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How Czech young people understand democracy, citizenship, national identity and the process of Europeanisation

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Introduction

In 1999, during the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, the former 1989 student leaders made an appeal to the present Czech political elite. This appeal was entitled 'Thank you, please leave', and it met with a widespread approval among the citizens of the Czech Republic. The appeal was aimed primarily at the current and former prime ministers and their closest staff.

Today's thirty year olds have apparently developed a well founded feeling that the ideas and ideals associated with their successful stand against the totalitarian establishment of the time have not been fulfilled. A new term has been coined for this situation: 'the Stolen Revolution'. As might have been expected, the politicians in question not only refused to resign, but described the former student leaders with rather unflattering adjectives.

The characteristics of the contemporary Czech society

This paper deals with the opinions and attitudes of Czech adolescents towards civil and social issues. Firstly I should like to briefly characterise the degree of development of Czech society, which I believe corresponds with the experience of the other post-communist countries.

The starting position of all these countries was very similar. Their economic life was centrally planned and isolated from the reality of market laws, economic rules and ownership relations. The banking system was biased and distorted and there were no institutions such as a stock-exchange. The massive and extremely fast transfer of vast amounts of property that belonged to 'nobody' (the so-called nationalised property) to real owners in the process of privatisation was not fully controlled, and caused extremely high economic losses.

The change of orientation back to parliamentary democracy was not easy in either the political or the legal sphere. The Czech Republic is at present in a phase of stabilisation. When we started, we knew nothing about free competition between political parties, and only through practice and our own painful experience have we realised the meaning of words that are common and widely understood in the West - words like coalition, opposition, majority government, minority government, and so on. We had to create new laws, including our constitution and establish or re-establish new democratic institutions, such as the Constitutional Court, the office of Ombudsman, etc.

The Czech Republic is going through one of the better times of its history, a history which has seen many periods of discontinuity and dependence. During the twentieth century we have had approximately 70 years of controlled and dependent periods and 30 years of free and democratic development.

The communist regime enhanced dependence on non-personal authority and formal groups. The meeting of so-called basic needs, which were reduced to material needs, was stressed. By doing this, the totalitarian regime managed to create an illusory feeling of

safety and security in some people. This goal was reached by destroying values and respect for the individual. (Macek. 1999, p.106, 107.)

School education was directed and strongly supervised by the establishment (and of course, had a one-sided ideological orientation). Survival in this system required a compromise between personal beliefs and the pressure of the government power. Usually it was better to hide one's true feelings. These factors contributed to a long-term loss of confidence and faith in one's own values. (Možný, 1999, Vacek, 2000)

As Macek says (1999, p.109) 'Life in a totalitarian state resembled childhood, more precisely being schooled under an authoritative style of education. People knew quite clearly what was allowed and what was forbidden. They were also aware of the punishments and rewards available. Suppressing one's individuality and following the rules given by the regime was actually rewarded within a certain limited scale.' The totalitarian regime supported the conviction that being dependent on a strong authority was not only necessary but was the best thing to do.

Other experts (for example S.Kučerová, I.Možný), when speaking about the young generation which grew up in the border period between totalitarianism and democracy after the Velvet Revolution, coined the term 'the cheated' or 'the deceived generation'. Kučerová speaks of the 'twice deceived generation': deceived for the first time when those who had led the political and social changes withdrew and handed leadership over to older and wiser people who had given them so many promises, and deceived for the second time now, when leading politicians prioritise the economic over other criteria, neglecting issues concerning education and the problems of the younger generation.

If the 1980s and 1990s represent a relativisation of values throughout Europe and the English-speaking world, then the post-communism countries were also influenced in a specific way. There was a double identity crisis, the first connected with the loss of security in the transition from totalitarianism to democracy which impacted on the whole society. The totalitarian 'children' lost their tie to an omnipotent authority and were offered a new democratic space which they did not know how to cope with, and Czech society is now going through the phase of searching for a new identity. This factor combines the second identity crisis, the so-called generation uncertainty. The new social space, full of change, represents a sphere where orientation is extremely difficult even for an adult, let alone for young people. The following section discusses how these facts influence the adolescent Czech population.

The movement of the Czech Republic towards EU through the eyes of Czech adolescents

How do Czech adolescents perceive the process of European unification? How beneficial for the Czech Republic is it in the estimation of those who will be most influenced by it? Is the EU itself perceived as a unifying factor or is this achieved by its individual members? Which European countries are preferred and why? What are young people's opinions on issues concerning the national minorities within the Czech Republic? How do they view immigration trends? Are they tolerant of different radical groups with apparent racist orientations? And finally, what is their own evaluation of the social space offered to them by parents and schools, where they can freely express their views?

We conducted a questionnaire covering these issues. 170 adolescent students (93 female and 77 male; all aged between 15 and 19). We wanted to know how they evaluate the prospective entry of the Czech Republic into the EU- first overall, and then in relation to themselves (or to their possible career opportunities).

On the overall question, 7.6% see entry very positively, 33.5% positively, 37.7% do not have any opinion (neutral), 14.1% see the issue negatively and 7.1% very negatively. To sum up. 21.2% of the teenagers see no advantage in entry and 41.1 % welcome it. Positive factors associated with the entry are travel prospects, education and job options. Negative evaluation is primarily concerned with perceived economic risks, for example with an increase in unemployment. Some students are worried that ‘everything will be expensive’. Individual answers involved concerns about losing national and cultural identity. Respondents who were neutral showed no interest in political issues, or insufficient knowledge of them. Approximately a quarter of the respondents were able to assess the pros and cons based on a sound knowledge of the issues.

The respondents were also asked about the personal benefits which they would gain on the entry of the Czech Republic into the EU. There was a substantial increase in the number who believe in a positive influence in relation to their personal careers (17.2% view it as very advantageous and 42.3% as advantageous, in comparison with the 7.6% and 33.5% respectively who were positive on the first question (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 How Czech adolescents view entry into EU in general

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
very positive	6	7.8	7	7.5	13	7.6
positive	5	45.4	22	23.7	57	33.5
neutral	19	24.7	45	48.4	64	37.7
negative	10	13.0	14	15.0	24	14.1
very negative	7	9.1	5	5.4	12	7.1
TOTAL	77	100.0	93	100.0	170.0	100.0

Table 2 How Czech adolescents view the entry into EU in connection with their future career

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
very advantageous	17	22.7	12	12.9	29	17.2
advantageous	35	46.7	36	38.7	71	42.3
neutral	13	17.3	36	38.7	49	29.2
less advantageous	4	5.3	8	8.6	12	7.1
total unadvantageous	6	8.0	1	1.1	7	4.2
TOTAL	75	100.0	93	100.0	168	100.0

We were also interested to know which European countries are attractive to Czech adolescents, and especially those in which they would, or would not, prefer to live.

France was the most popular country overall by a substantial margin with 67 (although there was a gender difference: while most females put France first, the male respondents favoured Great Britain). 45 students opted for Great Britain, 30 for Switzerland, 20 for Italy, 19 for Spain, 14 for Greece, 13 for Germany. The basis of choice seemed to be the perception of the country's economic status together with a favourable climate (this factor influenced the choice of southern European countries, probably through the respondents' holiday experiences).

The situation is rather more complicated for the negative preferences. Russia was chosen by 64 respondents, followed by Germany (45), the Ukraine (27), Yugoslavia (24), Poland (19), Great Britain (12), Albania (10), and so on. Other criteria apart from perceived instability and lower living standards seem to influence choice too; this is very apparent in the case of Germany, where the historical context has undoubtedly influenced even the youngest generation. There also seems to be suspicion of small countries which are surrounded by powerful and strong neighbours. There seems to be an interesting lack of trust in certain of our neighbours - not only Germany but also Poland - while others are perceived much less critically. Slovakia was listed by only 6 respondents and Austria by 3. The most favoured country by far is undisputedly France, with 67 positive points to 2 negative points (see Table 3).

In addition to the countries shown in Table 3, the following European countries all received one vote: Belgium, Chechnya, Lithuania, Moldavia, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal and Switzerland. Non-European countries receiving votes were India (5), Iraq and China (2 each), Bangladesh, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and the USA (1).

Table 3 European countries perceived as unpopular by the Czech adolescents

		Total	Male	Female
1	Russia	64	29	35
2	Germany	45	19	26
3	Ukraine	27	8	19
4 - 5	Yugoslavia	26	13	13
4 - 5	Poland	19	12	7
6	Romania	13	6	7
7	Great Britain	12	7	5
8	Albania	11	9	2
9	Bosnia	9	1	8
10	Italy	7	6	1
11	Slovakia	6	3	3
12 - 13	Hungary	5	2	3
	Turkey	5	1	4
14 - 18	Austria	3	1	2
	Bulgaria	3	2	1
	Croatia	3	0	3
	Macedonia	3	3	0
	Norway	3	0	3
19–23	Belarus	2	1	1
	Finland	2	2	0
	France	2	2	0
	Greece	2	2	0
	Sweden	2	1	1

The next part of the questionnaire was concerned with whether Czech adolescents are proud of the fact that they belong to the Czech nation. The results were unambiguous: 38.1% of the respondents are very proud and 47% proud to belong to the Czech nation (total 85.1%). The most common reason given was based on the fact that although we are a small country, we are able to assert ourselves and excel in certain areas. The respondents most frequently cited success in sport, especially in ice hockey (a Gold Medal from the Winter Olympics in Nagano). 11.9 % respondents remained neutral, 2.3 % (four individuals) were negative and only 0.6 % (one student) was very negative (Table 4).

Table 4 How patriotic Czech adolescents feel

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
very proud	34	44.8	30	32.6	64	38.1
proud	24	31.6	55	59.8	79	47.0
neutral	15	19.7	5	5.4	20	11.9
not proud	2	2.6	2	2.2	4	2.4
lack of pride	1	1.3	0	0	1	0.6
TOTAL	76	100.0	92	100.0	168	100.0

Another issue which we focused on was tolerance (or non - tolerance) towards immigrants, national and ethnic minorities, and the relationship of the respondents to the racist nationalistic movement in the Czech Republic. 7.8 % of the respondents consider the wave of migration into the Czech Republic positively or very positively; 36.2 % view it as negative and 9.6 % as very negative. The largest group (46.4%) remain neutral. Some respondents stressed the need to consider cases individually, with regard to a concrete person in a concrete situation (Table 5).

Table 5 Czech adolescents and their view of immigrants

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
very positive	2	2.7	0	0	2	1.2
positive	4	5.3	7	7.7	11	6.6
neutral	31	41.3	46	50.5	77	46.4
negative	29	38.7	31	34.1	60	36.2
very negative	9	12.0	7	7.7	16	9.6
TOTAL	75	100.0	91	100.0	166	100.0

The Czech Republic is relatively homogenous: there are no large national, ethnic or religious minorities. However, we were concerned with how positively individual minorities are viewed. The questionnaire asked respondents to rate congeniality on a scale of 1-5: 1 was very congenial, 2 congenial, 3 neutral, 4 uncongenial, 5 very uncongenial. This gave a 'congeniality index' of Slovaks 1.96, Americans 2.45, Jews 2.66, Poles 2.72, Vietnamese 3.40, Ukrainians 3.77 and Gypsies 3.90 – see Table 6. Three points were noteworthy:

1. The congeniality felt to Slovaks as former partners and inhabitants of the same country confirms the common opinion that the split of Czechoslovakia was caused by political and economic factors rather than by aversion between the two nations;
2. Most responses do not base their negative views of Vietnamese, Ukrainians and Gypsies on direct negative personal experience;
3. No gender difference in congeniality rating was observed

Table 6 Czech adolescents and their relation to national and ethnical minorities

	Total	Male	Female
1. Slovaks	1.96	1.91	2.01
2. Americans	2.45	2.46	2.44
3. Jews	2.65	2.60	2.71
4. Poles	2.72	2.63	2.82
5. Vietnamese	3.40	3.24	3.57
6. Ukrainians	3.77	3.58	3.97
7. Gypsies	3.90	3.77	4.04

We were very interested in discovering how our adolescents view the radically orientated racist and nationalistic movement called skinheads. 35.7% viewed it as extremely negative and 23.8% as negative: this means that 59.5 % hold a clearly negative view of skinheads. Nobody felt positively toward this racist movement although 11.3% agreed with the statement 'skinheads are right about somethings'. However, 29.2% seems a high proportion to hold a neutral attitude towards racism and national intolerance. A gender difference was observed here: female respondents were more tolerant - 41.1% were neutral compared with 15.8% of male respondents (Table 7).

Table 7 Czech adolescents and their relation to racist movement

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
positive	0	0	0	0	0	0
slightly positive	9	11.8	10	11.1	19	11.3
neutral	12	15.8	37	41.1	49	29.2
negative	18	23.7	20	22.2	40	23.8
extremely negative	37	48.7	23	25.6	60	35.7
TOTAL	76	100.0	90	100.0	168	100.0

The last part of the questionnaire dealt with the adolescents' views of their own freedom to express their opinions freely, both within their family and at school. The 169 answers show that 65.7 % of respondents can always express their opinions in their family environment, and only 5.3 % experience some problems in this area. The situation is more complicated in schools. Only 11.2 % think they can always freely express their opinion and 56.8 % that they can do so occasionally. In comparison, 24.3 % feel that it is exceptional to be able to speak freely and 7.7 %, they hardly have any freedom in this area. In summary, 32 % of adolescents from our research cannot - based on their subjective view - 'practice' democracy at school (Table 8).

Table 8 Democracy at school perceived by Czech adolescents

	Male		Female		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
always	9	11.7	10	10.9	19	11.2
often	44	57.1	52	56.5	96	56.8
seldom	19	24.7	22	23.9	41	24.3
almost never	5	6.5	8	8.7	13	7.7
TOTAL	77	100.0	92	100.0	169	100.0

Summary

The above results certainly do not express the opinions of all young people in the Czech Republic. However, they can help with the process of searching for a new individual and generational identity for our young people. They can also contribute to a more sophisticated approach for educators and educational institutes, not only in the Czech Republic but also on a European basis.

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