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.

Editor’s Notes
Tucker Zengerle ................................................................................................................2

Opinions
To Bailout or not to Bailout? That is Question □ Daniel Zeigarnik ................3

News Roundup
Events from the Third and Fourth Quarter of 2008 ......................................................4

World Press
El Watan, SME, The Fiji Times, The Star ........................................................................6

Reform of Health Care
Health Care in Motion. Analysis and Steps to a Solution □ Martin Jan Stránský ........8
Health Care Reforms in Slovakia Pushed into Action by the V4 □ Petr Pažitný .......10
Why we are afraid of the Health Care Market □ Pavel Hroboň .............................15
Interview with Jan Hnízdil:
Corruption in the Pharmaceutical Sector □ Martin Riegl .............................18
The Postgraduate Educational Crisis in Medicine □ Petr Nuc .................................23
Reforms Without Results □ David Rath .................................................................24

US Elections
It is Time to say “Enough” □ Lido A. “Lee” Iacocca ................................................26
Hope, Change or None of the Above? □ Ben Tallis ............................................28
Eight Catastrophic Years of George W. Bush □ Jiří Pehe .................................32
European Obamamania □ Alison C. Steingold .................................................35
What the US Elections Hold for Europe □ Elena Green ........................................36

Economy
An Interview with Jeffrey Sachs on Falling Markets □ Lukáš Kovanda ....37

Politics
The Czech Ambassador in Iran □ Roxanne Emadi ..............................................41
The Populist Moment □ Ivan Krastev .................................................................43

Education
Curricular Reform in the Czech Republic □ Elena Green .................................46

New Books
Dancing Over a Wreck □ Karel Černý .................................................................49

Culture
Comics – a 21st Century Medium □ Jiří G. Růžička ........................................50
Home is where People come back to after Trips □ Simona Jonsson .............55
Half Pint □ Michael March ................................................................................58

Parting Shots
Martin Stránský ........................................................................................................60

Cover illustration – ČTK.
With a nod to Jaromir Nohavica, this quarterly issue of The New Presence is largely devoted to reform. Specifically, we’re looking at both the proposed reform of the health care system in the Czech Republic, as well as reform on a global scale, as represented by the recent American elections. Given the comparative dearth of information in the international press on Czech health care as opposed to Barack Obama’s victory, we did our best to focus on the former rather than the latter.

But it is the words of Nohavica which might well serve as the proper tool for considering these issues. For it was Nohavica, the iconic Czech folk singer, whose music I heard on the evening of November 5th when I went to my local village pub for a beer to discuss the previous day’s elections in the US.

Mr. President
But you understand me
You, of course, know everything
You will sort it out, you will solve everything
You are going to save me
Mr. President
I just need a little luck
After all, why else were we jingling
Our keys in the square
Mr. President

Nohavica, of course, was referring to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, when an estimated 800,000 people turned out for anti-government demonstrations in Prague. The Czechs aren’t known for their proactivity when it comes to governmental reform – historically their fate has rested in the hands of larger and more powerful countries. This made their efforts toward liberation during the waning days of communism all the more impressive.

This is why it’s all the more noteworthy that the leftist Social Democrats swept the Czech regional and Senatorial elections not long ago in resounding fashion, taking (along with the Communists) all thirteen regional district leaderships. Negotiations are now underway to determine the extent to which the Communist party will return to government. With this newfound power, these revanchist forces will be able to squelch reform efforts – most crucially the overhaul of the Czech health care system and the privatization of Czech hospitals.

In this issue you will hear from under-secretary Pavel Hrobon, who wrote a compelling piece in support of health care reform, while Minister David Rath represents the opposition to these changes that headlined the recent elections here. In addition, you will hear from stateside Alison Steingold, among others, about what the US elections mean for the future of the transatlantic relationship.

As far as reform goes, Obama’s victory was a cathartic moment for millions of people across the world and continues to be celebrated as the end to a period in American history when the US government left its citizens, to say the least, a legacy with significant concerns. Liberals and centrists in the US are complimenting themselves for having taken the first step on the path to change about which Obama speaks so eloquently, and even American conservatives are watching closely to see whether he can deliver on his promises of reform.

Eight years ago, when I came to Prague for the first time, I am quite certain I would have been fully confident in the new American President’s ability to follow through on his plans to improve the economy, provide health care and create jobs, and protect American interests overseas around the world. But after living in the Czech Republic these past eight years and seeing the direction this country has chosen to take, it’s not difficult to understand why I might be a bit more skeptical than I was in my younger years.

After all, the slogan for the Social Democrats during the recent Czech elections?

“It’s Time for a Change.”

Tucker Zengerle
To Bailout or Not to Bailout? That is the Question

Recently, I think we've all noticed that the world's economy is in turmoil. But when did this become obvious? Maybe when reading the day's headlines became as suspenseful and occasionally as gory as a Stephen King novel. Maybe when your qualified and competent friends couldn't find gainful employment outside of laying bricks, or your employed friends suddenly found themselves on welfare? Or maybe, when your promotion fell through due to “economic considerations.”

Regardless of how it came to me or to you, this recession is now on most people's minds and has glued them to their TV sets or computers. With this backdrop, the latest domino in the American financial crisis – Michigan's Big Three (GM, Ford, and Daimler Chrysler) – is teetering and is now the latest in desperate need of a bailout.

The American government is thus faced with the question: to bailout the Big Three or not to bailout. The question has no clear party divide since this Republican administration has relinquished its hold on the party's philosophical opposition to government economic intervention. This ambiguous and difficult situation has forced the two sides to put forward well-reasoned and thoughtful arguments, as embodied most recently in opinion pieces and interviews.

There is a clear line drawn the political sandbox. The Republicans, bastions of supply side anti-Keynesian economics and proponents of small government, are obviously against it. They believe that the American automotive industry, with its shrinking market share, is in part inefficient from poor managerial decisions and a lack of ingenuity, but mostly from the back-breaking labor agreement with the United Auto Workers Union (UAW). The Republicans and conservative pundits state that going into Chapter 11 bankruptcy will allow the Big Three to restructure this contract, which burdens their competition with their European or Asian counterparts. They believe that the bankruptcy will hurt, but will ultimately save the domestic auto industry and, in the long run, generate a healthier economy. An analysis from Mitt Romney, a former presidential candidate with unquestioned auto industry experience, clearly sways public opinion against the bailout.

But public opinion sways back again when some prominent Democrat says the next day, “That's all well and good" but about one in ten jobs are connected to the auto industry. That Chapter 11 bankruptcy will lead to Chapter 7, forcing them to liquidate their quality products to foreign competition. That putting the UAW pension plan onto the government payroll will cost about the same as the bailout itself. And that in the end, the United States still needs a domestic auto industry. And so public opinion rallies behind, “The bailout is a necessary evil so we must carry it out, but must do so wisely.”

But here's the counterpunch: the American government just gave its automobile industry 25 billion dollars a few months ago. What's to say they won't return with the same request in a few more months? The American people must take a stand, and take it now. When will you decide that the bailout is too costly? What incentives to change (this year's buzzword) do these companies have if the prospect of future bailouts stand ahead?

And so, where does this leave us? The answer is that there will be a bailout. This is because at the end of the day Obama is a Democrat, and as the prominent member of his party, he supports unions, especially the United Auto Workers Union.

The Democratic Congress, with a progressive, but pragmatic president, will bailout the Big Three to the chagrin of conservatives. The good news, however, is that the excellent manner in which Obama and his team have conducted themselves and their receptiveness to such bailouts will prompt a much more sound, transparent, and ultimately successful bailout package for the Big Three then anything this recent lame-duck Congressional session could have passed. Now the American people must wait and see if their hopes and cautious optimism will materialize two months down the road.

Daniel Zeigarnik
is a business analyst
working and living in Boston, US
Events from the Third and Fourth Quarter of 2008

**8. 8. China**
The Beijing Olympics commenced under the banner, “One World, One Dream.” A grandiose and computer-enhanced fireworks display inaugurated the Games.

**9. 8. Georgia**
Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili renews the sovereignty of Georgia as he takes military action in the breakaway region of South Ossetia. In response, the Russian Premier Vladimir Putin occupies Georgian territory.

**11. 8. Czech Republic**
In response to what the chairman of the CSSD party Jiří Paroubek deems as a right-wing oriented media, Paroubek suggests that CSSD develop a party magazine with a left-of-center orientation. His advisors, however, have doubts over the success of the magazine.

**18. 8. Pakistan**
President Musharraf resigns after prolonged disputes with the judiciary. He defends his presidency, but states that he must do what is best for the country.

**20. 8. Czech Republic**
The Georgian conflict reveals the discrepancies within Czech foreign policy. President Klaus issues remarks in opposition to the Czech government’s support for Georgia.

**22. 8. Czech Republic**
Klaus’s stance is by no means unique within the diplomatic world. His opinion is shared by the president of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, the revolutionary leader of the “island of freedom,” the Cuban President Raúl Castro, and Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria. The latter is a strong ally of Russia.

**22. 8. Syria**
President al-Assad proclaims that the alliance between Israel and Georgia will instigate Russia to sell more weapons to other Arab nations.

**29. 8. Czech Republic**
Regarding foreign policy clashes in the government, Michael Romancov of the Metropolitan University of Prague states that “Klaus is attempting to raise his grade as a Central European politician. When he failed to open the doors to the US, where... Havel was always welcome, he is now attempting to at least open them in Russia.” Miroslav Macek reflects, “I am amazed at some of the curious pedagogues that we pay for with our tax money.”

**4. 9. Georgia**
American Vice President Dick Cheney criticizes Russia’s military action in Georgia, and states that the US will side with Tbilisi in this Russian-Georgian conflict. Cheney also supports President Mikheil Saakashvili’s bid for Georgia’s ascension into NATO.

**4. 9. Czech Republic**
Morality in local politics reaches a new low. An M.P. from DDS is not only caught gathering damaging information about his colleague Vlastimil Tušťy, but is also caught preparing to blackmail Olga Zubova, a Green Party coalition M.P.

**5. 9. Angola**
After sixteen years of civil war, Angola is conducting parliamentary elections. Since the last elections ended in a large conflict, all eyes are now on the contest between the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

**5. 9. Czech Republic**
In a Machiavellian fashion, Martin Bursík dominates the Green Party convention. Paradoxically, most of the attention is focused on Prime Minister Topolánek, who believes that M.P. Tušťy is to blame for the blackmailing scandal involving M.P. Morava. M.P. Tušťy wanted to call attention to dirty practices within local politics.

**8. 9. Russia**
President Medvedev announces, for the second time, that Russian troops will withdraw from Georgia. He sets a departure deadline that corresponds with the arrival of EU observers.

**10. 9. Israel**
A member of the government and former agent of Mossad Rafi Eitan, is quoted saying that the current Iranian president could be kidnapped as a means to bring him before the International Tribunal in the Hague for his threats against Israel. Eitan participated in the abduction of Adolf Eichmann.

In response, Iran called upon the UN to denounce the Israeli M.P.'s statement since they are a member state of the UN.

**12. 9. Czech Republic**
The Minister of Education Ondrej Liska presented the form of the new state A-level examinations, which will cost the government an estimated 480 million CZK in preparation expenses.

**12. 9. Thailand**
Former Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej is running again for the premiership, a position he was forced to leave after a court decision.

**12. 9. Venezuela**
Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez calls for the support of his Bolivian counterpart, Evo Morales. With the words “go to hell,” Chavez expels the US Ambassador, P. Duddy. Duddy is given three days to leave the country.

**13. 9. Central Europe**
The Visegrad Four do not come to a conclusion regarding which country is to blame in the conflict between Russia and Georgia. President Klaus notes that there are two different stances.

**15. 9. Zimbabwe**
Authoritarian President Robert Mugabe comes to an agreement with the opposition to share power with Morgan Tsvangirai, the incoming Prime Minister. Despite falsifying the results, Mugabe lost the presidential
elected and a majority in parliament. The parliament is now capable of blocking his decisions. South African President Thabo Mbeki helps to broker the deal.

**17. 9. Czech Republic**
The Supreme Court in Olomouc rules in favor of M.P. Kofšťek. Kofšťek maintains that the prime minister’s acquaintance Marek Dalko and lobbyist Jan Větřek tried to bribe him four years ago. They allegedly offered him ten million crowns and the ambassador’s post in Bulgaria, in exchange for withdrawing his support for the government under Stanislav Gross. Jiří Paroubek announces in a press release that the court’s decision reveals the corrupt practices of Prime Minister M. Topolánek and his co-workers.

**18. 9. Israel**
Israel’s foreign minister Cipi Livni is chosen as the chairman of the parliamentary party Likud. Livni’s goal is to replace Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who is a member of the party. Olmert is currently facing allegations in a corruption scandal.

**18. 9. Czech Republic**
The Senate rejects a proposal to legalize euthanasia or assisted suicide. Minister of Health Tomáš Julínek and PmD. Olga Stehliková were both against the new legislation, stating that the proposal goes against international agreements and human rights.

**19. 9. Rwanda**
Rwanda becomes the first country in the world to have a majority of women in parliament. This anomaly is a reaction to the civil war and genocide in 1994. The new constitution allot thirty percent of parliamentary seats to women, and it prohibits political parties to form based on ethnic or religious principles.

**19. 9. Czech Republic**
The Minister of Defense Vlasta Parkanová signs an agreement which grants the US the right to place American troops on Czech soil (SFOA). The Russian envoy to NATO reacted saying, “The Czech government has sold the security of its people for a new toy – the anti-missile system.”

**19. 9. Croatia**
The foundations of Croatia’s academic sphere are shaken by a corruption scandal. Police arrest around twenty professors and a few specialist assistants for accepting bribes during examinations.

**20. 9. Pakistan**
The Czech Ambassador Ivo Zdarek does not survive a terrorist attack in the capital city. The attack occurs during the Muslim festival of Ramadan and appears to be in response to the new presidency of Asif Ali Zardari. In his inaugural speech in parliament, Zardari promises to take a tough stance in the fight against terrorism.

**20. 9. Czech Republic**
The former minister of finance and member of Prime Minister Topolánek’s first government, Vlastimil Trúšty, has accused the prime minister and the current Minister of Finance Miroslav Kalousek of corruption. According to Trúšty, both men tried to bribe city mayors in Central Bohemia to withdraw support for Trúšty’s chair over the Central Bohemian Region. Trúšty’s allegations are part of an internal ODS struggle, in which evidence of wiretapping has indicated connections between the murder of businessman František Mrázek and lobbying conducted by Secretary of the Interior Ivan Langer and Trúšty in the businessman’s interests.

**21. 9. Israel**
Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tenders his resignation, and relinquishes his candidacy to lead the ruling party Kadima. Olmert will remain in his post until a new government is formed.

**23. 9. South Africa**
Eleven PM’s from the JAR government have left their posts in response to President Thabo Mbeki’s resignation. JAR now faces its biggest political crisis since the end of apartheid. The ANC party is divided between supporters of President Mbeki and his rival Jacob Zuma, the current chairman of the ANC. Zuma’s strong left-wing opinions have caused some to become concerned over the economy.

**4. 11. USA**
The citizens of the United States vote for change as they elect Democratic candidate Barack Hussein Obama as their 44th president. The election results signify a historic moment for the American people as they vote in their first black president and proclaim the end of the Bush era. The Democrats gain a majority in Congress, and the defeated Republican candidate, John McCain, issues Mr. Obama congratulations in his concession speech.

**12. 11. Czech Republic**
In the second half of their advertising campaign, the Czechs reveal EU2009.cz as their design logo for their six-month governance of the EU presidency. Written in block letters that each bear a different color, the logo refers to the Internet domain of their presidency.

**26. 11. India**
Coordinated terrorist attacks strike several landmarks in the Indian capital of Mumbai. The 60 hour siege killed more than 150 people and sent the famed Taj Mahal Palace hotel up in flames.

**24. 11. Russia**
Prime Minister Vladimir Putin issues hopeful remarks towards the future of Russian-American relations with Barack Obama in the White House. Putin states, “We hope that the new leadership of the United States will be more constructive, and will help us come to a mutually acceptable solution.” These remarks reflect a recent conciliatory tone which has arisen since President Medvedev’s decision to not congratulate the President-elect Obama.

-red-
Nepotism within the Algerian job market

According to research conducted by the National Office of Statistics (ONS), 40.6 percent of employed Algerians received their current job through family members or acquaintances. The results show that the government has failed to regulate the job market by creating jobs and other initiatives.

The results completely contradict a point made by the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Tayeba Louha, who stated in March that no more than 12 percent of jobs were acquired through the old practices. According to Mr. Louha, jobs found through work agencies account for 50 percent of the total. The research reveals, however, that the number is as low as 6.8 percent. If we examine the research results further, we find that employers contacted their employees 17.6 percent of the time, and 15.4 percent of the applicant pool passed the selection procedure.

The enquiry’s results reveal substantial differences between sexes and between cities and rural areas. While 57.7 percent of men within the productive age-group are employed in cities, only 14.3 percent of women work in urban centers. This dichotomy increases further in rural areas where 61.1 percent of men are employed, but only 6.3 percent of women.

The results show that 12.4 percent of the Algerian population is illiterate. Meanwhile, 22.7 percent of the literate population is currently making minimum wage. The percentage of people with a basic education has risen to 31.1 percent, and those with a secondary education has risen to 21.4 percent. Only 12.4 percent of the population is college educated or has a university degree.

Despite the fact that they compose a much smaller part of the work-force, women are more likely to attain a higher level of education than men. The data reveals that in cities, 24.2 percent of men have a secondary school education and only 12.1 percent have a university or college degree. The equivalent percentages for women are 27 and 34.4 percent.

The same holds true for rural areas as well. Women who are employed in rural areas are more likely to have a degree from higher education than men. And while fewer men attain secondary and high education degrees in rural areas (respectively 15.6 and 4.6 percent), only 18.9 percent of women pass their secondary education exams, and 19.4 percent graduate from higher education.

Aside from the substantial difference between men and women concerning employment levels, the data also reveals that, as expected, people who live in cities are far better educated than those who dwell in rural regions.

One of the most disturbing facts from the poll is, however, that the unemployment level among people with university or college degrees is increasing.


ei Watan

Ali Titouche
El Watan
is an independent French-language political newspaper in Algeria.
It was founded in 1991 and gives voice to Algerian opposition.

6 September 2008

Highlanders for the Charter

Fed up with lying politicians, the inhabitants of the village Novasa gathered in Nabuyanita (a city on the largest island of Fiji—Viti Levu) to voice their support for the People’s Charter, and convey to the temporary premier Bainimarama that they have lost faith in the current political system.

They also voiced their concerns over whether their local province will receive adequate help with infrastructure and general economic growth.

The current prime minister participated in the gathering. He expressed his support for the Charter and also listened to the complaints of the highlanders.

Most of the villages in the province are not accessible by any major mode of transportation, do not have consistent access to fresh water, and lack electricity. Water for drinking, cooking and cleaning is taken from the local river.

Even Nabuyanita, situated 70km from the city of Sigatoka, is only accessible via small hillside roads, furrowed by deep crevices caused by land erosion.

Villagers complained about politicians who offered nothing more than empty promises during the course of the elections.

One of the local highlanders asked the prime minister why he promised to seriously invest in the region when all his previous promises have proved empty.

Random questioning of local inhabitants who were not present at the gathering showed relatively strong support for the People’s Charter of Fiji.

Margaret Wise
Fiji Times
is the oldest distributed newspaper in Fiji.
It was founded in September 1869 in the city of Levuka on the island of Ovalau.

11 October 2008
MPLA is strengthening its position

A resounding victory in the otherwise halting and chaotic elections legitimized the powerful position of the ruling party in Angola.

The electoral committee announced that in elections where 54.8 percent of the Angolan population voted, the left-wing MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola) carried the elections with 81.76 percent of the vote. The opposition party UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) managed a mere 10.6 percent.

The results of the election confirmed the victory of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos’ MPLA party, which now has a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly and consequently the majority required to make constitutional changes.

With the next round of presidential elections planned for 2009, this election stands as a litmus test for President dos Santos’ popularity.

While the opposition is threatening to dispute the legitimacy of the results, the leader of the party UNITA, Isais Samakuva, refused to comment on the elections before the official numbers were announced. Lawyers for the UNITA party emphasized that if the party did not criticize the irregularity of the elections, such criticism would come from legal channels. A representative of the UNITA party, Jardo Mukalia said, “What choice do we have? This is not something we can solve on the streets.”

A spokesperson for the MPLA stated in reaction to the results, “We have to sit down and thoroughly analyze what this overwhelming victory means in terms of what is expected of us. We have to meet all of these expectations.”

In his pre-election speech, dos Santos outlined that he wanted, in the interest of national unity, to reorganize the government and amend the constitution to equally distribute the country’s wealth. Despite experiencing an economic boom due to its oil and diamond industries, two-thirds of the population live in poverty on two dollars a day.

Even though the independent observers from the SADC (Southern African Development Community) deemed that the first elections since the end of the civil war (1975–2002) were fair, EU observers have delayed a verdict until the electoral process is established and regular.

Despite the lack of support for the opposition party UNITA, Samakuva remains optimistic: “Our country just made another step towards securing a stable democracy.”

Fran Blandy
The Star
is a South African daily paper based in Gauteng (province of Johannesburg).

8 September 2008

The court sides in Lexa’s favor, and determines his imprisonment to be unlawful

Former director of the Slovak Information Services (SIS), Ivan Lexa, won litigation at the European Court of Human Rights against the Slovak Republic. The court agreed with Mr. Lexa’s complaint, which he logged in 1999, regarding his “unlawful” imprisonment following the kidnapping case of Michal Kovac Jr.

In his complaint, he stated that the Minister of Justice, some high-ranking officials and even the main investigator identified him on several occasions as a criminal, thereby infringing on his rights of presumed innocence.

Lexa was happy with the court’s decision. He stated through the agency SITA that "this ruling reveals that my decision in 1999 to take a stand in accordance with Article 32 of the Slovak Constitution and to go into exile was justified, and that this was the only viable solution given the government’s infringement on my basic human rights.”

He also noted that the Slovak government was found guilty of violating Article 4, Paragraph 1 of the European Convention, which guarantees personal safety and freedom. In his statement, Lexa also included a thank you to his international team of lawyers.

According to the chairman of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), Vladimir Mečiar, the government should not only reimburse Lexa for his time in prison, but also for the damage done to his reputation and honor.

“We no sort of monetary compensation can give back the time and take back the pain that was felt during the course of these events," Mečiar said.

Lexa requested damages from the Slovak government, but left the sum up to the courts. In the end, he received 8000 EUR in damages and an additional 18000 EUR for court costs. According to Mečiar, Lexa will give the money to charities that help people caught in similar situations.

This judgment will come into effect provided that neither side appeals the decision within the next three months. If one side decides to do so, the court will reopen the case.

Fran Blandy
The Star
is a South African daily paper based in Gauteng (province of Johannesburg).

29 September 2008
Health care in motion

Analysis and steps to a solution

Martin Jan Stránský

Good health is the most important thing that we have. If we want to sustain it, however, we need to have a good health care system in place. Currently, all health care systems within the modern world are under pressure from the rising costs of technology, medicines and services.

While the scale of the problem differs from one country to the next, a common variable exists in each situation: the success of any health care system is not just dependent on the amount of money put into it, but also on the way in which citizens and governments conceptually approach it. The latter is the most important – of all the relevant factors within more advanced countries, cultural attitudes have molded the form of health care more than any other factor.

For example, the cultural emphasis on individual independence and importance in the United States means that Americans currently tolerate the fact that 45 million Americans have no health insurance to this day. Even though the health care cost per individual in the US is much higher than the European average, the standards are, at times, worse. The reason for this, simply put, is that in America no one is allowed to die. Each high-risk birth must take place, and every patient with a chronic disease must be kept alive, no matter the cost.

In Europe we believe in a compromise based on social norms, with a dominant role for the state. In post-communist countries, the notion that the government is there to “take care of me” is now in conflict with the fact that nothing is for free.

Three criteria
A working health care system must address and realize three criteria. First, everyone needs to know their position and options within the sector as well as their rights and their responsibilities. Next, financing must be effectively controlled and focused on quality. Lastly, all changes and plans must follow a single strategic plan.

In the Czech Republic there have been eleven ministers of health in the last eighteen years, and none of the aforementioned criteria have been fulfilled. It is hard for a successful family to emerge if one changes one’s partner every year and a half.

The first minister of health, who has finally addressed true reform (or better put, who was allowed to do so in the face of conflicting political agendas and an objectionable financial situation) is the current minister, Tomáš Julínek.

The huge health care tanker has finally left the socialist dock in the direction of modern European waters, but the ship remains burdened by remnants of the past, both societal as well as simply arising out of inexperience: among the latter is the inability of politicians to analyze, formulate, and effectively communicate solutions to the complex problems that health care reform presents.

Four problems and four solutions
Many problems exist, but there are four main ones. The first and foremost is Minister Julínek’s approach in attempting to privatize the entire system, from hospitals, clinics and even medical schools (the latter met with too much political resistance to pass). While privatization is not necessarily a bad thing, Julínek should have first defined what services the state would ultimately offer and then specify where they would be placed within the grid of the system. Entire segments were left out, such as nursing home and hospice care for the elderly, which remains woefully undersized. For privatization to proceed, one first needs to know what the state will offer, and where it will offer it. Once this is specified on a map, privatization can become more receptive to rational reflection.

For example, if a certain service is only available within a state-run hospital in a given region or area, then that service should remain state-owned. But since Julínek never defined which entities are to remain state-owned, the uncertainty which exists among health care professionals has now spread to the patients.

The second problem lies in the dominant role of the health insurance companies, their point system and their emphasis on quantity and not quality care. In the 1990s, the government allowed Czech insurance companies (these handle the claims of all Czech patients – there are no Czech insurance companies for private patients) to grow like wild-fire and without adequate state control. Consequently, nine different insurance companies now offer “state health insurance.” The only difference between them is their customer approach; the services that they offer are the same. The presence of nine state-wide insurance companies...
companies is also unnecessary, since we are not paying for efficiency, but for nine different directors and their offices. The solution here is to have only one insurance company to take care of state customers, with the other eight being “freed” to offer other insurance services for above-standard (not covered by the state) care in an environment of healthy competition.

Also in need of addressing is the insurance companies’ system of remuneration. The financing system has been flipped on its head. While the number of procedures and the number of patients is remunerated, the actual results are not! The entire system is moving in reverse, rewarding health care providers for long lengths of stay and high numbers of patients treated, instead of rewards being based on how much the providers actually save. From a governmental point of view, these costs must be regulated at the top level down, instead of letting individual “segments” of health care fend for themselves.

The third problem is the points-based reimbursement system on which health care payments are made. This is bureaucratic nonsense, since the system unnecessarily converts the crown into a point and then back to a crown again. Services between provider and insurance company are negotiated via the point scale, and reimbursement to the provider is based on the amount of crowns per point that each provider negotiates separately with each insurer. All services should be negotiated and paid for in crowns, since health care costs crowns, not points.

The final problem is corruption. Corruption consumes twenty percent of the yearly health care budget. It works primarily at the level of “drug politics.” Instead of buying drugs for all of the entities at once (and getting a bargain price at the same time), the government gives the directors of hospitals and chief physicians the opportunity to choose which drugs they want to buy and prescribe. One only needs to look at just where the directors of oncological (and other departments that buy a lot of drugs) spent their vacations and compare it to their salaries to see the depth of corruption.

In the end, both physicians and patients abuse the health care system with corruptive practices. We have the highest average for patients visiting their doctor in the world – an incredible seventeen times per year. This means, that if one individual visited the doctor two to three times in a year, someone else must have gone thirty times. From my own personal experience as a doctor, I can not think of a single illness that needs a health check every two weeks over an entire year.

In an attempt to curtail this trend, Minister Julínek implemented a payment system for patients in regards to check-ups and hospitalization, instituting a 30 crown fee for each visit to the doctor and a 60 crown fee for each day spent in the hospital. After the first six months, patients handed over a handsome sum of approximately 600 million crowns. The money was injected back into the system, resulting in better purchases of equipment and medicines, and fewer visits meant shorter waiting times.

The problem with such an across-the-board payment system is illustrated by a situation in which many senior citizens found themselves. Those living off limited pensions felt that these health care charges were too great. The fact that it is impossible to get three warm meals per day on 60 Kč (the daily hospital fee) was lost on them. The Ministry should have focused on the people who actually do abuse the system by racking up thirty visits, thus sparing those who do not abuse the system.

Instead, in the recent October elections, the voters focused on this one point and overwhelmingly voted the Civic Democrats (the party of Minister Julínek) out of office and voted in the opposition (Social Democrat) candidates in all thirteen districts. The voters succumbed to populist promises that their 30 crown payments would be paid for them by the district, thus proving that the communist-socialist mind-set is very much alive and well in the Czech Republic: Czechs still prefer not to have to pay anything at all out of their own pocket and, instead, have the state pay for them from state funds, even if it means taking funds away from other needed areas such as teacher’s salaries, infrastructure repair, etc. In the Czech Republic, we still have a long, long way to go.

Martin Jan Stránský
Physician, political commentator, publisher of the New Presence
Despite Central Europe’s increasing standard of living, the V4 governments (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) are still lagging behind the EU15. This is painfully clear on three fronts: in economic performance, in health care expenditure, and in the average life expectancy. The following connections can be made:

1. Greater economic strength means more potential investment into health care.
2. Greater investment into health care generates better results.
4. The potential for improvement increases when a low expenditure is increased.

In 2005, the EU15 governments spent an average of 2875 US dollars per person on health care – two and a half times more than the governments in the V4. The V4 governments spent an average of 1221 US dollars – a number equivalent to the amount that the EU15 spent in 1990 (1261 USD).

The EU15’s increased spending stems from their economic growth. In 2005, the average GPD per person in the EU15 governments was 33,913 USD. In the V4 governments, it was a mere $17,003. Again, this number parallels the EU15’s GDP per person in 1990 (17677 USD).

The difference is even more obvious when you compare the average life expectancy between the V4 and the EU15 governments. In 2005, the average life expectancy in V4 governments was 74.5 years. EU15 governments reached this level in 1983! Since then their average life expectancy has risen to 79.4 years – almost 5 years longer.

The problem is that during the past fifteen years, this difference has not markedly decreased. In the EU15, the life expectancy has risen by 3.5 years while in the V4 by 3.6.

As opposed to economic performance, spending on health care, and average life expectancy, our expectations from our health care system are not lagging. Patients expect the same level of care as in the EU15 despite the great monetary differences in allocation and expenditure. Since spending on health care is directly related to economic performance, governments are trying to find reserves in the system itself. Health care reform is certainly an option.

**Semashko’s legacy**

Free health care in post-communist governments is a legacy of the Soviet health care system, the foundation for which was laid after the Russian Revolution in 1917 by Nikolaj Semashko.

The first presumption of Semashko’s system was the government’s responsibility for the health of its people. The
second, that there should exist universal and free access to health care. The third was an emphasis on prevention.

The USSR was the first government in the world to constitutionally guarantee free and universal health care. Despite this fact, patients paid some unofficial costs for a budgetary deficit, which thereby threatened the aims of universal health care. The resulting system was ineffective, under-financed, and provided low quality care. The lesson learned – central planning increases corruption, decreases motivation, and creates structural inconsistencies.

After the Second World War, Semaskov's model was exported to countries in the eastern block where it fell to naive gratuitousness and individual irresponsibility. The availability of modern drugs, diagnostics and care was subsequently restricted and the average life expectancy thereby decreased.

Duties were introduced in Slovakia as late as 2003 – fourteen years after the fall of socialism

Free health care is not regarded as a valuable asset, but begets the following behavior:
1. Individual irresponsibility regarding personal health – engaging in unhealthy lifestyle choices and exposure to risk factors such as smoking and alcohol.
2. A tendency towards excessive use of the system.
3. The need to show gratitude through bribery and corruption.

Slovakia introduced duties on care in 2003 as the first nation among the V4 with the following results:
1. Patient visitations decreased by ten percent within the primary sphere of care. Emergency services decreased in a parallel fashion. Specialist visitations decreased by two percent.
2. Fears that care accessibility would worsen were not confirmed. Instead, 1.5 percent of people stopped going to the doctors all together.
3. The number of prescribed drugs markedly decreased. The spending on drugs increased in 2003 by a mere eight percent.
4. In December of 2002, 32 percent of respondents identified corruption as the biggest problem within the health care system. In 2004, a mere ten percent retained fears over corruption. After the accession of Ficov's government in 2006, duties were cancelled and replaced by recommendation slips from the 1st of January 2008. Individuals must have these recommendation slips when

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of care</th>
<th>Savings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outpatient care</td>
<td>3,0 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency bed care</td>
<td>21,2 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic disease care</td>
<td>1,1 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>15,0 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare tools</td>
<td>0,5 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>0,8 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41,6 bn HUF</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cost savings brought on by a decrease in demand (in billions of Forint)
(Source: Ministry of Health – Hungary, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of care</th>
<th>Savings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultation with doctor (per visit)</td>
<td>20 SKK (0 SKK from 1. 9. 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300 HUF (40 SKK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 CZK (40 SKK)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Pharmacy charges (per recepy) | 20 SKK (0 SKK from 1. 9. 2006) |
|                              | 300 HUF (40 SKK) |
|                              | 30 CZK (40 SKK) |

| Charge for hospitalization (per 1 day in hospital) | 50 SKK (0 SKK from 1. 9. 2006) |
|                                                    | 300 HUF (40 SKK) |
|                                                    | 60 CZK (80 SKK) |

| Emergency services (per visit) | 60 SKK |
|                               | 1000 HUF (125 SKK) |
|                               | 90 CZK (120 SKK) |

| Date of implementation       | 1. 6. 2003 |
|                            | 15. 2. 2007 |
|                            | 1. 1. 2008 |

Duties were introduced in Slovakia as late as 2003 – fourteen years after the fall of socialism

Free health care is not regarded as a valuable asset, but begets the following behavior:
1. Individual irresponsibility regarding personal health – engaging in unhealthy lifestyle choices and exposure to risk factors such as smoking and alcohol.
2. A tendency towards excessive use of the system.
3. The need to show gratitude through bribery and corruption.

Slovakia introduced duties on care in 2003 as the first nation among the V4 with the following results:
1. Patient visitations decreased by ten percent within the primary sphere of care. Emergency services decreased in a parallel fashion. Specialist visitations decreased by two percent.
2. Fears that care accessibility would worsen were not confirmed. Instead, 1.5 percent of people stopped going to the doctors all together.
3. The number of prescribed drugs markedly decreased. The spending on drugs increased in 2003 by a mere eight percent.
4. In December of 2002, 32 percent of respondents identified corruption as the biggest problem within the health care system. In 2004, a mere ten percent retained fears over corruption. After the accession of Ficov's government in 2006, duties were cancelled and replaced by recommendation slips from the 1st of January 2008. Individuals must have these recommendation slips when
visiting specialists. As a result, specialist accessibility worsened and patient satisfaction decreased.

**In Hungary, health care fees were introduced in 2007**

Hungary introduced health care fees on the 15th February 2007. The results were similar to those of Slovakia: decrease in demand, increase in system cost savings, increase in earnings for providers, and a decrease in corruption.

Previously hindered by high demands, system savings increased after the reforms were introduced. According to calculations done by the Hungarian Health Ministry, the savings could amount to 41.6 billion Forint; the greatest savings will come from emergency bed care (21.2 billion Forint) and from drugs (15 billion Forint).

The earnings increase for health care providers represents the reform’s third important effect. Providers’ earnings increased by 21 billion Forint, or by 20–50 percent. Furthermore, the physicians’ easy transfer between hospitals and outpatient areas may have contributed to the aforementioned decrease in bed care.

**Health care fees in the Czech Republic were introduced in 1. 1. 2008**

Only preliminary results are available so far. According to the Czech Health Ministry, its goals are being realized because the fees are working. In comparison to the previous year, in the first two months emergency room visits decreased by 44 percent, specialist visits decreased by 24 percent, and hospitalization by 14 percent. Preliminary findings appear to show a decrease in pharmacy visits.

And while prescriptions have decreased by 45 percent, this decrease may actually result from stocking up in 2007.

The Ministry also asserts that the 5000 CZK protection limit meant to protect chronically ill patients from intolerable financial burdens is also working well.

**An increase in purchasing efficiency**

The four governments’ experience with soft budgetary restrictions is painful (box 1). Health care system debts rose to 26.6 billion SSK in Slovakia in 2002. The Czech Republic has poured around ten billion CZK into the system, and in 2006, the government increased its contribution by nine billion CZK to cover debts. In Hungary, the monopolistic OEP has seen the 300 billion Forint deficit grow since 2002. The deficit only stabilized after the government’s decision to intervene. And in Poland, hospital debts reached six billion Zloty in 2005 despite government contributions.

**Slovakia: Health Insurance companies as joint-stock companies**

As the first of the V4 countries, Slovakia has issued hard-line budget restrictions in an attempt to eliminate resource waste. Health insurance companies were transformed into joint-stock companies in 2005, and were given the green light to earn profit and stop producing debt. The same applied to hospitals. An important moment in the transformation came when the company Veritel assumed creditor debts towards hospitals and insurance companies. Veritel wrote off debts of 33 billion for twenty billion SSK. Nowadays, the only debtors within the system are the government hospitals, whose debt at the end of December was around seven billion SSK.

Tough budgetary restrictions and profit motivations encourage the health insurance companies to change their purchasing behavior. As insurance companies compile provider lists, the selectivity and availability of insurance products has risen. Private health insurance firms have increased their market share in Slovakia in the last three years from 20 to 33 percent.

The decision to leave health care purchases to those most informed and motivated by budgetary constraints (with the government functioning as a type of regulator) has started to spread throughout the V4 governments. Hungary and

**"Soft budget” restrictions**

This quote was first used by Janos Kornai in the 1970s. The syndrome of “soft budgetary restrictions” comes forth for a certain organization when in a certain environment there is a support organization (the government), which covers any deficits built up by the organization. It could even be done through direct support. We can also consider other forms of indirect soft budgetary restrictions in the form of benefits that the government provides to health insurance companies or hospitals, such as prohibiting the restraint of debtors to hospitals.

Poland are not far behind; Hungary decentralized its health insurance market in 2008, and Poland will begin in 2010.

**Hungary: schizophrenic owners and a fear of profit**
The Hungarian reforms represent a more hybrid and experimental approach than the health insurance company reforms in Slovakia. The Hungarian approach is a product of the coalition government between socialists and liberals. While their approach does fulfill the basic requirements of the multi-HIC (Health Insurance Company) model, it also includes a few controversial measures, which threaten to complicate the whole working model. The proposed model suggests that the government should hold a majority share within each HIC and place restrictions on profits.

The government plans to establish twenty-two joint-stock companies to tempt investors. The government will, in the form of an international tender, receive rights to insurance policyholders in one of the twenty-two districts. They will also be able to seek out policyholders in the districts that they did not "win." The government promises a profit on the tender of 12,000 Forint per person. This money is supposed to contribute to the modernization of the health care system.

**Proprietary schizophrenia**
The government's right to a shareholding majority in the HICs is a slap in the face of corporate governance. Each HIC will have to define its own vision and corporate strategy. Each will be focused on its own part of the market. The HICs will have their own preferences in terms of size, profit, and regional functioning. As a majority shareholder, the government will have access to all of the HICs, and it will be able to affect the direction they take. How will this work in practice? How can the government vote on strategic decisions en mass? Will the government feign ignorance regarding the strategies of other companies?

An even greater paradox develops if bankruptcy threatens one of the HICs. Will the government bail it out by giving it greater contributions? Will it do the same for the rest of the HICs?

And thirdly, how will the antitrust regulating body view and consider these points? Can a fair and competitive market exist if the majority shareholder in each of the participants is the same? Won't the elimination of the monopoly on health insurance in Hungary only lead to partly decentralized power with non-functioning HICs?

**Profit phobia**
The phobia from generating profits within the HICs is a European-wide phenomena. The Netherlands, Russia, Switzerland, Slovakia, and Germany (in part) have sought to quell this phobia. The governments of Hungary and the Czech Republic are currently discussing the implementation of a profit-based approach.

The Hungarian proposal is based on regulating profit and creating a maximum one percent income after redistribution. This is not the right approach. The government should not define limits or restrictions on profit use, which is under the competency of the HIC owners. Rather, the government should fix universal insurance rates and define risk compensation. Profit regulation is predicated on tight cost control, which aims to prevent "non-curing" of patients which allows profits to accumulate from waiting lists.

The mechanism for profit regulation will require the HICs to cope with the timing and cost risks of their policyholders. It will demand that regulatory bodies apply thorough controls over the creation of obligatory reserves.

The government's role in modern health care politics should be to focus on an efficient and sane regulation of the system and not everyday operations. Under this model, political influence, ineffective allocation of funds and corruption will all decrease. If Hungary wants to develop a modern, pluralist health insurance system and at the same time give private HICs a chance, then the Hungarian government should follow the model in the Netherlands, where more than 30 HICs thrive on the market.

The government has no share holdings in them, but five regulatory bodies do oversee the fairness of competition.

**Czech Republic: For the time being in the legislative process**
On the 27 February 2008, the legislative board discussed Minister T. Julinek's seven law reforms.

**Basic requirements for implementing the plurality model**
- The policyholder has a guaranteed freedom of choice between HICs.
- The HIC has a right to reject the patient.
- Introducing a risk compensation system will level out any differences.
- HICs will vie in an atmosphere of healthy competition for services and products.

*Source: Health Policy Institute, 2008*

Most of the discussions regarded the transformation of the HICs into joint-stock companies and the transformation of teaching hospitals. The government opposition and one coalition party, the KDU-CSL, oppose the decision to make HICs joint-stock companies. The profit question is a significant concern much as it is in Hungary and Slovakia.

The proposed reforms go beyond the transformation of the joint-stock companies. The reforms grant individuals the right to choose a health plan that corresponds with their preferences. According to the new legislature, the HICs will offer the following health plans:
- **Standard health plan:** the range is defined by local law and access to health care.
- **Health plan driven by health care:** the policyholder is ensured a range of health care services but does not have access to them.
- **Health plan with a high partaking:** this plan guarantees a minimal amount of public funds from the health insurance policy (the plan guarantees access to a minimum range of health care services).

**Poland: Only a plan**
According to the materials prepared by Minister Ewa Kopacz, a plan exists to break up the insurance policy monopoly held by the National Insurance Fund (NFZ) between smaller autonomous HICs. They will create a basis for competition with clearly defined ranges of rights and obligations.
Citizens will be able to choose whichever HIC they wish. The newly formed controlling body will oversee and monitor the access to health services guaranteed by the HICs.

The reform will count on the development of above-standard care health insurance, which is not covered under public funding.

The responsibility of hospitals to repay their debts will fall onto the shoulders of their owners. The project to break up the NFZ should take effect by 1 January 2010.

The tax proportion of financing public health insurance is rising

All four countries finance their health insurance system with funds from common tax-payers and with supplemental governmental support for non-wage-earning citizens.

Before tough budget controls were introduced, responsibility for the deficit fell onto the government. It is obvious that tax money has begun to finance an increased proportion of health insurance.

In the Czech Republic, the proportion of government tax income devoted to financing health care has remained at a relatively constant 23 percent. In Slovakia, however, effective to finance regulators through the governmental budget. It makes far more sense for these bodies to be paid for through the industries that they are assigned to regulate.

The United States is the only country in the civilized world that does not have universal health insurance. At the same time, the US spends more money than all other countries on health care (health care accounts for 15.2 percent of their GDP). The health care system is based on commercial health insurance.

The law does, however, provide universal emergency care and many programs exist that ensure health care for people who do not have health insurance.

UNPOPULAR CHARGES

The Slovak health care reforms which came under the leadership of Rudolf Zajaca from 2002–2006 should inspire surrounding countries. In all the countries, the reforms (especially health care fees) have been unpopular. R. Ficov and his government abolished these fees after working with them for three years. In Hungary, a successful referendum was held to abolish the reforms on 9 March 2008, only a year after their introduction. FIDESZ, a right-wing party, was behind the call for a referendum.

The referendum required citizens to answer three questions. The first referred to the health care fees during doctor visits; the second, to fees related to hospitalization. The third had nothing to do with health care, but covered the proposed decision to abolish university fees. Over 50 percent of the eight million eligible voters took part in the referendum, and over 80 percent of them voted to abolish the charges in the health care sector.

A similar situation exists in the Czech Republic, where the Social Democratic (ČSSD) opposition party is promising to abolish the newly-created fees. The subject of health care fees has dominated the campaign for regional elections, which will be held in the autumn of this year.

Portion of financing health care coming from government tax income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>0 %</td>
<td>7 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>24 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>27 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HU</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>18 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
<td>12 %</td>
<td>12 %</td>
<td>17 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>30 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>28 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>24 %</td>
<td>24 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CZ</td>
<td>29 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>18 %</td>
<td>19 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
<td>20 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>23 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why we are afraid of the health care market

Does health care have to be a budgetary black hole?

The health care system reform proposals invoked strong discussions on many points among key and skeptical groups within the population. While objections to a reformed health care market exist, these objections are usually not founded on any strong or rational arguments.

What are the plans for reform?

As the Czech population ages and modern medicine advances, the Czech health care system will require more and more money. This kind of situation can be dealt with in three ways: increase public funding (and at the same time increase governmental debt), lower the availability and quality of the services provided, or start more effectively handling the money within the system. Simultaneously, this last point would require that we transform the financing of publicly-funded health care (that is, how contributions to publicly-funded health insurance; the second activity consists of contract agreements between insurance companies and health care service providers. The choice and division of contributions is the part of publicly-funded health insurance; the first activity is comprised of the selection and division of contributions to publicly-funded health insurance).

As the population of the Czech Republic ages, the Czech health care system will require more and more money.

As the population ages and modern medicine advances, the Czech health care system will require more and more money. This kind of situation can be dealt with in three ways: increase public funding (and at the same time increase governmental debt), lower the availability and quality of the services provided, or start more effectively handling the money within the system. Simultaneously, this last point would require that we transform the financing of publicly-funded health care (that is, how contributions to publicly-funded health insurance; the second activity consists of contract agreements between insurance companies and health care service providers. The choice and division of contributions is the part of publicly-funded health care; the first activity is comprised of the selection and division of contributions to publicly-funded health insurance).

The answer is yes, though it is important to distinguish between two types of activities carried out by health insurance companies – the first activity is comprised of the selection and division of contributions to publicly-funded health insurance; the second activity consists of contract agreements between insurance companies and health care service providers. The choice and division of contributions is the part of publicly-funded health care insurance; the first activity is comprised of the selection and division of contributions to publicly-funded health insurance.

The present government has created a proposal for fundamental reforms within the health care sector. These reforms are based on a regulated market. The reforms seek to not only stabilize the system, but to increase the availability of much needed quality health care services for all citizens. The reforms also seek to make full use of existing reserves within the Czech health care system. In other words, the reforms target the system’s wastefulness, which different sources gauge at around 40 billion CZK.

Are savings of this kind realistic? The answer is yes, though it is important to distinguish between two types of activities carried out by health insurance companies – the first activity is comprised of the selection and division of contributions to publicly-funded health insurance; the second activity consists of contract agreements between insurance companies and health care service providers. The choice and division of contributions is the part of publicly-funded health care insurance, in which access to needed health care is guaranteed to all citizens regardless of their economic situation. In short, these contributions are largely defined as percentages of income or, in other words, contributions depend on one’s ability to repay them. Their size has little to do with the risk of disease or illness. The contributions are therefore mostly based on the wealth of the client, as opposed to other factors. These types of contributions are in contrast to premiums, which represent money that each insurance company receives from policy-holders based on their potential usage of health care services. Premiums have nothing to do with the set contribution that was put into the system and reflect, instead, the preferences of the client in terms of how insured they would like to be. This is not a unique model in Europe, nor is it the only one. For example, in Germany the contributions are collected by insurance companies, while in the Netherlands, they are collected by financial institutions. The Czech Republic is expecting a change on this front.

During the next few years there should be a consolidated tax, toll and social insurance contribution collection process in place within financial institutions. The mapping of public health insurance contributions to income size and distribution will result in stability. The situation in the Czech Republic with its closely knit network of providers means that a solution to the financial question will also, with some minor adjustments, resolve the question of the physical availability of health care. But other questions remain.

What possibilities exist in one’s choice of a provider? What will the quality be of their offered services? How will the health professionals treat me? How efficient are the individual health institutions; how efficient is the whole system? Can I be treated as an outpatient instead of being hospitalized? These questions, among others, encompass the patient’s options and the efficiency of the system as a whole.

We are convinced that the market, rather than the government, will more effectively increase the efficiency of the system and the comfort of the policy-holders (insurance company clients). We are therefore proposing a regulated competitive market for insurance companies and the offers that they make to clients. Regulation has a few key points: defining the range of available services, ensuring the claim on those services and regulating profit creation.
Every insurance company will have to (just as it has to today) offer the same package of publicly funded health care services; this is defined by the law. This requirement is now much better defined, making it easier for the policyholders to claim services.

Apart from that, a newly formed authority will not only oversee the realization of the policyholder requirements, but will also monitor the financial situation of the insurance companies.

Health insurance companies will be able to use (such as today) only a certain amount of their income on their operational costs (around four percent). The remainder of the income will need to be used to pay for their clients’ health care. If one of the companies manages to increase its profit margin by increasing the quality of its services while reducing their cost, it will have to redistribute 85 percent of this profit among its policyholders. The company will then be able to keep the remaining 15 percent as a reward for its success.

The choice to choose one’s own insurance company will remain in the hands of the citizens. This informed choice will be based on obligatory information that the company must provide. For example, the companies must provide an overview of their financial situation, any above standard services, and a list revealing the quality of their standard health care services.

**Present Reaction to the Reforms**

The reform plans, even before being put forward in their finalized versions have caused a thunderous reaction and in some cases even outright rejection. This response lies partly in the incomplete explanation of the reforms aims. Other factors also include: an unfavorable economic and political environment, the impact (mostly emotional) of the insufficient economic reforms in the 1990s, and even a deeper emotional fear of a market-driven health care system.

An unstable government and the constant fighting between the two main parties in the country does not make for a favorable environment for any kind of reforms.

The health care reforms have, in fact, met absolute rejection by the shadow health minister of the ČSSD party, Dr. David Rath. This atmosphere causes a complete polarization of views and restricts any constructive discussions. It is obvious that political parties should differ in their views. But when questions are raised which regard the country's prosperity as a whole, members of parliament should not be at an 180 degree angle to each other.

In order to cultivate political discussion within a stable and prospering country, it is essential to first agree on basic tenets and then reduce the angle of disagreement to around 30–60 degrees. In this way, we will be able to build upon the work done by previous governments, while at the same time we will leave room for possible changes.

But the problem that is now on our hands, consists not only of the fundamental rejection of the steps taken by the current government, but it lies in the blind implementation of a direct management health care system model – a model which was abandoned by all other developed nations. This direct management model will encourage, on the one hand, insecurity within the whole sector and, on the other, the current government to quickly push through as much as possible before the coming elections.

The economic situation is not even favorable for the reforms. An old saying goes, “if you want to put forward a change then start a crisis.” Currently we are trying to enact change at a time when the system has been relatively prosperous. Of course, from a long term perspective, it is the right thing to do – in the midst of a crisis, reforms are often pushed through without heed of pain or effort; at a time like now, however, they can be implemented in near painless phases. In periods of prosperity most citizens are not concerned about future threats.

The memory of past experiences during the economic transformation in the nineties has without a doubt caused resistance to a conformed market solution.

Since there has been a lot of talk about the legal insufficiency of this transformation it will not be addressed here. If it weren’t for these insufficiencies, most of the population would not associate all joint-stock companies with asset stripping.

Paradoxically, this situation was used to vastly improve current laws and regulations. Stock companies are now much more transparent and safe in the legal sense than different forms of semi-governmental, non-profit organizations. While past experiences locked (and actually implemented) financial institution oversight firmly into the laws, the same oversight is found lacking towards health insurance companies.

Nevertheless, despite our own national characteristics, the Czech Republic is not the only country where the proposal to base health insurance off of the market invokes emotional reactions. These criticisms seldom take place in rationally led discussions. Let us therefore go and have a look, based on the facts, at some of the myths and legends in the health care system.

**Myths and Legends within the Health Care System**

To begin, I would like to indicate one criticism of the health care market reforms with which I agree. Health is not a commodity. Health care is, however, a service – its goal is to remove pain, help individuals improve, and sustain good health. Therefore the same financial rules should apply to health care service as to any other. Each service provider has a right to ask for a fee. The only difference between health care services and other services is that it needs to be publicly available. This is, and still will be after the reforms, covered by the public health insurance.

Critics of the market health care plan have popularized an argument regarding the immorality of profit. The reforms do not, however, introduce profiting into the system. It is already there. Almost eve-
Everyone who is currently working within the health care sector makes a profit: pharmaceutical companies, providers of drugs and medical tools, doctors in private practice and hospitals.

Profit is a reward for good work and motivation to perform even better. Participants in the health care system do not profit from pain, but from its removal. Profits from health care are not amoral but instead help deliver the better services that people need and want.

One problem in our current system is the lack of motivation. Health insurance companies, which should be the main monetary contributors to the system, are unable to make a profit. This fact is reflected in the way that our money is handled. The companies do not have the strength or motivation to compete against those that are profiting. Money meant for health services is therefore often given away without much thought.

The choice is clear – the health care system will either generate profit within clearly set rules created to improve patient care, or it will continue on in its non-transparent way, straining the pockets of everyone, but especially those who are economically the weakest and the least capable of fighting back.

I would also like to address the belief that private companies cannot safeguard public interests. The fight against hunger is also of public interest, and we are not solving it by deprivatizing bakeries. We are solving it with monetary contributions.

This is exactly how the collection for publicly funded health insurance works. Any type of legal organization can have access to this money, which is secured under strict rules and government control.

Repeat experiences in the Czech Republic have shown that the government (represented by the politicians and officials) is not always the best housekeeper.

For completeness, the term “public interest” is not something that is defined within the Czech health care system. It is, however, defined within the legal documents of the EU. The EU commission conveys that given stringent rules and controls profit or non-profit, private or public sector groups can guarantee the provision of health care in the public interest.

The proposal for the reforms is, therefore, fully aligned with the rules of the EU. This statement is affirmed in the existence of a parallel model in the Netherlands, where it has been working well for a few years now.

Pavel Hroboň is a physician, deputy minister of health and one of the co-authors of the health care reforms.

---

Yellow coaches to 14 European countries
STUDENT AGENCY express

- Comfort you deserve!
  Stewardess on board
  Leather seats
  Coffee, cappuccino, tea and chocolate for free
  Newspapers and magazines for free
  Screening of films, listening to CD and radio

- Prices which will make you happy!
  Our tip! Berlin for 550 CZK

www.studentagency.cz
nonstop infoline: 841 101 101

* prices in CZK
In the last few months, speculation over corruption in the pharmaceutical industry has surfaced again. The recent speculations were prompted by a planned urological conference in Kenya. The insurance company Apotex was supposed to sponsor the conference and receive a certain number of drug prescriptions in return. Do you regard this as an isolated case, or does it only reveal the tip of the iceberg?

The safari case in Kenya is unfortunately not an isolated case. Similar cases happen more than ten times a year. A few days ago, a Czech news station reported that the company Actavis had paid for a group of dermatologists to holiday in Egypt. But the interesting aspect [of this story] is that no conference had actually taken place. Usually, [sponsored] tours like these have a very specific agenda, and the doctors who take part also lecture on necessary educational topics.

In reality, real knowledge is not passed on. Business concerns drive the actions of the pharmaceutical industry. Their goal is to increase their drug sales, their profit and their share of the prices. This of course affects the information that they present at conferences. They teach doctors how to prescribe drugs, and they
Anti-corruption measures within the new health service proposal
The relationship between doctors (health professionals) and representatives of pharmaceutical companies (the medical industry's suppliers)

Work contracts for health care professionals stipulate that the patient must receive the best possible care. The content of this work agreement does not, however, require doctors to contact pharmaceutical company representatives, participate at pharmaceutical company-sponsored conferences, or sign contractual agreements, etc. These activities are nonetheless carried out during working hours in violation of the Labor Code and the interest of the employer (the health professional or medical institute in question). Punishment for these activities rests in the competency of the employer.

The authority to sign pharmaceutical company contracts (related to patient studies, drug orders, medical tools, and equipment, etc.) should rest not in the hands of a representative organization. The organization's role and duties must be explicitly defined and embedded within its work contract. Contract agreements between medical institutions and pharmaceutical companies should follow rules set in laws covering public orders (i.e. the Commercial Code, etc.). These contracts must be set in writing, publicly accessible on the Internet, and placed in the annual management reports of said medical institutions.

Medical institutions must, as well, inform all of their pharmaceutical or insurance company partners about their contractual agreements.

Finally, contracts between doctors and pharmaceutical company representatives cannot be monitored or restricted in any form outside the framework of their work agreement. Health care professionals and medical institutes receive backing from companies in all sizes and forms: advertising materials, medical equipment, gifts, financial support, entertainment, lecture coverage, and conference invitations, etc.

Currently, this type of sponsorship and patronage is not permissible within the framework of a health professional's work responsibilities. Sponsorship that occurs outside of this framework (i.e., during holidays or after working hours) is subject to regulation and taxation by financial institutions.

Contracts must adhere to regulation No. 40/1995 Sb., the Regulation on Advertising and Amending the Law. A contract's content must correspond with employer practices and bear a signature before the agreement enters into effect.

Doctors need to inform health insurance companies about any and all agreements that they have signed with other companies. This includes information about sponsorship gifts – their value, form, and any obligations that may stem from them.

The framework of the agreement states that doctors may not reveal any information acquired while working for his employer. Companies may not use drug prescriptions, medicinal substances or tools, clinical studies, patient lists, educational programs, or publications, etc., as conditions for sponsorship.

Incidents of hidden corruption will be handled in compliance with the relevant regulations by institutes that partake in criminal proceedings. These regulations include the Ethics Code of Conduct (ČLK), the Ethics Code for pharmaceutical companies, Regulation No 40/1995 Sb., the Regulation for Advertising, and the Ministerial order No. 26/2007 for Anti-Corruption Measures within the Health Care Domain. Commercial gains are not to motivate a doctor's decision-making, but rather the well-being of his or her patient. Sanctions for violations will stem from the Ethics Code, the authority of health insurance companies, and the binding legal responsibilities of the offender.

If a company wants to present a sponsorship gift to a medical professional, the company should do so through an independent foundation or fund. This foundation will then, on the basis of a transparent tender, distribute this gift among the designated recipients.

Post-marketing, non-intervening, pre-register and other drug studies, medical supplements, and tools
Companies should submit post-marketing studies on drugs, supplements, and tools exclusively through an independent organization or authority (SU KL). These studies should occur only with the condition that the health insurance companies, which have contracts with the government or private medical institutes, receive and approve all relevant information.

A proposed study must have a clear and purposeful justification; it must detail the means of execution and duration, the type of medical institute, the number of patients and health professionals it will impact, and the associated costs, etc. SU KL and other related health insurance companies must first approve the study before it may be executed.

When a company completes a study, it is obligated to summarize its results in a final report, and send this report to SU KL and the other insurance companies.

Doctors who execute these types of studies outside of their work contract agreement are in direct breach of the Labor Law. The execution of a study requires that the company (submitter) and the employer (medical institute) sign a contract.

In the work contract, the employer must clearly state the doctor's role in the execution of these studies. While the submitting company may not directly reward the doctor for his or her work on these studies, the employer may. But the size of the reward may in no shape or form be linked to a certain number of prescribed drugs, medical supplements, or medical tools.

A patient's participation in these studies requires an explicit written agreement, which will act as an appendage to the study. If these principles are breached, they will be assessed in accordance with the aforementioned regulations, criminal law, and within the authority of the health insurance companies.
create the illusion that diseases are in fact caused by a lack of drugs.

However, a vast majority of health issues are, in fact, related to lifestyle and habitual behavior – not eating well, lack of exercise, stress, etc. A doctor’s task should be to unearth the problem, and then to advise the patient on how to change his or her habits in order to get better. In many cases this works even without drugs.

I am absolutely certain that the vast majority of doctors are not corrupt. The problem concerns the lack of leadership from influential people: heads of clinics, departments and institutions and doctors with a large patient turnover. These are the people who are of interest to the pharmaceutical companies. I call them “the owners of medicine.” Upon returning from their trips they show the companies gratitude, whether consciously or not, by projecting it into their daily medical practices.

They publish in specialized magazines, lecture their colleagues, partake in clinical studies, and compose positive drug lists. They decide what, in practice, medicine should look like. They are the tip of the medical iceberg. The problem is not that a doctor may prescribe drug A instead of drug B. The biggest threat is the pressure exerted by pharmaceutical companies to make the doctors prescribe drugs in situations where the patient does not even need one. This is known as “medicalization.” Medical problems are created from everyday difficulties that have nothing to do with real diseases or real medical problems. Nowadays, more patients actually feel the effects of the “cures” as opposed to those of diseases.

Four years ago in Italy, investigators discovered that between the years 1999 and 2002, the company GlaxoSmithKline had invested around 228 million EUR into efforts to “help the sales of drugs.” A wide array of arrests of doctors and company employees resulted. How did this case come about?

The Italian state institutions, which had been given the mandate to fight organized crime, finally lost their patience in 2004. The financial police put forward a list of 4713 people, of which 4400 were doctors, and charged them with corruption by the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline. Hundreds of GSK employees were prosecuted. The results showed that one hundred and thirty-four different medical institutions were involved in ninety-four Italian cities.

I have no information about the results of the investigation, but the Italian police force is still concentrated on corruption among doctors. This was confirmed by a case in July of this year. Police found that at the Santa Rita Clinic, eighty-six unnecessary operations took place with only one goal – to line the doctors’ pockets.

The problem concerns the lack of leadership from influential people, namely, heads of clinics, departments and institutions, and doctors with large patient turnover. These individuals and their institutions refuse to take any action to deal with this issue.

The prosecuting attorney stated that “the patients were operated on irrespective of their pain, which was not decreased but, on the contrary, increased.”

Investigators noted one case in particular, where an eighty-eight year old woman was unnecessarily operated on three times. The clinic received 12,000 EUR for each operation. The owners of the clinic, as well as thirteen doctors, were banned from practicing any further medicine. I am afraid that our situation over here is much the same. The only thing missing is a system of recourse.

The problem of criminal cooperation between doctors, pharmaceutical companies and companies that provide medical tools, implants and other technical or biochemical equipment is well known. Medical institutions have enough information, proof and even power to solve this corruption problem. The Ministry of Health’s anti-corruption notice exists in addition to the Ethics Code of the Medical Cabinet, the Labor Code, the Code of Advertising and other norms. The problem stems from the fact that these institutions refuse to take any action. Each one is a part of the corrupt environment in one way or another. Meanwhile, the only people who feel the health impact of this corruption are the patients. It is astonishing how much time health care institutions, the police and the media spend on regulatory charges. I am sure that they have their reasons. But as to solving the crisis in the health care system, the measures are marginal in their effect. According to data from Transparency International, corruption costs us an estimated twenty billion CZK a year. The Ministry, the police and the doctor associations idly watch on.

I am afraid that within the medical and pharmaceutical world the problem of corruption has no solution. A lot will depend on the consistency shown by the police in regards to the Apotex case. If, in the end, charges are leveled against specific doctors or company representatives, the proceedings could destabilize the whole system of corruption. Until now, clinic directors, doctors and department heads have never even contemplated the idea that they might need to answer police questions about who paid for their turnover. These questions about who paid for their turnover.

Doctors should follow ethical codes of conduct, for no greater reason than to earn their patients’ complete trust. How will the speculation regarding doctors’ corrupt practices impact levels of trust between patients and doctors?

Of course, patients are deeply disturbed by the cases of doctor corruption that have been highlighted in the media. In medical practices, the patients’ [needs] are constantly being interchanged with [the wishes of the] pharmaceutical representatives. Patients register the “myst-
terious” changes in their prescription drugs even though the old ones had been working. They are losing trust in their doctors. There is also the issue of tainted information about care practices and drugs reaching decent doctors. The prestigious medical journal, Nature, found that around forty percent of first time authors have received some form of financial incentive to submit. The same goes for clinical studies.

Nowadays, no one can say with certainty that [the submissions] have not been manipulated. The doctors do not have, more or less, a chance to access the original source to check the veracity of the information they receive. In turn, the patient cannot be a hundred percent certain that his or her care is being provided with his or her best interests in mind, or that the doctor is wholly independent and not influenced by any given company.

An interesting paradox is how representatives of pharmaceutical companies are getting tangled in the problems that they themselves have created. On the one hand, they seek to break the will of the doctors. But in the back of their minds, they hope that they will not succeed. They are fully aware that at some point they may find themselves in the patient’s place, with the same uncertainty as to their doctors’ motivations. They are also fully aware that medicine is based in having trust towards one’s doctor. Setting right the damage that has been caused will be extraordinarily difficult.

Pharmaceutical companies have, by law, an ethics code. The Ethics Code of the International Association of Pharmaceutical Companies has a total of ten pages. Is this a reaction to the suspected unethical conduct that many companies have engaged in?

I have read the Ethics Code, and I must say it was a very entertaining read. On the one hand it is very detailed and strict. For example, it states that in pharmaceutical marketing materials “the font size of expert statements cannot be smaller than two millimeters.” However, it is very general and lenient on fundamental questions like the motivation of doctors.

As an illustration of this, it states that “Entertainment during conferences sponsored by companies must be of a reasonable level.” But what is a reasonable level? It goes on to say that “…travel costs, accommodation costs, and food costs may be covered by the sponsor.” But if this is the case, then what else is there to cover? Also interesting to me was the statement that “…members of IAPC should avoid organizing conferences in places used for recreational activities,” when it is common knowledge that they are hardly ever organized anywhere else.

This kind of ambiguity can conceal anything. And ensuring that the companies stick to the code is another issue in and of itself. Neither the people who take part in these exotic conferences nor the companies [who sponsor them] usually complain. If there is no dissension than there will be no one to criticize this activity. And in any case, not all pharmaceutical companies are part of the IAPC, which means the code does not apply to them.

Recently, the subject of so-called post-marketing (non-intervening) studies has come up. Companies pay doctors to “assess” drugs already approved by the SÚKL; in return, the doctors receive financial rewards. What do the companies use these studies for?

Extravagant conventions in exotic places raise too much unwanted attention. Companies therefore look for more elegant and less obvious ways to motivate doctors to prescribe drugs. It was this impetus that made them develop the idea of post-marketing studies. They contact doctors with the aim of, according to the Ethics Code of the International Association of Pharmaceutical Companies (IAPC), “collecting valuable information about the clinical usage of and effects of approved drugs.” The joke is that these drugs have already been clinically tested, approved, and registered. No further studies are necessary.

The doctors record the patient’s information: the type of drug, dosage, and in some cases even the side-effects. He is not paid for tasks that relate to treatment, but “only for the records containing the information.” He can receive up to 1000 CZK for a single patient who has been prescribed a certain drug. That is a healthy addition to a meager wage.

In large hospitals such “studies” are routine. The doctors who take part feel a sense of pride in their contributions to valuable research. Pharmaceutical companies pay well. The heads of hospitals are tolerant. Patients regularly swallow needless drugs rather than returning them.

Insurance companies recharge them. Nominally, everything is both medically and legally acceptable. No trace of corruption exists. In reality, this reflects another means to pressure doctors into prescribing particular drugs.

The pharmaceutical sector has huge turnovers, both in profit and in expenses, in the fields of development and research. Logically, companies want to profit from their products no matter the price. How can the system change to eliminate corruption?

No one has to come up with anything new. It would be enough to follow existing norms and to stringently prosecute seemingly insignificant [incidences of] corruption. Nothing appears wrong when a doctor receives a stamp from a company. Everything is still okay when he is sent a gift or invited to lunch. But it is difficult to know when to draw the line in this case. At this point, [the doctor] is just a small step away from a safari, a post-marketing study, or direct provisions for prescribed drugs. The medical sector needs to be cleansed from the bottom. A step by step a cleansing
would unearth corruption of greater magnitude.

Improvement of course also depends on each individual doctor or health care professional. We all suffer from complying with corruption.

The money that companies give to conferences in exotic countries is projected onto drug costs. We all contribute to these [costs] in the form of health insurance. This is the root of the whole crisis and [it is a factor in] the low income of doctors. Consequently, we are simply serving to preserve the current state of affairs.

I would very much like to know the degree to which medical institutions would be willing to fight corruption. In August of this year, I sent out a proposal on anti-corruption measures that they could set up immediately, without needing to accept new laws. I received a response from the Health Ministry, which said that they would take a look and let me know. The Ethics Committee told me that the proposal was sound and of good quality, but that “unearthing corruption is difficult and rare.”

Neither the government’s Health Committee under David Rath, nor the General Health Insurance Company (VZP), responded. Paradoxically, the IAPC and some of the pharmaceutical companies showed great interest in cooperation. Costs of corruption, marketing, and advertising have seemingly grown beyond their means. Maybe they themselves see the need to start doing something about it.

MUDr. Jan Hnízdíl was born in 1958. He is a physician, and specializes in psychosomatic medicine. He is the author of several professional publications.

---

Let’s build

a school in Africa

Seven new schools for 1560 children have already been built from the 2004-2007 collections

Public collections will be held October 14-16 in the streets of Czech cities.

Contribute to the money-boxes of the scouts!

Each DMS is 30 Kč and the account of Let’s Build a School in Africa will be credited with 27 Kč.

Account number: 222 444 555/0300

www.skolavafrice.cz

SEND A DMS AFRIKA TO NUMBER 87777

Each DMS is 30 Kč and the account of Let’s Build a School in Africa will be credited with 27 Kč

The public collection has been permitted by the Register of Charities under number #MFF/2003/464/0062

---
The Postgraduate Educational Crisis in Medicine

The vast majority of leading professionals view their young colleagues as “cheap labor” for handling bureaucratic paperwork.

Upon their successful completion of six-year medical programs at faculties in Prague, Plzen, Brno, or Olomouc, young graduates face an unenviable task – choosing a field of specialization.

The lucky ones find work in their desired medical fields; the less lucky ones must choose from “less attractive” alternatives.

There is, however, another group of individuals which prefers the theoretical side of medicine and would like to concentrate on “research.” Unfortunately, the structure of the Czech system essentially railroad the recent postgraduate theoretic into a lecturer position, which offers minimal rewards and demands a near full-time commitment.

These individuals receive grants in the same way as “postgraduates” from other non-medical faculties. But, in my experience, the non-medical postgraduates come into “work” once a week and only for a few hours. As a rule, this allows them to focus on their other job full-time.

A relatively large group of these medical postgraduates consists of doctors who comply with terms for which each EU member state should be ashamed. These doctors work a full work week, usually at the teaching hospitals. But because of EU requirements, they are officially credited with just 4.5 hours per week, or ten percent of a normal workweek. As a result, their income is lower than a waiter who works at a high-end restaurant.

Some people argue that statistics on doctors’ pay are not accurate. This is true because the statistics take into account income that is earned outside of the normal working hours. This extra income usually comes from their monthly evening and weekend work. We cannot, therefore, really speak about the financial motivation of our national elite.

Postgraduate Studies of Desperate Virtue

Most doctors working under these conditions are not actually interested in research. For these doctors, postgraduate studies are simply a means to practice at “high quality” workplaces within big city teaching hospitals.

Another problem has evolved as postgraduate students have entered teaching courses or taken on short-term or research assignments in specialized fields. The vast majority of leading professionals view their young colleagues as “cheap labor” for handling bureaucratic busywork – never-ending piles of forms and documents. But this is not the work of individuals who are enrolled in specialization programs. While some anomalies exist, these postgraduates are rarely freed from their secretarial role to engage in real scientific work.

I have also spoken with older colleagues who believe that “anyone that focuses on the theory of medicine can not possibly learn to execute it in practice.” But this statement lacks validity. Modern scientific methods and medicines like antibiotics owe their presence, in part, to the theoretic and the theories that these colleagues denigrate.

Functionless System

Pre-attestation phase doctors need to acquire a certain number of working hours at different levels of workplaces. According to our current system of attestation, a postgraduate student with a workload of 0.1 could theoretically pass a specialist exam after more than fifty years of experience at a hospital.

Some regulations exist which work with a pre-attestation workload of 0.5, but not for 0.1 or 0.2. Whether a young doctor may come forward for attestation after five or maybe even eight years of practice is completely up to his superior’s views on his performance. While most workplaces now do accept worked-off hours, this process has yet to be legally defined.

In comparison to other countries, we have much to catch up on. Postgraduate students are assessed on the same basis as full-time doctors; if their results are good enough then they become eligible for individual grants. On the other hand, if they complete their studies and defend their dissertation, they become preferred candidates at teaching hospitals. The dedication these candidates have shown towards their research projects makes them appear valuable in a field that seeks out innovative and independent individuals.

Based on my personal experiences, I know that Western European universities fully acknowledge the contributions made by young postgraduate students, whose intelligence, energy and zeal are not underestimated. Students and doctors in their pre-attestation period are treated as partners; their mentors guide them as mentors should.

In the Czech Republic you can, however, find workplaces that have started to come to the same conclusion. These places have begun to greet the rising generation of doctors with a different attitude. Unfortunately, you can count their number on the fingers of one hand. This fact manifests itself in the Czech Republic’s appalling standing among international counterparts.

Petr Nuc. The author is a postgraduate student at Charles University. He has also studied at a top western university. For professional reasons, the author has chosen to use a pseudonym rather than his real name.
From the very beginning, the Health Minister Tomas Julinek has emphasized the Ministry’s reformist attitude and willingness to overhaul the Czech health care system.

But the Ministry of Health has approached the question of health care with ubiquitous carelessness; they have not rationally approached the problem and compared the Czech health care system to its foreign counterparts. If Julinek’s team were to do so, they would certainly find that Czech patients receive an excellent value for their money. There is not a cheaper health care system in the world that produces better results.

Doubtful reforms
Only a blind fanatic could believe that the system will be equally or more efficient after a complete restructuring.

No system is ever perfect – improvement is always possible. But such a large “shake up” will only waste more money on newly created problems. Julinek’s team is well aware of this fact; as a result, they have attempted to focus on the impending problems of an aging population fifty years down the road.

Even the communists who believed in their eternal rule did not plan with such foresight.

While Julinek believes that he stands behind a bold vision, his grasp on power will begin to slip over the next two years. The Czech people know better than to believe that privatizing health insurance or paying a doctor’s fee will solve or prevent the problems of 2050.

Topolanek and Julinek are constantly discussing the reforms, but real action has been conspicuously absent from these talks. During their two years in office,
they have managed to change only two aspects of the health care system – they’ve introduced visit fees and a new drug payment procedure. The new fee system decreased the number of visits to the doctor in its first months. Julinek presented these results as a goal and as a success.

**What are the effects of the reforms?**
The Ministry has not seriously analyzed the possible health effects that these reforms might produce. Meanwhile, the Ministry believes that it has successfully stopped so-called malingers from going to the doctor. But its officials do not acknowledge the marked decrease in drug prescriptions for high blood pressure – aka “the silent painless killer.” The same trends are also evident in other prescriptions.

If the situation does not change soon, we will begin to see the number of complicated chronic diseases increase. In the end, we will pay more than what was “saved” or amassed by the 30 CZK fees. Furthermore, these reforms have been instituted at a time when the health insurance companies maintain an unbelievable and growing margin of 30 billion crowns.

The second aspect of the reform changed the payment procedure for drugs. The process is now centralized under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and its organization SUKL (Státní Ústav pro Kontrolu Levic). This means that specialists have been excluded from the decision-making process, which is now in the hands of Ministry officials. While the original system raised criticism for its lack of transparency, the new system is even less transparent.

**Pharmaceutical Companies are Profiting**
The whole system has yet to really take-off, but the first results are already in. Excess tolls for some drugs have increased tenfold, and cheaper generics show a decline in market share. Meanwhile, some original companies have shown double-digit percentages in their midterm growth.

Julinek thinks that the reforms have been successful because modern and expensive medicines are now available in the Czech Republic. But once again, Julinek and his team have not conducted a serious analysis of the system’s efficiency. While it is good to know that the cost of a cancer treatment is now twice as expensive as it was last year, we also need to know what effects this increase has had on survival rate, patient care, etc. Unfortunately, there have been few changes. I do not share Julinek’s belief in the reform’s success because pharmaceutical company profits have risen.

**Why is it a Bad Idea to Privatize Health Insurance?**
Topolánek and Julinek like to emphasize that the reforms are not yet in place – they state that the newly introduced fees are simply preparation for what is to come. They allude to the privatization of health insurance companies, and the absolute liberalization of the relationship between companies and health service entities.

Nine of the ten public health insurance companies will be privatized – the government will own VSP. These companies need to offer different insurance plans; patients need to have a choice. But the plan revolves around the fact that the patient must give up his right to choose (doctors, hospitals, etc) in exchange for some benefits. In addition, the insurance companies will dictate “limits” of treatment a doctor may prescribe or give to a patient.

Privatization means that people will become the targets of marketing campaigns run by the private insurance companies. These campaigns will focus on the elderly and the young since these two groups frequent the doctor more often, and thereby generate a greater revenue for the insurance companies. Companies with a larger percentage of young or elderly customers will prosper. The system will become lopsided as patients put more in (visit fees) than get out (medicine and care).

Furthermore, we will all have to pay an obligatory health tax to private firms. Julinek realized the absurdity of his plan after he listened to those who criticized it – private owners will cut off cost and profit numbers from this tax and only then distribute the rest for care.

He wants to avert this trend by forcing owners to divide the profit between their insurers. Julinek is trying to dictate how the owners should run their businesses, i.e. how much they are allowed to spend on running costs.

Most people realize that these efforts will end up in the Constitutional Court. What is the logic behind privatization if you restrict the owner’s right to generate profit? Is Julinek simply trying to avert further criticism from the KDU-CSL and the Greens. Julinek’s plan will only make matters more worrisome for the state of health insurance in the Czech Republic.

Until now, most people have not been interested in issues of health care; they have not held high requirements. But we have a lot to look forward to if we create a competitive environment between insurance companies and insurance plans.

We will not only have to deal with insurance agents and advertising campaigns, but ten years after we have chosen a plan, we may find out that it doesn’t cover the disease that we have.

The position of health professionals and health service entities will change as well. Doctor’s contracts with insurance companies will revolve around the question “to be or not to be?” Nowadays such contracts are under state control. The reform will force an agreement between the doctor, insurance company, and the entity. As a result, doctors will have to agree to ridiculous terms because their employers will be striving for a unique market advantage.

Since insurance company owners will own their own net of facilities, nothing will stop them from setting their own income above that of their competition. As their competition is forced to ruin or bought out, this so-called market of competition will become monopolized by a few.

Julinek believes that a properly competitive market will solve all the problems in the Czech health care system. Julinek also plans to change teaching hospitals into businesses, and he plans to privatize other hospitals now under ministerial control.

Privatization appears to be the driving force for the entire reform. It is not difficult to suppose that the reforms are merely a facade for some people to capitalize on what will surely be a mess.

You would be hard pressed to find another country where such major reforms have been attempted in such short period of time. I fear that we will become the shining example of what not to do.
Lee Iacocca, the man who rescued Chrysler Corporation from its death throes. He's now 82 years old and has a new book, and here are some excerpts: "Am I the only guy in this country who's fed up with what's happening? Where the hell is our outrage? We should be screaming bloody murder. We've got a gang of clueless bozos steering our ship of state right over a cliff, we've got corporate gangsters stealing us blind, and we can't even clean up after a hurricane much less build a hybrid car. But instead of getting mad, everyone sits around and nods their heads when the politicians say, 'Stay the course.' Stay the course? You've got to be kidding. This is America, not the damned 'Titanic.' I'll give you a sound bite: 'Throw all the bums out!' You might think I'm getting senile, that I've gone off my rocker, and maybe I have. But someone has to speak up. I hardly recognize this country anymore.

The most famous business leaders are not the innovators but the guys in handcuffs. While we're fiddling in Iraq, the Middle East is burning and nobody seems to know what to do. And the press is waving 'pom-poms' instead of asking hard questions. That's not the promise of the 'America' my parents and yours traveled across the ocean for."

I've had enough. How about you? "I'll go a step further. You can't call yourself a patriot if you're not outraged. This is a fight I'm ready and willing to have. The Biggest 'C' is Crisis! (Iacocca elaborates on nine C’s of leadership, crisis being the first.) Leaders are made, not born. Leadership is forged in times of crisis.

It's easy to sit there with your feet up on the desk and talk theory. Or send someone else's kids off to war when you've never seen a battlefield yourself. It's another thing to lead when your world comes tumbling down.

On September 11, 2001, we needed a strong leader more than any other time in our history. We needed a steady hand to guide us out of the ashes. A Hell of a Mess! So here's where we stand: We're immersed in a bloody war with no plan for winning and no plan for leaving. We're running the biggest deficit in the history of the country. We're losing the manufacturing edge to Asia, while our once-great companies are getting slaughtered by health care costs. Gas prices are skyrocketing, and nobody in power has a coherent energy policy. Our schools are in trouble. Our borders are like sieves. The middle class is being squeezed every which way. These are times that cry out for leadership.

But when you look around, you've got to ask: "Where have all the leaders gone?" Where are the curious, creative communicators? Where are the people of character, courage, conviction, omnipotence, and common sense? I may be a sucker for alliteration, but I think you get the point.

Name me a leader who has a better idea for homeland security than making us take off our shoes in airports and throw away our shampoo?
We’ve spent billions of dollars building a huge new bureaucracy, and all we know how to do is react to things that have already happened.

Name me one leader who emerged from the crisis of Hurricane Katrina.

Congress has yet to spend a single day evaluating the response to the hurricane, or demanding accountability for the decisions that were made in the crucial hours after the storm.

Everyone’s hunkering down, fingers crossed, hoping it doesn’t happen again. Now, that’s just crazy. Storms happen. Deal with it. Make a plan. Figure out what you’re going to do the next time.

Name me an industry leader who is thinking creatively about how we can restore our competitive edge in manufacturing. Who would have believed that there could ever be a time when ‘The Big Three’ referred to Japanese car companies? How did this happen, and more important, what are we going to do about it?

Name me a government leader who can articulate a plan for paying down the debt, or solving the energy crisis, or managing the health care problem. The silence is deafening. But these are the crises that are eating away at our country and milking the middle class dry.

I have news for the gang in Congress. We didn’t elect you to sit on your asses and do nothing and remain silent while our democracy is being hijacked and our greatness is being replaced with mediocrity.

What is everybody so afraid of? That some bonehead on Fox News will call them a name? Give me a break. Why don’t you guys show some spine for a change?”

Hao Enough?

“Hey, I’m not trying to be the voice of gloom and doom here. I’m trying to light a fire. I’m speaking out because I have hope. I believe in America. In my lifetime I’ve had the privilege of living through some of America’s greatest moments. I’ve also experienced some of our worst crises: the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, the 1970s oil crisis and the struggles of recent years culminating with 9/11.

If I’ve learned one thing, it’s this: You don’t get anywhere by standing on the sidelines waiting for somebody else to take action.

Whether it’s building a better car or building a better future for our children, we all have a role to play. That’s the challenge I’m raising in this book. It’s a call to Action for people who, like me, believe in America. It’s not too late, but it’s getting pretty close. So let’s shake off the crap and go to work. Let’s tell ‘em all we’ve had enough.

Make your own contribution by sending this to everyone you know and care about. It’s our country, folks; and it’s our future. Our future is at stake!”

Lido Anthony “Lee” Iacocca, an American businessman and philanthropist, was born on October 25, 1924 in Pennsylvania. After completing high school in his home town of Allentown, Lee attended Lehigh University where he eventually graduated with a degree in industrial engineering. Iacocca completed his studies at Princeton University, and soon after began his career as an engineer for the Ford Motor Company. Eventually, Lee shifted gears and left his position as an engineer to become a prominent figure on the sales force. Here his talents and skills helped both him and the company prosper and Lee Iacocca ultimately became the president of Ford Motor Company.

Lee Iacocca is associated with a vast array of successful automobile models, most notable of which is the Ford Mustang, a legend of the American motor industry. Despite his great success, following a series of disagreements with the chairman of the board, Henry Ford II, Iacocca was forced to leave the company in 1978.

Upon his departure from Ford, Iacocca was once again able to display his management abilities, this time at the almost bankrupt Chrysler Corporation. Losing no time, he immediately set about restructuring the company, including the sale of the European arm to Peugeot. This proved a highly controversial move, given the substantial layoffs associated with it.

From his experiences during the oil crisis, Lee concluded that the future of Chrysler would be based on smaller, less expensive cars. His ideas proved profitable and the company’s economic situation strengthened exponentially. By 1987, the company had experienced such financial success that it could afford to purchase the American Motor Corporation (AMC), the owner of popular brand-name Jeep. In late 1992 Lee Iacocca retired, leaving his position as director of the Chrysler Corporation, thus closing one of the great chapters of the American car industry.

Lee Iacocca’s activities were far from limited to the automobile industry. Over the years, his foundations have invested in diabetes research following the death of his first wife relating to complications from this disease. In 1982, he was named the chairman of the Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation, which was founded by President Reagan to renovate the Statue of Liberty. Furthermore, in cooperation with W. Novak he wrote his autobiography: Iacocca: An Autobiography, which later became a bestseller from 1984 to 1985. Staying true to his heritage, Iacocca donates funds to his alma mater, Lehigh University, to promote study programs.

Iacocca plunged into politics in the year 2000, when he supported the successful candidacy of Republican George W. Bush. Four years later his preferences dramatically changed, when he then became a supporter of Democratic candidate John Kerry. Since 2007, Iacocca has been even more intensely engaged in politics than ever before, having launched a private website that acts as an open forum on the subject of American National and Foreign Politics. The launch of the site is pre-dated by the publication of Iacocca’s latest book, released in May of 2007 and entitled Where Have All The Leaders Gone?, from which the above passage has been extracted.
Senator Barack Obama's presidential candidacy has inspired enormous enthusiasm throughout the United States and Europe. Standing behind the mantra-like incantation of words like Hope and Change, the young leader has reached out across the racial divide and promised to heal divisions created by culture wars and the Christian-corporatist insurgency of the Bush administration. Obama rallies have more closely resembled rock concerts than the staid gatherings surrounding other, greyer politicians.

Obama claims that America needs to reinfect itself with the “Audacity of Hope” – to dare to dream the American dream again, and to reassert itself as the preeminent force for good in a world beset by impending environmental catastrophe, fundamentalist terrorism, and the spectre of a new cold war. According to Obama, this hope is predicated on his own vision of change, which he believes will mend and remake a broken and battered America.

On issues from Iraq to immigration, from education to energy policy, Obama has attempted to distance himself from the current administration and the Republican candidate, Senator John McCain. Surely this is good news for any sort of left-leaning individual who has cringed under the horrors of the Bush-Cheney gang. As Obama’s path to Pennsylvania Avenue became increasingly assured, it became ever more worthwhile to examine and reassess the substance behind his campaign. Will an Obama presidency mean a radical departure from the policies of the Bush-Clinton-Bush years, or even from a McCain administration? And, what does Obama’s candidacy and potential presidency say about democracy and politics in the 21st century? Can we look forward to hope and change or is Obama in fact more of the same in an era in which politicians are stars and politics is a soap opera played out in front of a curtain, carefully drawn to conceal the real locus and identity of power?

In order to grasp the nature and degree of change that we can expect under Obama, it is necessary to explore the main themes of team hope and the promised changes that he and his campaign have made.

The Globalisation of Hope?
Regarding foreign policy, Obama has echoed Condoleezza Rice’s promise (made four years ago when she became secretary of state) to re-empower US diplomatic efforts around the world. This promise is important to many Americans, who believe that the Bush administration’s belligerent behaviour and bawdy rhetoric are key sources of recent anti-Americanism. Obama’s eloquence is a welcome change in this respect. If he becomes president, the number of misunderstandings and noses out of joint caused by ill-chosen words may well decrease.

Unfortunately, this new tone and tenor is where change stops. Obama’s stance on international diplomacy is revealed in his attitude towards Iran, with whom he wishes to engage without preconditions. Obama’s attitude is, however, less novel than it seems; his approach requires Iran to abandon its nuclear programme and end its support of terrorism in exchange for incentives such as WTO membership. If Iran does not comply, the Islamic Republic will face isolation. Apparently these are still rights the US reserves for itself and its selected “friends of freedom.”

Ben Tallis

Hope, Change or None of the Above?

Why voting for Barack Obama was more like buying fair trade coffee than storming the barricades.
A similar attitude has framed the West’s recent dealings with a resurgent Russia. Craving respect and a proper seat at the top table of international decision making, Russia was told to sit down and shut up over Kosovo unless she acquiesced to the American-inspired decision to ride roughshod over international law. When this particular set of chickens came home to roost in South Ossetia, Obama’s rhetoric was certainly preferable to that of McCain, Bush, and Cheney, but his analysis and policy thrust was much the same. Russia, constructed by our politicians and media as a land of drunken serfs who crave autocratic leaders and is still sore over a lost empire, had lashed out against a small, democratic, and western-friendly neighbour. For this she must be stopped. And then came the appeals to international law. The crashing hypocrisy needs no further elucidation.

Under Obama, the rest of the world can continue to look forward to being lectured by Americans who cannot accept that others have a genuinely different and legitimate points of view and warns against disregarding the American way. It is worthwhile to remember that during the Clinton years (which have been retrospectively glorified by comparison to what followed), the KLA was trained, Sudan and Yugoslavia were bombed, and the United States’ assumed dominance as underwriter of the New World’s Order fanned the flames of fundamentalism. This was a time when the US had a smooth talking, likeable president who promised change. The fallacy that the “End of History” gave the American ideals of freedom and liberal market democracy a hegemonic lock on the world has resulted in dire consequences in the American administrations’ treatment of competing Weltanschauungs. Obama’s stance seems no different in this regard.

Despite Obama’s rhetoric, no real change appears on his agenda for Iraq and Afghanistan. A pledge to withdraw from Iraq is definitely preferable to John McCain’s seemingly open-ended commitment, but as Jeremy Scahill of Democracy Now and The Nation indicates, Obama’s pledged withdrawal is not comprehensive. Obama intends to not only keep bases in Iraq, but to maintain the world’s largest embassy and keep the airport open. Scahill estimates that these latter commitments will alone require an excess of 65,000 troops. This says nothing about the continued presence of contractors, military or otherwise. This is a WINO – a withdrawal in name only.

In Afghanistan, the candidates mainly disagree over the extent to which the US should reveal its intentions to widen the war into Pakistan, with Obama the most open about this hideous, farcical re-run of Cambodian and Laotian tragedies of the Vietnam era. In this theatre, Obama’s commitment to change remains as elusive as hope to the Afghan people.

Change begins at home?
Obama’s professed domestic policies are meant to set himself apart from both Bush and McCain. In practice, however, no real choice exists between the candidates. The genuine conflict between competing visions that constitutes real politics has been replaced by the puppet-show pugilism of debates, which are controlled and licensed by the two main
parties and exclude other candidates and opinions.

Obama has pledged to extend health care coverage to the 47 million people in one of the world’s most “advanced countries” who currently go without. McCain’s proposal does not address this issue and actually proposes to cut spending on the Medicare programme, so while Obama’s approach is preferable, it does not radically diverge from the status quo. Obama’s plan relies on the market to continue providing health care for profit, and does not adequately address issues of quality or regulation for insurance companies. If Obama wanted to make real change that would give genuine hope to millions, then he should advocate universal health care, free at the point of delivery.

Obama’s commitment to provide $4000 credits to every student entering higher education is a central pillar of his plans for education reform. In the exorbitantly expensive world of college education, any small amount helps, but this will not even cover the tuition fees at many of the relatively affordable state schools, let alone the living expenses and book costs. So despite these positive aspects, the proposal’s approach is superficial, and does little to address the key issues in US higher education. Given that tertiary education is a public good, why is it not freely available and funded by taxpayers? Those who argue that the quality of education would decline should consider the annual number of graduates who, under the current system, enter the workforce unemployable in their field of study, and whose course structure allows them to complement their major subject with credits in something like golf. Obama’s proposal will do little to change the main dynamics of the US education system, which provides world-beating schools for the privileged, maintains the position of the governing elite, and simultaneously saddles the majority of (middle class) college students with exorbitant debts, securing their participation as good producers/consumers. The poor are and will continue to be largely excluded from this system as failing schools, dire social circumstances and the grinding expectations of a turbo-consumer society preclude them from climbing the socio-economic ladder. The image of Obama as a poster-child for the American dream is misleading in this regard. While his example is inspiring, it is an exception and provides a legitimating façade for a society characterised by decreasing social mobility. While committed to destroying the superficial obstacles to individual progression, American society crushes the mechanisms of social solidarity, which offer the only hope of progress to the excluded.

Both McCain and Obama appear to have borrowed a leaf from the book of Bush when it comes to energy policy. Although these policies sound less gratifying when coming from the BigOil BigMouths of the Bush administration, both candidates nonetheless advocate “technical” solutions such as clean coal. But as Democracy Now has questioned, is coal really a “panacea” especially when there are doubts that the “burning of coal [can] ever be clean?”. McCain and Obama alike reveal an unwillingness to present Americans with the reality that faces them. Americans must choose between consuming less and accepting their role as disproportionate polluters, to the detriment of the rest of the world, especially the Global South. So what is the reason for this reluctance?

The collapse of communism was accompanied by the accelerated decline of modernist ideas of social democracy. As consumer-citizens, we live in a post-modern, atomised world where we need no longer entertain grand ideas or strive for noble causes. Apparently, neither American presidential candidate could countenance a proposal to curb consumption in order to reduce the United States’ contribution to global warming. In turn this gives lie to the trust that Obama claims to have in the American people. Surely such an educated country can understand the need to sacrifice now for the sake of our grandchildren and the continued survival of the species. It is time to consider whether our consumerist lifestyle has made us happy or whether this has merely been sold as a substitute for solidarity.

The other thrust of the energy “debate” has centred on realizing energy independence and reducing US reliance on foreigners for their fossil fix. But what these discussions on energy really highlight, especially given the points about diplomacy, is the United States’ inability to listen and, heaven forbid, compromise.

Crisis, Democracy and Politics
The “Credit Crisis” exemplifies the cosy bi-partisan consensus that underpins congress’ role as a distributor of favours to interest groups and the financial backers of individual politicians. Both Obama and McCain not only supported the largest, single redistribution of wealth since the New Deal (though in the wrong direction), but they also supported the individual earmarks for recalcitrant members of congress who have held out for their own interests.

While Obama has professed to care more about Barney Smith than Smith Barney (part of Citigroup’s investment banking unit), he will, in practice, do little to cull the leaders of the cult of greed. It does not seem as if Obama will humanize or tighten regulations on the financial system. People will remain second to profits, and incentives to save will rank lower than those to spend or to speculate. This should come as no surprise. Obama and his advisors are self-professed followers of the “Chicago School” of economics, as pioneered by Milton Friedman. His chief economic advisor is Robert Rubin who, like Henry Paulson (the secretary of the treasury and architect of the “bailout”) and Jon Corzine (the Democratic governor of New Jersey) used to be head of the investment bank, Goldman Sachs. Goldman Sachs has significantly contributed to raising the level of risk in the financial system and fuelling the corporate and consumer greed that characterises this period. Working alongside Alan Greenspan (the former head of the Federal Reserve), Rubin persuaded a young, Democratic president to abandon his plans for big government intervention to change America, arguing that the market could take care of things better. Obama’s knowledge of the fate of Clinton’s plans reveals not only his true convictions, but that the most pressing crisis in the US and in rest of the world is actually one of politics rather than credit.

Faking Politics, Faking Change
The lack of real difference between the Republican and Democratic candidates
is masked underneath the focus on their respective personas. The relative exclusion of third party candidates such as Ralph Nader or Bob Barr, or other dissenting voices such as Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul, produces a political debate managed and licensed by the main parties (under the guise of the Presidential Debates Commission) which eschews controversy. The media’s collusion in this process is reprehensible, pandering to the lowest common denominator of “Fox News,” creating scandal while maintaining advertising revenue as the highest common factor. As AT&T’s sponsorship of the Democratic National Convention highlighted, corporate America shall fear neither Obama nor McCain. AT&T’s sponsorship came in the wake of Senator Obama’s u-turn on granting retrospective immunity to telecoms companies, which were involved in the wire-tapping scandal in which the NSA illegally spied on US citizens.

This political façade is far from unique to the United States. Similar problems plague many European countries, including the Czech Republic where voters have been taught to distrust politicians. Meanwhile, the Czech media feeds its citizens a similar diet of scandal, and goes out of its way to avoid discussing issues of political substance. In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is content with his reputation as a clown for it obscures the conflict of interest embodied in his attempts to dismember laws on media ownership. In the meantime, he is desperately attempting to secure his own immunity from prosecution. In the UK, the façade was more blatantly erected as the New Labour and the Third Way moved centre-right. Essentially in agreement with the Conservative opposition, parliament is largely reduced to knockabout points-scoring and minor squabbles regarding the degree and extent of certain “reforms.”

Wherever it has appeared, the consensual post-politics of the Third Way disguises the political shifts that underlie its apparently managerial nature. The decision to accept market orthodoxy and abandon social democracy is a major political choice. When Tony Blair, a leader of a notionally leftist party, made concessions to the right in order to win the premiership. Members of his party hoped that once in power, Blair would revert to more traditional leftwing values. But he didn’t, and Britain suffered. Likewise, it would be a mistake to assume that Barack Obama has not advocated the genuinely change-making policies outlined above simply because they are not electorally expedient. Change in this case is a matter of style rather than substance.

A vote for Barack Obama will not change the world, but it might make a lot of Americans feel better about themselves. Consequently, while Obama will project a more positive image of the United States abroad, its citizens will continue to carry on with business as usual. Social divisions will carry on at home, and American leaders will continue to seek intolerant global dominance. Voting for Barack Obama was like buying fair trade coffee – a small gesture to soothe the conscience (particularly for middle-class liberals) without making any real sacrifice or committing to any significant political engagement. Americans must realize that voting for Obama does not fulfil their civic obligation. In the aftermath of the election, it is necessary that they maintain their socio-political awareness to engage in the real political work, which happens outside of campaigns and elections. Shopping can’t save the world, and Barack Obama cannot change America. Democracy should be about more than choosing the lesser of two evils, and so the only reasonable vote is a vote for democracy itself, which in this case would be for a third-party candidate. This is the only way to break the consensual two-party stranglehold, which is so damaging to US politics and to all of our worlds.

Ben Tallis is a political and security specialist with experiences in the Balkans and former Soviet Union. He is currently living in Prague.
Eight Catastrophic Years of George W. Bush

The wave of anti-Americanism, which progressively increased after the attack on Iraq, is probably the most tragic aspect of Bush’s heritage.

During his eight years in office, George W. Bush managed to do something that no other US president had done before him: almost completely destroy the reservoir of “soft power” (as classified by neo-Marxists), which had made the United States an inspiration to the world.

If we consider the United States to be an imperial power, we must amend our traditional definition of imperialism: it is not based on military invasions and the conquest of new territories, but instead on a type of hegemony achieved through expanding and exporting its pervading cultural and political identities.

Evidence of America’s “soft power” is found in those individuals who have criticized America for exporting a new form of imperialism, for shielding its own global interests despite claims to the contrary, and who have simultaneously been captivated by the American lifestyle, freedoms and pop-culture.

But the United States’s strength lies not only in its ability to export US culture and technologies, but in the competencies of its government.

Since the days of President Wilson, the United States has flaunted its opinion that democracy, its founding political system, is the standard by which all other countries should measure their governments. In fact, throughout the 20th century, the United States made a tradition out of exporting its democratic ideals, as it sought to implant democratic governments to its liking in sovereign states, which, for the first part, had just emerged as the capitulating enemy of war.

The 2000 presidential elections will forever be remembered as a dark spot on modern American democracy.

But it was Bush who, under the influence of neoconservatism, decided that he would export democracy by force. And although this was not a first for a US president, previous presidents had acted out of a conviction in basic human rights and trade freedoms. These ideals subsequently became the basis of international conventions throughout the 20th century. The Clinton administration, for example, vindicated its military actions in the Balkans to the international community with appeals to international law and human rights. The Bush administration, in contrast, made overtures to “the good” with terminology and expressions that were quasi-religious in nature.

The mistake was made right at the beginning

The manner in which Bush was elected to office preempted his unsuccessful presidency. The 2000 presidential elections will forever be remembered as a dark spot on modern American democracy.

As a quick recap, Bush’s opponent, Al Gore, won the popular vote by a few thousand votes. However, given the manner in which the American electoral system works, the final decision came down to the winner of the state of Florida, where Bush’s brother was governor. In this state, of all states, thousands of votes from ethnic minorities, who were more likely than not Gore supporters, were not counted, allegedly due to problems with the voting system. Speculation of a rigged election followed.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court of the United States, largely consisting of con-
servative judges, weighed in and deemed the Florida elections lawful and made Bush president.

The American public largely respected the decision of the Supreme Court and even Al Gore eventually conceded defeat. But the biggest problem in this situation wasn't the legality question of the Florida elections.

The problem was what followed: despite leading with only a fragile and divisive victory, Bush started strong-arming an agenda backed by neoconservatives and the Religious Right. Instead of trying to unify a divided America, he tried to force his conservative values on a large segment of Americans who, still reeling from the elections, strongly opposed his office.

The United States remained largely divided throughout all of Bush's presidency. The country – previously a symbol of progressive governance through democratic dialog – was fractured into two almost “enemy” camps between Bush's “red” states and the democratic “blue” states, which supported Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004.

From the beginning, Bush approached his presidency with a missionary's zeal. He did not strive to heal America's ailments, but to change her. He sought to squash the difference of opinion. And, no less, he did so with a religious subtext.

**September 11, 2001**

There is some question about how the Bush presidency would have evolved had the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks never happened. But what is certain is that following the attacks, the United States largely succumbed to militant quasi-religious rhetoric, in which the “war on terror” became a portrait for a battle between good and evil – a mission on which the fate of the “free” world relied.

In reality, America’s enemy was not, in essence, any real threat to the West. Terrorists from the ranks of Islamic fundamentalists were certainly capable of murder in numbers. But until September 11, fundamentalists were in a very small minority. Their attack on the United States or on Western democracy was – as it was later portrayed – more a battle for influence in the Muslim world.

A “terrorist victory” against the powerful Western civilizations would, on the other hand, require that the West give up what made it strong: individual freedom and pluralism.

Unfortunately, some of the Bush administration’s first reactions indicated a trend toward tightening internal security on account of personal freedoms. Furthermore, Bush tried to use anti-Muslim sentiment following the September 11 attacks to strengthen his own quasi-religious agenda in the United States.

The failure of Bush’s presidency is also marked by his move towards unilaterism. Despite the fact that terrorists had attacked the United States, arguably using the US as a symbol of the West, Bush painted the picture of a war between the United States and a nation of evil.

A conflict which could be described with some benevolence as a conflict between Islamic fundamentalism and the va-
The attack on Iraq, as opposed to the previous US attack on Afghanistan, went completely against the ideas embodied in the international fight against terrorism. Saddam Hussein’s secular government was by no means an ally of Al Qaeda. The conquering force’s inability to stabilize the country led it to become a platform for internal fights between terrorist organizations. Iraq became a symbol of a “democratic” regime installed by an occupying force.

**The attack on Iraq – independent of the previous attack on Afghanistan – went completely against the logic of the international fight against terrorism. Bush tried to use the sentiments from the September 11 attacks to strengthen his quasi-religious agenda in the US.**

The invasion of Iraq, for the most part, bypassed international law and dealt a large blow to the trans-Atlantic alliance. Relations between the Bush administration in the United States and its traditional allies in Western Europe froze.

Globally, the damage done to American prestige was even greater. The wave of anti-Americanism, which progressively increased after the attack on Iraq, is probably the most tragic aspect of Bush’s heritage. America ceased to be an attractive example for a whole generation of young people throughout the world.

The insistence on using force with little regard for the opinions and concerns of the international community changed the face of the United States – at the end of the Cold War the country emerged selfish as it enforced its own needs to the detriment of others.

While the United States has previously convinced the rest of the world that American interests are world interests, the Bush-led United States found itself in isolation.

**Economic crisis**

The instability of economic conditions in the United States is, presumably, the last indication of the Bush administration’s failure. The conflict in Iraq proved too great a financial burden, even for the largest economy in the world.

Furthermore, the tax decrease (that Bush promised when he came into office) compounded with the costs of war to produce catastrophic repercussions. Bush’s administration did not only swallow the large budgetary surpluses of the Clinton administration, but will leave behind the greatest deficit in US history.

The mortgage crisis, to which the weakness of the whole economy is contributed, was the final straw. Bush will leave behind a country in the middle of a recession, and at a time when the country’s largest mortgage companies have been nationalized in order to halt a depression.

**Something positive?**

A comprehensive and analytical assessment of the Bush administration’s time in office raises the question of whether there exists something positive during his two terms. Such positives are truly hard to find. For some, the improved situation in Iraq carries a degree of hope that the country may stabilize. For many, it’s too late.

The most positive thing that Bush – one of the least popular presidents in US history according to polls today – will leave as his legacy is the belief that America needs to change. Most of all, the end of the Bush era brought about a desire in the nation for a new direction. Barack Obama’s victory in the recent presidential election is the result. Most Americans and American allies believe that after the Bush administration, things can only get better. Bush, in that sense – and unfortunately for him – is the catalyst for a new sense of optimism.

Jiří Pehe is a director of the New York University in Prague.
European Obamamania

Alison Clare Steingold

They are part of a generation which has no name. Maybe they are now Generation O for optimism. Generation G for Green. Or Generation C for change.

It's morning in America, as President Ronald Reagan once boasted from his legendary campaign ads of 1984.

Here we are, 24 years later, waking up to the same reality of hope... and a different political party. One of the poignant storylines of 2008 has been the civic mobilization of America's youth and the growth of a populist spirit which has electrified and reenlisted so many Americans who felt their citizenship had been squashed, their voices muted, their power cut. They're part of a generation which has no name. Maybe they are now Generation O for optimism. Generation G for Green. Or Generation C for change. Or T for transformation. Or a reframed Y for “Yes We Can”.

This time, however, they're not waking up. They've been up – for hours, for days. They've been phone banking, emailing, calling their grandparents in Virginia and telling them to vote. They've been wearing their T-shirts, recruiting at the farmers' markets, traveling with old classmates to battleground states. And when the magic words “landslide” and “mandate” passed through the lips of every TV news anchor from CNN to NBC, they poured into the streets, congregating in a whirlwind series of impromptu street parties. In Chicago's Grant Park, home base for 47-year-old Senator Barack Obama from Illinois, an estimated 240,000 gathered to rally and watch Obama’s victory speech, all the while chanting that infectious election motto: YES WE CAN.

In Europe, fashion designers have stamped his likeness on the latest fashions. The recent MTV Europe Awards included no dearth of references to the incoming president with song tributes and speeches.

So what, exactly, is the European Obamamania all about?

On the global stage, this catch-phrase has hit fever pitch, likening comparisons to John F. Kennedy. Europeans have embraced the president-elect in overwhelming numbers, and there's a sense that while rebuilding European relations is still a Sisyphean effort, there is hope.

Touted as a leader for the 21st century and a postmodern president, Obama has catapulted to status as a cultural icon. With ancestry in Kenya, roots in Jakarta, Hawaii, and the mainland, Obama is not so much a native son as a child of the world. He transcends global borders and cuts across class and socioeconomic lines in his appeal, exciting Europeans to question the color barriers in their own political systems.

His connection with the youth vote appeals largely to disenfranchised European minorities – for example, in France, Muslims from the country’s former colonies in North Africa, who have rioted for the past years to exercise their rights.

Finally, his ability to wrangle the world through the Internet has vitalized and propelled grassroots community-building at home and abroad, suggesting a new model for the political process. On the social networking powerhouse Facebook, 3,994 members formed a group called “Congratulations Obama, From the Danes” (joining “France for Obama,” “Italians for Obama,” “Sweden Loves Barack Obama” and the 1,559 members of “Europe for Barack Obama”). It would be difficult to flip the tables and imagine Americans forming a support group for Václav Klaus.

There are no guarantees of restored US/European relations, and much of this will fall to Obama’s quick-fix solutions for the country’s sea of woes: economic uncertainty punctuated by the worst instability in the US stock market in a century; world markets falling like dominos; investment banks, seemingly present since time immemorial, now gone. Two unpopular wars. A climate crisis.

And amid this lengthy laundry list of To-Dos to restore the confidence of your "average American," it is also necessary to note the ever-vigilant eyes of the world stage.
What the **US Elections** Hold for Europe

A Briefing with Jan Švejnar

Jan Švejnar holds dual Czech and American nationality as an economist and director of the International Policy Center at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, the Everett E. Berg Professor of Business Administration, and a Professor of Economics and Public Policy at the University of Michigan. Švejnar ran for the Czech presidency in 2008. Švejnar has a wife, Katherine Terrell, and two children.

---

Do you think that the upcoming US presidential election is, as many commentators have framed it, one of the most important in United States history?

I think it is. The US is at a crossroads, America has a relatively low reputation abroad, and the economy needs a new approach.

In what direction must the new American president take the transatlantic relationship?

I think the important new element is close consultation and cooperation with the European allies. The new American president must gain respect of the Europeans and ensure that there is trust and willingness to work together.

How must the Czech Republic as the forthcoming EU president and the next American president work together to deal with the financial crisis?

Given that financial markets are now truly global, there must be close coordination between the EU and US presidents in policies that will be adopted toward the financial markets.

Do you think that the missile defense plan mirrors the philosophy and approach to diplomacy envisaged and practiced under the Bush administration?

I think that a well-designed missile defense is in the interest of America and Europe and transcends any single administration.

Would Obama’s support for meeting so-called rogue nations without preconditions find allies in the Czech Republic or European Union?

As I listen to Obama, it is clear that what he means is launching and maintaining diplomatic initiatives with these countries so as to maximize the probability of finding acceptable solutions to key problems. He is not talking about accepting their views or “inviting them for a tea”.

On 27 September, Vaclav Havel expressed in London that the Czech Republic should be grateful to the United States for everything that the country has done for the CR. Do you think that the current relationship between the Czech Republic and the United States is defined by the nation’s perceived indebtedness to the USA?

I think we should be appropriately grateful for everything that the US has done for us. The current relationship should reflect that as well as a position of two sovereign, friendly nations working together.

Do you think that the economic situation may force the next American administration to suspend the plan? Is this more likely to occur under an Obama or McCain presidency?

I do not think it is likely to be suspended under either one of them.

In regards to worldwide policy and Czech national security, which candidate do you believe has a better vision for the future of United States and Russian diplomacy?

I think that both have a good knowledge in this area. I expect either one of them to pursue wise and careful diplomacy.
Until now we have not tried to help the third world to the best of our abilities. So far there has only been a lot of cynicism,” says Jeffrey Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York, special adviser to the secretary-general of the UN, and one of the most influential economists of today.

Throughout the 1990s, you advised on how to transform centrally-run economies into market-based ones. Today, you have taken up the fight against extreme poverty. Your goals are not exactly simple. Extreme poverty is an anachronism that does not belong in the 21st century, where we have the means and technologies to farm crops, fight infectious diseases, and provide electricity and clean water.

There has been talk about a solution to the poverty faced by Third World countries for decades now, but still without success. The elimination of poverty necessitates a few steps of action. First, the world must feel a global responsibility to find a solution to this problem. There are those among us who still ask, “Why should we care?” We need to create effective investment systems in health care and agricultural sectors for places like sub-Saharan Africa or Afghanistan. We must ensure that the given help is not squandered.

At the same time though, it is important to note that the requested sums need not be excessive. For if you examine these monetary requests in light of their potential results, you will find a potential to not only save millions of lives, but to also prevent the types of conflicts which build during times of crisis – such are the possible benefits of these investments.

But alas, there is still a lot of cynicism in the world.
Does mainstream and modern approach to economics even provide the tools that could solve problems of this scope?

I think that the methodology of economic research does not really, in its current form, reflect reality. In the last five to ten years, I have read a lot of scientific literature mostly in the areas of biology, environmentalism, health care, and climatology. The way in which economists research is quite different from how it is done in these other fields.

In what way?

Economics is much less empirical and much more theoretical. Ultimately, we wind up going in circles, fighting for our different theories instead of finding systematic empirical relationships. When a biologist examines an ecosystem, he will log what types of organisms he sees, what the food chain is, etc. But when you ask an economist to study the same ecosystem, he will come up with a formula linking the assumed presence of N amount of organisms and M types of food.

The model for the economy should be, looking back on it, environmentalism. The only thing that people usually know about Smith is that he is “the father of the free market.” This is because they did not read “The Wealth of the Nations”.

If he were to study genetics, I assume that he would take N genes and try to create a mathematical model to explain their existence. A true geneticist, however, will dedicate his life to studying a single protein. He will do so in a very descriptive and empirical way, and he will not try to formalize hypotheses so much as try to unearth a web of systematic relationships.

The economist views economic relationships as if they were the laws of gravity, and he characterizes them as if they were gravitational constants – he believes that it is only then that he can manage to explain an entire economic system. This doesn’t work.

Is it even possible to unearth empirical regularities within economics, which is in its character subject to human individuality? One can experiment in physics and also in biology, but not so in human society.

Yes, that is true, but economists could attempt to expand their understanding of technological modernization and of the relationships between different economic branches. For example, we should certainly be able to determine the degree to which production will increase if electricity is introduced into a certain region. We need this form of empirical knowledge in order to make decisions. We should investigate how the “sub-system of electrical networks” affects the performance of the superordinate “system of heavy industry.”

Why doesn’t economics address this?

We don’t study this because it is not, in truth, viewed as part of academic research. But this is exactly the type of thing that we must know in order to make effective decisions and find solutions to problems. This is because many stances within modern economics are currently vulnerable and easily falsified.

Even if they are not true, these [stances] are then used as the core basis for our refined theoretical models. But they are too far away from practical measurements and savings.

Furthermore, theoretical economics is fractionalized into many different schools of thought.

There are many, many theories that are face to face with valuable experiments and are thereby based on empirical regularities. But even these empirical methods are often simplified; the economists will measure values and then apply them to a statistical test. Real work in the field – which makes use of all sorts of research tools and techniques and not just the ones written down in textbooks – is still very rare. We economists don’t work in the field; we don’t work like microbiologists who are constantly hunched over a microscope or like environmentalists who take direct measurements of the ecosystem.

Listening to you, I have the feeling that despite being an economist, you are turning your back on the field more and more, and that you are beginning to prefer fields such as biology or environmentalism.

Economics evolved in the shadow of classic Newtonian physics. This is where it draws its key hypothesis on balance and equilibrium. This kind of approach is very limited. The model for the economy should be, looking back on it, environmentalism. Environmentalism is about open systems, value flows, divisions in work, and the interaction between different components (companies, individu-
Biologists don’t even try to make large generalizations. They do not say, “Let’s assume N number of organisms.” Instead, they study and focus on individual cases, which are then used to develop explanations or classifications. Of course, they do try to summarize a higher, general framework, but such generalizations are always based on the accumulation of detailed specifics. I do not currently see any economists trying to do the same.

Are you familiar with the work of Fritjof Capr? It seems to me that your arguments are very similar. He suggests that the current paradigm within the sciences, which bases itself off of physics, should look to and follow a new one – environmentalism.

Yes. Our approaches are related in two ways, but even so they differ a little. The first is in methodology. The second is derived from really understanding [the truth behind] sustained advancement. Combining economic research with education about the ecosystem creates a good jumping board from which to take off and swim in the problem-filled waters of today. From there we can find answers to questions – whether we have enough energy and food, and whether we can, at the same time, continue to sustain global advancement.

These are the conclusions that I have arrived at and what I am striving to achieve here at the Earth Institute – I am cooperating with climatologists, biologists, and hydrologists.

Do you support these kinds of interdisciplinary approaches that combine economics and biology, or economics and psychology?”

Definitely, yes. That is more or less the reason behind the creation of the Earth Institute. An interdisciplinary approach is often taken, for example, for research on the frontiers of economics and sociology, or history and sociology, etc. This is good, but I think that the interdisciplinary approach should have an even
broader meaning, and include the Earth’s physical systems – water, climate, biodiversity, energy, and “human systems,” i.e. populations. Sustained advancement is the number one challenge for the whole planet. Integrating physical planetary systems with human economics and social systems is a way to combat this challenge.

Do you sometimes feel as if you are starting a whole new scientific discipline? Such that would, in essence, encompass “everything” – in a similar vane as August Comte attempted for sociology.

I am a great admirer of Professor E. O. Wilson of Harvard, under whom I, much as the whole world, became educated regarding the questions of ecology and biodiversity. Approximately ten years ago, he wrote an influential book called Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge. In it he proposes the unification of all knowledge across the whole spectrum of natural and social systems. This idea is very attractive to me. Yes, specialization is very beneficial, but so is the integration of biology and economics. We need enough food to survive, and in the biological world, we need to understand what drives us as human beings. I think that what Wilson said a quarter of a century ago is true – that evolutionary psychology would be a key discipline in the quest to understand human beings as such. While this is surely not certain, I think that this kind of integration will lead to new findings. This isn’t a metatheory for another metatheory: the question is whether we will be able to gain more insight and answers through this kind of integration. I think the answer is yes.

L:ets come back to pure economics. Which economists have had the biggest influence on you, and which ones do you admire the most?

Definitely Adam Smith – his book, The Wealth of the Nations, is really an amazing piece of work. It still applies, even 200 years after it was first released. The book is much richer than people think. The only thing that people usually know about Smith is that he is “the father of the free market.” That is because they did not read The Wealth of the Nations. I kindly recommend that everyone should read this book. Second is John Maynard Keynes – he was the greatest political economist of the 20th century. He brilliantly managed to combine political know-how with economics. His “discovery” of macroeconomics along with his understanding of the European ecopolitical situation after the First World War are priceless.

And if I should name economists that have had a major influence on me, then I have to mention Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Arrow and James Tobin – three influential researchers who view economics as a means to improve human life. They manage to brilliantly combine theory with scientific and practical research, to move forward and really stipulate clear ideas.

What about economists who support the free market, such as Friedrich August von Hayek, the leading representative of the Austrian school, or Milton Friedman?

Hayek began in the right direction, but went too far astray. I agree with him that an economy with too much government regulation is harmful and risky. But then he sort of became a guru for liberalism in a style of laissez-faire.

He stated that a welfare state would lead to the same suppression of democracy and freedom as a state under socialistic ownership. This was a very bad answer. It was not confirmed. I feel similarly towards Friedman. He held strong beliefs that could have lead to a breakthrough – he helped people understand the big financial crisis as a monetary phenomenon, but I think that he “overdrew it” as well.

Did he put too much emphasis on monetarism?

His idea to literally place the growth of monetary offers on autopilot (preset automatic growth of monetary offers in x percentage) and to end the central bank’s role as a “pilot,” was never really taken seriously in scientific circles. I do think, however, that his theory of inflation as a monetary phenomenon does have its foundations.

But I know that Friedman did not support a directly laissez-faire economy, but rather a very free and minimally regulated market – I think that this hypothesis is wrong, both empirically and analytically. Samuelson, on the other hand, arrived at one of the most important realizations within economics. According to his theory of public estates, under certain conditions a free market provides insufficient fundamental services. Markets work under certain conditions and under other [conditions] they do not. Friedman and others, who are in my view ideologists of the free market, ignore this basic fact.

---

Lukáš Kovanda,
New York
The Czech Ambassador in Iran

If they place an ambassador in Iran, the Czech Republic will join the rest of the twenty-seven member countries who have full diplomatic relations with the country.

The Czech Republic's decision to resume diplomatic relations with Iran is a calculated move to coordinate international relations in line with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This decision reflects an effort to curb what they suspect is Iran's attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. Overcoming a rocky past, current entanglement with US missile-defense plans and Iran's nuclear ambitions will define the progress between the two countries.

According to an announcement made by the Czech Foreign Ministry on September 24, the Czech Republic plans to appoint an ambassador to Iran by the end of this year or in early 2009, during which time they will hold the rotating presidency of the EU.

If they place an ambassador in Iran, the Czech Republic will join the rest of the twenty-seven member countries who have full diplomatic relations with the country.

“The Czech Republic believes that it is in the interest of both countries to exploit the full potential of their bilateral relations – in terms of economic and cultural cooperation, as well as political dialogue on important contemporary international issues,” Lukas Gjuric, a spokesman for the Czech Embassy in Tehran said by email.

The Czech-Iranian relationship is currently limited to a chargé d'affaires level. The diplomatic relations between the two countries were crippled in 1998 when Iran became angered over the introduction of Radio Farda, Persian-language broadcasts by the Prague-based and US-funded Radio Free Europe. As a result of these broadcasts, the Iranian government recalled its ambassador from Prague. In 2003, Iran went a step further and placed restrictions on Czech exports. This ban was, however, lifted last November.

Economically, an incentive exists for both countries. The EU is Iran's largest trading partner, accounting for approximately twenty-four percent of their total trade. While Iran contributes to a lesser extent of the EU’s overall trade, ninety percent of Iran's exports are based in oil and energy resources. Of late, these exports have become particularly valuable as diplomatic relations between the EU and Russia have become increasingly unstable. The Czech Republic may not, however, be able to assume the presumable economic advantage which would stem from an ambassadorship. The reason for this is the continuing conflict surrounding Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons.

“Although the relationship has significant growth potential, its development has been severely hampered by the ongoing problems related to the Iranian nuclear program,” states the European Commission's website.

EU exports to Iran have, on average, declined about ten percent in the past two years.

If trade relations are opened up between the Czech Republic and Iran, the Czech Republic's approach to the country will coincide with that of the EU. The European Commission stressed the importance of developing a full bilateral relationship in a joint press release on December 12, 2002. Negotiations began...
between the European Union and Iran in 2003, after the foreign ministers from Germany, the UK and France visited Tehran to discuss nuclear non-proliferation and the suspension of uranium enrichment.

“The EU expects that the deepening of economic and commercial relations between the EU and Iran will be matched by similar progress in the areas of political dialogue and counter-terrorism,” the press release reads. “These are interdependent, in dissociable and mutually reinforcing elements of the global approach which is the basis for progress in EU-Iranian relations.”

But Europeans are concerned by Iran’s policy on terrorism, human rights and nuclear development. Since 2003, the EU has been leading the international talks about Iran’s nuclear program. In January, the Czechs will take the helm.

In this position, the Czech government’s approach to Iran will diverge from the path taken by the United States. “While the US has taken a more principle position, saying, ‘we don’t talk to rogues,’ Europeans have always said, ‘well that’s fine and nice on a moral level but we live in the real world and in the real world, you have to talk,’” said Charles Freilich, a senior fellow at Harvard University and former Deputy Israeli National Security Adviser.

This decision comes at a time when the United States government, which cut all diplomacy with Iran in 1980, has proposed plans to build an anti-missile radar base on Czech soil. The anti-missile defense system is meant to protect the US and Europe from attacks by so-called rogue states like Iran.

In October, the Czech Parliament will debate whether to approve the radar. Polls have indicated that the majority of Czech citizens are against the base, but the figure in support has recently risen. The parliament’s decision may hold significance for the Czech Republic’s standing not only in Washington, but in Tehran.

“I would imagine that the US is looking carefully at [the Czech’s] decision to see what they do,” said Freilich.

The United States State Department declined to comment on the Czech-Iranian relationship and radar plans.

Petr Chalupecky, deputy director of the Czech Republic’s Security Policy Department said that ideally, the radar will be a non-issue because diplomacy will encourage Iran to abandon their nuclear program. “A stronger [Czech] diplomatic presence sends a signal, that we are still ready to sit and talk,” he said.

“But of course though,” he added, “Iranians are not particularly happy about being labeled as one of the threats to the West” that the radar is supposed to guard against.

Chalupecky explained that the Czech’s role as the European Commission’s president will not change the EU’s current approach to Iran. The Czech Republic will “pretty much inherit the state of affairs where [current EU president] France will leave it and try to push it forward.”

Concurrently, the Czech Republic will seek EU guidance in how to deal with what Chalupecky calls Iran’s “violently anti-Western policy” in order to build a relationship that may move Europe and the world’s security interests forward. A renewed relationship between the Czech Republic and Iran may be, in that case, quite significant during the Czech’s EU presidency in helping to more effectively mediate relations between Iran and the West.

Roxanne Emadi is an intern at The New Presence and journalism student at New York University in the United States.
The populist moment

Ivan Krastev

The rise of populism indicates the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions in the fields of politics, economy, and culture, and the growing popularity of the politics of exclusion.

Unlike the extremist parties of the 1930s, new populist movements worldwide do not aim to abolish democracy: quite the opposite, they thrive on democratic support. What we are witnessing today, writes Ivan Krastev, is a conflict between elites that are becoming increasingly suspicious of democracy and angry publics that are becoming increasingly illiberal.

“A spectre is haunting the world: populism. A decade ago, when the new nations were emerging into independence, the question asked was: how many will go Communist? Today, this question, so plausible then, sounds a little out of date. In as far as the rulers of the new states embrace an ideology, it tends more to have a populist character.” This observation was made by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner forty years ago. A period of time long enough for “populism” first to disappear and then to re-emerge as the global phenomenon it is today. More than any other concept currently circulating, “populism” captures the nature of the challenges that liberal democracy faces today. These emanate not from the rise of anti-democratic and authoritarian alternatives, but from dangerous mutations within liberal democracies themselves.

Clearly, populism has lost its original ideological meaning as the expression of agrarian radicalism. Populism is too eclectic to be an ideology in the way that liberalism, socialism, or conservatisim are. But growing interest in populism has captured the major trend of the modern political world – the rise of democratic illiberalism.

Be it the proliferation of populist revolutions in Latin America, the political turmoil in central Europe, or the political logic behind the “no” vote in the referendum on the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands – it is the accompanying rise of democratic illiberalism that worries us. The new populism does not represent a challenge to democracy, understood as free elections or the rule of the majority. Unlike the extremist parties of the 1930s, the new populists do not plan to outlaw elections and introduce dictatorships. In
fact, the new populists like elections and, unfortunately, often win them. What they oppose is the representative nature of modern democracies, the protection of the rights of minorities, and the constraints to the sovereignty of the people, a distinctive feature of globalization.

We try to account for the rise of populism today by the erosion of the liberal consensus that emerged after the end of the Cold War on one hand, and by the rising tensions between democratic majoritarianism and liberal constitutionalism – the two fundamental elements of liberal democratic regimes – on the other. The rise of populism indicates the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions in the fields of politics, economy, and culture, and the growing popularity of the politics of exclusion.

**The populist condition**

It would be a major mistake to view the rise of populist parties as a victory for anti-democratic attitudes. In fact, the rise is a by-product of the wave of democratization during the “long” 1990s. “Voice of the People 2006,” a global opinion poll conducted by Gallup International, found that 79 percent of people the world over agree that democracy is the best form of government available, but that only one third agree that the voice of the people is heard by the governments of their countries. It is precisely because current populists cannot be portrayed as anti-democratic that liberals are confused, and this makes them appear helpless in the face of the populist challenge.

In the current debate, “populism” is mostly associated with an emotional, simplistic, and manipulative discourse directed at the “gut feelings” of the people, or with opportunistic policies aimed at “buying” support. But is it appealing to the passions of the people forbidden in democratic politics? And who decides which policies are “populist” and which are “sound”? As Ralf Dahrendorf has noted, “the one’s populism is other’s democracy and vice versa.” Unless we take Brecht’s advice and dissolve the people in order to elect a new one, populism is and will remain part of the political landscape.

At the heart of the populist challenge is not the rise of political parties and movements that appeal to “the people” against the people’s supposed representatives, thereby challenging established political parties, interests, and values. Populism is also not appropriate for describing the transformation of the democratic political system in Europe and the replacement of party democracy with media democracy. Populism as synonym of post-modern politics, as flight from class and interest politics towards a new centre, is old hat.

The new populist majorsities perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities – in the case of central Europe, elites and a key collective “other,” the Roma.

The central European dilemma

The dangers of democratic illiberalism can be observed in the political dilemmas that central Europe faces today. The formation of the populist coalition in Poland following the elections in September/October 2005 was an early warning signal that something strange and unexpected was taking place in central European politics. It sounded even more loudly when Jaroslaw Kaczynski – twin brother of president Lech Kaczynski – replaced Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz as prime minister, bringing with him other populists such as Roman Giertych onto the cabinet [Giertych was dismissed in August 2007 – ed.].

The Slovak election on 17 June 2006 and the formation of a new government in Bratislava was an indication that what had happened in Poland was not just a one-off episode but part of a trend in central European politics. The cabinet formed by Robert Fico united his moderate leftwing populists, Jan Slota’s extreme nationalists, and the party of former prime minister Vladimir Meciar. The coalition offers a mixture of illiberal and leftist economic promises, most of them never implemented, and a conservative cultural agenda, an expression of rising insecurity and xenophobia.

The reasons why pro-European liberal reformists lost the election are not hard to pinpoint: they are above all high unemployment and rising social inequality. It is more difficult to explain why populists and semi-fascists were the sole available alternative. Is something wrong with central Europe – or could it be that something is wrong with democracy?

On the same day that Fico formed his government, the Slovak constitutional court announced that a Slovak citizen had filed a suit demanding that the court annul the results of the election. The claimant declared that the Slovakian Republic had failed to create a “normal” system of elections and had therefore violated Slovak citizens’ constitutional right to be governed wisely. In the eyes of the claimant, any electoral system that could bring to power as motley a crew as the new Slovak government could not be called “normal.”

The lone Slovak claimant had a point. The right to be governed wisely can contradict the right to vote. This is tradition-
ally what makes liberals nervous about democracy. One might almost say that the Slovak citizen was a reincarnation of the influential nineteenth-century liberal François Guizot (1787–1874).

It was Guizot and his colleagues, “the doctrinaires,” who used all their eloquence to argue that democracy and good governance can coexist only under a regime of limited suffrage. In their view, the real sovereign is not the people but reason. Thus, voting should be discussed in terms of capacities rather than rights. In the nineteenth century, capacity was translated as property or education; only those with the right education or enough property could be trusted with the power to vote. Today, nobody would dare to argue for restricting voting rights. Nevertheless, a respected liberal professor in Poland recently suggested introducing a test for political maturity. Putin’s sovereign democracy offers another solution: the project is not to limit the number of people with the right to vote, but to limit the choices for whom to vote. Kremlin’s political technologists thus manage a political system that de facto excludes the chance that undesired party or candidate might win elections.

It is perverse but true that, in the current epoch, European elites secretly dream of a system that will deprive irresponsible voters of the power to undermine rational politics, and that they are more than ready to use the European Union to realize this dream. At the same time, most citizens are convinced that they have the right to vote but not the right to influence decision-making, which is why they oppose further EU integration.

In this sense, central Europe today can be compared to the France of 1847, before the great wave of national-popular revolution in 1848. In 2007, the major protagonists of European politics are elites who dream of a politically correct form of limited suffrage, while the people are convinced that they already live under a regime of limited suffrage.

The new populist majorities perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities – in the case of central Europe, elites and a key collective “other,” the Roma. In the rhetoric of populist parties, elites and Roma are twins: neither is like “us;” both steal and rob from the honest majority; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners – Brussels in particular. Anti-elite sentiments were an important element in central Europeans’ motivation to support EU accession; now they are turning against the EU. Opinion polls demonstrate that during the accession process the majority tends to view Brussels as an ally in controlling corrupt elites. When these countries are in the EU, however, Brussels is perceived as an ally of the elites that provides a way to avoid democratic accountability.

The outcome is politics where populists are becoming openly illiberal, while elites secretly harbour anti-democratic resentments. This is the real danger of the populist moment. In the age of populism, the front does not lie between Left and Right, nor between reformers and conservatives. It is more the case that we are witnessing a structural conflict between elites that are becoming increasingly suspicious of democracy, and angry publics that are becoming increasingly anti-liberal. The fight against corruption, the “war on terror,” and anti-Americanism are just three manifestations of the new politics of populism.

Western liberal democracies promote the anti-corruption agenda in an attempt to channel anti-elite sentiments into support for democracy and economic liberalism; it is not the system that is the problem, but corrupt governments. In return for support the global “war on terror,” Washington allows discredited

---

**The dangers of democratic illiberalism can be observed in the political dilemmas that central Europe faces today.**

---

**The elites vs. the people**

The paradox of current European politics is best captured in the question: “How is it possible to have elites that, simultaneously, are legitimated globally and locally?” European politics fails to provide an answer. After all that has happened recently in Poland, Slovakia, and elsewhere in eastern central Europe, no wonder it takes confidence and imagination to remain a Euro-optimist.

---

**Liberal democracy is in danger when the structural conflict between “the elites” and “the people” is no longer seen as a liability but a major asset.**

---

but politically useful governments to label their domestic opponents “terrorists” and to curb civil rights. In the case of anti-Americanism, corrupt and illiberal governments try to win legitimacy by convincing frustrated publics that the US is the root cause of everything going wrong in their own countries and worldwide.

Liberal democracy is in danger when the structural conflict between “the elites” and “the people” is no longer seen as a liability but a major asset. The current generation of European liberals have been educated in a political tradition that wrongly assumes (historically and theoretically) that anti-liberal parties are also anti-democratic. This is no longer the case. The real challenge that liberal democracy is facing today is the rise of democratic illiberalism. Whoever wishes to save democracy is called on to fight on two fronts: against populists and against those liberals who hold democracy in contempt.

---

Published 2007
Reprinted from Eurozine.com
Curricular Reform in the Czech Republic

A Bandaged System that Remains Broken

Elena Green

“Let us have a practical, but also a general and a philosophical education. Today, especially, we also need historical and political education. Morality, today, is in large part political morality. Let us not, therefore, separate politics and morals.” Over a century has elapsed since these words were first issued by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk in his Ideals of Humanity. And while today we may use terms like partial knowledge versus key competencies, the task at hand remains the same: to approach education as a humanistic endeavor to produce democratically-minded, thinking and speaking civic participants – not learned robots. And so today, as the Czech Republic stands in a new century and in a new state, she stands also with a new Education Act, which aims to do just that.

The new Education Act was passed in parliament on 24th September, 2004. Replacing the Education Act of 1984, the new act formally reaffirms the legal status of the Czech schools, addresses the education of foreigners and minorities, and calls for the incorporation of students with disabilities into the general school system. It further stipulates that the maturitní zkouška (equivalent to final high school exams) for secondary school leavers must include three universal examinations in addition to specific profile examinations (examinations specific to students’ subject matter study).

One of the most contentious features of the new Education Act is currently being implemented – curricular reform. Whilst legislation throughout the 1990s took the necessary steps to abolish the teaching of Marxist ideology and began to redistribute central powers, the new act continues redistribution via curricular reform to a new degree. Each individual school within the Czech Republic must now develop its own curricula. But according to many educational professionals, curricular development is too hefty a burden to relegate onto the shoulders of school headmasters and teachers. They are not trained for this purpose and lack the time, teaching aids, and further training necessary to take on this new and unsolicited responsibility.

The act stipulates that each school will create a School Educational Programme [školní vzdělávací program] (ŠVP). The ŠVPs must follow guidelines outlined in corresponding Ministry documents called Framework Educational Programmes [rámové vzdělávací programy] (RVPs), which broadly address main teaching subjects and lesson time (the min. number of hours for each subject). Specific content is not addressed, but left up to the individual schools. This two-part curricular development reform went into effect in the first and sixth level of primary education in 2007/2008. Secondary schools are scheduled to initiate their programmes in September of next year.

A European Union Import:
The reform’s controversy stems, in part, from its emphasis on values, (i.e. Key Competencies), which are meant to generate a new approach to teaching and learning. The competencies stipulated in the RVPs for Primary (ZV) and Secondary (G) schools are the same: learning, problem-solving, communication, social, personal, civic, and working (entrepreneurial) competencies.

The decision to define and integrate key competencies into Czech curricular reform is not an innovation specific to the Czech Republic, but rather a worldwide phenomenon that began in the late 1990s. In 1997, the notion of key competencies resulted from two programmes (initiated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)): the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Programme for the Definition and Selection of Competences (DeSeCo). DeSeCo’s final report “Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society” was issued in 2003, and it outlined how competency-based education will produce individuals who can participate in a democratic society. The European Union currently promotes the integration of key competencies into the educational systems of its member states in their “Education and Training 2010” campaign.

The new Education Act places the Czech Republic on a course shared by other OECD and EU countries. Consequently, the MŠMT’s decision to adopt key competency education in the Czech Republic appears to be logical, legitimate.
and necessary. But as the Ministry’s lack of direction and half-hearted implementation of the reforms has become apparent, one must question if the authors of the reform took into account the problems and characteristics specific to their own nation’s education system. Jana Straková of the Standing Conference of Educational Programs [Stálá Konference Asociací ve Vzdělávání] (SKAV) comments, “I think that the development of all these changes did not come from national needs...we were just following the development in other developed countries.” Curriculum reform has consequently taken priority over adequately addressing controversial issues like multicultural and minority education.

The Debate: What Defines Education in the CR?

It appears that the Ministry adopted the key competencies into the Czech education system to address a form of teaching that Straková describes as traditionalism. Although a critical part of curricular reform, Straková states that the Czech education system needs to undergo some sort of transformation. Czech schools are still “very traditional: there are few practical activities and questions are not encouraged; students must simply listen and reproduce facts from memory...the school does not equip children with communication-skills, problem-solving skills, or critical-thinking at all.” The reforms seek to transform schools from a place of instruction into a place of engagement and development.

The RVP for secondary schools states that “the aim of education at grammar schools is to teach them to incorporate key competencies, to define in isolation...it is possible to implement the reforms, to try now is show schools how it can be done. Straková and Mandelová fear that the key competencies are a necessary part of curricular reform, but that “there is a very realistic danger that the curricular reform will only be implemented on a formal level. It is more difficult now to prevent this formal implementation as people already have their prejudices.”

The Education Act’s approach to curricular reform does, in fact, have many critics who are concerned that the reform will further the current trend in the depreciation of student knowledge and educational standards in the Czech Republic. In September 2007, 101 university professors, scientists and cultural workers signed a document entitled “Every Voice Is Heard” [Všem, jejichž hlas je stýlet], which called upon the media to address this issue. In October 2007, Lidové Noviny published an editorial “The Communicative Idiot – Our Goal;” [Komunikativní blbec – náš cíl] which stated that an educational system established on key competencies will teach children to converse about nothing – for they will have learned nothing to converse about. Essentially, they will become “communicative idiots.”

Critics of the reform are not in opposition to the key competences themselves, but in their potential to monopolize classroom time. The president of ASUD, the Association of History Teachers in the Czech Republic, [Asociace Učitelů Dějepsisu české Republiky] Helena Mandelová affirms “that only when pupils have knowledge can they [have] discussions, make arguments, and so on. Without knowledge it is not possible to build competencies.” Logically, the key competencies will only function effectively in tandem with a knowledge and skill-based education. It is ASUD’s belief that the competencies must become a part, neither separate to nor more important than knowledge and skill-based learning.

The Issue of Implementation:

Both Straková and Mandelová’s concerns find common ground in their criticism of the Ministry’s decision to give the task of curriculum development to individual schools. The Ministry has offered teachers very little guidance towards the integration of the key competencies into the curriculum. Despite the positive assertion that “key competencies are not an isolated phenomena, they are mutually linked and intertwined... and can only be acquired as a result of a comprehensive education process,” the competencies are, in these documents, detailed in isolation and separated from the list of “Educational Areas” (i.e. fields of study). While some might call this a mere technicality, it exemplifies the fact that the reform’s authors may themselves lack the will or know-how to implement the changes.

Where the Ministry has fallen behind in this respect, it is up to organizations like ASUD and those within SKAV to work with teachers to provide them with adequate training and effectively implement these changes. “What SKAV is trying to do now is show schools how it is possible to implement the reforms, to incorporate key competencies, to define key competencies practically, to design some instruments to help teachers learn
how to assess key competencies.” Straková notes that headmasters and teachers are not trained to develop school curricula in general, and especially not curricula with key competencies.

Following the reform, ASUD prepared ten booklets, “Methodological Inspiration: Suggestions on how to complete educational school programs for the subject of History” [Metodické inspirace: Náměty ke zpracování švp dějepisu] in order to “offer instructions and ideas based on practical experiences from developing school curricular programs.” The first few pages reproduce the material the Ministry has provided. The absence of ministerial guidance or direction is striking; indeed, the Ministry’s FVP program for the four years of history education in a primary school fills no more than four pages. “We think that it is not the work of the teachers to choose [what to teach] from world, European and Czech history… We think that the main work of teachers is to choose the methods and the teaching aids to motivate the pupils and [inspire] their interest. They are not prepared [to choose] what to teach,” Mandelová stated. After ASUD voiced their concerns and criticisms about the reforms, the Ministry cut off funding and publically criticized them.

The Absence of a Civic Dialogue
A significant problem is that there is no mutual dialogue among civic organizations, Ministry officials, educational professionals, parents, and those who influence thinking and ideas (i.e. the media). The absence of any sort of dialogue has created a situation in which many teachers and headmasters are not only unprepared to develop and teach this new curriculum, but they do not understand the reasons behind the reforms.

As Straková stated, some teachers don’t understand the reasons behind the reforms “because they were repeatedly told that the educational system in the Czech Republic was excellent, and that it provided students with everything that they needed.” Moreover, many parents worry that their children will fall behind in their knowledge and skills, especially in comparison to the rest of Europe. “Society does not understand. Parents do not understand,” said Straková, “And our elites are against this reform…so sometimes they [issue] warnings that the school is unorganized and not up to standards, [which makes] the parents afraid that the students will be disadvantaged in business prospects, in future studies and in entrance examinations.”

Jan Kovařovic of the Independent Interdisciplinary Group for the Transformation of Education (NEMES) stated that the MŠMT confined discussions regarding the reform to the Ministry and has done little to promote them. “There are too few people who have a sufficient level of knowledge or wisdom to take part. I think this reflects the role of the old regime, in that the discussions of politics is done within the confines of the party.” The Ministry must banish this mentality that still thrives, and it must promote a social and political debate about the reforms within society.

As Kovařovic said, “Education must be the first concern…because of the ethos.” The task of every Czech citizen is now to become actively engaged – to think, discuss, and agree on how to effectively implement educational reforms. These things are necessary if Czech society wishes to edify neither learned robots nor communicative idiots, but something human in between.

Lack of Vision
When Kovařovic speaks about educational changes in the Czech Republic, he uses terms like “transformation,” and he speaks about “energetic” individuals and “idealists” who hold “visions” for the future. It is unfortunate that Kovařovic refers only to years in the past. Kovařovic alludes to what has been absent from the Ministry’s reforms.

Throughout the 1990s, individuals, institutions and civic organizations like NEMES, PAU (Engaged/Involved Teachers Association) and IDEA (Independent and Diverse Educational Alternatives) developed a number of educational policy proposals to bring about a “transformation from within the school system.” But what these organizations lacked, as Kovařovic reflected, was a “harness” – someone or something to channel their zeal and efforts. While the Ministry could have become this harness, it chose not to.

Consequently, a state now exists in which the civic reformers who were once full of zeal are now doubtful; the teachers who once believed in the excellency of the Czech educational system are now doubtful; the parents who fear that their children will fall behind their European counterparts are now doubtful. Doubt is not the worst of the fears. What is to be feared, however, is ministerial apathy.

Without a civic dialogue, without cooperation from above and below, without the proper training for teachers and headmasters, the Czech Republic’s curricular reforms will threaten to be in Kovařovic’s words, “a still-born child.”


Elena Green
is an intern at The New Presence
and is living in Prague
Milana Terleova: Dancing over a wreck. Dancing Over a Wreck: The War-Diary of a Chechen Girl
Published by JOTA, Brno 2007, 192 pages.

Karel Černý

“The children are playing. It’s amazing how fast they grow! They have only known wreckage in their lives. What will become of them? What will become of the young Chechens, cut off from the world, sold for oil and gas? Left to their own devices against the military and militias, left without education?” These unanswered questions come from the end of the fascinating war-time journal written by a young Chechen girl named Milena.

Milena once lived a calm, safe and, from a teenagers perspective, boring life in her hometown of Orechovo. Before the war began, two memories stuck out in her head: the time her uncle found an old VHS of Rambo and played it for the entire family, and when a madras, or a school of Koran opened with a particularly charismatic teacher.

The war begins at a time when Milena is occupied with dreams of her graduation ceremony, an event that in the end never takes place. As the war appears imminent, Milena prays to the old Chechen gods alongside the women of Orechovo. But their prayers are in vain. In 1994, Milena’s school is destroyed by bombs from Russian airplanes. In the following year, the remaining houses are shelled. Milena sets off with her mother for Grozny – “the pearl of the Kukas.” The author had always dreamed of a life in this cosmopolitan town with its theatres, cinemas, museums, and schools.

But upon entering the town, she finds bombarded houses and a sign saying, “Welcome to Hell.” The entire city was dead – since the university was also closed, Milena had nothing to do but spend most of her time hiding undercover from the constant shelling.

Under the light of a candle she read the book Around the World in Eighty Days. Locked away in a cellar, this young girl of sixteen drew from the words of Jules Verne to keep alive her sense of space and life.

And while sitting in that cellar, the girl also drew hope from her grandmother’s storytelling. These stories surpassed all the works of Karl May and Jules Verne together.

Her grandmother, until her dying days, will remember the cold day in February in 1944, when Stalin classified the Chechen people as “enemies of the people” and were deported to Kazakhstan.

Despite Stalin’s attempts at genocide, the Chechen people survived. Now, the collective memory of this critical moment in history has become a source of hope and faith. Family became a focal point in Milena’s life: “Sometimes I ask myself how we would survive if we had the same family structures as the French.”

But the feeling of euphoria, which followed the Chechen victory over the Russian army in 1996 and the first free elections in 1997, did not last. Internal conflict took seed amongst the Chechens themselves. Milana was not alone in her fears that the country was teetering on the edge of a civil war similar to when the Russians were pushed out of Afghanistan.

As the scales of power increasingly tipped towards the radical jihadists from the Arab nations, the nation’s sweetheart, President Aslan Maschadov, was losing control.

The election of Vladimir Putin co-incided with several terrorist attacks in Moscow, which thereby instigated the Second Chechen War. A professional army and media campaign were mobilized alike. Kremlin propaganda portrayed the war as a “police operation,” as nothing more than part of the “war on terror.”

This, according to Milena, settled the bad conscience of the Western countries, who did not want to anger an increasingly self-confident Russia over a few Chechen civilians.

Every Chechen civilian was viewed as a potential terrorist in the eyes of the Russian soldiers, administrators, and judges: “An old man, standing over the bodies of young children, asks a passing Russian general, ‘Was it Putin’s bandits that told you to kill them?’ to which the general replied, ‘These are the future bandits.’”

Fortunately, the author survived the conflict due to a grant from the non-governmental organization, Students Without Borders. She subsequently left Chechnya to study journalism and political science in Paris. It was there, in Paris, that she recorded her experiences in her journal. In a non-accusatory fashion, Milena weaved together “important” and “minor” events to compose a story about a young girl’s war experiences, a story about the role of women in the Islamic world, and a look into the history of Chechnya. The text ends with a postscript written by the journalist Petra Prochazkova, who spent many years following the Chechen conflict. Prochazkova’s postscript serves to amend and compliment Milena’s text.
Comics are an independent medium apart from film and literature, which inspire their readers to feel a part of an exclusive society.

The turning point came at the start of the new millennium thanks to small publishing groups who were driven not by profit but by interest.

**Comics as a Medium**

While comics are more expensive than traditional fiction books, the number of comics that are published locally continues to rise. There are many reasons for this. Many people simply do not have or do not want to make time for reading traditional fiction. Comics are, in this case, an ideal source of noncommittal entertainment. Furthermore, the generation of the comics of ABC specialities now have the money to buy them.

While comics are more expensive than traditional fiction because of the complexity of the printing process, comics sales will continue to rise as the Czech economy continues to grow. It is now more economically sound to pay a thousand crowns for a book that the average reader will finish in a few hours (among the first comics to reach this sales price was 300 by Frank Miller in 2001; it had a mere 80 pages).

The most important reason, however, is that the Anglo-American countries, where most of the translated literature comes from, have started to publish comics that do not require any previous experience or knowledge of the genre. The overwhelming production of superhero comics is a complex interlinked web, with interlacing of plots between different publications in which one can easily get lost.

Comics are an independent medium apart from film and literature, which inspire their readers to feel a part of an exclusive society.

It is difficult to identify people who go to the cinema or read books with a certain group. Comics readers, on the other hand, have a lot in common: they share knowledge about the lives of their super-heroes, they meet up virtually in Internet forums and in reality at events such as ComicsFest! or during fan get-togethers.

The vast majority of comics fans in the Czech Republic have been recruited from Sci-Fi and fantasy groups. The list of comics publications reveal that the most popular ones fall into these genres.
From Gold until the Present

The history of comics forms a tradition which, according to most comics experts, began at the end of the 1890s (i.e. at the same time as film) when the *Yellow Kid* series was published by Richard F. Outcaulta. But if we broaden our definition of comics to mean a progressive group of associated pictures, we can even include Trajan’s Column or the Bayeux Tapestry. The medium underwent expansive changes in the 1930s with the Golden Age of comics. The Golden Age, which specifically cultivated the superhero genre, began sometime between 1937 and 1938, when the series of Detective Comics (which later led to *Batman*) and Action Comics (among the first issues was *Superman*) were first published.

The medium drew its strength from the superhero genre, which monopolized American comic production (European comics are much more diversified). Comics offered the genre something that neither film nor literature could offer at the time – amazing visual effects and a wide variety of character traits and fantasies.

The genre, with its roots in stories and legends, has a set of rules which do not give its heroes much room for evolving. Nothing really significant (bad or good) can happen to a hero at the end of the comic. And even if an author creates a new twist, such as a death or wedding, the following comic will undoubtedly revert back to normal.

The *Golden Age* subsequently ended as the 1940s drew to a close. But at the end of the 1950s, a second wave of interest in superheroes and superpowers generated a *Silver Age*. Lasting approximately ten years, the Silver Age brought forth new heroes and, more importantly, the first generation of collectors. As something specific to the comic book genre, almost all comic book fans are at the same time about the authors themselves. Before this time the authors had remained in the background.

At the beginning of the 1990s, authors themselves became part of advertising campaign and selling strategy. Their pictures were placed on the front page, which formerly had only the name of the superhero and the marketing slogans.

At this time, collections of comics became available in book form for the first time. These collections even included

According to most comics experts, the whole comic book genre started at the end of the 1890s.

The Golden Age subsequently ended as the 1940s drew to a close. But at the end of the 1950s, a second wave of interest in superheroes and superpowers generated a Silver Age. Lasting approximately ten years, the Silver Age brought forth new heroes and, more importantly, the first generation of collectors. As something specific to the comic book genre, almost all comic book fans are at the same time collectors.

The most significant date of late is probably 1986 when three fundamental works were published: *Watchmen* by Alan Moore, *Return of the Dark Knight* by Frank Miller, and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. While the first two are part of the superhero category, the third belongs to a more artistic genre that is specific to the author. At the same time, neither *Watchmen* nor *Return of the Dark Knight* are superhero comics in the classic sense of the word. In fact, they deconstruct the genre. In the *Watchmen*, the author asks “Who will watch the watchmen?” or in other words, how far will they go to protect mankind. Miller, in his *Dark Knight* series, creates an older hero out of Batman and renders the atmosphere gloomy. The time that follows becomes known to some as the “Dark age.”

Another change occurred in the second half of the 1980s for until then, comic sales relied on the superheroes that they portrayed. But in the latter half, people began to want to know more about the authors themselves. Before this time the authors had remained in the background.

At the beginning of the 1990s, authors themselves became part of advertising campaign and selling strategy. Their pictures were placed on the front page, which formerly had only the name of the superhero and the marketing slogans.

At this time, collections of comics became available in book form for the first time. These collections even included
The growth in comic book publishing owes thanks to the "graphic novel" – a longer comic book-based story, often published only in book form. This term was first used in 1978, when the comic book trilogy Contact with God by Will Eisner was published. This first graphic novel was aimed at people who still viewed the comic book as something only for children. Graphic novel is, therefore, more of a commercial term than a specialized one within the medium itself.

The Golden Age is Now!
In his book Reading Comics, comic book theorist Douglas Wolk describes the present time as the Golden Age of comics! This Golden Age is not derived from superheroes, but from author series. According to Wolk, author series are the only true source of the Golden Age.

Meanwhile, the most interesting publications within the US appear on the Czech market very quickly due to the strong interest and high sales in comic books. A few years ago, one could not imagine that a comic, which won the Eisner Prize (named after Will Eisner) both in the US and the UK would, even before receiving its honour, enter the Czech market translated into Czech.

This year the prize went to Rutu Modano, author of the comic set in Israel called Deep Cuts. The Czech market for comics combines the new with the old and the local with the international; currently we are halfway through the classic Sandman series by Neil Gaiman, and most of the works of Alan Moore or Frank Miller have also been translated. Even the works of Will Eisner, whose legends edition maps important events in history have found there way into the comics whose lifespan only reached as far as the next newspaper issue. These books entered the market as specialized comics stores were established and the medium also began to infiltrate regular bookstores.

Both volumes of Moore’s The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen are also excellent. In one volume, Moore extracts and places popular characters from literature (Captain Nemo, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the Invisible man, etc.) as he draws inspiration from the Victorian Age. These characters face darker elements such as M from the Sherlock Holmes series. In the other volume, he alludes to H. G. Wells’ War of the Worlds as he sets his heroes against an alien civilization (even Jim Carter from Burroughs makes an appearance). Next year we will hopefully see the 3rd volume on the market, as well as the special Black Dossier.

Another famous work by Moore is V for Vendetta, a story inspired by George Orwell’s novel 1984. The comic parallels Orwell’s stand against Thatcherism, and highlights the danger involved in over exercising security provisions such as street cameras a long time before “the war on terror” failed to pay heed.

A fellow countryman of Moore, Neil Gaiman authors of one of the most intriguing series, which is named after its main character Sandman. Gaiman draws from myths and integrates these tales into his stories. He even incorporates historical figures into his works, such as Shakespeare, Caesar Augustus, Marco Polo, and Robespierre.

Gaiman’s Sandman provides a foundation for a new subgenre called city-fantasy. The city, or the setting, becomes only one face of reality. In a parallel...
Comics don’t shy away from specialized literature. Among the best are reports by Joe Sacco.

fashion, the series Myths situates fairy-tale characters that have been chased out of their fairyland into city surroundings. Its author, Bill Willingham, directs his comics to an adult audience. In his first comic book called Legends in Exile, the wolf from Little Red Riding Hood transforms into a human being and tries to solve the brutal murder of Snow White.

Amongst the group of world-renowned comic book authors, we find Chris Ware whose Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Boy in the World, tells the story of a lonely man whose fate is influenced by growing up without a father. Jimmy Corrigan is dependant on his mother, and his only friends are fictional superheroes that he created in his youth. Ware offers his stories of people who exist outside of social norms through unique aesthetic – his drawings reveal perfectly regular links that stand in stark contrast to the stories themselves. Ware often creates complex graphical depictions of several events, which he links together with small simple pointers. Ware does not only make use of graphical connectors but also linguistic ones. He interlaces his pictures with accentuated words such as “and” and “then” or “because.” While it is often difficult to make sense of all of these interconnections, Ware’s work shows the uniqueness of the comic book as a medium.

Autobiographical works
Most of the modern works within the genre are autobiographical. Art Spiegelman began this trend when he published Maus, which depicts his father’s life in a concentration camp.

In his series Epilepsy, Frenchman David B. depicts the life of a family where one of the family members has epilepsy. He situates the unique fate of this family into the wider social context of France in the 1960s and 70s to produce a captivating and dark picture of the times. David B.’s drawings and designs uniquely combine symbolism with summarization, and are capable of portraying dreams or thoughts within a single drawing. His pupil, Marjane Satrapi, follows in his footsteps as she portrays life in Iran at the end of the 20th century in her tale Persepolis.

In Family Institution, American Alison Bechdel tries to come to terms with her homosexuality and the strange circumstances of her father’s death. Her work is full of allusions to other literary works, which she employs as frameworks for the individual lives of each family member.

In Blue Pills, the Swiss Frederik Peeters recounts his relationship with an HIV positive girl and conveys that living with a seriously ill person is not as bad as one might think. And finally American Craig Thompson, in his vast book Blankets, lyrically talks about his first love.

Comics – capturer of reality
As I indicated in regards to Moore’s From Hell, comic book authors do not shy away from transforming this medium
traditionally for children’s entertainment into serious literature. Among the best are the comic book reports by Joe Sacca. In Palestina, Sacco recounts his experiences during his visits to Israel; he attempts to convey the living standard of the Palestinian people who were relocated from their homes after the Second World War.

He doesn’t hide that fact that his sympathies lie with the Palestinian people, who are often depicted as terrorists within mainstream media.

In Safe Zone Gorazde, Sacco visits one of the “safe zones” that the UN established after the long war in Yugoslavia, and watches as neighbours become mortal enemies. Sacco doesn’t attempt to portray himself as impartial, but often, even sarcastically, comments on his own attempts to find striking themes for his comics.

Recently, a comic book called News on September 11th was published. It is not one of the better works, but its subject matter reveals that almost anything can depicted in comic book form.

**Czech pond**

While the Czech comic book market is lagging behind the world, a few noteworthy books have nonetheless been published. Jaroslav Rudis’ trilogy Nebel captured the media’s attention for its attempt to summarize 20th century Czech history. Less well known is, however, the excellent trilogy by Slovak Branko Jelinka. Jelinka’s Oskar Ed depicts Czech 20th history in far greater detail and uses a more complex style while injecting small amounts of surrealism into the piece at the same time. The series Monster Cabaret by Fred Brunold, Dzian Baban and Vojtech Maska draws from the same themes.

The authors work fantastically well with absurdist humour, which is rooted in the reality of the last forty years. The depiction of these historical narratives are aided by the drawings themselves, or to be more concrete, the adjusted photographs.

I should also give a brief mention to the series Voleman, in which the author Jiri Grus weaves the life of a “normal” boy from Holešovice into the superhero genre.

**A Lagging Understanding**

I have sought to convey that while a vast number of quality comics currently circulate on our market, quality reviews or works of theoretical literature are conspicuously absent. Last year Milan Krumla’s Comics: A Short History was nothing more than an empty list with no deeper review or analysis. Meanwhile, Thierry Groensteen’s The System of Comics was so badly translated that it caused confusion. Scott McCloud’s How to Understand Comics (to be published in autumn of this year) should hopefully deliver a more intricate understanding of the comic book medium.

Jiri G Ruzicka is the editor of A2, a weekly periodical for culture.
Home is where people come back to after trips

Simona Jonsson

Arlanda 16.15. The plane gained a wonderful speed. A sun drenched forest and the shelf of my home was left under me. Once again, I leave my home. Sweden is home. What does Sweden even smell like? The land is cold and has no scent. Cold as a fish from a lake named Sweden. The Swedes ate the fish and were infected by it. Now they are as cold as fish; their gills protrude quite a bit when they talk about politics and social problems.

The Swedish fish is a family fish. At the round table – even without King Arthur – everyone is equal, everyone has the same rights, and everyone gets to eat the same fish.

Swedish women don’t cry. Their tears were scared off by their dark glasses. National, international, family and inter-family problems, all these stole their smiles away. Maybe, in the summer, the sun will remind them of its existence, while thawing away all the serious problems of the Swedish women and bringing a smile back to their lips. Hopefully the rays of sunshine will jar cold hearts as the smell of the summer awakens the small naive child that is lust, passion and love.

And the sun’s rays will tickle the stern lines of the collars of the Vikings, who in turn will give their women their penises and their hearts. And the women will realize that the situation isn’t serious, while a simple-minded child stirs the women and men into a crazy awakening of dance.

Somewhere in the clouds at 17.15. The silver bird lands in the nest called home. And once again I return home. Once again I return to the Czech Republic. What does the Czech Republic smell like?

A week later, the plane gathers speed, and once again I take off while the world below me grows smaller. “I will become smaller and smaller until I am the smallest in the world,” said a Czech poet once.

The Czech Republic smells of humanity. The Czech Republic is a mass of villages, full of people arguing, of love and gossip. I am flying off to a country of quiet goliaths living in forests with fortresses around their hearts. Farewell to you, the little village known as Prague.

Mother and father are waiting for something good; the King and Queen are visiting their little princess in her detached house. Today, their princess is visiting them.

Just a few meters from my childhood home, my son is paying the price for his sensitivity, love, immaturity and for his first sin.

The only thing that remains is the hope that punishment is a gift from God and possibly the only way back to a life worth living.

I do not know the name of God, only His place in my soul. But God lives in Heaven. I believe that He will be understanding, that He first has to let the old evil leave in order to start anew.

The airplane descends back to the home known as Sweden and I thank God for the light that has enabled me to view the heavens above my homes. And I pray to God that He will show the same light to the little prince.

The fence

“I can’t imagine anything more beautiful than a Swedish summer,” I am told with sparkling eyes and a small hint of sadness by my old Swedish friend in the middle of January in a small German town that the Germans have named German Siberia. (I hear the same phrase; “there is nothing more beautiful than a Swedish summer,” from all of my Swedish relatives and in all the newspapers). “The Swedish winter is terrible, much like here, but oh, the summer!!”

It is once again January, and I am only one year older, as I move to Uppsala.

I am starting to understand the Swedish statistics that reflect the high number of suicides during the winter. “The Swedish winter is terrible, but oh the summer….” The words of my Swedish friend act as my talisman and stop me from becoming one of those numbers. In order for others to survive the winter, I build a small birdhouse in my garden. From the warmth of my study, I watch the freezing birds and along with them I long for the return of the magical Swedish summer.

Brave flowers peep from the ground, as my perfectly normal neighbours sit
I am leaving with a small flame of “anger” in my heart aimed towards the Swedish “politeness” and a regret over the garden, where I feel like I am in a public park. I leave and in my head there arises a protest.
outside in 10C heat in t-shirts taking in the sun. They are Vikings. Spring has come.

As if following a general's order, in all the gardens under all the Swedish flags, and despite the cold chill, our neighbours start to dig, root, hoe and build their kingdoms of flowers and fruits. I do not have such Swedish "thriftiness," nor do I feel joy over a bowl of preserved fruit or marmalade. I don't like the taste of cranberries or gooseberries. I would rather enjoy myself watching the beauty of the trees and bushes from our living-room window.

My Swedish husband loves homemade gooseberry jam and cranberry wine. The garden turns into a war of opinions between me and my Viking.

I move my chair, books and sunglasses from the safe haven of my terrace onto the green carpet of my garden. I know that summer has come.

Swedish politeness and the excessive attempts to not cause a nuisance under any circumstance seem inconceivable to me.

My husband misses the intimacy of our former village in this provincial town. He misses the neighbourly chats, visits and barbecues. Having a neighbour means having a social outlet. As opposed to him, for me, neighbours are an essential part of the process of purchasing a house. If one is lucky, then with the purchase one may even get some friends. And if not, then in the worst case, one can always move.

It is summer, time for barbecues and socializing.

Our garden is surrounded by four living fences. Actually, it's one proper fence and three small fences. The first little fence divides us from the road, which is about 2m from our house.

I am hopelessly fighting for some grand Czech lace curtains. In Sweden, windows are built instead of glasshouses for flowers. Flowers decorate and darken all forms of Swedish homes. Our flowers are small and ornamental; they do not block views from the inside out or vice versa. With the words "I have nothing to hide," my northern half disposes of my attempt to not inform the rest of the street as to what we are having for dinner. My flowers understand my need for privacy, especially in the mornings when I run naked back and forth between the bathroom and the kitchen.

Our new "Christmas star" – as opposed to all our previous "Christmas stars," which only survived until the end of January – has expanded to such proportions, that it now covers the whole of the window onto the street.

Our neighbour behind fence number one solved his privacy concerns in a very original fashion. He simply put wood over them.

Our neighbour behind fence number three has three dogs, two grandchildren, and works in the garden. I understand her need for privacy and I am glad that she has let the fence between us grow to man-sized proportions.

I look out over the garden through the living-room windows. The garden is a place for forming beauty, offers its owners nature, a home, and intimacy. At the end of our garden we have a small fence, which allows us a view into our neighbour's house. That house is occupied by an old married couple who take good care of their garden. Everything in it is nice and neat. Everything that is, except a big old hanger for drying clothes, which reminds me of Palermo. Knowing full-well that their flying underpants will not get their garden noticed or photographed for any gardening magazines, the old couple moved their Palermo giant next to the window into the kitchen. From there, the giant can follow my every move. I am reminded of its existence every time I look out of my living-room window. It's not that the giant alone invades our privacy. Hidden behind the curtains of flowers are two people. I see them every morning, midday, evening… hour after hour, day after day they sit there and look over their garden into our living room. Now I understand why the previous owner planted huge cedars to block the view from the bedroom for both for him and us.

I am not giving up my notion about keeping some intimacy to our garden. And when I see the old man with scissors in hand, trimming the already small hedge into even smaller proportions, I present my request with a small, polite smile, and with broken Swedish. Yes, both my husband and I would love it if the hedge got a chance to grow a little. My neighbour politely explains to me that if the hedge were to grow, then it would block the sunlight to his flowers. Let's forget about the fact that the shadow falls only onto our garden where we have no flowers. The same kind of fences grew to good proportions without such limitations on beauty.

I am leaving. Now I know how they say "no" in Sweden. I am leaving and I am thinking how wonderful it would be to enjoy these few summer days without the giant from Palermo or his owners.

I am leaving with a small flame of "anger" in my heart aimed towards the Swedish "politeness" and a regret over the garden, where I feel like I am in a public park. I leave, and in my head there arises a protest.

It is a warm Saturday in summer. I am lying in the middle of garden exposed to the sunlight and to the peering eyes of my neighbours. The intense rays of sun are reddening my skin. Under my swimsuit I feel streams of sweat. In the warm summer glare, I am offering the sun every part of my body. Every part, except for those covered by my sweaty swimsuit.

It would be wonderful if I could just sunbathe here naked, I think to myself. "What would the neighbours say about that?" I hear my voice from the inside, backing good neighbourly relations. "Maybe they would be glad to see more of my private parts," the other voice says jokingly.

In the most beautiful of Swedish summers I decide to act as if I were home in my "non-private, private" garden. Bathed in the warmth of the sun, I remove my swimsuit, signalling my protest. A protest against a lack of freedom in a place of freedom. A protest against the exaggerated attempts of not infringing on other peoples, all the while boldly staring into their dinner plates and their bedrooms. I am protesting against Swedish politeness and finding a way to say no.

While I am protesting, my husband is staring into the garden with glee. Perhaps he is not alone. And I wonder to myself whether the fence will get its chance to grow now or not. And while I protest, the most beautiful of Swedish summers passes on.
Michael March

M. March has invented a sensational hero: Half Pint. Seeing a snowball for the first time on Fifth Avenue – he learns about death and desides to be reincarnated as a corn muffin – but is brought back as the fifty-first floor of the Empire State Building. Half-realized – half assed. As Pound sez, “trying to make it cohere.”

I: Half Pint’s Return
(9 September 2008)

Half Pint decided to return “to the stone womb of his country. The decision is a dramatic one. He would bitterly reproach himself.” Half Pint’s infinite no collided with Vienna’s indefinite yes. Heresy and rebellion reduced to grapes.

III: Half Pint’s Identity
(17 September 2008)

Half Pint hated tourists – all tourists. He even hated himself. In darkest Prague change ruled the heavens. The alms of identity were not to be found.
IV: Half Pint’s Tooth
(17 September 2008)

Half Pint put his mind in his tooth. He could easily change his mind. He suffered at the hands of society. Only at the dentist’s – could he safely open his mouth.

VII: Half Pint’s Smile
(26 September 2008)

“The law of revolution is red, fiery, deadly – revolution is everywhere, in everything – it is infinite.”
Half Pint smiled. At last, “we are condemned to hope.”

VIII: Half Pint’s Prediction
(27 September 2008)

Lenin: “It’s easier to spit, than to wipe it off.”
Marcus Aurelius: “The present is all we have to lose.”
Half Pint: “Heavy cream.”

IX: Half Pint’s Position
(28 September 2008)

Half Pint positioned himself somewhere between human creativity and supernatural revelation. He read Adonis.
“I entered the school of grass. My forehead split open, my blood bereft of power. I asked myself: What should I do? Do I wall the city in with bread? I scattered myself in porticos of fire. We divided up the blood of kings. We hungered.”
A time between ashes and roses.

X: Half Pint’s Law
(28 September 2008)

Half Pint welcomed the secret service.
If only they were secret.
It was the law of the jungle.
Even Darwin was a spy.

XI: Half Pint’s Zipper
(4 October 2008)

Half Pint searched for Havel’s secret. The mind of philosopher kings.
He found the zipper:
What’s up – stays up.

XII: Half Pint’s Zipper
(3 October 2008)

Half Pint positioned himself somewhere between human creativity and supernatural revelation. He read Adonis.
“I entered the school of grass. My forehead split open, my blood bereft of power. I asked myself: What should I do? Do I wall the city in with bread? I scattered myself in porticos of fire. We divided up the blood of kings. We hungered.”
A time between ashes and roses.

XIII: Half Pint’s Zipper
(4 October 2008)

Half Pint searched for Havel’s secret. The mind of philosopher kings.
He found the zipper:
What’s up – stays up.

XIV: Half Pint’s Truth
(5 October 2008)

American radar would protect the world.
The world sought protection.
“We must suffer into truth.”
Half Pint preferred Aeschylus.

XV: Half Pint’s Match
(21 November 2008)

“From the crooked timber of humanity – nothing straight was ever made.”
Shop around –
“What gives light must endure burning.”

Michael March is president of the Prague Writers’ Festival and professor of poetry at New York University in Prague

Half Pint live from Prague on www.pwf.cz
A New World President

With the US presidential elections now behind us, we can conclude that a record 65 percent US voter turnout firmly disproved the theory that voter apathy is on the rise. At the same time, it also showed that the oscillations between a Republican and Democrat America, with the popular vote reflecting a 53 to 46 percent victory for Obama, remain very subtle.

From a practical point of view, the Democratic win will not bring about rapid policy change. America has institutions and political and market mechanisms that are strong and resistant to quick change. Much of Obama’s time will be taken up with having to manage two unfortunate wars on the foreign front and an economy in turmoil at home.

The true significance of the US presidential election lies elsewhere. First, from German national TV to the Islamic channel Al Jazeera, the entire world followed closely as the election results came in. This once again affirmed the far reaching importance of American politics, as did the global celebration following Obama’s victory.

In America, the election result has even greater significance, as it also coincided with the end of three eras – the baby-boomers, Bush/Republican rule, and the era of economic prosperity. Obama was able to portray himself as the candidate with just the “right amount” of change, with his fresh energy and excellent rhetoric captivating voters from new segments of the population.

More important, though, is that in voting for Obama, Americans were able to prove to themselves and to the world that they are still capable of gestures and events that are not only seminal, but that also regenerate the all-important American sense of purpose, uniqueness, and national destiny. For Americans, it is particularly this sense of uniqueness and the perception that they have the ability (and even responsibility) to function as a chosen nation, which forms a vital component of both national as well as personal identity. With numerous difficulties abroad and at home, electing Obama represented a valuable opportunity to recapture this feeling.

Obama’s victory has changed the world. As a trans-global poly ethnic, Obama’s victory provides hope and inspiration for every member of every minority in the world.

The reason why JFK became a legend is because he did not have a chance to justify the immense faith that people placed in him. My ardent hope is, that in a world of violence, that the same fate will not befall Obama. Were that to happen, then the greatest of hopes would turn into the greatest of tragedies. And we do not need any more legends.

Martin Jan Stránský
Physician, publisher, political commentator

PLEASE SEND YOUR ORDERS TO:
Přítomnost
Národní 11, 110 00 Prague 1
tel.: 222 075 600
Fax: 222 075 605
e-mail: info@vydavatelstvímjs.cz

Discounts on repeated ad
1× 5 %
4× 20 %
3× 15 %
2× 10%
Inside back cover
Inside front cover
Inside back cover
Inside front cover

Combined advertising: the sum of the respective print and internet rates minus 30 %.

TNP
Editor: Tucker Zengerle
Assistant Editor: Elena Green, Roxanne Emadi, Punam Bajaj
Přítomnost: Martin Rieg, Ivan Malý
Illustrations: Ondřej Coufal
Administration: Veronika Schusterová
Graphic Design: signatura.cz, s.r.o.
Type: Zdeněk Čižinský, Johana Kratochvílová
Publisher: Martin Jan Stránský
Photos: www.123rf.com (if it isn’t mentioned other way)

Czech Republic: 480 Kč/1 year (21 USD, 17 EUR)
Europe: 800 CZK / 1 year (45 USD, 32 EUR)
Other Countries (airmail): 1000 CZK / 1 year (57 USD, 39 EUR)
Subscriptions for students in the Czech Republic: 220 CZK / 1 year (10 USD, 8 EUR)

Internet version: 240 CZK / 1 year (11 USD, 9 EUR)

Advertise rates

Discounts on repeated ad
1x 10% 5%
3x 15% 6%
4x 20% 7%