**THE NEW PRESENCE**

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**Editor’s Notes**

Dominik Jůn ................................................................. 2

**Opinions**

Tactical Blunders  ■  Simon Pardek ................................................................. 3

The Thirtieth Anniversary of Charter 77  ■  Petr Příhoda ..................................... 4

A Full-Bellied Protest  ■  David Svoboda ........................................................... 5

**News Roundup**

A look at events in the Czech Republic as well as key stories from Central and Eastern Europe from the last few months ...................................................... 6

**The Czech Republic**

Should the Czech Republic Do Away with Proportional Representation?  ■  Zdeněk Suda ................................................................. 8

To Pay or Not to Pay?  ■  Rosemary B. Bryant ..................................................... 11

An Alcoholic Nation  ■  Lauren Escher ................................................................. 15

**Analysis**

The 2006 US Election  ■  William A. Cohn .......................................................... 19

**Special Features**

From Communism to Consumerism  ■  Brooke Skinner & Rosemary B. Bryant ......................... 22

Two Czech Karels  ■  Neel Bhuta ........................................................................ 26

**Russian Power**

Russia’s Eternal Enemies  ■  Emil Souleimanov .................................................. 31

A Different Cold War  ■  Michael Romancov ...................................................... 33

**Sport in the 21st Century**

Why?  ■  Jan Šiman .................................................................................................. 37

Sport for Everyone  ■  Irena Slepíčková .............................................................. 39

The Force Within: An Interview with Jaromír Jágr .............................................. 40

Nationalist Pride or a Nation’s Rejection?  ■  Tom Pedulla ...................................... 42

A Staggering Transformation  ■  Petr Feldstein ...................................................... 44

**Spotlight on Belarus**

A Nation in Name Only  ■  Miloš Řezník .............................................................. 47

Crows in the Sky  ■  Petruška Šustrová ................................................................. 49

A Refined Regime  ■  Siarhej Karol ........................................................................ 53

**Short Story**

Gottfluss’ Wasp Hives  ■  Jaroslav Veis ................................................................. 54

**Then & Now**

Creating a Customs Union  ■  A Přítomnost article from 1931 .............................. 58

**Letter From...**

Rosemary B. Bryant describes a trip to Krakow .................................................. 59

**Parting Thoughts**

The Fall of Russia  ■  Martin Jan Stránský ............................................................... 60

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*The New Presence* is the sister publication of the Czech magazine *Přítomnost*. Both magazines are published by Martin Jan Stránský, grandson of the original publisher of *Přítomnost*, which under renowned editor Ferdinand Peroutka became inter-war Czechoslovakia’s most widely respected periodical publication.

*The New Presence* is published on a quarterly basis. It features a mixture of original material and translated articles from our sister publication. Due to considerations of space and style, some articles may vary in style and/or length from the original.

Cover by Johana Kratochvílová
Dear readers,

A new year is upon us and I welcome you to the very first issue of 2007. As ever, we feature a mix of Czech, European and global stories. Anyone who has ever been to the Czech Republic knows that drinking is a popular pastime. But do Czechs drink too much and are they endangering their health by doing so? Lauren Escher tries to find an answer. Staying with the Czech Republic, Zdeněk Suda examines whether a change in the electoral system might help resolve the country’s ongoing political deadlock, while Neel Bhuta has a special look at two of the country’s most popular and controversial singers - Karel Kryl and Karel Gott. Meanwhile, with the results of the recent US congressional elections bringing a decisive victory for the Democrats, William A. Cohn asks whether the elections can be expected to bring about renewed accountability in Washington. Staying on global matters, we have a special look at Russian power, with Emil Souleimanov taking a look at how stereotypes and misconceptions help create the image of the “enemies of Russia.” In the same section, Michael Romanov examines the rise of Russia as a major global energy provider, and asks whether the country is perhaps engaging in a very different type of Cold War. We also take a special look at both Russia’s and Europe’s neighbour, Belarus, with special articles by Miloš Řezník, Petruška Šustrová and Siarhej Karol.

Sport is a subject rarely if ever covered by this magazine, so you might be surprised to find that in this issue we have an entire section called “Sport in the 21st Century.” But rather than give scores and post-match analyses, authors such as Petr Feldstein and Irena Slepičková attempt to examine some of the wider sociological factors that are related to sport. We also have an interview with Jaromír Jagr, trainer to one of the Czech Republic’s most popular ice-hockey stars about a unique form of spiritual energy.

We also have a short-story by Jaroslav Veis, a special look at the rise of Czech hypermarkets by Brooke Skinner and Rosemary B. Bryant, the usual opinions, analyses and much, much more. As ever, I wish you an enjoyable read and a very happy New Year.

Dominik Jón

“Komu se nelení, tomu se zelení.”
“He who is not lazy shall reap the rewards.”
—Czech Proverb
Tactical Blunders

At the time, the June 2006 Czech parliamentary election results could be seen as something of a vindication of Jiří Paroubek’s leadership of his Social Democratic party. From the dark, scandal-ridden era of his predecessor Stanislav Gross, when polls suggested the Social Democratic Party faced annihilation at the ballot box, to a “respectable defeat” in June (74 Social Democrat seats to the Civic Democrat’s 81 – the Social Democrats actually gained four seats), it appeared to many that Paroubek had been responsible for transforming his party’s fortunes. Following the months of political stalemate that ensued, Paroubek clearly needed to prevent the threat of a single stray Social Democrat MP from enabling a right-of-centre coalition from winning a vote of confidence in the Lower House. For a party with numerous “wings” and factions, he did this by asserting an iron grip on his party. Dissent and debate were essentially stifled, and, in essence, Paroubek became the embodiment of an entire political movement. Much of this is understandable in the current political climate, but Paroubek is also responsible for numerous and ever more fatal tactical blunders.

Following the June elections, Paroubek was quick to accuse the other side of foul play. There were even accusations that the police were helping provide the opposition with various scandals related to his party. The irony of this actually serves as a reflection of his own party’s governance of the country. Where were the court proceedings to prove such accusations? Where were the slander trials and investigations? There were none. Why? Because during its eight years in office, the Social Democrats had done very little to advance the cause of a functioning, independent judiciary or an accountable police force. So now Paroubek becomes a victim of a country that he helped to create. One lacking accountability and fair due process.

It has almost become too easy to swallow the Czech right’s stereotype of Paroubek as some sort of Chairman Mao-in-waiting figure – and such a picture is just as hysterical as Paroubek is himself often accused of being. Nonetheless, the Social Democrat’s blocking of the ascendancy of the right-of-centre election winning Civic Democrats may prove to be his biggest blunder.

If preventing a “dictatorship of the right” Civic Democratic government from destroying the country, was Paroubek’s true aim then that was something he succeeded in doing in June 2006. Voters rejected such a strong lurch to the right, and instead indicated a desire for centrist and moderation. The Civic Democrats were kept in check. However, by not allowing them to govern, Paroubek legitimised the image of himself and his party as the main obstacle to a moderate government. Thus, Paroubek destroyed the perception of the Social Democrats as a balancing force, and created the impression that power is the only thing worth fighting for - even if that meant relying on the communists.

As a result, the Civic Democrats predictably climbed in the polls and went on to sweep the recent Senate and local elections.

The fact that the Czech Communist Party will support Paroubek’s attempts at forming a government is taken as given. But the implications of such reliable and guaranteed support are deeply repulsive to many Czechs. A Paroubek-led government supported by the communists would do little more than guarantee the Civic Democrats a landslide in any upcoming election.

Many Social Democrats are beginning to grumble. Paroubek has very quickly transformed himself from party saviour to its greatest liability. The fact that he presented a shadow cabinet filled with the same controversial ministers of the former government (David Rath: Health, František Bublan: Interior) underlines the growing public perception that at this time, another Social Democratic government would be a huge step backwards. If the party is to halt its recent slide, then it is time to make the problems of the country the Civic Democrat’s, rather than the Social Democrat’s responsibility. In order for this to happen, Paroubek should enable Topolánek’s Civic Democrats to head a minority or coalition government, or face the prospect of an ever greater voter backlash.

Simon Pardek

The Thirtyth Anniversary of Charter 77

I am trying to imagine how, one day when they are old enough to ask, I will explain to my grandchildren about the events surrounding the creation of Charter 77 (See “Two Czech Karels” pg. 26). Will they even ask? Thirty years is a long time, and the events of those days grow more distant with each passing day. But then I remember asking my grandparents about World War I, and hearing an answer. I even remember asking about the Prussian-Austrian War, and hearing my grandfather recall what his grandparents had once told him.
Should they ask, I will tell my grandchildren that the Charter was the one deed undertaken during that dark era that prevented me from falling into a deep sense of sadness and shame. When I explain the context, they will surely understand what I mean. But I probably won’t be as successful at painting a picture of the atmosphere that prevailed in those days. I honestly don’t know what they will say about the fact that I didn’t sign the document, simply because I was afraid to do so.

I hope that my grandchildren will be intelligent, ask questions and have an awareness of the era that they will be growing up in. I will tell them that Charter 77 was a symbolic moment during which my “era” ended and theirs began.

I see that moment as a kind of swan song in which the great aspirations (such as truth – sorely lacking back then) which harked back to before the founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic (in 1918) allowed themselves to be heard. I hope I will have the opportunity to explain to my grandchildren about people like Josef Dobrovský (19th century historian, one of the most important figures of the Bohemian national reviv -Ed.), Karel Hynek Mácha (19th century Czech romantic poet –Ed.), Karel Havlíček Borovský (19th century Czech writer, poet, critic, politician, journalist, and publisher –Ed.), T. G. Masaryk (Founding president of the Czechoslovakian state –Ed.), F. X. Šalda (20th century literary critic and writer –Ed.), Josef Pekář (20th century Czech historian –Ed.), Emanuel Rádli (20th century Czech philosopher –Ed.) and Ferdinand Peroutka (20th century Czech writer and journalist –Ed.). I also hope that I will be able to tell them about the Munich agreement (which, in 1938 ceded part of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany –Ed.), about the Nazi occupation; about the forced expulsion of Sudeten Germans from the country; about the 1948 communist putsch; about the Stalinist terror of the 1950s; about the 1968 Prague Spring, and about people like Václav Havel and Jan Palach (student who set fire to himself in protest at the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia –Ed.). That is, of course, assuming that they will have the patience and interest to listen. Then, there is the Charter 77 – the last act, after which there are only events.

And if they ask me about the November 1989 Velvet Revolution? Then, I will say “Children, it was a chance for something spectacular, but as a true activity, it happened somewhere beyond us. Here it was only an event.”

Peť Příhoda

During the scandal surrounding Hungarian PM Ferenc Gyurcsány’s unswitting bout of honesty a tape recording emerged in which he was heard admitting that his party had achieved nothing and had lied to the electorate) the streets of Budapest saw heavy rioting and demonstrations. Many Czechs must have thought at the time “this could never happen in our country.” The disturbances were certainly rowdy, but they could not mask the fact that they were occurring around the 50th anniversary of the anti-Communist Hungarian uprising – an event that many Hungarians remain immensely proud of. The result was that the current disturbances could not help but be tinged with a hint of sadness.

Awareness of our limited fighting spirit at key moments, coupled with an acute sense of our own selfish, jealous and easily corruptible nature has fomented a sense of self-hatred amongst Czechs. One can live with such sentiments, but whether one should is another question. The fact that we seem to revel in our own small-mindedness only serves to underline the failure of the collective national intellect – something crucial to the wellbeing on any nation.

There are moments in history where national or collective events are rendered meaningless by individual and very personal fears. However, an important factor is played by those events that have served to collectively bring out the best and worst in us. But even such moments can be relative. There is a huge difference between a Czech Nazi-era worker earning his bread through collaborating with the regime, and a Ukrainian partisan chased into the woods by the German army. Similarly, we often fail to grasp that resistance during the harsh days of 1950s “red terror” was far more difficult than under the Nazi occupation, precisely because the lines between oppressor and oppressed were far more blurred.

In any society, there are always only a few that can truly be called brave. In revolutions, the emphasis is always on getting the often docile masses to participate. East German, Polish and Hungarian uprisings during the late 80s were as much about the economic and material dead-ends that the respective regimes had led the populaces to. But this does not detract from their actual accomplishments; indeed, revolting against economic hardship is clearly a legitimate component of a protest against a lack of freedom. However, this impoverishment was noticeably absent in Czechoslovakia. A country that was during the 19th century regarded as the economic heart of the Austrian empire, was very easily corrupted during the 20th, but the achievements of those days continued to bring Czechs prosperity right through forty years of communist rule.

A lack of freedom, albeit with a full belly represents a true problem for all democrats, as public motivation for revolt remains minimal. This was something the Czech communist authorities knew all too well. A particularly unpopular financial “reform” enacted by the Czechoslovak government in 1953 serves as a perfect example of the above. Demonstrations flared up across the country and though most were quickly suppressed, in the city of Plzeň, 20,000 people gathered and denounced and attacked the regime, demanding free and open elections. The authorities learnt very quickly from this first revolt in the Soviet satellite states, and the economy of the country moved towards a relatively greater level of prosperity from then on.

The people of Romania, for example, endured far greater hardship, and this far greater authoritarianism and dictaturship was required to prevent revolt. We Czechs had it far better, and so we protested far less. Sixteen years on from the fall of Soviet communism, Hungary and the Czech Republic have much in common by way of corruption and mismanagement. But in the Czech Republic, our streets are quiet and our bellies remain full.

David Svoboda
**7th October 2006**

Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, known for her criticism of her country’s handling of the war in Chechnya, is shot dead in her Moscow apartment. Her murder is widely suspected to be connected with Vladimir Putin’s government. Grigory Yavlinsky, representing the liberal opposition party Yabloko, describes the murder as ‘an outrage and a tragedy. Putin fails to offer a response to her death for three days, raising eyebrows in diplomatic circles.

**8th October 2006**

The European Commission releases a report regarding the European Union’s further expansion. After the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in January, it is unlikely that more countries will be admitted for several years. The Balkan nations will be eligible for entry under six conditions, in a bid to improve the corruption and organised crime which some critics believe mean they poor candidates for full membership. Only six countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Finland, Latvia and Estonia) have announced that they will freely accept workers from Bulgaria and Romania after January 2007. Britain remains wary following the influx of around 600,000 Polish workers to the UK in the last two years – a number between four and nine times greater than that expected in the last period estimated in the October 2005 round of temporary free movement of EU citizens.

**10th October 2006**

It is confirmed that the Czech Republic will open its labour market to Romania and Bulgaria when the two countries join the European Union in January. But, the country will continue to reserve the right to limit the movement of labour if the number of workers reaches a level that limits employment opportunities for Czechs.

**11th October 2006**

Following its failure to win a parliamentary vote of confidence, the Czech Civic Democratic minority cabinet of Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek resigns. Topolánek, who was appointed by the President, had a constitutionally mandated one-month period to secure a vote of confidence. This represents the first attempt at forming a government in the Czech Republic since the June elections. President Kavkova mana on Monday that the outgoing government remain in place until after the October 21st local and senate elections.

**12th October 2006**

It is revealed that the Czech Republic may erect a border fence along the Slovak border, ending free travel inside former Czechoslovakia unless Bratislava tightens controls on its frontier with Ukraine. The warning is made by the Czech ambassador to Bratislava Jan Kubat. Meanwhile, a proposed Christian Democratic election new leaders a centre-left majority in the country, as the new leader of centre-left Social Democrats elect a new leader, the centre-left mayor of Vestm, Senator Jiří Míček. Míček’s decision earlier this year to move several hundred Romany rent-defaulters out of a disputed block of flats in the town centre, an act described as “turning an ulcer” caused an uproar at the time.

**13th October 2006**

The Czech Chamber of Deputies approves the state budget for 2007. The budget anticipates a state income of 949.5 billion crowns (over 45 billion US dollars) and a 91.3 billion crown (an estimated 4.3 billion US dollars) deficit. Deputies from the Civic Democratic, Social Democratic, and Christian Democratic parties voted in favour of the budget, while the Communists and the Greens opposed it.

**14th October 2006**

Talks on forming a broad coalition government in the Czech Republic collapse following the resignation of the Civic Democratic Deputy from talks with the Social Democrats. Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek states that differences over gay marriage and the make-up of the cabinet were insurmountable.

**17th October 2006**

Current Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek states that a proposed coalition between his Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic and the Greens will probably undergo a vote of confidence by the middle of January 2007. The Civic Democratic leader later suggests that half of the seats in the proposed cabinet will be offered to the smaller coalition members. The proposed coalition is an exact mirror of the first Civic Democratic Minority government back in the summer and lacks a majority by one parliamentary seat. The Civic Democrats state that this time they hope to win the support of deputies from other parties.

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**17th October 2006**

Russian authorities receive a significant number of complaints about the poor treatment of prisoners, the continued application of the death sentence and government-controlled media. As a result, Papstev moderate the criticism of the Czech government, saying the European Convention on Human Rights and the Social Democrats now have enough seats in Parliament to change the constitution if they were to gain power. The two parties have 53 of the 81 seats in the Senate and 155 of the 288 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The elections are seen as the first major test of public opinion since the inconclusive parliamentary elections in June.

**20th October 2006**

A poll released by the CVVM agency reveals that 74 percent of Czechs trust President Václav Klaus, while 28 percent of those polled expressed trust in the government of Acting Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, despite his party’s recent success at the polls.

**28th October 2006**

At the EU–Ukraine summit, delegates state that Ukraine is not yet ready for accession to the EU. Žebušok, who was appointed by the President, had a constitutionally mandated one-month period to secure a vote of confidence. This represents the first attempt at forming a government in the Czech Republic since the June elections. President Kavkova mana on Monday that the outgoing government remain in place until after the October 21st local and senate elections.

**29th October 2006**

The EU–Ukraine summit, delegates state that Ukraine is not yet ready for accession to the EU. Žebušok, who was appointed by the President, had a constitutionally mandated one-month period to secure a vote of confidence. This represents the first attempt at forming a government in the Czech Republic since the June elections. President Kavkova mana on Monday that the outgoing government remain in place until after the October 21st local and senate elections.

**30th October 2006**

The Czech Republic and Germany unite to block EU plans to increase duties on beer by thirty-one per cent. České lze, which produces more than 200,000 litres of beer per year, met with officials from the European Union to discuss the issue. Meanwhile, the government has been asked to increase the price of beer by 12% per litre of beer. In a move to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade issues a warning to Polish workers to the UK in the last two years – a number between four and nine times greater than that expected in the last period estimated in the October 2005 round of temporary free movement of EU citizens.

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**A LOOK AT EVENTS IN THE ZCH REPUBLIC AS WELL AS KEY STORIES FROM CENTRAL-EUROPE**

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**8th November 2006**

Following its failure to win a parliamentary vote of confidence, the Czech Civic Democratic minority cabinet of Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek resigns. Topolánek, who was appointed by the President, had a constitutionally mandated one-month period to secure a vote of confidence. This represents the first attempt at forming a government in the Czech Republic since the June elections. President Kavkova mana on Monday that the outgoing government remain in place until after the October 21st local and senate elections.

**9th November 2006**

The EU offers Belarus increased trade, aid and mobility on condition of its improve- ment of human rights and democracy in the country. Following negotiations with the EU in March, the EU froze the assets of several Belarusian officials. European commentators have described the EU as a step towards closer ties with the West, with the aim of encouraging political reforms. This is the first time that the EU has imposed sanctions on a country outside the Schengen zone.

**10th November 2006**

The EU offers Belarus increased trade, aid and mobility on condition of its improve-ment of human rights and democracy in the country. Following negotiations with the EU in March, the EU froze the assets of several Belarusian officials. European commentators have described the EU as a step towards closer ties with the West, with the aim of encouraging political reforms. This is the first time that the EU has imposed sanctions on a country outside the Schengen zone.
Should the Czech Republic Abandon the Winner-Take-All System in Favor of Proportional Representation?

In the Czech Republic, where the Lower House of Parliament is elected through a system of proportional representation (the Upper House is elected through a winner-take-all system), a debate has been raging about whether to fully shift towards winner-take-all. The main reason is the post-election deadlock that has snarled the Czech Republic since June 2006 – the result of which was that no party could gain absolute power and the only truly workable solution was a large, unpopular grand coalition between the two largest parties.

Though no decision has been made and no proposal put forward in parliament, certain circles have been suggesting that the Czech Republic should change its electoral system. Within these circles, most support the adoption of the so-called winner-take-all system, the kind practised in Britain and the United States. The main argument for the change is that it will provide greater political stability in the executive than does proportional representation. Czech proponent of this system argue that it would end the era of wafer-thin government majorities (the last functioning Czech coalition government had a majority of one MP) based on shaky coalitions in parliament. Those that remember the situation in the country during the First Republic (1918-1938) would certainly welcome this as well. At that time, the multinational makeup of the electorate (until 1945, there were 3 million Sudeten Germans/Austrians in the country as well as numerous Hungarians in the east – Ed.) necessitated that all basic groupings and sections of the political spectrum were represented. However, such a wide spectrum hindered the creation of a functional parliament.

Thus, during the 1920s, Czechoslovakia was governed by numerous varied and volatile coalitions, often between right and left, until an agreement was reached among key parliamentary fractions, the so-called “Pact of Five” (later Eight), which committed the pact members to an approved vote on virtually all bills tabled by this informal coalition. Such procedures, were hardly in tune with the classical principles of democracy. This era was symbolic of an increasingly polarized and fractured Czechoslovak society. Many view the 1920s example as a reason to avoid similar “grand coalitions” and caretaker governments to resolve today’s Czech political stalemate.

The second advantage of a majority system is that it creates a greater opportunity for contact between the electorate and political representatives. Every seat represents an independent competition within a given constituency, rather than the support of a nation-wide political programme. Proponents argue that voters are far more willing to express their opinions, hopes and concerns, and know whom they can turn to when addressing or expressing both regional and wider political concerns. Elected officials must then heed these concerns far more than in a system in which a party simply creates a list of candidates behind the closed doors of the party apparatus as it does with proportional representation. This is a clear positive, particularly as it allows for a focus by both parties and constituents on local issues, rather than just national-wide party allegiances.

Flexibility and Openness

In a simplified, bipolar winner-take-all democratic system, smaller parties, which have inevitably been assigned a non-decive role, are forced to come to terms with the fact that governance as well as the framing of the basic political debate is essentially left to the two major political parties. At the same time, this means that for either of the two dominant parties to prosper, they cannot focus on a narrow spectrum of interests or ideas. Thus, both are forced to present themselves as complex coalitions of internal interests (for the Left: centrists, trade unionists, liberals and socialists – for the Right: centrist, conservatives, religious conservatives, nationalists etc.) that can group these varied outlooks under one political roof.

But such flexibility also has disadvantages. Sometimes, the umbrella can be so big that it is difficult to find any true difference between the two main parties. At other times, the cabinet or executive assumes the reigns of the party to such an extent that the rest of the party is literally left sitting on the “back benches” – a situation often ascribed to British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s so-called “Presidential” style of leadership. Further, candidates reliant on local electorates and expressing both regional and wider political concerns. Elected officials must then heed these concerns far more than in a system in which a party simply creates a list of candidates behind the closed doors of the party apparatus as it does with proportional representation. This is a clear positive, particularly as it allows for a focus by both parties and constituents on local issues, rather than just national-wide party allegiances.

Weaknesses

One of the disadvantages of winner-take-all voting systems is the way that they can allow parties to reap the benefits of their respective policies while the citizens suffer the consequences. In a winner-take-all system, the two major parties are the only ones that can form a government, and they are the only ones that can have any influence on the country’s policies. This means that if one party wins a majority of seats, it can make decisions that benefit its supporters but harm the losers. This can lead to unfair outcomes and a lack of accountability.

Another disadvantage of winner-take-all systems is the way that they can lead to one-party dominance. In a winner-take-all system, the party with the most seats is the only one that can form a government, and it can make decisions that benefit its supporters but harm the losers. This can lead to one-party dominance, which can be a problem because it means that the government is not accountable to the citizens who do not support the party in power. This can lead to a lack of representation and a lack of democratic accountability.

A final disadvantage of winner-take-all systems is the way that they can lead to legislative gridlock. In a winner-take-all system, the party with the most seats is the only one that can form a government, and it can make decisions that benefit its supporters but harm the losers. This can lead to legislative gridlock, which can be a problem because it means that the government cannot pass legislation that benefits the citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the winner-take-all system has its advantages and disadvantages. It is important to consider the specific context in which it is implemented and to weigh the benefits and drawbacks carefully. In the Czech Republic, the decision to switch to proportional representation would be a complex and controversial one, and it would need to be carefully considered by all stakeholders.
Experience of the notorious opposition agreement (in 1998, the two main parties in the Czech Republic - The Civic and Social Democrats - entered into a so-called opposition agreement in which a Social Democrat minority government was tolerated by the opposition Civic Democrats. The end result was widely criticised as being unproductive - Ed.), the notion of a majority voting system seems appealing to many.

But would this change truly fix the Czech system or simply create new problems? It is certainly true that the political culture of a country in many ways determines the appropriate electoral system. For example, a winner-take-all system would be inappropriate in the European parliament, which is currently elected through proportional representation. This is because the EU parliament not only represents numerous nations, but also varied political movements within those nations.

Majority voting was also inappropriate in Czechoslovakia during the First Republic, as a multi-faceted society would not have found itself properly represented. With the expulsion of millions of Germans after the Second World War, the situation in Czechoslovakia changed, and the country became more ethnically homogenous.

In the Czech Republic, there is a tendency to view each political conflict as one of insurmountable differences from which neither side can retreat. An experience with both types of totality - Fascism and Communism - may well have changed the political climate, but not necessarily the Czech mentality. For many Czechs, the fact that in 1948, the communists were able to Democratically assume control of the country and then dismantle the very mechanisms of democracy within it, remains a particular historical sore point.

One cannot easily predict how the average Czech voter would respond to a universal winner-take-all system. The results of the June 2006 parliamentary elections as well as the ensuing October 2006 senate and local elections suggest that the majority of Czechs trust either the Social or Civic Democrats to serve the interests of their country. Both of these parties thus have a realistic chance at being successful with a winner-take-all system. The main losers would be the smaller parties, who are largely determined to prevent such a change in the system. Ultimately, the winner-take-all system can be seen as more pragmatic, whereas proportional representation remains a more ideologically rooted system.

Does the Czech Republic really need this reform? One could argue that rather than such a seismic change, far smaller tweaks in the country's present electoral system would do far more towards creating a climate of responsibility and political maturity within the country.

Zdeněk Suda is a sociologist and a long time contributor to Radio Free Europe. Slightly edited from the original Czech.
To Pay or Not to Pay?

A look at the arguments for and against free university education

The issue of financing university education has been dominating government agendas across Europe and the world for years. “Contrary to what is often assumed, entirely state-funded, ‘free’ systems of higher education do not guarantee equitable access and participation.” So stated Ján Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Multilingualism, in an EC communication of September 2006. In Britain, the issue of the “top-up fees” implemented by the current Labour government has caused heated debates in parliament, universities and schools. As of September 2006, new regulations allow universities to charge students up to £3,000 per year at their discretion for tuition – a doubling of previous years’ rates.

Meanwhile, in many countries where free university education is available, such as France and the Czech Republic, it is becoming increasingly evident that quality comes at a price. In the Czech Republic, which has a long tradition of free higher education, numerous political attempts to institute fees have been defeated in parliament, and such proposals remain highly unpopular with the electorate. Proponents of free education argue that it is the only way to maintain a level playing field, in which education remains a right, not a privilege.
nents of tuition fees, argue that not only is free education an unfair tax on all citi-
zens, but that it by no means guarantees a quality education.
There are approximately 6,000 uni-
versities and equivalent institutions in
Europe, currently catering for some 17
million students. In a recent table pub-
lished by The Times Higher Education
Supplement in London, which rated the
top 50 European universities, the list was
dominated by the UK (11 universities),
the Netherlands (7), Switzerland (6), France
(5) and Germany (4). Only seven other
countries featured in the list. Although
there are some exceptions, the majority
of the countries topping the ratings re-
quire some kind of tuition fee paid by
students, even if these are effectively “free
at the time” in terms of loans, or sup-
plemented by government grants. The
conclusion suggested by these statistics – albeit a simplistic one – is that purely
state-funded education systems will nev-
er be able to compete with those that are
financed by students themselves.

**Different processes**
Each country has its own process of
university selection, and the criteria for
entry varies greatly. In several countries,
the main basis for this is compulsory ex-
aminations at the end of a student’s sec-
ondary education. Austrian pupils take the Reifeprufung (higher-level exam) and
may also be required to take further en-
trance tests in their specialist subject. In
Britain, universities decide whether they
will offer a student a conditional place
based on their predicted A-Level results.
These results must then be achieved or
bettered before a place is offered. Brit-
ish students are also required to provide
a personal statement of their extra-cur-
ricular activities, as well as teachers’ ref-
ereces. Students in the Czech Republic
sit for end-of-school exams, which con-
sist of written papers and an oral inter-
view.

However, in other countries, institu-
tions are restricted by regulations and
directives rather than applicants’ aca-
demic performance. Belgian universities
are obliged to accept all those that apply,
regardless of their capacity or ability, and
attempts to introduce an entrance ex-
amination have been resisted. Denmark,
Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and
Iceland accept applicants according to
the number of places available.

In the USA, each institution pro-
duces a specific application form requir-
ing a combination of SAT Reasoning
Test scores (a final examination taken by
high-school students), references and
easy examples. Each application
is paid for separately, many costing $80
each. No limit is put on the number of
institutions to which a potential student
may apply, meaning that the applica-
tion process itself may cost hundreds of
dollars. Universities may waive this fee
if the student can prove financial hard-
ship, but the effort of doing this in itself
(meaning testing, providing documentary
evidence of income) for every applica-
tion made, often discourages those from
less wealthy backgrounds from taking this
initial step.

**Right of ptvílebo?**
During the debate over university finan-
cing in the Czech Republic, critics argue
that tuition fees would deter able stu-
dents from lower income families from
applying. Similar arguments are voiced by
the British press. The London Evening
Standard has recently claimed that “uni-
versities are failing to attract enough
students from poor families,” while The
Independent notes, “the latest university
expansion has widened the gap in oppor-
tunities enjoyed by the richest and the
poorest families in Britain.” The news-
paper also noted that “the proportion of
state-school pupils at university has
fallen to its lowest level for three years,”
clearly a worrying statistic.

Universities have historically been the
stomping grounds of the elite. From their
earliest origins they were fundamentally
religious institutions teaching advanced
topics to the children, almost invariably
sons, of the aristocracy (at the time of the
foundation of the oldest European uni-
versities, academic education itself was
also reserved for the privileged few). The
widening of admissions to mainstream
university education in western Europe
only began in the mid-nineteenth cen-
tury, before which only wealthy white
males had been accepted. At Cambridge
University, the first female students were
examined in 1882 but were not formally
recognised as full members of the uni-
versity until 1947.

At Cambridge, there is a long stand-
ning tradition of applicants from the pri-
ivate education sector, but the university
has in recent years launched an “access”
campaign to encourage applications by
state school students. Although in Brit-
ain, the decision to gain a university edu-
cation has arguably lost much of its up-
per-class stigma (in 1992, polytechnics
were granted university status, enabling
them to award degrees, and therefore
making degrees much more attainable)
historical mentalities still linger, along
with the assumed stereotypes. Even the
grandiose architecture and somewhat
pompous traditions of historical institu-
tions – not to mention their academic
demands – may dissuade those from less
affluent or academic backgrounds from
applying.

State-funded modern systems may
therefore have the advantage: they have
the potential to provide quality educa-
tion without having been automatically
pigeon-holed as unattainable by long-
standing public perceptions. If their
financing is restricted to central gov-
ernment sources, this reduces the com-
petition between institutions (which
might otherwise have the right to set
their own tariffs and therefore select only
richer students) and creates fewer ten-
sions between students from different
social backgrounds. Thus, the stigma of
having to apply for financial aid is pre-
vented.

**Proponents of free education argue that it is the only way to maintain a level playing field, in which education remains a right, not a privilege.**

**Contacts**
Whether or not financial factors have
a significant effect, application proce-
dures are another aspect of tertiary edu-
cation currently causing concern. Being
offered a place at a certain university can
also present huge obstacles. It has been
suggested that at certain institutions,
processes are far from transparent. In
a recent article published in our sister
paper Příbuznost (Evropské univerzity ve
bratří početným zmenšan [European uni-
versities are afraid of reform], Autumn
2006) Radim Válečník and Simona Wei-
dner note that “In the Czech Republic, it
is clear that a candidate’s general knowl-
dge and personal contacts within the
institution play a greater part than their
actual achievements and abilities dur-
ing the application process. This system
is therefore a great contributor to social
segregation, … judging candidates’ merit
by their family status and other privi-
leges rather than their potential alone.”
In post-communist countries, corrupt
practices are often closely tied with the
state administration. Thus, the argument
goes, transferring control to the private
sector or charging admissions (rather
than increasing efficiency, accountability
and transparency) will reduce or remove
such practices, as well as reducing the
overall burden of public debt and ex-
penditure.

Many argue that neopatism still flour-
ishes at the world’s top universities, re-
gardless of whether education is free or
not. In the US, where there is no central
body to regulate applications, it is widely
presumed that applicants whose parents
were alumni of the institution will be fa-
voured. This angers those campaigning
for the rights of ethnic minorities, whose
parents are less likely to have attended
the more prestigious establishments. The
US application process requires various
letters of recommendation, and it is often
felt that applicants whose references are
written by judges, senators or celebrities,
or those closely connected to the school
in question, may stand a better chance of
being considered. The children of ben-
efactors also appear to be favoured.
In an interview with this author, a third-
year Boston College student noted “If
you give a school ten million dollars,
your kids will get in.” Thus, contrary to
the theory that fees reduce nepotism and
corruption, many critics argue that as-
seessment through abilities – even if the
benchmark of “abilities” is variable – is
in theory a fairer method than by finan-
cial means alone.

Despite the British government’s defence of the recent introduction of so-called “top-up” fees through the greater avail-
ability of financial aid, the National Un-
ion of Students (NUS) has argued that the
changes have already had a negative
effect on applications. Applicants de-
creased by 15,000 compared to last year,
especially in traditional subjects such as
classics, history and music. However,
the expansion of student loans means that
tuition will still be “effectively free” dur-
ing study, being added onto the total loan
amount, as opposed to in previous years,
when tuition was paid at the beginning
of each term. Students only start to re-

According to some, as a result of such in-
stitutional support or careers advice, and the
dearth of practical skills deemed attractive to
employers. France currently has 65,000
psychology students, a quarter of the Eu-
ropean total.

The majority of European education
authorities, whether national, provincial
or local, are able to offer financial sup-
port (grants, bursaries and scholarships)
to those that could not otherwise afford
a university education. Even in countries
where tuition is free, such as the Czech
Republic, the Ministry of Social Welfare
is able to subsidise accommodation and
living costs. Elsewhere, student support
comes indirectly, and helps with other
costs incurred. In Germany, a combina-
tion of loans and grants are offered. The
maximum loan is currently €521, which
can decrease to as little as €1 per month.
Accepting a €1 may seem ridiculous, but
acceptance makes students eligible for
cut-price telephone services and a free
TV license.

In fee paying systems, often little or
no provision is made for those from a
comfortable, but not affluent, financial
background. The situation in Great Brit-
ain is slightly different, and has changed
recently to accommodate the Septem-
ber rise in fees. Loans are provided by
the government-owned Student Loans
Company, (though the administration
of some debts has been sold to private com-
panies) and 75% of the loan is available
to all applicants, regardless of their finan-
cial status. The remaining 25% is means-
tested according to parental income.
For the year 2006-7 the maximum loan
available was £4,405, but on top of this
students could claim a non-repayable,
income-assessed maintenance grant of
up to £2,700. However, acceptance of
the maximum grant reduces the maximum
loan amount to £1,200. Thus, the great-
est amount available to an undergraduate
from a disadvantaged background is
£5,905.

Most British institutions offer grants
and scholarships that are independent
of the loans. Cambridge University
gives a limitless number of bursaries of
up to £3,000 per year, depending on ap-
plicants’ parental income. As tuition fees
}

Rosemary B. Bryant is a graduate from
Britain’s Cambridge University.
Written exclusively for The New Presence.
The Good Soldier Švejk (The protagonist of Czech author Jaroslav Hašek’s novel) once famously noted that any government that raises the price of beer is destined to collapse within one year. It is a superstition that even totalitarian governments dared not forget. Today’s Czech authorities appear to be no different.

In November 2006, both the Czech Republic and Germany blocked the passage of a proposed 31% increase in the minimum EU duty on beer and spirits. This would have added 1 cent to the price of a half liter (17 fluid ounces) of beer. According to Vlastimil Tlustý, the current Czech Finance Minister speaking in Brussels at a press conference on 28th November 2006, “We Czechs believe that beer is a part of food. We cannot agree that such a typical Czech product be put at a disadvantage.” Such strong sentiments have deep roots in the Czech Republic. To what extent is alcohol a cultural symbol of the Czech people, and is such a state of affairs worrying – or even dangerous?

A Long History
When a foreigner thinks of the Czech Republic, it is likely that one of the first things to come to mind is beer – and for good reason. According to the UK-based Society for the Study of Addiction, in 2003, Czechs drank an average of 162 liters of beer per person, more than any other nation on earth. That’s a bottle of beer for every man, woman, and child in the Czech lands every day. The only part
Nationalistic Awakening and the Pub

According to sociologist and researcher Jiří Vojnol’s paper Beer/Patriotism in the Czech Republic, aside from beer, the pub itself was always a crucial part of Czech culture. He writes “The significance of beer and pubs in modern Czech society certainly originates from their long-lasting history. The depth of their relationship arises from their interconnection over the years of common development. We cannot focus on the history of the beer culture in the Czech lands without paying attention to the development of pubs.” As early as the 14th and 15th centuries, the tavern was where people gathered to hear the news and stories of the day. The manuscript Písně dávno zbožné ("the Groom and the Scholar") written at the end of the 14th century notes, “Kdo do krámy chodí, často nikdo se jemu nějaká a k tomu novýmlahu." "Who goes to the pub often learns various stories and news."

By the 19th century, the pub had become an essential part of the Czech national revival, with both nationalists and revivalists holding meetings at pubs across the country. An important reason for this was that the pub had become a key place where people could talk in Czech (the primary language in the Austrian Empire was German). Thus strong nationalist sentiments became inextricably connected with beer, wine, slivovice (plum brandy) and many other beverages. Of all these, beer clearly remained the dominant drink of choice. A nineteenth-century patriotic organisation Sokol contains the Czech national drink: "Our famous forefathers, good old Czechs, loved good beer... We are also Czechs, the grandchildren of our famous grandfathers. We respect their deeds and honor their drinks. This way, we honor our grandfathers in graves. Let us drink beer, let us praise beer and show that we are their grandsons, that we too are Czech!"

Drowning the sorrow

Following the Communist takeover in 1948, alcohol assumed a very different role in Czech society. Once a symbol of national pride, alcohol soon became a toton to drown out the economic and spiritual malaise of a nation. Communist economic policies often effectively meant that people were paid to sit around doing nothing, which invariably translated into large numbers of productive people spending day after day in the pub, drinking heavily. To an extent, these policies also destroyed people’s work ethic: with motivation irrelevant and good work essentially pointless, sitting in a pub became both a subconscious protest and a symptom of a failing system. One son of a pig herder who worked on the communal farms during communist times explained his father’s daily 10am shot of slivovice this way: "Well, I guess it is just a tradition. During communism work was not a serious thing, you had to do it but not well, so people drank all day. I guess this tradition has not died." Alcohol remained cheap, and in a regime where free speech was denied, the hopes of a nation were again (as with the nationalist movement) often condemned to futile chatter in pubs across the country. Meanwhile, the country’s breweries suffered from a lack of investment, and by the 1989 Velvet Revolution, many were in poor condition.

Culture of symptom?

In today’s post-communist environment, beer is still considered the drink of choice for young people who continue to consume it at increasingly higher levels. The pub has remained a key place for Czechs to gather after work. Even former President Václav Havel noted the significance of the beer and pub culture, stating in 1995, "I suppose that drinking beer in pubs is a good influence on the behavior of Czechs, because beer contains less alcohol than for example wine, vodka or whisky, and therefore people’s political chat in pubs is less crazy." The political chat may be less crazy, but the other dangers involved in excessive drinking remain.

Unlike Britain, which has struggled with the problems of binge drinking (believed by many to be a reaction to licensing laws which, until recently, stipulated that public drinking must end at 11pm) the Czech Republic can be described as excessively binge drinkers. Rather, the sum total of alcohol consumption provides a worrying statistic for many health experts. A 2003 report by the Czech Statistical Office analyzing the Czech adult population’s drinking habits noted that 33.4% of men and 14.1% of women consume 20 grams of alcohol daily and/or 75 grams at a single session in a month. Both are considered hazardous patterns of alcohol use. The situation may actually be even worse than the Czech Statistical Office findings suggest that women have been suffering from the same symptoms. In 2002 a study entitled "Prague Women’s Drinking Before and After the ‘Velvet Revolution’ of 1989: a Longitudinal Study" by Czech researchers Luděk Kubicka, Ladislav Česmy and Jiří Konecny, it was noted that "the proportion of heavier drinkers (with average daily alcohol consumption over 20 grams) increased from 7.2% to 14.0%". The rise in drinking can be attributed to the increased amount of beer consumed per occasion, rather than an increase in the number of occasions. However, although the figures for female alcohol consumption are rocketing, male levels of consumption have not changed significantly from the projected level. Also notable in this study was the greater tolerance of drunkenness. The findings suggest that women have been drinking more, and that they consider it acceptable to do so. Why this change in women? According to Dr. Václav Drtovská, the head physician for addiction treatment at Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, "The shift in the 90s brought so many new responsibilities, and some
people found it difficult to cope. Under the communist regime, you could always find a way to blame personal failure on the system. 'That's no longer possible.'

**Doesn't everybody like to drink?**

Many countries have problems with alcohol consumption. It is estimated that, Europe-wide, 15 million people regularly consume harmful levels of alcohol. There are around 195,000 alcohol-related deaths per year, and alcohol is responsible for a quarter of deaths amongst males aged 15-29. The Czech Republic lies somewhere between the EU average and the Russian example (where, according to a study by the Medical Council on Alcoholism, thousands of people die prematurely each year as a result of excessive vodka consumption). According to heartstats.org, compared with Western Europe, Czechs' drinking habits are getting worse. Between 1992 and 2001, levels of alcohol consumption fell in Italy, Germany and France by 20%, 15% and 13% respectively – yet in the Czech Republic, consumption increased.

Despite a blurred boundary between cultural and pathological drinking, certain attitudes do seem to be shifting, albeit gradually. To a foreigner, sober drivers in the Czech Republic seem bad at best: the country is also notorious for drunk driving. In the past, Czech police were often powerless to convict drunk drivers caught behind the wheel, and it took repeated infractions or a very serious accident, to bring offenders to court. In July 2006, a law was passed whereby anyone caught driving with a blood alcohol level above 0.8% concentration could be convicted and face harsh penalties. Under the new law, police officers can take away licenses on the spot for drunk driving – a stark contrast to previous regulations, under which drivers would receive a fine and walk away with license in hand. The law has had a dramatic effect on fatalities, bringing them to their lowest level in over 35 years.

According to Luděk Kubicka (co-author of the aforementioned study), while 93% of Czechs regard beer as the national drink and 90% regard it as something to be proud of abroad, 67% think excessive beer drinking is a demerit of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic. Astonishingly, 63% of Czechs think that the national attitude towards beer is "excessive" – a fact that would have Švějk's character rolling in his grave. Beer may arguably form an integral and essential part of Czech culture, yet statistics show that Czechs may have to compromise this attitude in the future, as the social and health issues associated with it are reaching crisis point.

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This article was written as part of the New Presence internship program with New York University, Prague.

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**META o.s. - Sdružení pro příležitosti mladých migrantů** je nevládní nezisková organizace, jejímž počinem je podporovat osobní rozvoj mladých cizinců, a to v oblasti vzdělávání, které považujeme za jednu z podmínek úspěšné integrace do společnosti. Svou činností chceme přispět k oboustrannému přínosu a bezkonfliktovému soužití cizinců a většinové společnosti.

1. září 2006 zahájilo sdružení META činnost Poradenského a informačního centra pro mladé migranty (PIC).

**Kому jsou služby centra určené?**

- cizincům ve věku 15 až 30 let, pobývajícím dlouhodobě v Praze, nebo nezískujícím dobu pobytu.

- rodicům mladých cizinců, kteří se neúspěšně spojili se vzděláváním svého dítěte.

**Nabízíme pomoc při:**

- výběru a kontaktovali školy
- přípravě na přijímací řízení
- uznaní rovnocennosti dokladů o předchozím studu
- seznámení se školním životem, s studijními povinnostmi a jejich plněním
- řešení problémů spojených se samotným studiem
- řešení problémů s ubytováním, školním životem
- vyhledání vhodného doplňkového či rekvizitačního kurzu
- zprostředkování a zabezpečení pomoci s hledáním děti po dobu části na kurzu

**Jen dýně roste vleče.**

Staňte se dobrovolníkem!

Připojte se k nám a pomozte nám podporovat mladé cizince při jejich vzdělávání!

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**META - Association for Opportunities for Young Migrants** is a non-governmental, non-profit organization. Its principal aim is to support the self development of young migrants, mostly in the field of education, which is necessary for their successful integration. Thus we want to contribute to mutually enriching co-existence between the immigrants and society at large. On September 1st 2005, META has opened a Counseling and Information Center for Young Migrants.

**Who can use the service of our center?**

- foreigners between the ages of 15 and 30 years, living in Prague, with all kinds of visa.

- parents of young foreigners who need to solve problems related to the education of their child.

**We offer help with:**

- choosing and contacting a suitable school
- preparation for entrance exams
- managing validation of certificates and documents form previous education
- orientation in the new school environment
- solving school difficulties
- finding an appropriate solution such as alternative forms of study, retraining schemes etc.
- managing day-care while parents attend classes/courses

**Only a pumpkin grows lying.**

Become a volunteer!

Join us to support young foreigners in their education!
Though the 2006 US midterm election is over, its impact is yet to be felt. Widely hailed as a dramatic change in US politics, the long-called-for replacement of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld was announced even before the release of the final results, which saw both the Senate and the House slip from Republican Party control. The dismissal of the highly controversial US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, represents another high-profile casualty of the recent anti-Republican backlash. Will a Democratic Congress hold to account what many view as the radical neo-conservatives who have controlled the federal government since 2001?

Confronting abuses of power
November 7th, 2006 saw US voters cast ballots on what was billed as a referendum on President Bush and the Iraq war. Election Day Exit polls (by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International) asked 11,798 voters for their views: 57% disapproved of the US war in Iraq; 68% said the war was very important in how they voted; 60% disapproved of the Bush administration and 74% said that corruption and scandals had a significant effect on their decision.

In the run up to the election, there was no shortage of political scandals to animate voters. There were allegations of violations of public disclosure law; warrantless wiretapping, data mining and other unlawful spying; leaking of the identity of undercover agents, obstruction of justice, bribery, fraud, campaign financing illegalities and several other forms of corruption. Further, human rights violations involving unlawful indefinite detention, kidnapping, secret prisons and torture have also been widely reported. (e.g., in the current annual reports of Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Committee for the Red Cross). For the once finely-oiled PR machine headed by Bush aid Karl Rove, the disintegration of the "Bush message" during this election was a stunning blow.

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with him and not the Bush administration. During the interview, Clinton was asked by interviewer Chris Wallace to repond to allegations that he had failed to respond to allegations that blame for 9/11 lay in the administration’s tactic of clearly remaining focused on its “war on terror.” While campaigning across the country, Bush told a gathering in Nevada “If you listen closely to some of the leaders of the Democratic Party, they sound like they think the best way to protect the American people is to wait until we’re attacked again.”

In the election there was a noticeable shift away from the post-9/11 “by the flag, for our President” media mantra. Nonetheless, many noted that Fox News stayed true to its alleged pro-Republican bias. In a pre-election interview in which Jack Ciattarelli portrayed the Democratic Party as plotters, and instigators of the group’s recommendations weren’t actually used by this administration. The media:

A PARTISAN PATRIOTISM

When the damaging National Intelligence Estimate report was leaked, Bush once again used the Karl Rove-honed strategy of explaining away ineffectual and counterproductive policies by asserting that critics only give comfort to the enemy and endanger the security of Americans. “There’s a leak in our government, coming down the stretch in this campaign, to create confusion in the minds of the American people about the nature of this enemy,” said Bush.

Playing with words

Despite ongoing scandals, the Bush administration’s tactic was clearly to remain focused on its “war on terror.” While campaigning across the country, Bush told a gathering in Nevada “If you listen closely to some of the leaders of the Democratic Party, they sound like they think the best way to protect the American people is to wait until we’re attacked again.”

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The Rise and Rise of the Czech Hypermarket

In 2003, two Czech film students made a documentary film designed to satirize Czechs’ newfound love of consumerism. Following an elaborate marketing campaign, unwitting customers were lured to a non-existent Czech Republic never suffered the kinds of political abuses that have plagued the Czech Republic at this time. A post-communist-era Máj store at Národní třída in Prague was quickly to enter the Czech Republic. Perhaps the difference is the corruption of relevant authorities in [the Czech Republic]." In 2002, an Income Research study reported that approximately 30% of Czechs preferred to shop at hypermarkets rather than at other retailers. The most recent Income Research study shows that hypermarkets’ share of the Czech retail industry has reached 30% with little concern for architectural aesthetics or environmental issues. In an interview with The New Presence, Dr. Zdenek Kuhn, a professor at Charles University School of Law, noted, "Buildings aesthetics are necessary in both [the West and the Czech Republic]. Perhaps the difference is the corruption of relevant authorities in [the Czech Republic]."

Took the West that prosperity could exist behind the Iron Curtain. All supermarkets shared the same brand name, Jednota (meaning Unity), but luxury goods were hard to come by. The state-owned shop Tuzex provided Czechs with their only access to western products. There, people could purchase cans of Coca-Cola, Marlboro cigarettes and Walkmans. However, with the Czech Koruna effectively worthless, purchases at Tuzex could only be made with so-called “bony,” an alternative currency issued by the state in exchange for hard currency. During the 1970s, the Czech government set about building several department stores. Although the goods they sold did not differ greatly from those available elsewhere, the stores did create an impression of material choice for the country’s citizens. The two most famous communist-era department stores in Prague were Kotva and Máj. Today both businesses continue to operate, although in the case of Máj (meaning May Day), ownership has transferred from the state to the British supermarket chain Tesco (Kotva is now owned by the Irish company Markland). Following the 1989 revolution, major international supermarket chains were quick to enter the Czech Republic. Newly permitted private ownership led to a flourishing of independent stores as well as a mass expansion of supermarket chains.

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Increased interest in consumerism could have been an inevitable consequence of a post-communist society. For decades, goods were basic – today, the choices are limitless. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident in the Czech Republic than in the rise of so-called “hypermarkets” – stores so huge and offering prices so low, that many Czechs viewed them as a manifestation of what could be described as the ultimate Czech dream: “something for nothing.”

Storefront Socialism

During the communist era, the Czech Republic never suffered the kinds of shortages and famines that afflicted, for example, Romania or Russia. Indeed, the country was often perceived as a storefront for the communist system, designed to prove to the West that prosperity could exist behind the Iron Curtain. All supermarkets shared the same brand name, Jednota (meaning Unity), but luxury goods were hard to come by. The state-owned shop Tuzex provided Czechs with their only access to western products. There, people could purchase cans of Coca-Cola, Marlboro cigarettes and Walkmans. However, with the Czech Koruna effectively worthless, purchases at Tuzex could only be made with so-called “bony,” an alternative currency issued by the state in exchange for hard currency. During the 1970s, the Czech government set about building several department stores. Although the goods they sold did not differ greatly from those available elsewhere, the stores did create an impression of material choice for the country’s citizens. The two most famous communist-era department stores in Prague were Kotva and Máj. Today both businesses continue to operate, although in the case of Máj (meaning May Day), ownership has transferred from the state to the British supermarket chain Tesco (Kotva is now owned by the Irish company Markland). Following the 1989 revolution, major international supermarket chains were quick to enter the Czech Republic. Newly permitted private ownership led to a flourishing of independent stores as well as a mass expansion of supermarket chains.

From Communism to Consumerism

Brooke Skinner and Rosemary B. Bryant

The December 6th Report gave a sharp rebuke to Bush’s Iraq policy. Days later, Baker (responding to Bush’s public comments which were skeptical and dismissive of parts of the report), told the press that the White House should not treat the report “like a fruit salad” to pick and choose from, but rather as a comprehen- sive strategy to chart a new way forward. No matter how Bush operates during his last two years in office, he will leave the next President with diminished interna- tional standing, an overstretched military and record budget and trade deficits.

Democratic Oversight

Controlling the House of Representatives gives the Democrats power to control spending and launch investigations. Will they deny funding for operations in Iraq, impeach Bush, or investigate the apparent embezzlement of some $10 billion in unac- counted-for Iraqi reconstruction funds? New Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi may lead investigations into the Bush administration’s alleged abuses, but many have suggested that with their eye on the 2008 presidential elections, the Demo- crats may be unwilling to rock the boat during Bush’s final two years in office.

Will the results of the 2006 election promote greater accountability? The required steps are obvious: strong campaign finance reform legislation, non-partisan control of congressional redistricting, responsible media and media literacy, consistency and honesty from politicians, prohibiting pork-barrel politics (government spending that is in- tended to benefit constituents of a politi- cian in return for their political support), transparency in government including open bidding for government contracts, among others. The European tradition of giving free air time to candidates may be a good starting point in reducing the role of money and influence-peddling in US politics. Whether the 110th Congress passes a substantial campaign finance law or not will be a good indication of its future intentions.

In the final analysis, whether the 2006 protest vote will lead to real accountabil- ity remains an open question. At stake is whether America may regain global respect as a true democracy, in accord- ance with its Constitution, rather than as a country in which those in power re- main above the law.

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Tesco, Tesco Everywhere...

Tesco is currently the largest retailer in Britain and the fourth largest retailer in the world, behind the US giant Wal- Mart, French-owned Carrefour, and US company The Home Depot. In October 2006, Tesco declared its market value to be 29.090 billion pounds sterling. The chain operates over 2,500 stores around the world, in countries as diverse as Chi- na, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, the Republic of Ireland, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Slovakia, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, and the United King- dom, with 308 new international stores planned for 2007. It also has plans to open a chain in the United States in 2007, focusing mainly on the US west coast. The first Tesco store opened in London in 1929, the first supermarket in 1968, and the first hypermarket in Israel, England, in 1973. In the international sphere, Tesco parent “over-saturation” of the market. Between 2005 and 2006, the French re- tailer, Carrefour, pulled out of the Czech Republic and handed over control of its stores to Tesco, in exchange for some of Tesco’s stores in Taiwan, a move which ensured Tesco an even greater market share in the Czech Republic. In 2006, the German retailer Edeka also decided to pull out of the Czech market as did the Austrian company Julius Meinl, creating conditions for a potential oligopoly.
first entered Hungary in 1995 and opened stores in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic the following year. Today, Tesco sells everything from groceries to electronics, internet services, financial services, and clothing. The average size of the company’s Czech stores is approximately 6,800 m² (slightly larger than the international average), and numerous new stores are planned to open in the country in 2007.

In the Czech Republic, the company has become extremely well known, partly due to controversial issues surrounding its development. One of these is the creation of vast signs that display its brand name across the entire façade of its stores. Another practice involves the placing of ultra-high Tesco signposts. In many Czech towns, the company’s logo has become a dominant feature of the townscape. According to the company’s Czech website, Tesco takes concerns about these practices very seriously: “Each store of Tesco [sic] wants to be a good neighbour, from the time its foundation stone is laid. We accommodate the size and location of our new stores and landscape cultivation to their surroundings... We also take environmental protection into consideration – in the neighborhood of our stores we plant the same number of trees as water sources and pay attention to effective use of energy.” The company clearly believes that it has good intentions, but some argue that these are hollow words.

Continued expansion in the Czech Republic may go unchecked, as laws in the Czech Republic regulating retail are more relaxed than in many western countries. For example, France has enacted a law called the Loi Gaillard (which was recently revised and renamed the Loi Distredd), which regulates the prices at which corporations may sell their goods. In Britain, rules dictate that retail stores must not be “detrimental” to town centers, harm the accessibility of shops, or damage the environment. However, the so-called “needs test” (which permits the building of major shopping schemes only if an area’s population is deemed to have insufficient retail space) may soon be lifted by the British government, following considerable lobbying by the US company Wal-Mart. In an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian, Andrew Simons, influential policy director at the New Economics Foundation, noted that the proposal “would be Armageddon in town centers and small shops.”

The Czech Republic has no laws that are even comparable. Dr. Zdeněk Kuhn attributes this to the legacy of communism, general apathy, and lack of plentiful disposable income. He says, “People are hungry to consume. Consumption is the basic uniting principle of the Czech people.”

In Britain, various protest groups have expressed concern at what they see as the destruction of independent businesses, and the creation of so-called “clone towns.” Numerous organizations campaign specifically against Tesco, for example VeryLittleHelps.com, which labels the company “The Exceedingly Self-Centered Organization,” and provides an anonymous forum for employees, former employees, and customers to discuss the company. A 2002 report by the aforementioned environmental think-tank The New Economics Foundation noted that “Retail spaces once filled with independent butchers, newsagents, tobacconists, pubs, book shops, greengrocers and family owned general stores are filled with supermarket stores, fast food chains and global fashion outlets.” It is a trend that is sweeping across the UK, the US and the rest of the world at an alarming rate.

In the West, such campaigns as well as a functioning media continue to probe and pressure the major supermarkets. Issues such as the perceived excess of packaging, lack of nutritional information on products and the targeted use of “pester power” (placing children’s products low down on shelves) have all had to be addressed by the major Western retailers. Meanwhile, an article by The Times Online reveals that while Tesco advertises price reductions of up to 38% off certain advertised products, at the same time it will raise the prices of its best selling items. Its rivals claim that this strategy turns what customers perceive as a 30 million pound price cut into several million pounds profit for the company.

Today, Tesco controls about 30% of the grocery market in the United Kingdom, a figure which a website known as “Tescopoly” claims can be partially attributed to unfair trading practices with its suppliers – often threatening to put many out of business. The campaign groups argues that this could be prevented by adaptation of its code of working practice. The organization wants to see stricter rules in place, governing the activities of the major supermarket chains. Tesco have blocked any new takeovers by major supermarkets; stronger planning policies to protect local shops and High Streets; a legally binding code of practice to ensure that farmers at home and overseas are treated fairly; an independent watchdog to protect the interests of consumers, farmers, and small retailers; and rules to protect workers’ rights. A November 2006 poll for the British newspaper The Guardian found that 70% of Brits believed that big stores both harmed small producers and limited consumers’ choice.

The Czech Republic, where according to many, a truly active civic society is still largely absent, such concerns are rarely voiced. In an interview with The New Presence, Dr. Zdeněk Kuhn of the Charles University Law School noted. “Western consumers try to support some good idea... whereas people here do not care.”

**The Czech Model**

Whereas Tesco once limited itself to out-of-town hypermarkets and stores in major city centers, it has been seeking to expand into smaller Czech towns. The retailer currently owns 31 smaller stores, and plans to add “dozens more.” The company is also testing the potential of small convenience stores in smaller stores, and plans to add “dozens more.”

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This article was written as part of The New Presence internship programme with New York University.
The parallel lives of two of the Czech Republic’s most popular and controversial musicians — Karel Kryl and Karel Gott.

On March 3rd, 1994, Karel Kryl died in a Munich hospital. His heart had failed him on a Munich street, and he passed away a month shy of his fiftieth birthday. Three months earlier, another man with the same first name, Karel Gott, received a platinum record in Prague from the music company Supraphon for the best-selling Czech album of the previous two years.

Karel Kryl and Karel Gott are arguably the two most important figures of modern Czech music. The two artists were also contemporaries, both in their heyday during the late 60s and early 70s. However, this is where the similarities end. Gott is a pop singer with a huge and loyal fan-base in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany and across the globe. Kryl enjoys a very different type of popularity — as a protest artist and folk singer who helped inspire a revolution. The two artists, both of whom are influential and iconic, chose different career paths. In so doing, they hold vastly different positions in the Czech consciousness.

The beginnings
Karel Kryl was born in 1944, the son of Karel Kryl and Marie Krylová. His father owned a printing business, which was confiscated after the Communists assumed power in 1948. Kryl mostly focused on artistic studies (specializing in ceramics). After leaving school in 1962, he spent the next six years employed in a variety of professions. At first, Kryl worked as a quality controller in a ceramic establishment in Spořilov. He then went on to work as a cultural educational artist in Olomouc, Ostrava. In January 1968, Kryl moved to Prague for the first time, securing a position working as a stage-assistant in the documentary department of Czech Television. That year saw the overthrow of reformist Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubček and the invasion of the country by Warsaw Pact forces. These events made a great impression on Kryl. He began to write and perform songs that reflected his love for Czechoslovakia and his decidedly negative view of the Soviet occupation. He often coupled his performances with speeches containing strong anti-Communist rhetoric.

In early 1969, Kryl released his first album, Bratrůvku zavírají vrátka (Close the Gate, Little Brother), which was filled with songs describing his disgust over the occupation and the inhumanity of the regime. Following the 1968 invasion, the country began a slow drift towards the normalization era and Bratrůvku zavírají vrátka was soon banned by the new government.

Karel Gott is five years older than Kryl, being born in 1939 in the city of Plzeň. He is the only son of Karel and Marta Gott, his father was a mechanic before the war. After World War II, the family moved to Prague for better employment opportunities. Gott’s first love was painting, which was the focus of his initial studies. Proving to be less than adept at this venture, he soon turned his attention to becoming a mechanic. Beginning in the late 50s, Gott decided to try his hand at singing, entering various amateur contests in pubs around Prague. In 1958, he won his first competition and two years later he decided to quit his job as a mechanic. Not long after, Gott joined the prestigious Prague Conservatory studying opera singing.

In 1963, Gott recorded the song “Snow Drift Eyes,” which became a huge hit, propelling Gott to the top of the Czech popular music scene and netting him the Golden Nightingale award. This award is given every year to the winner of a national poll, which determines the most popular singer in the country. Gott’s victory in this poll and his stranglehold of the competition in later years is the best demonstration of his unmatched popularity in Czechoslovakia.

In 1966, Gott released his first English-language album. The success of this album provided the impetus for a six-month tour in Las Vegas in 1967. He also performed at the World Expo in Montreal and on Canadian and American television. Gott was well-received by critics and audiences on this North American tour, and he returned to Czechoslovakia, more popular than ever. He ended the decade cementing his status as an international superstar at the Cannes Music Festival in France; his identity as a European idol was thus secured.

Two different symbols
If commercial popularity is used as a barometer for judging an artist’s success, then Karel Gott has certainly been more successful than Karel Kryl. The time during which both of these artists were at their peak is crucial in understanding both the men and their music. Kryl’s songs endured a very different fate than Gott’s. Gott was promoted as a Czech superstar, first domestically, and then internationally, gaining opportunities to perform on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Kryl, however, at relatively the same time, became one of the first artists to be censored in Czechoslovakia. Not only was the selling of his music banned, but Kryl was successfully prevented from performing at shows or disseminating his music.

The difference between the two artists is further illuminated in the public’s perception of the two men. Milada Poličenková, a professor of contemporary history at the Anglo-American College in Prague, notes that as a girl in the 50s and 60s, she thought of Karel Gott as a rock star idol. “He had a very positive image and never had much in the way of scandal. And he had an absolutely fantastic tenor voice, which we all used to die for.” In contrast, she said that Karel Kryl was “not that great a singer, but his songs were legendary for their imagery of the Soviet invasion. It was great poetry and the songs had great mobilizing potential.”

Though Only 50,000 copies of Kryl’s first album were allowed to be sold in the country, Kryl’s music soon became an underground phenomenon. Despite an official ban on his music, tape recordings circulated across the country. Hikers began to perform his music at campfire sing-a-longs, a practice that continues to this day. Jan Sulc, the editor of Karel Kryl: Rozhovory, a recently published anthology of Kryl’s interviews, notes that “Bratrůvku zavírají vrátka became the emblematic expression of the feelings of an entire nation.”
I don't know anyone that didn't know the album or the songs... it defined the occupied nation.” According to Milada Polšenková, Kryl’s songs do not claim that sort of political or cultural influence “His songs were very poppy...[and while] he never expressed loyalty to the Communists, he never spoke out against them... he was very neutral.” This lack of a political agenda invariably raises many questions about Gott’s allegiances. Gott lived a life of comfort, while most people in his country did not. In order to even approach the standard of living that Gott had, collaboration with the Communists was necessary. However, at the same time, Gott brought people joy with his music during a time of repression.

Exile – one forced, one voluntary

By 1969, Karel Kryl was being threatened with a life of persecution, incarceration and even death if he continued to propagate his music and ideas. It was because of this forced isolation that Kryl embarked on a “voluntary” exile across the Iron Curtain to Munich in West Germany. Leaving on September 9th, 1969, Kryl did not return to his native country for thirty years, coming back during the Velvet Revolution in November 1989.

While in Germany, Kryl studied the history of art and journalism at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich. Perhaps more importantly, he began to work as a freelance contributor with the US government-funded Radio Free Europe network. At first, he was a disc jockey with the Czechoslovak network, and it was access to this medium that allowed Kryl to communicate with people in Czechoslovakia. According to Olga Kopecká, a colleague of Kryl’s at RFE, he used the time he had to “play a lot of his own stuff.”

Kryl continued to make and release music critical of the Communists. The best example is his second album Rákova (Cancer), released only a few weeks after his arrival. One music critic called it “a description of the bleak atmosphere that prevailed in Czechoslovakia.” More albums were released later, but these are not as well known or influential. In 1983, Kryl became a program editor at RFE, a position he held until 1991. As a whole, his time at the network in Munich can be characterized as one of advocacy, toward the Czech people and against the Czech Communist government.

While RFE was officially banned in Czechoslovakia and blocked by a network of jamming devices, there were still those able to occasionally get reception. Such people would listen to tape Kryl’s songs. Kryl’s broadcasts were mutually beneficial to both Kryl and RFE. Kryl used the banner of RFE to receive credibility around the world and RFE used Kryl to cement its credibility in Czechoslovakia. According to Olga Kopecká, “When you young people went to the streets on November 17th, 1989 (the start of the Velvet Revolution), they were often Kryl’s listeners, instead of listeners of the more famous dissidents... Karel Kryl was very important for that generation.”

In 1969, Karel Gott also went into voluntary exile in West Germany, but returned after a few months. Gott wanted to travel to other countries to perform, and after the velvet revolution, he was “in-collaboration with the Communist regime.” Kryl did not like Gott and thought that he was in “collaboration with the Communist regime.” He notes that Kryl was “very unhappy with the signatures” of the people who signed the Anti-Charter. Many Czechs would agree with these sentiments, claiming that Gott, who had come to the Charter by betraying their values and collaborating with the Communist government. However, not all Czechs hold such a view. Many, he concludes, believed that there were many extenuating circumstances. “If you had openly refused to sign, you would be limiting your career. It is impossible for us to be wealthy and powerful. We know what the signatories were going through, and we do not know how the signatures were organized... people, both the public and Kryl himself, according to Kopecká, would be happy now if the Anti-Charter had never happened.”

Polšenková offers some reasons why Gott, despite being allowed to travel outside the Soviet bloc, never attempted to escape the country or speak out against the government. “He is like a god in this country. He would never be as popular or as respected anywhere else as he is here. Also, he was treated well here, so there was no need for Gott to leave... people lost hope [after 1968] that strong action could do anything... [And so] you got on with your life.”

Many of Kryl’s views are also to be found in assessments of Kryl’s life and work. In a discussion with this author, many students attending Charles University in Prague expressed a view common amongst Czechs: Kryl was not really significant. Gott, despite being allowed to travel all over the world, remained one of the most popular vocal artists in the country. According to the Czech record label Suraphon, he has sold more than 15 million records in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There are no official numbers regarding the amount of records he has sold around the world, but estimates range from 30 million up to 100 million. This December Gott again received the country’s most prestigious music award for best male vocalist.

Kryl’s biggest star served to legitimize the upcoming revolution in the eyes of the population.

An iconic image exists of the two vastly different artists, one an anti-Communist folk singer returning from exile, the other an international pop star and celebrity, standing together on a balcony during a rally in Wenceslas Square in 1989, both waving to the crowd. Kryl’s return to his native country was not the only thing he thought it would be. The musician wanted all former Communists punished, but President Václav Havel and others did not believe it was beneficial for the new country to begin its existence by holding systematic purges of all former Communists. Further, believing that many had joined the party in the name of convenience or practical reasons rather than ideological ones, Havel believed unfair to punish so many of the country’s citizens. Kryl was also disenchanted with the wild capitalism that existed in the transition from communism to a market economy.

Vojtech Klimt notes that Karel Kryl was “anti-communist man number one for his generation. But for the new politicians, he was not a partner. He was a critical, man who continued to criticize what he found dishonest about the capitalist system. He adds that “Kryl wanted the country to become completely Western, and its failure to do so immediately, along with the later split of Slovakia from the Czech Republic led him to stay in Munich rather than return to his former home in Prague.”

Karel Gott had a much more successful transition to capitalism in the 90s. Though he announced his retirement early in the decade, he quickly renounced it when he saw how much popularity he still had. Since then, he has appeared in movies and television commercials, and continues to spread his brand of music all over the world. He remains one of the most popular vocal artists in the country.

This article was written as part of the New Presence internship program with New York University, Prague.
the region embodies post-Soviet Russia's struggle to come to terms with its modern status. 

A LOSS OF CONTROL 

The break-up of the Soviet Union, though welcomed by most of the world, represented a tragedy to many in Russia. The loss of the Baltic, Caucasian and Central Asian states, as well as Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova (Moldova) represented a strong blow to the Russian self-image. Though most of the post-Soviet Republics soon joined the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States, a new non-federal association that in essence served to maintain strong ties to Russia, so-called "colour revolutions"—most notably the "Revolution of Roses" in Georgia in 2003 and the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004—led many CIS members to shift their allegiances away from Russia towards the West. 

Relations between Russia and some post-Soviet states such as Georgia (which, along with other republics of the former Soviet Union, gained independence in 1991) have thus been decidedly fraught. Georgians' relationship with Russia became noticeably shaky following the 2004 election of President Mikhail Saakashvili, who sought membership of NATO and closer ties with the West. In late September 2006, Russian-Georgian relations reached a new low with Georgia's arrest of four Russian army officers accused of espionage—which Russia described as "an act of state-terrorism." Russia soon retaliated with air and sea blockades, bans on Georgian exports and most crucially a crackdown on Georgian migrants living in Russia, which included a series of deportations. Meanwhile, Russia itself also remains home to many so-called "ethnic republics"—semi-autonomous entities that were not granted or did not seek independence from Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many of these are little known, and include names such as Kalmykia, Bashkortostan, Tuvra, Adygea etc. However, there is one region that has come to the world's attention, not only because of a bitter struggle for independence over the last fifteen years, but two with two major wars being fought there, it provides an example of the new "public enemy number one" in the Russian mindset—Chechnya.

THE ETHERAL ENEMY 

Throughout its history, Russia's rulers have cultivated the image of an eternal enemy. This ultimately served to mobilise society and shift its attention away from social and economic concerns. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the bi-polar world order, Russia began to shift away from animosity towards the US—instead looking closer to home. In March 1996, in an article for the Russian daily Novoye Vremia, Russian journalist Alexandre Minkin wrote: "The government needs another enemy. Without this enemy, it will be hard pressed to explain why sixty percent of Russians live below the poverty line. Public dissatisfaction is a major power. So let's rather attack the Chechens and not the governors and prefects nor the Kremlin, which has not paid wages for months and is increasing our rents." In 1991, Chechnya declared independence from the Soviet Union. But the newly created Russian federation did not recognise Chechnya as an independent state. There were three main reasons for this. First, Chechnya had never been an "independent" entity within the Soviet Union (like, for example Ukraine) and thus had no constitutional right to secession. Second, Russia feared that Chechen independence would herald the break-up of Russia, with other parts of the country (such as Kalmykia, Tatarstan and Dagestan) and also voting for independence. Third, chaos in Moscow and a growing sense of individual animosity between Russia's president Boris Yeltsin and the Chechen leader Jokhar Dudayev created an atmosphere of mutual suspicion, which contributed significantly to the escalation of the conflict. 

The Chechens have been fighting against foreign domination as well as with domestic feudal elites throughout their history. Despite being pagans and Christians for centuries, by the 17th century the Chechens had largely converted to Islam (today, most Chechens are Sunni Muslims), though more than a thousand years later, Christianity was spread in some areas of Chechnya by Georgian and Armenian missionaries with local pagaents remaining strong to this day. Russian influence in the region goes as far back as the 16th century and the days of Ivan the Terrible. However, it was not until the 18th century and the spread of the Russian Empire (which existed between 1721-1917) that conflict with the Chechen people began to escalate. Chechnya was finally absorbed into the Russian Empire in 1859, which led to a considerable wave of emigration by the locals. In 1936, the Chechnya-Ingushetia region was granted the status of autonomous republic within the Soviet Union. However, several years later, on the direct orders of Stalin, all Chechens were ordered to be expelled to Kazakhstan (for alleged Nazi collaboration); as a result of the deportation and the ensuing years of exile, around a third of the Chechen population perished. The Chechens were only allowed to return in 1957, following Stalin's death. The region endured decades of "Russification" during Soviet rule. Rebellions against the Russian "occupiers" have been regular occurrences in the region for hundreds of years, with two major wars being fought in the last fifteen years alone (1994-96 and 1999 to the present day).

UNWELCOME IMMIGRANTS 

During the Soviet era, Russian perceptions about people from the Caucasus region tended to be positive. However, in the 1980s, a sense of alertness and fear began to permeate the Russian consciousness. This was partly due to economic migration from the Caucasus to Russian towns and cities. The fact that the immigrants often found themselves in foreign surroundings in which they were largely unwelcome served to reinforce the perception among Russians that they had to rely on themselves. This led to a strengthening of a clan-based and ethnic solidarity. In some cases, young Caucasians began to form criminal gangs, bound together by ethnic-cultural loyalties. However, criminal and economic activities were not the only factor that led many Russians to feel a sense of antipathy towards these people. Cultural factors played a role as well. In situations of conflict, traits that were once viewed positively began to take on negative connotations. Pride became arrogance, traditionalism became backwardness, initiative was viewed as rudeness, daring was viewed as aggressiveness, enterprise as greed, etc.

"Caucasians are everywhere" 

Decades of co-existence between the Soviet Union and the peoples of the Caucasus has clearly not brought about a wider understanding or appreciation of its people by the wider Russian populace. Indeed, most Russians have (just as other former members of the USSR once did) only a superficial knowledge of Caucasians, largely based on Soviet-era cultural stereotypes. Stories of the maliciousness and bloodthirstiness of the mountain people of the Caucasus remain common. Such fears strengthen a sense within Russians that Caucasians are everywhere and that there are simply too many of them. This, despite the fact that according to a 2002 national census, (officially registered) Caucasians only make up 3.3% of the overall Russian population (with the largest Caucasian group being the Armenians, who account for 0.8%), while the dominant Eastern Slavic group accounts for around 83%.
The “Caucasian mentality” does not condemn prosperity and success in the same way that the post-Soviet mentality views it as only being possible through dishonesty or theft. The “suspicious” behaviour of Caucasians in the eyes of many Russians only serves to confirm such adages. According to many Russians, Caucasians make money at the expense of (native) Russians and misuse their good will against them. The largely harmless posturing typical in the Caucasian culture is often viewed as representing negative intentions by many Russians.

Studies have shown that from the mid-nineties, Russian xenophobia has taken on a notable anti-Caucasian dimension. To the question of whether non-Russians in Russia represent a serious problem, 55% of respondents in a public opinion poll responded in the affirmative. According to the poll, 70% of 18-25 year olds have a negative view of Caucasians living in Russia while people over 55, for whom the memories of the past are more vivid, have a far more tolerant outlook – less than 40% have a negative view. Incidentally, during the early nineties, in an era of great post-Soviet expectations, young Russians were actually the most tolerant group. The ensuing instability, which came about during the “cowboy capitalism” era of former president Boris Yeltsin, ultimately served to increase social aggressiveness and suspicion.

The stoking of anti-Caucasian moods in Russian society – deliberately or otherwise – can largely be blamed on the media. Moscow major Yuriy Luzkhov was quick to blame an external enemy for a collapsed residential building in the capital – “This is Chechen terrorism,” he declared. An earlier comment by the former head of the Russian security service Mikhail Barsukov, was even less compromising. In front of television cameras, he generalised the efforts of the Anna Chechen warlord Salman Raduyev (died 2002) and his paramilitary campaign by saying “All Chechens are bandits, criminals and murderers.”

Similar comments by government representatives, politicians and respected public faces not only about Chechens and Caucasians but also members of other nations, are unquestioningly spread by a sensationalist media. Further, the ethnic dimension is often played up on occasions when the perpetrators of various crimes are from the Caucasus. In cases when a Caucasian is suspected of committing a crime, his or her country of origin is always made public. When it appears that the perpetrator may have other origins, such as Ukrainian or Tatar, this is only mentioned in passing.

From the mid 1990s, the Chechens have dominated the anti-Caucasian mood in Russia. Soon after the September 1999 attacks, in which terrorists from Chechnya were believed to carry out bomb explosions of residential apartments in the Russian cities of Moscow, Volgodonsk and Buynaksk, the pan-Russian Centre for Public Attitude Studies noted that 64% of Moscow’s inhabitants were for the forced expulsion of Chechens from the capital – essentially an act of ethnic cleansing.

The government also deliberately played up accounts of repression against Russians living in Chechnya. This was done in order to stoke anti-Chechen public sentiment and increase support for Russia’s war against Chechnya between 1994-96. The conflict came about following attempts at secession by Chechnya.

It is also true, that public opinion has largely been influenced by numerous recent bloody terrorist attacks in Russia by Chechen extremists and their sympathizers. In 2002, Chechen militants took 850 hostages in a crowded Moscow theatre demanding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. All of the 42 terrorists were killed, along with 129 of the hostages, when Russian special forces took over the building. In 2004, the Beslan school siege, in which Chechen (as well as Ingush, Ossetian, and Russian) terrorists seized a school in North Ossetia, led to the deaths of 344 civilians, of which 186 were children.

It is certainly true that some Caucasians have done much to contribute to their people’s bad reputation among Russians. As of today, in the symbolic world of many Russians, which is influenced by growing militarism and xenophobia, the words “Chechen” and “Caucasian” have become synonymous with words like bandit, extremist, terrorist and separatist. These semantic clichés continue to be stoked and disseminated by the Russian media and some politicians. Sadly, such fears will probably last long beyond the duration of the current conflicts and will only truly be quelled when Russian pride is replaced by an era of Russian self-examination.

This is an adapted and expanded version of an article, which appeared in Přítomnost by Emil Souleimanov, lecturer at the Institute of Political Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague. Currently, he is based at Harvard University.
Since the Industrial Revolution, energy usage has been one of the key indicators of economic prosperity. By the end of the 19th century, societies that had not increased their demand for and usage of energy were increasingly being viewed as outsiders by the major global powers. This fact was underlined by former US Defence Secretary Henry Kissinger (under President Nixon), when he stated, “Who controls the energy sources controls the fate of nations.”

For the European Union – one of the greatest energy consumers world-wide this became particularly evident during the early months of 2006. Russian gas giant Gazprom (which accounts for around 93% of Russian gas production) announced that the price of gas supplies to the Ukraine was to rise from $50 per 1000m³ to $230 per 1000m³, with immediate effect. Ukrainian petitioning proved unsuccessful and the country’s gas supplies were turned off for three days on 1st January, prompting widespread panic. Eventually, the countries compromised on a one hundred percent increase, and the supply was restored.

Although the stand-off primarily affected former Soviet areas (in a seemingly unrelated incident, pipelines supplying Georgia, Armenia and Chechnya were targeted in a series of explosions at the end of January. The Russian government blamed Chechen rebels, Russian sabotage was widely suspected), the EU also felt the aftershocks. Estimates of gas consumption vary between individual countries, Europe imports between twenty and fifty per cent of its gas from Russia, mainly along the Ukrainian pipeline network, but also through Belarus into Germany and Poland. Therefore, any disruption was bound to have an effect.

At first glance, it may have seemed that Gazprom’s efforts to raise the prices of supplies in Ukraine and Moldova were entirely justified. Until then, both countries had paid below-market prices for Russian gas, not to mention the various opportunities for siphoning off extra gas from the so-called Yamal-Europe international gas pipeline for free. For these reasons, Russian demands were viewed as reasonable by European countries, who believed that they could result in a greater level of “price transparency” – one of the main aspirations in European energy politics.

Today, the state-owned monopoly known as Gazprom can by no means be considered a non-political actor. The Russian government increased its stake in the company from 38% to 51% in 2005, and its Board of Directors is chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. The recent fall of the pro-Western government in Ukraine three months before parliamentary elections (the parliament sacked Prime Minister Yuri Yekhanurov’s government in January after it capitulated in the argument over gas prices – Ed.) serves as a key example of its political influence.

Many argue that the EU did not treat the Russian-Ukrainian stand-off seriously enough, and that those who still believe that an equitable agreement with Russia will be reached are at best naïve. In October 2006, the EU held an informal energy summit attended by Russia, its primary objective being to persuade Russia to sign the International Treaty on Investment...
and Trade in Energy (ITITE), which has already been signed by most European nations. Europe’s reliance on Russian gas and oil is expected to sky-rocket in the near future, and such treaties are viewed as paramount to ensure good political and economic relationships between supplier and consumer. The ITITE would force Russia to make its energy market more accessible to European investors, creating a system of mutual reliance and profitability, and lessening the grip of Russian national monopolies in the sector. However, President Putin refused to adhere to the agreement, question its wording, particularly clauses referring to human rights issues being key conditions for future investment.

The question remains, is an agreement truly possible, or will Russia seek to hold Europe to ransom? And is Europe, in its desperation for a seemingly secure energy supply, ignoring the threat posed by what many call an increasingly less democratic Russia?

Russia in the Saddle

In essence, the only commodities that Russia successfully offers the lucrative EU market are fossil fuels and minerals. Indeed, each of these materials represent such a significant source of income that Russia has begun to resemble a Middle-Eastern oil emirate. Without access to the nearby and highly solvent European market, President Vladimir Putin’s ambitious plans (announced in 2003) to double his country’s energy supplies indicates that in Russia, energy is now considered its principal strategic asset. In 2006, shortly after being sworn in as president, Putin told an international meeting of Russian energy players in the Siberian town of Surgut: “The state and also Russian embassies around the world should seek to present Russia with a so-called ‘musketeer’ principle towards the European market – a reality – are still seen by EU countries as a number of oil and gas projects are currently being discussed.”

In 2005, the European Union and Russia agreed to a $41 billion USD, 30-year agreement to transport gas from Russia to Europe, which is set to begin by 2014. According to the terms of the agreement, Russia will supply energy to the EU at a rate of one billion cubic meters per year, which is expected to cost an estimated $750 million USD per year. The agreement is expected to be in effect for 30 years, and will supply the EU with approximately 25% of its gas needs.

The agreement was signed in St. Petersburg, following a meeting between Putin and EU officials, including Prime Minister Tony Blair of the UK. The agreement was seen as a key step in the ongoing effort to diversify Europe’s energy supplies, and to reduce its dependence on Russian energy. The agreement was also seen as a means of increasing Russia’s influence in Europe, and of reducing the influence of the country’s powerful neighbors, including the US. However, the agreement was met with criticism from many EU officials, who argued that it would lead to an increased dependence on Russian energy, and would undermine efforts to diversify Europe’s energy supplies.

Ammunition

In recent years, Russia has undertaken three important projects. The first is the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean export pipeline, which is estimated to be completed in stages between 2008-2015. The pipeline will stretch for over 4000 km, cost an estimated $11.5 billion USD, and have a capacity of 80 million tonnes annually. The pipeline will transport oil from Taishet near Irkutsk to the southern Russian port city of Nakhodka (near China). Secondly, the planned Murmansk oil pipeline in the Russian sector of the Barents Sea is another major project, which will transport oil from the Barents Sea to Murmansk (estimated cost of up to $4.5 billion USD, capacity of 200 million tonnes of oil per year), and finally there is a plan to increase the capacity of existing oil pipelines from western Siberia to the Baltic Sea. A planned North-European gas pipeline should then travel under the Baltic and North Sea to Britain. President Putin and Prime Minister Blair signed this deal in June 2003, in the same week that the British Petroleum Corporation (BP) paid $675bn in cash and shares for a 50% stake in the Russian oil company TNK. The Russian company holds over 40% of the world’s recoverable oil reserves, and is expected to be a major player in the global oil industry.

The energy security of the EU also has a social and political dimension. However, the emphasis on energy security has been more narrowly defined by the EU, focusing on the need to reduce the EU’s dependence on Russian energy, and to increase the diversity of its energy supplies. This has led to a shift in focus from the importing countries, to the exporting countries, and to the role of energy policy in shaping the energy landscape of the EU.

In conclusion, the role of Russia in the EU energy market is complex and multifaceted. The EU is deeply dependent on Russian energy, and has been forced to make difficult policy decisions in order to diversify its energy supplies. The EU’s relationship with Russia is also complicated by the EU’s concerns about human rights issues, particularly in the countries of the former Soviet Union. The EU and Russia are currently engaged in a process of dialogue, aimed at improving the EU-Russia energy relationship, and reducing the risks associated with the EU’s dependence on Russian energy. However, the EU and Russia still have significant differences on energy policy, and it remains to be seen whether these differences can be bridged.

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Football and ice-hockey can be considered to be the two most globally popular team sports. Individual clubs have their fans who organise in various associations or fan-clubs. Their aim is primarily the exchange of experiences and opinions relating to the various players, and to the performance of their beloved clubs. But in the last few years, this scenario has changed significantly.

Today’s football matches are not only watched by fans, but also by an ever-present police force, ready to intervene at the onset of trouble. Before matches begin, police separate and even barricade fans from opposing teams. An ever-present fear of violent conflict has begun to be associated with team sports, primarily football and ice-hockey. On television, we see clips of scuffles between opposing fans, or of fans and police. Bottles and sticks are thrown and the colours of the “enemy” are set alight. And then there is the racial abuse that players of a non-Caucasian background must frequently endure, leading to the usual post match condemnations and threats of recriminations.

Football hooligans are responsible for one of the greatest tragedies in the history of sport. On the 29th April 1985, the Heysel stadium in the Belgian capital Brussels, hosted a European league match between Juventus and Liverpool. While on the pitch the players battled for the title of European champion, the viewers around them were often battling for their very lives. Live television pictures of the deaths of 39 fans (another 400 were injured) were beamed across the world.

Soon after, football riots made their way to the Czech Republic. On the 18th June 1985, Sparta Prague fans were travelling to a decisive away match against Banská Bystrice. Within the space of a few minutes, they entirely destroyed the interior of the train they were on. Why? This question was again asked by the film...
The period of the late 1980s can be viewed as one of societal change throughout the Eastern bloc. The work that was created reminded Czechs of the post-1968 development of their country and of individual episodes that occurred therein. For example, the era between 1970-1989 is often described as one of normalisation or harsh state-instigated repression. Despite this, it is clear that the period of the late 1980s can be seen as one of societal change throughout the Eastern bloc, primarily brought about by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika. Indeed, one can barely imagine that Szymanik’s film, Why?, looking at the dark side of the socialist youth could have even been made before the mid 1980s. The Gorbachev era caused a various opening up of the public debate about certain painful and uncomplimentary themes – one which didn’t officially exist in the worker’s parades of the communist era. Besides the subject of football hooliganism, there were also debates about drug dealers and users (subjects addressed by Czech screenwriter Radek John, who wrote a book about the life of a drug-addict called Memento, he also wrote the screenplay Bony a kild which looked at the life of Prague black-marketeers).

Is the media the message?

Almost every work of art that attempts to examine unwelcome societal traits finds itself in a certain paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it points to a certain problem, shows its effects and warns against it. On the other hand, it can function as an inspirational guidebook on how to behave in such a way. Indeed, even the makers of Why? could not avoid the latter. Upon its release, both viewers and those less concerned about the film may inspire copycat events. In the end, the filmmakers stuck to the line that “A film will hardly corrupt a person who is not already corrupt.”

A film can be interpreted from numerous viewpoints, and it is up to the viewer to make an informed decision. Naturally, it is only the viewers who are equally able to the role that various social phenomena had in their own lives. For example, what they saw went to see Sparta or nothing, to make an informed decision. Naturally, it is only the viewers who are equally able to the role that various social phenomena had in their own lives. For example, what they saw went to see Sparta or nothing, to make an informed decision.

Sparta or nothing

Besides Szymanik, the Czech documentary maker Jan Šiman is a journalist. In 1989, he was in the midst of filming a documentary feature entitled Najvětší příání (My Greatest Wish). In this film, the director simply asked passers-by what their greatest wish was. Some mentioned love, happiness etc., while others stated that they could not express their greatest wish (the fall of the regime) for fear of recriminations. Unwittingly, the film perfectly captured the dying days of the Czechoslovak communist regime. The last day of filming actually occurred on the 17th November 1989 – the day of demonstrations that led to the Velvet Revolution.

One of the groups of people that Najvětši příání sought comment from were fans of the Sparta Prague football club. Their on-camera responses were both chilling and fascinating. The fans were unbearably humble and simple people. Their greatest dream in life frequently was “that Sparta wins the league.” Repeated questioning with the aim of focusing on something other than football yielded nothing. Sparta, Sparta and nothing but Sparta.

Perhaps football fandom is even more important than the sport itself. Those who wish to experience football hooliganism in all its “glory” can, thanks to the internet, visit the Czech website www.hooligans.cz and see for themselves what sport really means to many people.

Sport For Everyone!

Czech sport, unlike many other fields within society, was never harshly frowned upon from the outside world by the communist regime. After 1989, in terms of equipment, the Czech Republic was quick to catch up with its more affluent neighbours. Today, evidence of a globalised sports sector is not only found in top-level sport, which is saturated with different sources of finance, but also in the sports activities of the whole population. “Sport for all” today manifested by the fact that in the last fifteen years, the number of officially recognised sports has more than tripled. Only one need cite cycling related sports as an example. Once, the sport was clunky and limited to spend racing and long-distance racing. Today, there are a whole variety of cycling related sports including freestyle, ramp-based display cycling and much more. Such “de-sportification” of sport, wherein so many sports are created that just about everyone can at least play one of them, has a clear positive effect. People have the ability to choose from a wide spectrum according to their desires and abilities, without fear of performance-related discrimination.

Meanwhile, non-elite sports are finding the rules relaxed so that as many people as possible can take part, irrespective of ability. Part of the reason for this is that sport is an important. Cultural factors such as these help to determine which sports we deem important, which we enjoy, and what if at all we know of them.

Levels of education also influence participation in sport. People with higher levels of education choose sports for the children that benefit their health and fitness. Those with lower education and lower income may select sports which offer their children a route to a higher social standing – such as tennis, football and golf. The higher one is on the societal ladder, the more they engage in recreational sports. Meanwhile, non-elite sports are finding the rules relaxed so that as many people as possible can take part, irrespective of ability. Part of the reason for this is that sport is an important factor determining participation in sport. Today, when parents begin to drill their children with the aim of creating future sports stars, the problem becomes all the more obvious.

The elite sport competitions offer their children a route to a higher social standing – such as tennis, football and golf. The higher one is on the societal ladder, the more they engage in recreational sports. Meanwhile, non-elite sports are finding the rules relaxed so that as many people as possible can take part, irrespective of ability. Part of the reason for this is that sport is an important factor determining participation in sport. However, non-elite sports can also be considered as an alternative to elite sport. People with lower levels of education and lower income may select sports which offer their children a route to a higher social standing – such as tennis, football and golf. The higher one is on the societal ladder, the more they engage in recreational sports. Meanwhile, non-elite sports are finding the rules relaxed so that as many people as possible can take part, irrespective of ability. Part of the reason for this is that sport is an important factor determining participation in sport. However, non-elite sports can also be considered as an alternative to elite sport. People with lower levels of education and lower income may select sports which offer their children a route to a higher social standing – such as tennis, football and golf.
Marian Jelínek (1963) was born in the Czech town of Český Krumlov and went on to study sports sciences in Prague. After graduating, he played for the second division hockey team of Slaný, but after being injured at the age of twenty-five, his career came to an abrupt end. For several years, he worked as personal trainer to the Czech ice hockey legend Jaromír Jágr. Four years ago, he co-authored a book on mental techniques in sport called The Secret Path to Success. This year he co-authored the self-help book Find Yourself.

To what extent is sport the same as it was a hundred years ago, and to what extent has it become mere commerce?

The point of the original Olympic games was the principle of kalokagathos (Greek word usually symbolising a form of holistic, or positive praise heaped upon a given individual – Ed.), a celebration of the body and also the spirit, and their co-ordinated and development. Certainly it wasn't sport in the sense that we see it today. Then, the Olympics were combined with debates, poetry recitals, and sport was viewed as just one of many events.

During the establishment of the modern Olympics, the spiritual and physical elements began to be separated. Today, the physical and psychological aspects are clearly separate and the Olympics have become a mere forum for chasing fame and money. For the player, their energy top end has become a mere business, in which individual players have become de-facto billboards for advertisers. Even the rules are now changing to accommodate the sponsors – for example in ice hockey, the third (Editor's note: An ice hockey match consists of three twenty-minute intervals) are being interrupted to accommodate advertisement breaks, which is in my view totally illogical. Players have in their contracts the kind of clothes they are allowed to wear. The sports star has become a mere financial investment. Stars are cultivated from childhood, by companies who identify them and create campaigns around them in order to raise their value. Then the players wear the logo of that company. The genuine motive of individuals is still to be the best – to win. But the motives of those backstage are purely economic.

The American film Jerry Maguire suggests that even to want to go into sport in the first place is entirely about money. In sport as well as in other aspects of human activity, there is something that motivates and pushes you. And I believe that those motives fall into two categories. Internal motives, related to ego and rational, which are motives that are in a sense selfish and purposeful – a desire for success and popularity. The external motive is money – let's not be afraid to say that. You don't just lead a company so that it prospers, you lead it to make money. Besides the two motives, there are internal factors which are not necessarily rooted in rationality – a person wants to be a winner, wants to be the best and does not care about the financial or material rewards. When a boy of fifteen has a poster of Jaromír Jágr on his wall, and his parents already view him as an NHL (The United States National Hockey League) player, all those motives and factors are combined. Let's say that such dedication leads to a contract with good results. But let's say that he begins to stagnate. What makes some players average and some excel is a significant motivating factor. The machine that carries the metaphorical wagon load of money on the train never travels as far as if you put the money at the back of the train.

Do business pressures make it difficult for sports players to focus on the psychologi- cal side of things?

It depends. A player is not just a mass of muscles, which can be programmed to work on Friday to give a maximum output on Sunday. That is not enough. The player has a soul and a psyche. That is why I focus on three elements in my training. The first is the physical body, which is kept in good condition. Then there is training in which the body learns technique and gains abilities. But then there is the fact that in training an athlete can perform wonderfully but still disappoint in contests. This is the other key factor – the state of mind. What's going through the player's mind when they are about to kick a penalty or serve a ball? Few trainers are concerned with this, despite the fact that it is the state of mind that determines whether inherent talent, training and condition will be able to emerge at the right time and in the right way. Fear, like-involuntary and dead-end thinking can destroy all of the above.

During a contest, the player is in the here and now, and that is where all thoughts must be focused. It is necessary to connect the energy of the mind and the energy of the body, and only then is the strength of the individual at its peak.

Stars are cultivated from childhood, by companies who identify them and create campaigns around them in order to raise their value.

Is that not repressing the existence of something very natural and human? Surely it’s normal to get nervous?

It is not natural, it is learned. Before a small child begins to realise its own sense of self, and its own ego, it is capable of acting out its needs and expressing its desires without restraint. Only later does it learn to hide under tables or behind its parents. When a player tells me of their fears, I ask them what benefits do such fears actually bring about? Naturally they can't name any. We assume that this is a natural fear, but in fact, it is a fear that is learned. Such ingrained principles are harmful in sport. An entirely different instinctive reality must be found. Only then can a player enter the zone in which only the ball, net or whatever is what counts.

What about the third factor?

Next to the health of the body and mind there is also what you could describe as a non-physiological energy, which forms a large part of the future of sport and man in general. The intersection of these three factors is what brings about a stability of form and performance. By non-physiological energy, I mean that which is unknown to science. Energy, which does not work as part of the cardio-vascular system is something that has been part of Asian perceptions for years.

Physiologists remain silent on this subject. Despite this, the example of what a mother's love can do for her child is known to everyone. Tibetans are able to cross the desert with ten metre long jumps - with the help of meditation, they can rid themselves of the effects of gravity. The human organism is an unbeliev- able tool, which thus far we are not fully able to control. Perhaps we are too bogged down in the physical and anatomical and orthodox science is setting us certain limits. Perhaps we are drilling our sports players too hard, and in the process we are draining down their joints needlessly, when in fact this can be supplemented by this alternative form of energy.

There is another method which is be- coming increasingly popular – doping, which shifts the body's limits of exhaus- tion. I am convinced that instead of this, these non-physiological energies can be used just as effectively.

Has sport has become so systematised, that the spiritual element which you noted, has vanished?

No, sport, but society in general. We have been bogged down by the material. We want to be able to quantify everything. There is an explosion in material products, be they computers, electronics, products, be they products, be they computers, electronics, products, be they products, be they computers, electronics, products, be they products, be they computers, electronics, products, be they products, be they computers, electronics.
etc. And this has meant that we have shifted away from our inner development. Human development is actually reversing. Eventually, people are finding that material happiness does not exist, and that is why, for example, non-orthodox methods of healing are increasingly being sought out.

Don’t you fear that business could also exploit the return to the energies that you have mentioned?

All advances in humanity have an inherent duality — they can both strengthen or destroy us. From the discovery of iron, to the invention of dynamite, to the invention of the atom bomb, the point is always whether our state of consciousness will allow or not allow such a step to be used. But fortunately, internal energy is so personal to the individual that it can never be turned into a metaphorical atom bomb. People can of course misuse the energy they have, but this usually leads to a loss of this energy. The assumption is purity.

We are equal in that we are all human, but intelligence and levels of consciousness vary greatly. We are all individuals with a certain capacity. A person is bettered by thought and the building of an internal consciousness. People with newly acquired capabilities will continue to apply them to their professional lives and will begin to excel. This is already happening. Only a fraction of those that understand quantum physics rule the entire field.

So how should the public view sport?

Some people are simply entertained, others identify so much with the teams or players, that their devotion is transformed into aggression, often fuelled by alcohol and gambling. Sport without excitement is unimaginable — I know many lawyers who “lower” themselves to the level of a fifteen-year-old and scream for their favourite team. As long as there is no violence, such passion belongs to sport. The mass nature of sport is a given – the finals of the football World Cup can be watched by four billion people. Tribal warfare is firmly entrenched in our genes.

Interview conducted by Ondřej Aust

The WBC competition was impossible to take seriously. The U.S. players were still shaking off the rust after not having played in that (the WBC was held in the “off season of American Baseball – ed.). It was hardly surprising, that under such far-from-ideal circumstances, excluding a 17-0 thrashing of a South Africa team that included 10 teenagers, that Team USA batted a meager .242, including a pitiful .125 with runners in scoring position.

Another issue was that the “Classic” involved limits regarding the major league arms of pitchers who were still recovering after the long off season. The pitch limits tainted every game but, in particular, the finale. Cuba was forced to keep two of its finest pitchers in the dugout.

The so-called Classic also allowed a new tie-breaker mechanism based on runs allowed, that permitted eventual champion Japan to advance, even though it’s record was 1-2 in the second round. Finally, the “Classic” was governed largely by minor league umpires, who too often showed why they are not in the big major leagues.

The WBC, with its unabashed appeal to nationalism, succeeded in its primary aim to create international excitement. According to Fidel Castro, the power went out in Cuba because so many televisions were tuned to the championship game. And the Japanese were overjoyed with the outcome. Pitcher Akinori Otsuka, who joined outfielder Ichiro Suzuki as the only Japanese major leaguer to participate in the title contest, claimed that Japan’s success dramatically changed the sport’s landscape. “I always thought that the best players in the world were in the major leagues,” he said. “This tournament shows that’s not true.”

No way.

The tournament showed that major league players, when they do not have adequate time to practice, when they are far from their best, can be defeated by highly motivated, thoroughly-prepared international opponents.

Japan and Korea are examples of two teams who were as sharp as they could possibly be. Japanese pitchers were models of precision, yielding only 17 walks in 62 innings. Korean pitchers mixed their fastballs to strike out 37 of 92 batters. However, both teams bowed out with embarrassing losses to Cuba.

Japan’s 9 run loss to Cuba was not unexpected. And the Japanese were overconfident, with players taking steroids, was a “Classic” in name only.

While Americans rightly shrugged off the WBC setbacks, it also must be admitted that the international community is closing the gap in baseball. And quickly. An unwillingness to practice for long hours on the part of US players is resulting in a loss of fundamentals. The sight of major leaguers popping up or feeding off bunts is all too common. Team play, exemplified by the willingness to surrender an at-bat to advance the runner, is not seen often enough.

But to attach any significance to the Classic, with its pitch counts and funky tie-breakers, would be as grievous an error as kicking a routine ground ball.

Chicago White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen put it best, when he said at the end of this lame tournament, “Japan and Cuba were better prepared than anyone else. They had more time to practice. The team was together a long time and Cuba knew it was going to play in the World Classic. But those two teams, they’re not that good. They have maybe a couple of players who are okay, but if they play 162 games at this (major league) level, they might win 20 games.”

The next World Baseball Classic is scheduled for 2009, then every four years after that. I can’t wait.

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A Staggering Transformation

Petr Feldstein

At the beginning of the 21st century, sport is both imposing and depressing

Sport remains a legitimate and an immovable phenomenon in any society. It is not, as many view it, a subject that is superficial, simplistic, marginal or casual. Rather, it is a subject that is current, complicated and often painful.

The paradox of sport

Sport as a societal issue is often underplayed, despite the fact that in much of the world, certain matches and competitions are of paramount importance. Hence, the paradox of sport. This paradox can also be seen in the fact that sport in some form or another, interests just about everybody while from another perspective, it interests almost nobody at all. Most of us like to watch sport, though we dwell on it (with the exception of passionate post-match analyses) far less.

There are many issues that lie at the heart of sport in general. What effect will the commercialisation of sport have in the years ahead? Just how high will individual players’ salaries go? Are players being exploited by ever more demanding schedules? Who owns our favourite sports clubs, the fans or the shareholders? Will drug-taking and doping really make certain sports non-viable?

The changes that sport has undergone in a relatively short period of time are immense. Modern day sport as we know it has existed for barely longer than a century, and despite this, over that time, much has changed both for the better and worse. World records and other measures of performance and endurance are constantly being broken, in some cases at an unbelievable rate. What was several years ago an extraordinary feat is today inadequate. Would the celebrated stars of yesterday be flattened by today’s athletes and sportsmen and women?

Archive footage of bygone games once considered legendary would appear to suggest that the answer is yes. The far better levels of training, support and general fitness levels now demanded render the stars of yesterday 40 more shadows of their contemporaries, be they athletes or tennis players, Naturally, there are exceptions, such as the former footballers Pele and Maradona, who archive footage proves were those rare talents that are often described as sporting geniuses.

A leap of faith

Today, it is extremely rare for players and managers to be so dedicated to a particular team, that they remain with one

Sport in the 21st century
Doping

The single greatest problem faced by sport today is doping, which guts the principles and joys of sport and leaves every result suspect. Doping destroys the very credibility of competitive sport. Nowadays, this specific kind of drug taking has become a scientific field carried out by underground scientists. In the US, doping scandals, particularly in athletics, have become so great in recent years that the authorities have decided to actively pursue offenders. The recent doping scandal at the Tour de France which led to the expulsion of several key competitors before the race as well as to the “winner” also being disqualified is but one example of the overall crisis that doping has caused in sport. The 1988 Olympic scandal that led to Ben Johnson being stripped of his 100m gold medal still resonates with many today.

With new advances such as gene doping on the horizon, cheating may eventually become impossible to detect.

Euphemism of the “freedom” of the player to choose to take performance-enhancing substances or not.

This radical camp has yet another argument at its disposal. Allowing science and athleticism to fully coalesce will produce hitherto unseen results and will help to attract new viewers and new sources of sponsorship revenue. There is, they argue, no other way. Traditional forms of training are dying. Today, an athlete who doesn’t take drugs may well be placing him or herself at a disadvantage. Other forms of training have also emerged, be they psychoanalytic, meditational, or even occult. Proponents of these methods view them as a crucial alternative to chemical enhancement of performance. However, their role and advantages are far more difficult to measure than the gains and dangers afforded by doping.

Obscene money

Present-day sport is primarily about money. This can be said to be the greatest single change in the field of sport since its invention. Once athletes were poor. No longer. Today, they serve as billboards for large sports brands such as Nike or Adidas, and are paid millions to wear brand items. Basketball player Michael Jordan’s multi-million dollar deal with the Nike company became a model for the financial possibilities of sports players as “brands”. Ensuing revelations over just how and where (specifically, guarded Asian “sweatshops”) most branded sports garments and shoes are made, caused yet more controversy.

A number of players such as the former Manchester United’s striker Ruud van Nistelrooij have publicly stated that the wages in England’s Premier League are obscene. Debates rage over whether to cap certain football players’ salaries.

Then there is the question of how to assure that funds reach smaller clubs. The related issue of television coverage, which is partly responsible for the hike in salaries has also become paramount.

The world as sport

This year’s football World Cup in Germany proved beyond all doubt that football is the most universal and popular sport in the world. Nevertheless, its global reach also means that it is the most scandal-ridden of the sports. Match fixing, in which referees are bribed to ensure certain results is the most common form. This year’s World Cup winners Italy, are mired in one of the biggest match fixing scandals in the history of the sport, one that has led to severe sanctions against several of Italy’s most famous and richest clubs.

Meanwhile, the number of sporting disciplines continues to grow. This partially comes down to a natural evolution and the transfer of street games into more structured arenas. Another notable trend is the rise in popularity of so-called adrenaline sports. Such sports are becoming ever more popular, perhaps because the viewer can identify with the players taking part, and can easily imagine themselves performing such dangerous stunts as bungee jumping. Indeed, this is an example of the kind of blurring of boundaries between participant and viewer that is lacking in other more structured sports.

By the end of this century, sport will have undergone further changes. In 1912, the fifth modern Olympics took place in Stockholm. Only fifteen sports were played. There were very few women amongst the competitors. The Winter Olympics or the Paralympics did not yet exist.

No doubt, those looking from the future back to our recent Olympics may view our era similarly. Perhaps ultimately, sport will start again from scratch.
A Nation in Name Only

Throughout their history, Belorussians have fought off both Mongols and Turks. They were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania for centuries, then part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, before being annexed by Imperial Russia. Short-lived independence in 1918 led to Belarus coming under Soviet domination. This troubled history, has left Belarus with a confused, even self-destructive sense of identity.

The concept of Belarus as a sovereign state is relatively new, a situation shared by neighbouring Lithuania and to a lesser extent, neighbouring Poland. All three countries have a closely intertwined history, one that often exceeded notions of self-determination based on language and culture. I remember a chance discussion with an unknown fellow traveller in the middle of Poland during the 1990s. “As long as Mickiewicz’s statue in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius (Adam Mickiewicz 1798-1855 one of the best-known Polish poets and writers –Ed.) bears the name Adamas Mickievicus (the Lithuanian name), I will never believe that the Lithuanians are acting in a friendly manner towards the Poles, or that they are free of the past.” The greatest poet of the Polish pantheon started his most famous work, Pan Tadeusz (aka The Last Foray in Lithuania: a History of the Nobility in the Years 1811 and 1812 in Twelve Books of Verse) with a challenge to the Lithuanian country, one in which he used the term Lithuanian fatherland to mean his native land – today’s Belorussian territory in the region of Navahrudak, once part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that existed between 1569 and 1795.

So was Mickiewicz a Belorussian or a Lithuanian patriot? Perhaps the former, though during his lifetime, Belarus was a concept that lacked recognition, being linked with territories to the East, while the territories to the West that Mickiewicz came from were referred to as “Black-Rus”. Nevertheless, the first proponents of the Belorussian national movements in the second half of the 19th century were already discussing how exactly to refer to this renewed nation. In the end, the name Belarus won out, whereas other possible names referred to ancient Eastern Slavonic tribes which settled today’s Belarus during the Middle Ages, who could thus be viewed as the founding fathers of the nation.

Polish assumptions

Throughout the centuries, the Polish-Belorussian-Lithuanian region bore witness to many cultural, political and artistic activities that all three cultures lay claim to today. For example, both Lithuanians as well as Belorussians view Mickiewicz as their own poet. The same can be said for Tadeusz Kościuszko, the leader of a Polish uprising in 1794 (A failed attempt at ridding Poland of Russian influence –Ed.), to which a great number of Lithuanian, Belorussian and Ukrainian regions also added their voice. Even then, a call for self-determination based on national-cultural factors, was nothing new.

In terms of cultural history, there is Stanisław Moniuszko, universally regarded as an eminent representative of the Polish National Opera, who is at the same time considered to be the composer of the first ever Belorussian opera.

Polish perceptions of its own cultural sphere caused many problems throughout the region’s history. In this sense, Belorussian culture, language and tradition were viewed as mere regional variations of Polish national culture. This was fanned by the continued existence of certain Polish elements who continued to call for the establishment of an independent Polish nation. Since with the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Poland had ceased to exist,
and was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria. It was not until 1918 that Poland was again officially re-born. Un-like Belorussian nationalists, Poles had an empire-centric pan-national notion of renewal, one which encompassed lin-guistic and cultural barriers as well as the regions of Belarus and Lithuania.

**Russian assumptions**
Problems emanated not only from the Polish side, but from the Russian side as well. In the 19th century, a dispute ensued between Russians and Poles regarding the cultural affiliations of the Belorussians. Russia viewed Belorussian history as essentially Russian, and the annexation of Belorussian territories was viewed as part of a natural reunification of Russia. The Russian state had at its disposal forceful means to prevent any outbreaks of nationalism, such as censorship and various dictates (the very kind that Belorussians now receive from their own leader President Lukashenko). Belorussian's eventually came to resent such government restrictions, and many of them began to support the numerous anti-Russian Polish conspiracies and revolts.

Russian historians and also some Belorussian intellectuals began to interpret the historic status of the former mid-dle-age Lithuanian Grand Ducky not as the historic status of the former mid-dle-age Lithuanian Grand Ducky not as ethnically Lithuanian, but as ethnically Russian, thus Belorussian. They pointed to the Slavonic character of the region. This perception actually continued to "unite" the Slav peoples throughout the Soviet era under Russian rule.

**Belorussian aspirations**
Fully-fledged Belorussian nationalist agitation began with a notable delay compared to surrounding cultures, for whom the 19th century had been a renaissance in the notion of national self-determina-tion. Indeed, it did not fully develop un-til the 1890s, at a time when in the case of the Czech or Polish example, one can already begin to discuss the embryonic formation of the modern nation. This was a time of strengthened Rus-sification in the Czarist Russian empire and the persecution of unwanted move-ments was common. Belorussian dis-sidents remained restricted to a narrow group of isolated intellectuals, artists and higher-educated citizens, making it diffi-cult to extend the concept of the strugg-le for the nation state to other levels of society. Low levels of mobility and a poor communication infrastructure within the largely isolated rural Belorussian society only accentuated the problem.

However, at the end of the First World War, (during the war, the region had been occupied by Germany) Belarus managed to gather enough momentum and de-clared independence. In 1918, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed by the now Bolshevik Russia, ensured that Finland, Es-tonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Belorussians and Ukraine would exist independently. But independence proved fleeting, and in 1919 Belarus became the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following the Russian occupation of eastern Lithuania, the region was merged into a Lithuania-Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Belorussian lands were divided between a renewed Poland and the Soviet Union in 1921.

In Poland, Belorussians, de-spite much representation in parliament, were again in retreat. In 1939, the Soviet Union annexed Polish-held Belorussian land as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a short-lived non-aggression treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

Negative experiences with both the Polish and Soviet governments led many Belorussians to turn towards Nazi Ger-many. Under German occupation, Be-lorussian state administration did develop, although this was primarily a strategic development by Germany, since it was to be used against the Soviet Union, communists, Poles and Jews.

After WW2, this pro-Nazi affiliation meant the discounting of this portion of the national representation, but also the wider discounting of Belorussian nationalistic movements. Suddenly, the national concept was viewed as a dangerous facet of bourgeois nationalists, and sug-gestive of collaboration and sympathy with Nazism.

When Belarus formerly became part of the Soviet Union after WW2, nation-alistic movements were almost entirely forgotten. Instead, an officially propa-gated myth of partisan Communist Be-lorussians was created, in order to cul-tivate affiliations with the Soviet Union. This was linked to the strengthening of the Russian character of the country and economic interdependence with the Soviet Union. In the end, Belorussian classical literature was mostly read in Russian. If Belorussians did attempt to emphasise Belarus, the communist part-y was careful to frame this as a Belarus re-public within the Soviet Union, not the Belorussian nation.

**Lukashenko**
The aforementioned post-WW2 develop-ments have been used by current Pres-ident Alexander Lukashenko to keep his stranglehold on the people. Lukashenko continues to view nationalist efforts as dangerous and as “an enemy of the people”. He also views Belorussian iden-tity as not something national but rather territorial and has clearly expressed his wish for full integration of Belarus with Russia.

This has hindered the development of Belorussian national movements. Fur-thermore, a large portion of the popula-ince does not consider itself Belorussian at all, viewing its statehood as irrelevant. The Belorussian president scorns the na-tional culture of his own country and his politico are designed to undermine the notion of nationhood. Thus, it is left to nationalists to press for democracy and a pro-Western (non-Russian) orienta-tion.

T he situation of the Belorussian op-position is similar to that faced by other Eastern bloc countries before the fall of communism during the late 1980s. Before the October 2004 Belorussian parliamentary elections, the opposition created a bloc known as “5+”, universally known as “pjat’orka”. The number was intended to reflect that this grouping re-presented the union of 5 political parties, and the suffix “+” symbolised the addi-tional presence of various non-govern-mental groupings that supported the op-position. It is important to note that the aforementioned elections were also com-bined with a referendum, whose results were, according to both the opposition and international monitors, falsified. The referendum asked voters whether the Belorussian president should be given extended powers including being able to serve a theoretical third term, despite the constitution preventing this. Ultimately, according to official results, President Lukashenko, won 83% of the vote and secured himself a second term in office.

The organisation “pjat’orka” says much about the state of the Belorussian opposition. Its members include several normally intractable opponents inclu-ding the National Front and Communist Party. The first of these represents a poli-tical stream, unknown to Czech society, but in evidence in all of the newly inde-pendent countries of the former Soviet Union.

In non-Russian speaking societies, communism was perceived as an act of Russification. Resistance to foreign overlords and attempts to maintain and renew the local language and culture (in Soviet countries, native languages were usually suppressed in favour of Russian, something that did not occur in Eastern European Soviet satellite states) was some-thing that could unite all opponents of the Soviet-led communist regime.

In Belarus, this problem was all the more complicated because its history of independence and nationhood is rel-atively weak. Historically, Belarus has mostly existed as a component of other national entities. In this sense, the coun-try differs from the post-Soviet Caucus nations, such as Kazakhstan as well as the Baltic states, although the latter have also endured their fair share of occupations. Furthermore, at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union,
Russian was so predominant in Belarus, that the native tongue was only confined to limited rural pockets. Surprisingly, President Lukashenko, who was once the head of a Soviet collective farm, is in fact unable to speak proper Russian. Belorussian himself. Indeed, on August 26th 2006, Lukashenko ordered the country’s Education Ministry to essentially re-write the Belorussian language within two weeks in order to make it easier to use. Such disdain for a basic cultural tenet of Belorussian society (80% still claim Belorussian is their mother tongue) underlines an entirely different concept of the nation state – the Belorussian leader once observed that the world had only two great languages, English and Russian.

**An uninspiring opposition**

The Belorussian National Front is in many ways a direct continuation of the opposition movement during the Soviet era. In 1988, opposition groupings played a significant role in making public information about mass graves in the city of Kuropaty, where the Stalinist secret police had once executed as many as 6,000 people. At the time when political culture was still in an embryonic phase, a new and unexpected element entered the scene: in June 2004, Alexander Lukashenko was elected president.

**A Run-of-the-Mill Dictator**

Lukashenko can be said to have found a way to pull the right switches of the electorate. He entered the scene at a time when Belarus began to suffer both the economic effects of the Soviet break-up and also the transition to a market economy. This transition, similarly to the entire post-communist world was undertaken in a haphazard, corrupt and decadent manner. Into this climate of scepticism and wide-scale frustration came Lukashenko, a former anti-corruption officer, promising that all would be as it once was. The older generation voted for him en masse, whilst Lukashenko also managed to rejoin nationalistic votes, with carefully placed rhetoric and the cultivation of an image of an “ordinary man.”

The aforementioned “pat’ orka” communists have also played a significant role in Belarus’ recent history. In fact, the country has two communist parties, with the “pat’ orka” post-communist communists being confined to the opposition. Its head has said: “We are not Stalinists, but we are true, especially since the better-suited social democratic label is already used by two other political parties.”

Having assumed the Belorussian opposition landscape, it can appear to both confusing and frustrating sometimes the opposition lacks candidates for government, while at other times, parties frequently change those people they nominate to run for office.

Naturally, the concept of a civic society can be said to be entirely alien to president Lukashenko. NGOs and citizens’ groups are subject to the same kind of surveillance as the opposition. Two NGOs, known as Viasna and Zuber respectively, provide an example of the current situation. The first, Viasna is a grouping whose stated aim is to assist those unfairly monitored of imprisoned by the government for political reasons. The group finds such people lawyers, provides legal assistance and advice and also provides food for the families of the imprisoned to take to them.

Zuber is, or more precisely was (the group ceased to function in April 2006, and has suspended attempts to press for a Belorussian front) essentially an institution for young and very young Belorussians. Zuber activists focused on public demonstrations (often resulting in violent clashes with the police), distributing leaflets etc.

Many Belorussian NGOs exist in the form of quasi-official or underground educational or awareness “initiatives” similar to those that existed in the satellite states of the Soviet Union before the fall of communism. Often their activities lack the formal approval of the authorities, with many having lost official status due to government disapproval – and thus their activities often find members on the wrong side of the law.

**Living on the Edge**

In Belarus, any activity that lacks official approval can be said to be bordering on illegality. For example, middle schools that teach the Belorussian language or Belorussian books and journals find themselves in such a position. Such groups have in many cases lost their official status, but continue to operate. Professors teach students at home in the hope of finding them foreign scholarships (many Belorussians study in Poland and the Czech Republic); magazines are able to continue because the law states that publications that fall under a certain circulation do not require official approval – naturally the unofficial print run often far exceeds this limitation.

Belorussian society can be compared with that which existed in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989. A large group of people, perhaps even a majority remains content with the Lukashenko regime. And why not? The universal propaganda constantly reminds the public how well the country is doing in comparison with other post-communist republics. Belorussian television viewers are frequently told that their hard work is contributing towards a better society, and that unemployment will not be tolerated and that pensions will rise etc.

Those who are not content with such a bankrupt form of security continue in vein to reject the status quo in Belorussia. Lukashenko’s propaganda certainly continues to be an affront to all free-thinking people. One such person is a Belorussian woman known as Olga Timochina. The following text appeared in one underground publication after this year’s presidential elections: “In the 1970s and 80s, people in the Soviet Union were afraid but continued to smile. The “sticky” universal fear that exists today did not exist. In some cases people knew the rules of the game, and unwillingly followed them or learnt to circumnavigate them. Today, the horror lies in the fact that the rules keep changing in front of one’s eyes. For example, internet satirists of the president are prosecuted, and only then is a relevant regulation created that makes such an act a crime. The laws relate to “discreditation” and “slander,” under which anything that is deemed unwelcome can be categorised. Such practices hover over our heads like crows in the sky.”

__Petrukša Šušterović is a journalist__
A Refin ous Era

The Brezhnev-era factories were put back to work and the volume of petroleum products from Belarus to Europe increased by a factor of 2.7, outpacing the mere price effect. The increase in Belarus’ petroleum exports was the result of a deliberate policy by the government of Belarus to use Soviet-era refineries in Mazyr and Novopolatsk to refine Russian oil and sell it to the West. The refineries, whose capacity far exceeds the domestic needs of Belarus, were designed as part of the Soviet energy strategy in the 1970s. Back then, rising oil prices prolonged the life of the moribund Soviet economy by a decade. President Lukashenka clearly hopes for a similar effect on his regime.

In 2003, the $32 million of exports from Belarus to the United Kingdom could be disregarded as a rounding error. But just two years later Britain imported goods worth 12 times as much, and is on track to exceed $700 million in 2006. As an exporter to the UK, Belarus is now ahead of Ukraine. In the greater EU, the picture is the same: between 2003 and 2005, exports from Belarus to the 25 current member states increased by 70 percent and amounted to 3.3 billion euros last year. Where less than 20 percent of Belarusian exports went to the EU just three years ago, this share has now grown to over 50 percent. This is a remarkable transformation, and even more remarkable is how little it has been noticed. But there’s a simple explanation: the increase is due entirely to changes in the global energy markets. The annual average price of oil doubled between 2003 and 2005, while exports of petroleum products from Belarus to Europe increased by a factor of 2.7, outpacing the mere price effect.

A Middle East oil state, Belarus’ prosperity is now built on oil. But unlike most other oil states, Belarus does not have its own mineral deposits, rather, it refines the crude it gets from Russia. Oil constitutes roughly 40 percent of Belarusian exports; it also constitutes about 40 percent of its GDP. The country’s economy has become a pipeline with a refinery on top. Refining other people’s oil is not a bad business, especially at a time when global refining capacities cannot meet demand, as is currently the case. But it normally does not yield the sort of profit that Belarus is now realizing. From 2003 to 2005, the difference between the market price for Russian crude and the price paid for it by the Belarusian refineries was between 35 and 45 percent, according to Belarusian government statistics quoted by Jaroslav Romanchuk of the opposition United Civic Party. Other observers quote similar margins.

This difference allows Belarusian refineries to make around $10 profit per barrel, after accounting for the unprofitable domestic oil consumption. (For comparison, the European refining industry, which does not have access to discounted Russian crude, was losing about $4 per barrel in 2005.) This is a fantastic profit: Russia itself makes less money on extraction than it allows Belarus to make on refining. This lucrative profit of some $1 billion for Belarus every year.

In a country personally run by the president, it is all too obvious where these profits go: the national library building, the celebrations for the national holiday on 3 July, armored vehicles for the police. The transformation of Belarus into an oil state would not have been possible without changes in Russia. In fact, it is another aspect of a dramatic transformation that has occurred in Belarus’ mighty neighbor to the east since 2003.

A few years ago, the direct integration of the Belarusian economy into that of Russia would not have been possible. Oligarchic, chaotic, and corrupt as it may have been, Russia was nevertheless a market not controlled by the state. Today, things are very different. Still operating on market principles, engaging foreign capital, and participating in global economic clubs, Russia has re-established the central role of the state in economic management. Its leadership is pursuing a deliberate strategy of creating a powerful state-centric domestic economy built around energy assets. Having rationalized and partly renationalized its energy industry, the Kremlin created a system of large core enterprises run by current or former government officials and personal allies of President Putin. In this new emerging Russia Inc., Belarus Inc. is a small subsidiary that is allowed to refine some of the Russian oil in order to sustain its otherwise stagnant Soviet industries. Meanwhile, just as Russia has increased the role of the state in its economy, Lukashenka is allowing a greater role for the market in his. Unlike Putin, he does not have to appoint his people to key management posts — no serious business has ever been possible in Belarus without an affiliation with the president’s apparatus. To the end, the two countries’ systems are converging, and this, just as Belarus’ reliance on oil, has clear political implications.

Belarus now pumps large quantities of oil to the EU. What does this mean for the economy and the prospects for democratization?
One seemed to have the courage to en-
ter the middle of the wasp farm. The tunnel
was large enough to walk through. Gottfluss
stopped and turned his head. He could hear
the buzzing and the chirping of the wasps.

"They can be heard from several kilometres away.
Once stung with the neurotoxins, the target immediately
falls into a kind of coma, and dies within the hour. And there
is one other important factor: the neurotoxins break down into harm-
less metabolites, so the organs remain
even capable of killing larger mammals.
Once, some over-curious youngster had cut
through the door with a diamond-tipped saw, with tragic results. Gottfluss
had put his limp, lifeless body in a bath full of
caustic lye, then poured the remains into a huge
waste reservoir next to one of the
runways. When he realized how many harm-
less metabolites, the wasps were waiting to be
awoken, coded and sent out into the world.

The man looked disappointed, just as
most visitors did. Despite this, they all
wanted to see the veguaria.

"Their instincts are far more refined
than any other life form on this planet," explained
Gottfluss. "They can sense their target from
several kilometres away."

In this day and age, Europe could boast
of many achievements, but with progress
had come abuses, addiction and viola-
tions. Drugs were a primary concern, even
though they were responsible for far
terrible losses in comparison with ter-
rorism or transport-related accidents.

"You bet the store!" Gottfluss en-
quired.

"Not me. My daughter. She decided to
give up on the stuff, but he decided that
she was too new and had to be
posed."}

Gottfluss' wasp hives lay in the mid-
dle of a fork in the road. The larger
road on the left connected the
Czech towns of České Budějovice
and Plzeň. Today, it connects Rotterdam
with Ankara at either end of the Union.
24 hours a day, the road was chocked
with cars and lorries packed so tightly to-
gether that even if the road was not cordoned
by a two metre high wall, a person still
couldn't cross it. The only way to get to the
other side, to reach the pub known as
"The Old Sokol" about three hundred
metres away, was to go on a muddy
trench through a concrete tunnel. Official-
ly, the tunnel was intended for deer and
wild boar, so the journey involved ne-
gotiating numerous unpleasant deposits
along the way.

There was a small two-roomed house
at the fork in the road. Gottfluss lived
in the first room and worked in the second,
where he also kept his samples. It was
the first room and worked in the second,
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The man's iris, taken by a camera in the peep-hole of the development laboratory, and made it into a format compatible with the database system. Upon his return to Bologna. Running a search on the scan led to the "Silentium from Strakovice" funeral service. Based on the new information, he requested a certain way of finding the man's true identity, as at least one of the institutions would reply with an accurate answer.

No problem, promised the mayor. That could have been managed.

Vodkoli petrol station, with its noon-stop service, was the ideal place. Sometime the major would even carry Gottfluss' name there. The money had been transferred to the Foundation's account. Meanwhile, responses had come in from Europe. Čelabinsko, confirming that the iris was not present on the European database. Perhaps, Gottfluss thought to himself, he drank moonshine recently. He must have.

He was woken up by his computer alarm. "Good Morning. It's 7 o'clock on the system." Gottfluss noted. "Shut up!" shouted Gottfluss. He returned to the machine only after he had finished his second cup of tea. Two more hospitals had replied, both writing that the client who had now paid him did not exist. He removed the bottom of the shelf where he had placed a small box containing the white header case. He had gone into the vespekurium. The programming "bait" consisted of a dump of metal wires, inside which a red toy was parked. He placed it in a cylinder at the edge of the room, and poured a little flat Pepsi Cola around it. The room temperature was set to 38 degrees Celsius, the humidity increased to 95% and the cylinder was covered with protective gauze to prevent the wasps from escaping. That was the easy part. Within two hours the swarm would attune itself to the scent and attack anything that emitted it.

"Hello Gottty," said Stáha, "Gumbáru!"

Gottfluss nodded and headed towards a shabby table in the corner occupied by Křivanec, the village mayor.

“Your want something again, don’t you? I can tell, you know.”

A pint was placed on the table as Gottfluss continued to take the video from his camera. "Twosilentium from Strakovice," he said. "Tomorrow, one of your people is heading for Prague. I need them to take a package for me and leave it at a certain place." Gottfluss continued.

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Creating a customs union

In this section, we reprint articles from our original sister publication which show how little things have changed.

Přítomnost, March 1931

The German-Austrian customs union, which was recently announced by the leaders of both countries, is being hotly debated throughout Europe. The realisation of this project is the result of considerable negotiations by both parties. It took eighty years for customs regulations to be standardised in the German states. Abolishing border controls within today’s France took even longer. Before the war, Luxembourg enjoyed an effective customs union with Germany and a similar union with Belgium has now existed for a decade. An examination of the success of this union points to the future development of the German-Austrian union.

On 25th July 1921, the governments of both countries made an agreement that was not merely customs-based, but also represented monetary unification, railway unification and a host of other measures. Within this agreement, the political sovereignty of Luxembourg was guaranteed.

The very concept of a customs union has been hotly debated throughout Europe. The leaders of both countries, which was recently announced by the leaders of both countries, is be...

Bedřich Weiner

Dear Friends,

We arrived in Kraków at 5.30 am. The night train from Prague had been an experience, to say the least: a short way into the journey we realised that our carriage had no heat or light, so we put on every available item of clothing and huddled together for warmth. Every few hours, inspectors flung open the compartment door, shining torches in our faces and shouting for our documents. We eventually arrived in Poland – frozen, stiff, grumpy and sleep-deprived.

It is difficult to gauge the atmosphere of any city in the cold dawn light, but we immediately noticed the cleanliness of the streets, the parkland that surrounded the city on all sides, and the compactness of the town centre. Although no shops were open, there were plenty of workmen around setting up barriers for a parade later that morning. We assumed that this would be in honour of Armistice Day, but later we discovered that it was Polish National Day, which marked the formation of Poland as an independent state, following the Treaty of Versailles which also occurred on 11th November, 1918. National flags flew in the Old Town Square, adorned buildings elsewhere in the city and even fluttered from the roofs of trams. It seemed strange that while this day entailed respectable mourning elsewhere in Europe, here it meant marching bands, music concerts and communal sing-songs in the square.

Kraków's Old Town Square is the largest in Europe, and arguably one of the most beautiful. The Cloth Hall (described in my guidebook as “the oldest shopping mall in the world”) stands at its centre, with the Town Hall Tower in one corner and St. Mary’s Basilica, with its two uneven towers, in the opposite corner. Every hour a bugle call is played from the higher of the two, in remembrance of a trumpet who attempted to raise the alarm during a Tatar invasion during the 13th century, but was shot in the throat by an enemy arrow. Consequently, the tune ends abruptly at the point at which the poor man was forced to stop. It seems an odd thing to commemorate every hour around the clock; nonetheless, it appeared to be an expression of the city’s renewed pride rather than just a tourist gimmick.

A late-afternoon gathering in the Square was a perfect representation of this apparent civic- and national – pride. A couple of thousand people braved the cold (although I was assured that, for Poland, this weather was actually quite mild) to sing patriotic songs. jaunty performers dressed in the red and white of the Polish flag led the singing from the front, and there was a reasonably loud response from the crowd. Given Polish history, it is easy to see why Poles cling to their national celebrations: the country has been invaded, occupied, divided, redrawn, pillaged and geographically obliterated many times in the past.

Today, Poland has plenty to boast about, such as the Jagiellonian University (the second oldest in Eastern Europe, after Charles University in Prague) which includes the astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus among its alumni. However, it would also seem that Kraków is haunted by the many unpleasant chapters in its history: the legacy of the Nazi occupation and the Communist regime is evident everywhere. Only a tiny number of Synagogues in the Jewish Quarter still function as places of worship – a perpetual reminder of the Holocaust. The graves in the Jewish cemetery are unkempt and crumbling: the descendants of those buried there have in most cases either died or emigrated. Less popular on the tourist route is the Jewish Ghetto, on the south of the river, which represents the most horrific aspect of Kraków’s history. In its main square, train-tracks have now replaced the train-tracks which, from 1941 to 1943, transported Jews to nearby Auschwitz. The square itself has been designated a monument to the Ghetto’s victims. A controversial piece of installation art by Piotr Lewicki and Kazimierz Latała, consisting of evenly spaced oversized wooden chairs, was unveiled there in 2005. Standing at the edge of the square, it is all too easy to imagine the events of sixty years ago. What was most surprising to me was that the buildings of the Ghetto have remained relatively unchanged; the area is now a council estate, with families living in the same apartments as those where Jews were once held. Heavy investment, demolition and redevelopment have clearly not yet been forthcoming.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Poland’s accession to the EU in 2004 and the rise of low-cost airlines, Kraków has become a popular tourist destination, and the city was crammed many visitors during our visit. Some say that more profitable American-style bars and “international” restaurants have shunted traditional establishments to the outskirts of the city, but Kraków still manages to retain its charm and character. With tourist revenue and EU investment, Kraków is clearly prospering.

Rosemary B. Bryant

Kraków
Russia has been saved from economic ruin by the two-fold combination of a drastic increase in the price of oil and the West's unbridled need for fuel. However, rather than using the windfall to invest in infrastructure, social services and education, control of the money has been left up to the different political-mafia clans that make up today's Russian state.

As far as the modus operandi of Russia's energy policy is concerned, only one word is necessary: control. It is a policy that has no place for partnership, as can be seen by Russia's ongoing obstruction of Western companies working in the country.

In the name of ever-increasing control through centralization, Russia refuses to divide the producers and distributors of its energy sector. Such a division would weaken the state's control by encouraging outside investment and partnership. Putin claims the issue to be "our internal decision and our decision alone". A de facto embargo on external energy investors is now practically complete, with systems in place to maintain strict control over countries that refuse to tow the line. An example of the lengths to which Russia is prepared to go was provided in January 2006 when Russia simply turned off the gas supply to Ukraine following the sudden hiking of gas prices from $50 to $230 per 1000m³ – a price the country was not prepared to pay. Is this the way that a supposedly democratic nation should behave?

Russian history has never known anything approaching a true democracy. Today, the country ranks towards the lower end of every survey regarding political transparency and human rights. The Freedom House Index places Russia 147th in the world; The Freedom House Index describes Russia as "not a free country"; Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index places Russia as 121st out of 163 countries: Paraguay, Zambia and Sri Lanka all rate more highly in the survey. It could be said that under Putin, Russia is returning to its most familiar historical role and position, with figures in power assuming a tsarist role. Its basic premise is that of an apparatus-state, in which the respective local barons fight for the spoils, instead of re-investing them or distributing them fairly.

This brings us back to recent headlines. We can be absolutely sure that the Russian police will never uncover the true murderers of the bankers, businessmen and journalists (such as Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead outside her Moscow flat in October) who spoke out against the regime. We can also be certain that the real murderer(s) of the ex-KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko, who turned his back on Russia, will never be found. Putin's response, that Litvinenko (who died in London after being poisoned with the radioactive substance polonium-210) "did not die a violent death" is simply repugnant. However, it is practically inconceivable that a seasoned politician like Putin would have allowed Politkovskaya to be murdered on his birthday, or Litvinenko to be murdered at the start of the recent key European summit evaluating Russia's bid for admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Yet what is certain is that in Russia, the hit man and the enforcer have no shortage of clients.

Martin Jan Stránský