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Working Group

Governance and Citizenship in the European Union - The Influence of Culture

Membership in the European Union vs. Fear of German Domination
A Czech Perspective

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Thesis

The long-lasting domination of German culture in Czech history, the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia after World War II and the new dimension of Czech Republic citizenship after 1993 all represent sources for deeply rooted scepticism in Czech society about membership in the European Union.

Taking into account the extensive presence of German capital in the Czech Republic, many Czechs are suspicious whether joining the EU will not eventually result in a renewal of German cultural, economic and political domination.

This paper tries to argue that if these existing fears are not properly addressed, they may have a detrimental effect on the outcome of an eventual referendum on EU membership and serve as a cheap argument for populist policies against EU membership.

Cultural identity concepts

Czech culture has been growing in a symbiosis with German culture for many centuries, in the Middle ages, when the Czech lands were part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as well as later, when they became part of the Austrian Habsburg Empire. This symbiosis with German culture ended during World War I.

In 1918 a new state was formed, based no more on the idea of autonomy within Greater Austria, but on a common bond with the neighbouring Slavic nation of Slovaks. This new state of Czecho-Slovakia created a new basis for cultural identification for both Czechs and Slovaks - no more "Czechs within a German-speaking country" or "Slovaks within a Hungarian-speaking country", but "Czechs and Slovaks within their own country". Although not openly oppressed, it makes sense that the German (Austrian) and Hungarian minorities remaining in that new state could not necessarily fully identify with the new cultural concept of "Czechoslovakia".

When the opportunity arose in 1938, the majority of German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia voted for a pan-German option, thus helping to disintegrate the country, which in turn formed the background for their unfortunate collective expulsion when Czechoslovakia was recreated in 1945.

Fear of German Domination

With this historical background in mind, one could assume, that after World War II the “Czechoslovak” identity would have strengthened and the relations with German culture both in Germany and Austria could grow on new ground. However, none of this was possible after the Communist take-over in 1948 and a forcible subordination of the country under Soviet rule. People who represented pre-war Czechoslovak identity were either jailed or exiled and a new and exclusive cultural identity concept was introduced by force - socialism and friendship with the Soviet Union.

Relations with Germany were shaped by ideology - Western Germany became the synonym for an aggressive imperialist attacker and a revengeful enemy who sought to recover its lands from where its people were expelled. Eastern Germany became a friend by order. The GDR was henceforth to be addressed as a friendly and reliable brother nation who had nothing to do with the anti-Czech policies of Nazi Germany. This did not prevent the GDR however, to help occupy Czechoslovakia in August 1968 together with the other Warsaw Pact armies.

Today we live fortunately in a different Europe. The geo-political situation has changed, after the Velvet Revolution and German unification new agreements have eased existing tensions and the bi-lateral relations are very friendly and co-operative. After 1993 Czechs live in a homogeneous state with very small Polish and German national minorities and a somewhat larger ethnic minority of Roma. The political idea of a modern independent Czech state, voiced already in 1848, became a reality. The question many people ask is whether all is now going to be lost to a Brussels-based, presumably German-dominated multinational administration?

Towards a European Identity

It should not surprise that with a view to the historical Czech experience a certain scepticism towards EU membership remains. Although there is a general consensus that for economic reasons EU membership is a necessity for the Czech Republic, the concept of European governance is being politically cultivated as an object of criticism. Moreover, the idea of European citizenship has to compete with two general trends - on one hand of those people who do in general not attach much importance to citizenship (partly as an experience of the hollow legal and constitutional system under communist rule) on the other hand of those people who focus on their local consciousness of being Czech (and thus feeling no urge for changing it - in their view - for a vaguely defined European identity).

As Germany is for many Czech still synonymous for the “West”, an important aspect in the debate about Czech membership in the European Union should therefore be a stronger focus on the experience of Germany as a Member State of the EU. By showing on concrete examples, how the EU has changed Germany and what influence EU membership has on German political culture, one might both ease existing fears of a

dominant Germany and demonstrate the compatibility of local, regional, national and European identity.