevitably led to adaptive responses. Here, the Czechs adopted the path of least resistance, which in time became practically encoded as a national character trait. In 1922, Czech psychologist and Senator Frantisek Marek wrote: ‘The Czech nation was pursued by its enemies all the way to the boundary of moral death. Instead of an increase in pride, the result was an overcompensation in conformity.’

Finally, an address at the intersection of the heart of Europe, while it may contribute to cultural richness, offers very little time for historical rest. An 82 year-old man, who may never have left his Czech village, has had his nation re-named five times and has lived through six different political regimes in his lifetime.

Myth No. 3: ‘Czech character is something special.’

Some good news, more bad. M. Paulus Stránský, in the famous treatise *Respublica Bojema*, wrote in 1643, that ‘the Czech nation is handicapped by faults and at the same time bestowed with positive traits.’

The same circumstances that led to an increase in conformity at the societal level led to withdrawal into family, cottage, and self - to areas where nothing and no one else could enter. Here, the Czechs excelled: the nation created - and still creates - an unbelievable number of writers, poets, musicians and scientists, not to mention world class tennis, ice-hockey and football players.

However, the progressive withdrawal of the individual into his inner world eventually led to the inability to accept objective criticism. To this day, such a vital flaw continues to stifle constructive dialogue, the ‘modus operandi’ of democracy-building. One only needs to look at the reactions of our chief political protagonists, Václav Klaus and Milos Zeman, to any criticism, to see this malevolent character trait in full bloom.

Unfortunately, even the inner world of the citizen eventually collapsed under the pressures of the totalitarian years, which themselves devastated the character of Czech society. The communist laboratory of class struggle produced the seeds of jealousy among Czechs, and from it developed a complex labelled as the ‘post-totalitarian syndrome.’ According to an internationally-funded study by Martina Klicperová (Psychiatric Institute, Academy of Sciences, CR 1997), this syndrome is characterised by the following traits: absence of belief in a higher order; positive reaction to populist ideology; unwillingness to seek out causes of dissatisfaction; need for immediate gratification; preferring easy solutions over difficult

More importantly, Klicperová's study concludes that the above character traits were not in and of themselves formed solely under the years of totalitarian rule, but that they reflect the basic nature of pre-1948 Czech society as well. Furthermore, their continuing presence serves 'not only as a sign of the past, but also as a marker of a disposition to drift back to a totalitarian state.'

Myth No. 4: '*Czech atheism is underestimated.*'

True. This is one of the most undervalued of Czech character traits in terms of its significance. The Hussite defeats resulted in a permanent weakening of the role of the church and of religion as a whole, both at the individual and state level. Within their inner world, Czechs increasingly turned to their own convictions rather than to external influences. This eventually led to the formation of a different or 'Czech truth.' In the end, faith as a principle in and of itself - not just in god, was pushed out of the picture entirely.

To this day this remains a severe handicap, since in order to develop democratic principles of conduct, an aspect of faith - i.e. belief that some sort of higher order exists - needs to be present. While young America adopted the motto 'In God We Trust,' the Czechs chiselled 'A Nation Unto Itself' onto their new national theatre.

In today's Europe there is not a nation with a functioning democracy that has a society with an atheistic underpinning, or one in which relations between church and state are ill-defined. Put another way, it is difficult to establish and maintain

democracy in a faithless environment such as exists in today's Czech Republic.

Myth No. 5: *‘Czechs experienced democracy earlier than others.’*

Only a little, and not enough. Czechoslovakia was founded as an independent nation state in 1918 on the soil of the former Austrian empire, with its culture and traditions. Democratic ideals were imported to the young Czech nation principally via a small group of elite intellectuals, led by Tomáš G. Masaryk. Within a short time, the young Czech nation emerged as a shining centrepiece in the centre of Europe, developing into the seventh largest industrialised state of its day. However, much of its success was built on the pre-existing Austrian work ethic and sense of functional bureaucracy. Czech society worked extremely well in practice, but more along lines of cooperation between the mayor and the local factory owner, keeping any ‘vertical’ connections to Prague at a distance. This is still the case today.

In Prague, the role of central government was blurred at best: the 20 years of the so-called First Republic (1918-1938) saw 20 cabinets come and go, innumerable waxy coalitions, and the progressive disintegration of the Senate (as is happening today). All took place under the watchful eye, and sometimes political intriguing, of ‘father’ Masaryk, looking down on parliament from his perch on Prague castle.

Despite achieving enormous economic success, the young Czech nation was unable to form its own political identity. In 1926, the famous Czech author Karel Capek wrote: ‘Today, the only thing that remains somewhat unclear is just what

Myth No. 6: *'In 1989, we won democracy.'*

No. We became free. Freedom and democracy are not the same thing. Democracy cannot exist without freedom, but freedom can get along very nicely without democracy. India under British rule serves as a distant but useful example.

It is far easier to become free than it is to become democratic, since the latter in turn, is dependent on certain positive principles. These include a functioning justice system (equality for all before the law), freedom of the press and media, and an active civic sector. Achieving true democracy is a multi-layered, complex, and extremely time-consuming task.

Myth No. 7: *'1989 represented change.'*

Not as significant as we think. As mentioned, we won freedom, but we did not build democracy. Following the jingling of keys in Wenceslas Square in 1989, millions returned

In 1989, there was no real revolution. One either has a revolution or not. The term ‘velvet revolution’ is an oxymoron. 1989 brought new actors onto the stage, but the acting company remained the same. Over the ensuing eleven years, as opposed to Poland or Hungary, the ruling elite of the Czech Republic has remained largely unchanged. The communist managers of factories, financial institutions, and businesses simply donned a jacket and tie.

At the level of the political party, the Czech Republic is the only post-communist state in which the communist party has not renounced its ties to its past, a past in which the party authorised the execution, imprisonment and persecution of thousands of its citizens, and the shooting in the backs of innocent men, women and children as they tried to flee to freedom. Not only has this party, and those in it, never been punished, but its former members, old and young, still hold key positions in the Czech Republic. Despite such a past, the communist party continues to enjoy the support of one out of five Czech voters.

At the socio-economic level, we now know that the transformation engineered by Václav Klaus was a sham. Instead of capitalism bringing real capital, a unique form of socialism was engineered, in which the government artificially kept inflation and unemployment low by maintaining bloated state-run sectors, such as health care and transportation. The selling off of real state assets and the privatisation of banks was purposefully stalled, so that the state-controlled banks

would continue to provide loans to state enterprises, political parties, and their pet projects. The philosophy of ‘the market will decide,’ supported by the arrogant and self-confident statements of the premier, neglected other vital aspects of democracy-building, such as the establishment of a functional justice system. All this served to put the brake on democratic developments. Eleven years after 1989, two and a half million Czech pensioners and families with children still have their bread put on the table by the state. The standard of living for one out of every three Czechs is therefore completely controlled by the state.

Myth No. 8: ‘*We live in a democratic country.*’

No, we live in a post-communist country with democratic institutions which do not work completely democratically, and in which totalitarian practices continue. Here are several examples:

Conflict of interest between the public and private sector continues to be omnipresent. Positions of directors, board members, and other controlling positions of power continue to be occupied by politicians, their relatives, and associates irrespective of merit. The membership of the wife of an eminent politician on the board of directors of a banking giant, and a leading Senator serving a president of another bank are but two examples.

The platforms of political parties and statements by their leaders do not reflect what the parties really do. For example, the pre-election platform of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) supported EU entry and aggressively opposed Social Democrats’ (CSSD) policies. Shortly after the elections, the

Political parties continue to focus on the centralisation of power, instead of the voter, who interests them only once every four years when elections come round. The recent parliamentary media committee's takeover of public television is another example of continuing totalitarian functioning. This 'putsch,' smoothly engineered by committee chairman Ivan Langr (ODS) - a man whose methods the communists could still learn from - is a perfect example of the misuse of power and the abuse of citizens' rights. By using loopholes in poorly written legislation and through personal pressure, Langr forced the resignation of the director, chief political moderator, and the entire governing board of Czech TV, and replaced them with hand-picked substitutes.

Myth No. 9: *'The Czechs want democracy.'*

Not true. Tomáš G. Masaryk once wrote 'as the majority, so the nation.' What then is the position of today's Czech citizen regarding democracy? Recent public opinion surveys from IVVM and the Center of Empirical Studies (STEM) show that

citizens' opinions on just what democracy means to them centre on two areas: the fulfilment of economic expectations and the guarantee of self-fulfilment. Only 19% mention equality before the law, while only 1% feel that democracy is associated with freedom to criticise government. The fact that democracy is associated with responsibility, and that there are other pre-conditions needed in order for it to develop is not mentioned at all.

For the Czech citizen, such an incomplete view of democracy means that criticism of it is only likely to increase. In a STEM poll of April 2000, 64% of Czechs had a 'very severely negative' view of democracy (two years ago, the figure was 40%), while three out of four think that democracy is in a crisis of 'far-reaching' proportions. The same percentage are unhappy with the current state of politics as well.

In an IVVM poll of January 2000, although 60% agreed with the statement that 'democracy can solve problems,' they also felt that it does not, since 'people fail.' This telling survey shows that Czech citizens view political systems based on their previous experiences — as something controlled from the top down, and not, as is the case of democracy, determined from the bottom up. In 1992, future Czech premier Milos Zeman himself wrote 'the political masses shall remain happy, aggressive, and dumb, while the majority, who cannot be considered citizens but only inhabitants, shall look to pass their own responsibilities to a leader.' For the majority of Czech citizens, the concept of democracy as both an individual responsibility as well as a legal and national system is extremely remote. Most Czechs are still not convinced that the differences in the capitalist and communist work ethics are that great. Czechs associate democracy with the ability to earn capitalistic wages, while retaining the rewards of a socialist state. For example, in a recent STEM poll, three

Czechs do not want democracy not just because they do not know what it is, but because they do not know what they can actually expect from it. Nor are they aware of its need for sacrifice and its true benefits. Furthermore, the distorted ideas that Czechs have concerning democracy negatively influence their decisions regarding other crucial issues such as European identity and EU entry, issues which are predominantly – almost exclusively - judged by criteria of possible economic gains.

Myth No. 10: *‘Today’s Czech Republic is developing in an uneven fashion.’*

True. In the process of rapidly emerging from a dysfunctional past and confronting a new reality, the Czech Republic is exactly at a point where paradoxes dominate. Three examples may suffice: In contrast to premier Zeman’s improving EU accession performance and striving for EU membership stands his being sentenced for libel, wherein he continues to ignore the court’s verdict to the point that he is now being fined by the courts and his personal assets are in danger of being seized.

No sooner was the Czech Republic a Nato member, than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in tragic-comical form, stated that it did not agree with Nato’s tactics in Kosovo, since Nato ‘decided on Kosovo before we became members.’

Although the average citizen is easily, and usually quickly, fined for not paying his tax for TV ownership (the so-called public TV tax), he is able to view examples on the

same TV of directors, politicians and bank chairmen merrily stealing funds, and avoiding all legal consequence whatsoever. However, these examples do not necessarily mean that things are all bad. Rather, they are simply a reflection of the current balance between our past experiences and habits and the new reality. The public and the private spheres are full of paradoxes.

Possible solutions

When I presented these ideas in a lecture at Innsbruck University, a well-known Austrian surgeon commented that Austria really does not have a true democracy either, but a ‘very sophisticated system of personal intriguing and power holding.’ A senior US State Department official noted, that as far as the EU is concerned, ‘It works so undemocratically, that if it had to admit itself as a new state into the EU, it wouldn’t.’

Democracy should not be seen just as a political system, but as a thought process, a way of living. I am not claiming that there is a single country where democracy works ideally. That may never happen. But, it’s important to understand that democracy exists in different forms. You can look at democracy as a building with many floors; particularly in post-communist countries we are not far up yet from the ground. For the West, taking a better, longer and deeper look at these countries and supporting their democracy-building activities will provide much better results than has the hitherto misguided policy focusing on establishing control through military and UN personnel and offering general financial support.

The path to positive change begins by clearly identifying both the current state of affairs, as well as mistakes of the past.

The above ten points can therefore be considered a starting point, but they are not the end of the affair.

We should push the understanding of democracy. Very little has been done to further democracy and to support its understanding in the Czech populace. The concept that democracy can establish itself without help and hard work is erroneous. The campaign to promote democracy in the Czech Republic is even weaker than was the campaign for Nato entry. Here, not only Czech, but also western politicians are to blame, since the latter continue to fall into the trap of assuming that once freedom is in place and democratic institutions are established, practical functioning democracy will follow. It's time the West again increased funding to institutions and organisations that promote democracy and especially the activities of the civic sector. One must learn to crawl before one walks. While emphasising that the establishment of democracy does take time, actions that result in quick (non-financial) rewards for all should be publicised. A small example: the recent bill giving pedestrians right-of-way at crossroads is an example. Although the bill goes into effect in six months, it already has a 75% popular approval rating, and many drivers and pedestrians have already begun to act as if it were in force. Such examples, even though small, serve as crucial building blocks for developing the psychological substrate of democracy.

We should establish values as being meaningful. Every society needs values upon which it stands and which it considers to be meaningful. In order for values to emerge as a meaningful concept in the Czech Republic, two things must happen: Czechs must be reconciled with their past, and an effective justice system must be established.

How can we be reconciled with the past? Czech society continues to suppress tremendous inner conflicts. Our inability to confront our past continues to poison our everyday activities. The cure lies in opening up the past, so that the sore can be allowed to drain. At the same time, justice must be done. However, this should be a justice of reconciliation, not retribution. It could be like the reconciliation taking place in the Republic of South Africa thanks to the Truth and Reconciliation commission, headed by Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu. This is also an area that offers tremendous opportunity for involvement by political parties, churches, civic organisations, etc.

We should establish real equality before the law. After the fall of any totalitarian regime, the need for true law and order is always the greatest. When looking back to the government of Konrad Adenauer, West Germany's post-war Chancellor, historians praise him most for establishing the rule of law, something in which Germans could believe, which ruled above interests of the state, and which contributed to the emergence of modern German identity. The recent blocking by the Czech parliament of the legal reform package, and the statement by the state prosecutor that out of 100,000 cases a year, 70,000 are postponed, means that the Czech Republic has not learned a valuable lesson. Establishing a functional justice system with equality before the law leads to other positive chain reactions, such as the development of an independent press and meaningful investigative journalism.

We should reform political parties. In 1914, Eduard Benes (later Czechoslovakia's second president) wrote 'We lack political culture, and we lack political traditions.' Today's political parties are heavily tainted by a past which had very little to do with democracy. Instead, they are dominated by the personalities of their leaders to the extent that other opinions

The first party that recognises its true role and treats the voter as a true partner, while offering him or her concrete solutions to daily problems, will achieve success in an unprecedented fashion.

We should strengthen the role of institutions. In order to block increasing centralisation in the Czech Republic, the role of certain public institutions must be strengthened. The election of the President should be done directly by the voters instead of through parliament, and his existing powers should not be limited further. The Senate, which 66% of Czechs consider today to be a useless institution, should be reformed into a truly independent body, or else it may cease all together.

Decentralisation is important, since people will then start to separate politics from the politicians, and focus on policies, not personalities. One only needs to look at England, where Winston Churchill was not re-elected as Prime Minister in 1945, despite leading England to victory in the War.

We should put the churches on firm ground. According to a STEM poll, two thirds of Czechs consider churches to be vital to Czech life. Even though the churches, especially the Catholic Church, have done little in the way of stepping out of their cloistered mentality and providing pastoral support beyond their walls, the time is ripe for greater governmental recognition of the positive potential role the churches have to offer.

We should look in the mirror. On 1 Jan 1990, Václav Havel warned us not to look for the causes of the negative

effects of the past forty years outside of ourselves, but to search within. We need to begin to look for the answer to the question: 'What does it mean to be Czech?'

We are now at a unique point in history where, for the first time in a long while, no one is telling us what to do. It is a time when we can shape our own destiny. Many citizens, and just a few politicians, are starting to recognise that in such a time, they indeed can play a crucial role. The construction of democracy is just beginning.

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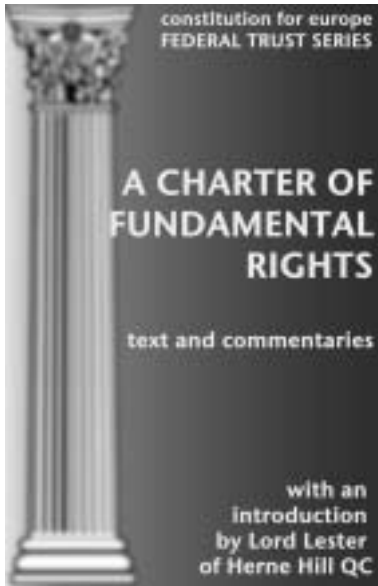
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