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Russians and Czechs: Under Influence of Past and Present
Perception of Russians in the Czech Republic

The approach of Czechs to Russians has gone through various periods when relations have been very different. If we help ourselves with slogans which we can meet in history we can create two substantially opposite positions.

Czech revivalists used to say in 19th that *it would be better in Bohemia when Cossak's horse drinks Vltava's water* and a century later it was possible to read on the walls of Prague's houses signs crying: *Ivan, go home*. We can say that today we can also very often meet indifferent positions to Russia and Russians.

Prior to we make a small historic excursion through various periods, characterized by various positions to the topic, it is necessary to make several introductory remarks.

First of all, it is necessary to stress that it is not possible **to create any monolithic picture** because there are differences between social and political groups as well as differences between older and younger generation. Generally, we could say that supporters of right-wing parties and members of the older generation are significantly more negatively tuned towards Russia than supporters of left-wing parties or members of younger generation.

Public opinion surveys regularly present various popularity rankings of nations and nationalities living in the Czech Republic as well as assessments of foreign states from point of view their popularity and possible threats. These rankings are interesting and provide us with certain information but problem is that they do not answer the most **substantial question why** such-and-such nation is popular or unpopular or why such-and-such nation is considered to be a threat and other not.

Attitude of Czechs towards Russians is specific because Czechs, like with several other nations, have an immediate experience with them. The immediate contact, its history, current behaviour of Russia and Russians living in the Czech Republic are **key factors** having impact on Czech thinking about Russia and Russians.

My lecture is based first of all on historical context and its impact on current state of affairs. This method provides us with opportunity to see some moments which are not so visible in results of public opinion surveys.

Passing over contacts between Kyivska Rus and Great Morava and some other moments when Czech milieu was in the contact with Eastern Slavs we could open our story in 19th century when Russia played an important role in thinking of Czech politicians about status of Czechs in Austrian and later Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

The position of the group of important Czech politicians, understanding Russia like a potential mighty protector of Slavonic tribes, could be characterized by verses from lyric-epic poem by Jan Kollár encouraging Slavs to *lean on the mighty oak*, i.e. Russia. This position was strongly shaken by detailed contact with Russian reality (during visit of Russia realized by top Czech politicians like a protest action in 1867, e.g.).

Change of mind which Karel Havlíček Borovský, one of the most important representatives of political life in Bohemia in second half of 19th century, experienced is a very instructive illustration. He was a supporter of panslavism but after immediate personal contact with Russia he completely changed his position because he learned out very quickly that such a protector would be much worse than the existing one.

However, Russians were taken by Czech society like a relative Slavonic nation and sympathy was visible. A big demonstration of amicable relation to Russian occurred during stay of Suvorov's army in Bohemia during Napoleonic wars (1798-80).

During the First Republic (1918-1938) we can observe a visible dichotomy of positions towards Russia. The situation then could be characterized by following points:

- **after Great War and October revolution Soviet Russia was a widespread issue in the Czech society**
 - October revolution was taken by left-wing parties like an inspiration;
 - thanks to the *white* emigration, supported by President Masaryk, the Czech society got in immediate touch with Russians;
 - Czech official representatives did not accepted October revolution
 - ☐ Masaryk as well as Kramář respected tsarist Russia with its tradition and culture but they refused Lenin and bolsheviks;
 - ☐ diplomatic relations were officially established *de iure* only in 1935, *de facto* in 1922;
- **attitude towards the U.S.S.R. in the second half of 20ies and in 30ies became theme of political confrontation between leftists and rightists**

- participants of the frequent trips brought from the U.S.S.R. very different information dependent on their political orientation
- particularly Moscow trials in 1936-1938 were issue that very strongly affected discussion about the U.S.S.R.;
- in 1925-1932 more than one thousand people – members of cooperative Interhelpo left to U.S.S.R. to build communism (number of them met tragic destiny during Great terror);
- **Czechoslovak-Soviet relationship became better before WWII when President Beneš looked for allies not only in the West but also in the East;**
- discussions about Soviet ability and willingness to help Czechoslovakia in 1938 is sometimes issue of discussion even today.

After WWII in period 1945-48, Czechoslovakia made the first strong immediate contacts with Russians, who came to Czechoslovakia as liberators. However, behavior of some soldiers of Red Army was not exemplary, most of Czechs was grateful to Soviets for the liberation and Czech attitude towards the U.S.S.R is possible to asses like positive. Comparing with the situation in neighbouring countries Czechs were an exception. This time Czechs used to spoke about fulfilling of prophecy: *It will be better in Bohemia when Cossak's horse drinks Vltava's water.*

This positive attitude helped to Czechoslovak communists, regarded as the best friends of Moscow, to win the parliamentary elections in 1946 and to make a crucial step towards the establishment of the communist dictatorship and opening doors to strengthen of the Soviet influence in the country. Many of them paid later a heavy toll for it.

The first positive experience with Russians was also linked with negative moments (increased influence of Communist party, Moscow's pressure on Prague) having crucial impact on further destiny of Czechoslovakia. Communist party with help of Moscow managed to establish Soviet power in the country and to isolate Czechoslovakia from its historically natural milieu.

Development of country under Soviet's supremacy after 1948 together with presence of U.S. Army in Czechoslovakia in 1945 have created conditions for discussions emerging even today, i.e., *what would have been if Prague had been liberated by U.S. Army?* It is a nice space

for intellectual game but reality is reality and Czechoslovakia found itself in a *bear hug* that caused:

- **Substantial change of the attitude of the Czechoslovak society majority towards the U.S.S.R.**
 - Soviets were taken rather as enemies installing and supporting communist regime committing oppression and crimes;
 - this opinion was strengthened and confirmed in eyes of Czechs in 1968 when armies of Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia;
 - obviously different position of various layers of the Czech society towards the U.S.S.R. There was an official - looking like positive - position being in a sharp contrast with opinion of majority;
 - this historical event has had its impact on understanding of Russia until today, although, Russia is not the U.S.S.R.;
 - a lot of gleeful jokes showing Soviets like stupid bumpkins.

Already negative attitude of majority of the Czech society towards Russians became even worse after the occupation of the Czechoslovakia by armies of the Warsaw Pact in 1968. However, the occupation was realized by the Soviet Army in the cooperation with armies of other communist states, from long-term perspective only attitude towards Russians was touched.

The U.S.S.R. lost number friends and supporters also among communists. A lot of them did not approve intervention and were expelled from party. Even their children *got* an opportunity to feel what party disfavour meant.

Year 1968 has played negative role in Czech-Russian relationship until today. According to surveys more than 60% of Czechs were not ready to forgive Russia year 1968. Year 1968 meant the end of all illusion concerning communist ideas and illusion concerning the U.S.S.R. which was very closely connected with these ideas. Also increasing communist marasmus in the country was even more linked with the U.S.S.R. than with local leadership which was taken like a Kremlin's puppet.

All negative tendencies were strengthened by **robust and awkward effort to build love to the U.S.S.R.** (the U.S.S.R. our torchbearer, annual months of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship etc.) **that provoked directly opposite reaction.**

The sign *Ivan, go home!*, which emerged in 1968 like immediate reaction on the invasion is possible understand in broader context, i.e., like a wish to leave Soviet *ally* completely. Slogan *With Soviet Union forever* trumpeted by communist leaders since 1948 was in creative way broaden by Czechs with addition *but no for any minute longer*.

The time to consider such a variant came twenty year later as a result dramatic changes that occurred in the U.S.S.R. *Perestroika* not only changed centre of communist power it also was gradually changing the approach a lot of Czechs to the Soviet Union. Simply put not Brezhnev's but Gorbachev country became *sexy*.

Slogan of the communist party *the Soviet Union – our torchbearer* began looking rather interesting than *silly*. Paradoxically it was leadership of communist party that did not share relatively positive stance to Gorbachev's effort of substantial communist as well as non-communist part of society and in this way it lost the last chance to save itself.

With big expectations the Gorbachev's visit of Prague in 1987 had been waited and a lot of rumors had been connected with it. But Secretary General did not fulfill expectations, that he forced Czechoslovak comrades to personal and substantial changes, and more or less supported current communist leadership.

Although, Secretary General disappointed his Czechoslovak supporters, **the experiment ongoing in the U.S.S.R. then attracted interest and aroused sympathy in Czechoslovakia.**

- weekly published by Soviet's occupational power *Týdeník aktualit* (Weekly News) which was for a long years ignored became very asked and popular newspaper bringing to Czechs interesting information on perestroika and history of the U.S.S.R. Communist again were not too happy about it but they were not brave enough, like their comrades in GDR, to ban an unpleasant *diversion*.

Stormy year 1989 and following period very quickly erased all innocent attempts to reform communist system. Czechoslovakia together with its neighbours received a chance to take its destiny in own hands and it also meant a relief from *bear grip*.

Velvet revolution and withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia removed the U.S.S.R and a bit later Russia from Czech horizons. Russia seemed to be too far but sometimes it *managed* to demonstrate its existence. The coup d'état attempt in 1991 trying to remove Gorbachev showed very clearly which part of Soviet society had a support of Czechs who kept their fingers crossed for Gorbachev and Yeltsin against their opponents.

Czech approach to Russia in 90's of 20th century could be characterized something like *positive neutrality*. Symbol of the continuation of changes in Russia – President Yeltsin was taken as an amazing figure respecting the independent development of former Soviet satellites. If Russia was taken like a potential problem it was caused by its internal difficulties and their potential to have impact on its neighbours.

In 90's the third immediate contact of the Czech society with Russians happened because a number of Russians found in the Czech Republic their new home. Wild period of establishment of market economy in Russia and rumor surrounding this process gave a birth to the opinion in the Czech Republic that almost everybody coming from Russia had to be *member of mafia*. In this context Russia has been understood like a resource of problems with criminality in the country.

- Karlovy Vary, nicknamed by Czechs Ivan's Vary, became of the symbol of the presence of Russians in the country and this presence has not been understood in positive way.

On the other hand, it is obvious that a part of the Czech society restore its positive attitude towards Russian culture (theatre (Russian avant-garde, new conception of Russian classics by Czech stage directors, movies inspired by Russian texts etc.). Even sportive matches have gradually lost their political content so typical for these matches in communist period.

Some Conclusions

State of affairs which we have now is a result of the impact of various historical and current elements. Among historical ones the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia is the most substantial. Among current reasons we can find behaviour of today's leadership of Russia as well as the Russian community living in the Czech Republic. Not too positive role also plays a suspicion that Russia wants to restore its influence in the Czech Republic.

There is, of course, a question how the situation will develop in the future. This development will be linked with three main factors:

- it is possible to expect that change of generations will gradually change the Czech approach and attitude towards Russia will be more neutral;

- an important role could play the Russian community in the Czech Republic. Will it continue in its current behavior or will it try more to cohabit with the Czech society?
- future development in Russia and its foreign policy also presents a very important factor having impact on analyzed issue.

It would be unreasonable to expect some substantial changes in the near future. Change of image of the Russians in the Czech society will be a long-term process with unpredictable result. Once upon a time all began so promisingly: *It will be better in Bohemia...*