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

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

Welcome to the first New Presence of the New Year, and also my last as editor of this magazine. In this special issue, we take an in depth look behind the curtain at what went wrong with the transformation of the Czech Republic promised by the Velvet Revolution. Jan Urban discusses his work investigating the so-called “Diag Human” affair which serves as a prime example of the corruption and mismanagement that characterised the early years of the post-communist era in the Czech Republic. In addition, Eric Tabery takes a biting look at the excesses and faux pas of the current Czech political elite. Meanwhile, in separate pieces, Alexander Loesch and Zdeněk Suda, look to the Czech historical experience for some clues about today’s political malaise. Finally, in a special piece, Gia Emilia Castellano examines exactly what went wrong following the Velvet Revolution and asks why cynicism and apathy have again reared their ugly heads, even with regards to this seemingly joyous event.

Further afield, Ivan Krastev looks at the rise of populism in Eastern Europe, while Jaroslav Šonka looks back at the fascinating story of the sinking of the German sailboat the Pamir in 1957. In a special section on pensions and pensioners, author Libuše Bautzová examines the economic impact of an ageing populace, while Fabiano Golgo examines how different cultures approach old age. Meanwhile, regular contributor William A. Cohn, provides a fascinating and in-depth look at how government private contractors don’t always bring value for money or greater accountability. With scandals such as the Blackwater shooting of innocent civilians in Iraq, Cohn’s piece raises some very pertinent questions. We also have a short story from Alena Müllirová, a look at Czech inventions from Sonia Kalausová, the usual opinions, commentaries and much, much more. As always, I wish you an enjoyable read – and as I move on to new pastures, I wish you all the best in the future.

Dominik Jůn

“Tak dlouho se chodí s džbánem pro vodu, až se ucho utrhne.”
“One walks so long with a jug looking for water, until one day the handle breaks off.”
Old Czech Proverb
Post-communist countries are often thrust into long periods of turmoil, inefficiency and corruption following their releases from totalitarian rule. The result is that many first embark on lawless and corrupt neo-liberal transformations of their economies. After this fails, they soon swing back towards tighter more authoritarian rule. The most dramatic example of this is found in Russia. The Yeltsin experiment did not work, so, says Putin, let’s be a safe, proud and strong dictatorship again. Does the West carry any responsibility for this state of affairs? Could certain mechanisms have been in place that would have prevented the initial free-for-all “painful transformations” that have followed in most, if not all post-communist societies? Western thirst for “new markets” has certainly played a role in convincing countries such as Russia (not to mention most of Latin America) that the West simply cannot be trusted. The end result is that in such tender, emerging countries, democracy is often misinterpreted as a frightening lurch into poverty, injustice and exploitation. Even “stable” democracies such as the Czech Republic have witnessed this swing, albeit on a smaller scale than Russia. First corrupt and misguided neo-liberal economics, then protectionist neo-socialism, then back again, and so the swing goes. All the while, the same immovable faces vie for power. Today’s Topolanek government may be useless, but what is the alternative? Vote Paroubek, Rath and Bublan back into power? And after they have failed, do Czech voters then bring back Topolanek’s men again, with Kalousek and Čunek from prostituting themselves to any coalition that will have them; they would have prevented “big men” such as Klaus and Zeman or Topolanek and Paroubek from turning political governance into an ego contest and they would assure that the “old faces” aren’t allowed to hang on to power for too long. These rules would also mean that with each election, a new and fresh choice was offered and most importantly, they would necessitate that ordinary citizens could make their way into the political system. In Russia, these rules would have prevented the rise of the cult of Putin; in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and every other post-communist country, they would have helped to move democracy forward by leaps and bounds.

Such criteria could do much to prevent the extreme, oversimplified and often ignorant mischaracterisations of political management that accompany post-communist political thinking. Instead of the immature “love and obey America or the EU” or “hate and protest against the US or EU” mentality, such rules could help to foster a more mature, educated and informed discourse. With that, the West could gain the rightful trust and respect of newly democratic nations – a kind that would not evaporate as soon as their citizens got tired of being able to eat Big Macs and drink Coke.
As a journalist, I’ve never encountered a situation in which my interviewee threw something at me. Several years ago, during an interview with Czech President Václav Klaus, this happened to a renowned radio journalist colleague of mine. The incident was well publicized — Klaus, angered by a photographer’s mobile phone ringing, grabbed it and threw the device against a wall. I don’t know what tricky questions my colleague could have been asking, but I do know that Klaus missed his target. As far as that shattered mobile phone is concerned, it was certainly rude not to turn it off while interviewing the head-of-state. But it is far more shocking when the head-of-state reacts like a drunken lout.

Even though during my life I have conducted hundreds of interviews, I have never encountered anything similar. But I did once encounter something entirely opposite. Several years ago, I was preparing a portrait of the economist Jan Švejnar (presidential candidate in upcoming elections) for a book about the history of Czech science. Švejnar, who is famous for managing his time with ultra-efficiency, was in Prague (from America, where he lives) for only a short period. I had a good feeling about the meeting and Jan Švejnar spoke openly, animatedly and interestingly. Later, I discovered to my horror that my tape recorder had let me down — the interview had not been recorded. For two days I battled over what to do. In the end, I wrote a very apologetic email asking for another meeting. Švejnar had since returned to Michigan but replied that we could meet in two months time, when he would be in Prague again. And so we did. He was very polite, and never once did I get the impression that he felt that my initial mistake was indicative of a lack of professionalism on my part. He patiently re-answered all the questions that I had already asked him before. I was so thrilled by this that some time later, I contacted him again, this time to see if I could interview him for Přítomnost on the subject of Slovakian economic reform, in which he too had played a part.

We agreed to meet in a Prague café. Meanwhile, I was babysitting a small child, and the boy’s parents were late in relieving me of my duty. After dropping the boy off with his parents, I ran as fast as I could, but I still arrived fifteen minutes late. Jan Švejnar was standing in front of the café reading a newspaper. He smiled and calmly said that we may have to conduct the interview a little quicker now. Thankfully, my tape recorder did not let me down this time — nor did Jan Švejnar, whom I will always remember as a true gentleman.

Libuše Koubská
In refusing to engage in a public debate with opposition candidate Jan Švejnar, President Václav Klaus is gravely shirking his obligations to the citizens of this country. It’s not that his refusal to debate the University of Michigan economist smacks of undue caution. After all, any man who, three weeks before his country’s bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, can tell a conference full of environmentalists at the UN that they’ve got it all wrong, cares not a whit about political survival.

It’s not because of the overt arrogance of his brushoff. On the contrary, despite his highly controversial standpoints, precisely this ability to buck one “completely misguided” political tide after another is one of his most attractive qualities. Even the sheer, calculated slyness of his snub is not unanticipated. After all, what is to be expected from the author of the infamous Opposition Agreement?

Nor is there any surprise in Klaus’ cavalier treatment of the people he is supposed to represent. They are clearly of no further use to him. But ever since Klaus began to court the Communist vote in the last presidential election, thus showing he cares not a jot for public opinion, he has made no pretense to the contrary. Admittedly, Professor Švejnar is also court ing the Communists, and this is equally disturbing.

To be sure, a televised debate could actually help the relatively unknown Švejnar to greater visibility and popularity among the masses. The cosmopolitan Princeton doctoral graduate could indeed give the president a run for his money. Still, the erudite Mr. Klaus, with his razor sharp wit and considerable charm, is a more than equal match.

Granted, as the president is not elected by direct ballot, there is no pragmatic, political reason why President Klaus should put himself through the media circus of a debate. Still, it is his duty to rise to this challenge. Why? Because, at a point in the distant past, Czech citizens exercised their democratic rights. Maybe not directly for Mr. Klaus, but for an intermediary they trusted to choose the next president. And, to evaluate that decision, they need to see the two potential leaders of this country duke it out in the debating ring.

Mr. Klaus must prove that he is worthy to go on being president, and the contender for that post, Professor Švejnar, also needs to prove his mettle. That, and not scoring points with a handful of legislators, is the entire point of the time-honored, no-holds-barred battle of wits known as a presidential election. Unless the contenders come out of hiding, it just won’t work.

Eva Munková
A look at events in the Czech Republic as

**5th October 2007**

President Vaclav Klaus signs a bill on public finance reform. From January 1st, Czechs will pay cash for visits to doctors’ surgeries and hospital stays. The legislation also introduces a flat income tax rate of 19 percent, and raises VAT on foodstuffs and medicines to 19 percent.

**12th October 2007**

A regional court sets a precedent when it orders Ostrava City Hospital to pay 500,000 crowns (almost 26,000 USD) in compensation for involuntary sterilization to Iveta Cervenakova, a 30-year-old Romany woman.

Meanwhile, President Vaclav Klaus, admits "surprise" at the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore, Klaus, who publicly questioned the impact humans have on global warming at a UN conference last month, said the connections between the former US vice-president and world peace were "vague".

**14th October 2007**

The Czech state agrees to pay religious orders 83 billion crowns (over 4 billion USD) in installments over the next 60 to 70 years in compensation for property confiscated by the former communist regime. One third of the actual property will be returned and the money will compensate for the rest.

**17th October 2007**

The Czech Republic withdraws its candidature for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council after failing to secure sufficient backing in a vote against Croatia. In the first round of voting in New York, the Czech Republic received 91 out of 186 votes, while Croatia got 95 – both falling short of the necessary two-thirds majority. When the result of the second round was also unfavorable, the Czech Republic pulled out.

**21st October 2007**

US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates arrives in Prague ahead of meetings with the president, prime minister and other Czech representatives to discuss the possibility of a US radar base on Czech soil as part of a broader US defense shield in Europe.

Meanwhile, Donald Tusk’s liberal Civic Platform Party routed Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s conservative Law and Justice (PiS) Party in an early election called after Kaczynski’s coalition collapsed due to corruption charges.

**22nd October 2007**

The Czech government approves a plan to introduce green cards for selected non-EU professionals to attract workers from outside the EU to areas short of labour. The Czech market lacks skilled manual workers as well as experts with university education. The government expects the green cards will simplify the current work permit system.

**1st November 2007**

World Bank statistics show corruption in Czech state institutions has worsened in the last ten years making it the second worst country in Europe in terms of government employees accepting bribes. Data shows the Czech Republic is the only new EU member country where corruption within state institutions has increased.

**5th November 2007**

Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek appeals for a "nuclear energy renaissance" to cut EU dependence on imported energy at the European Energy Forum in Prague, organized to discuss a common energy platform and outline a plan on objectives through 2020 as well as commercial cooperation with Russia.

**7th November 2007**

The Czech cabinet approves the transformation of Prague Airport into a joint-stock company opening the way for its privatization some time next year. The sale of the airport could bring as much as 70 billion CZK (3.5 billion USD) into the state coffers.

**10th November 2007**

1,400 police come out to stop right-wing radicals from going ahead with a march through Prague’s historic Jewish quarter on the anniversary of the 1938 Nazi pogrom Kristallnacht. Prague City Hall made clear from the start it would break up any unauthorized demonstration.

**13th November 2007**

The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg rules that the Czech Republic discriminated against 18 Romany children by forcing them to attend special schools. The state will have to pay each of them 108,000 crowns (5,865 US dollars) in compensation.

**18th November 2007**

A methane explosion in the Zasyadko mine in the Ukraine causes the largest mining disaster in the country’s history, with 100 miners dead and some 450 trapped below ground.

**20th November 2007**

State Attorney, Alf Salichov, drops his investigation into alleged bribe taking by Jiří Čunek for a second time, due to lack of evidence. Mr. Salichov first threw out the charges in August, due to “procedural shortcomings” but the Supreme State Attorney asked him to reopen the investigation.

**21st November 2007**

A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers and the World Bank shows the Czech Republic has the most bureaucratic tax system in the European Union. Of 178 states surveyed, the Czech Republic ranked 113th in terms of tax system efficiency and 168th in terms of administrative burden – making it the worst in the EU.

**23rd November 2007**

Polish Premier Donald Tusk tells parliament his government will refuse to sign the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, due to an agreement with the previous conservative government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, which chose to opt out due to concerns that the charter’s provisions related to morality and family could contradict Polish law. Tusk said that, although he did not share his predecessor’s objections, he needs the backing of Kaczynski’s party in order to reach the two-thirds majority required to ratify the Reform Treaty as a whole.

**24th November 2007**

Klaus wins unanimous support from Civic Democrat Party in his bid for president. The Civic Democrats have a total of 122
representatives in the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. To win, Mr. Klaus will need the vote of all of these representatives, as well as 19 other MPs.

**28th November 2007**
Slovak and Hungarian police arrest three people trying to smuggle 1 kg (2.2 pounds) of radioactive material into Slovakia in order to sell it for one million US dollars.

**29th November 2007**
Ukraine’s pro-Western “Orange” parties led by Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko agree to form a coalition – the first step towards a new government after September elections gave the two parties enough combined votes to defeat current PM Viktor Yanukovych’s party. The coalition has a majority of just one seat in parliament.

**2nd December 2007**
President Putin’s United Russia party wins 64 percent of the vote in a landslide victory in parliamentary elections. However, foreign observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe said the election “failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections.”

**5th December 2007**
The Czech Parliament approves the 2008 state budget proposal with expenditures of 1, 107 billion crowns and a deficit of 70.8 billion crowns. Of the 200 member lower house, 100 deputies supported the bill, while 97 were against. Meanwhile, The Senate approves an amendment to the foreigners’ law forcing non-EU foreigners who marry Czech citizens to wait two years and pass a language test to get residence permits. At present they can apply immediately. Interior Minister Ivan Langer says the tougher rules are necessary in view of the country joining the Schengen border free zone.

**6th December 2007**
Interior ministers from the European Union’s member states give final approval to the Czech Republic’s accession to the border-free Schengen area, along with 8 other EU member states, on December 21.

**12th December 2007**
Vaclav Klaus signs an amendment allowing children of parents without permanent residency status to attend school, including children of parents with residency permits for longer than 90 days and foreigners illegally living in the Czech Republic. The previous law gave only EU citizens or those with permanent residency the right to study at Czech schools.

Meanwhile, Russia formally suspends its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), which limits troops and weaponry across Europe, saying it no longer serves its interests. The treaty between Western and former Warsaw Pact states was signed in 1990, but NATO never ratified a revised version from 1999.

**13th December 2007**
EU leaders sign the Treaty of Lisbon, a toned down version of the EU constitution which French and Dutch voters rejected in 2005. The treaty, which aims to create a more effective foreign policy, stronger leadership and more streamlined decision making within the expanded 27 member block.

**14th December 2007**
Czech-American economist and professor at the University of Michigan and former advisor to Vaclav Havel, Jan Svojnar, confirms he will run in the Czech Republic’s upcoming presidential election.

**15th December 2007**
Moscow warns that a US missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland could provoke retaliation from Russia. Russia’s Chief of Staff Yuri Baluyevsky expressed dissatisfaction with the course of negotiations between Moscow and Washington on this matter, saying the two states were locked in a “direct standoff.”

**17th December 2007**
Three quarters of young Czechs have a negative attitude towards the Roma, according to a survey of 12 to 20 year olds conducted by the non-governmental organization People in Need. At the same time, more than three quarters of respondents said there was no discrimination in Czech society.

**18th December 2007**
Yulia Tymoshenko becomes Ukrainian Prime Minister for a second time when she wins by a narrow margin of 226 votes in the 450-seat parliament after the opposition boycotted the vote. She was nominated for the post by Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko who had sacked her during her previous term as prime minister.

**19th December 2007**
Talks at the UN Security Council on the future of Kosovo collapse when Serbia and Russia reject a US and EU plan to gradually help steer Kosovo towards full independence and membership in the UN in a regime of “supervised independence” which would prevent it from merging with Albania, or having its Serb areas split off to become part of Serbia. US and EU negotiators said the two sides are irreconcilable.

**20th December 2007**
The Schengen border-free zone expands to nine new states, lifting border controls between old and new EU member states and creating a vast border-free zone for 400 million Europeans in 24 countries stretching from Spain to Estonia.

**4th January 2008**
The Czech Finance Ministry files a criminal complaint against an unknown perpetrator in connection with possible fraud concerning the repayment of Libya’s 4.5 billion crown (252.7 million USD) debt to the Czech Republic for arms supplies which dates back to former Czechoslovakia. Libya has produced a letter from 1997 questioning the existence of the debt. Finance Minister Miroslav Kalousek said the document was a forgery. On the same day, police charge 24 former officials of the Ministry of Defence and business people linked to them with fraud in the form of dozens of manipulated tenders amounting to hundreds of millions of crowns.

Compiled by Eva Munková
Over half of the inhabitants of our planet are women, but even the most advanced nations don’t have fifty percent of female politicians. All over the world, even in the European Union and its institutions, women are in the minority. Paradoxically, most southern states, developing countries or states in Africa or Latin America are better off than the northern countries when it comes to the number of women in politics.

Many people say that politics are rough, inherently masculine and simply not for women. This is nonsense. Politics are only “masculine” because so few women are involved in them. At this point, only women who conform to the male model and beat their male colleagues at their own game can succeed. For example, Margaret Thatcher only had one woman in her government in her entire eleven-year stint as premier.

During my numerous political campaigns, I met many successful women, including managers. Often they looked down on me because I was involved in politics. I realized that these women have a very difficult time identifying with our political environment because it is almost completely dominated by men. The consequence is that women are not interested in politics and often find them distasteful. And this does not bode well for our democracy when (at least) fifty percent of the population has a negative attitude toward the politics of our country.

But this isn’t about trying to get representation for women for its own sake. Because there are few women in politics, as well as in other areas, we are missing ourselves in our cars. And quotas are simply regulators that redress an initial injustice.

The Czech Republic applies a proportional electoral system in its parliamentary elections and uses the so-called Hondt system to convert the number of votes into seats. This too is an attempt to correct reality in order to improve representation. So why should we avoid a correction in the form of a quota, which merely ensures that fifty percent of the population will be fairly represented? Seen from this angle, measures such as quotas make sense. Moreover, to paraphrase what Winston Churchill said about democracy: it’s not an ideal solution but we haven’t yet invented anything better or more effective.

Here, however, quotas are so controversial that even once high-ranking politician Miloš Zeman, when asked what he thought about quotas answered: “Fortunately, this mad-cow disease hasn’t reached our country yet.”

At the same time, no one is surprised that aid to help girls obtain basic and mid-level educations is flowing into developing countries. Quotas are a way to help people who need it -- they also help those who deserve it. Certainly it is better to have a capable man in politics than an incapable women but the present situation in Czech Politics is such that there is an excess of incompetent men and a dearth of competent women.
Under the guise of a noble fight for equal opportunities, women’s interest organizations are presenting the introduction of quotas for women in politics as a panacea for all kinds of gender-related problems.

In the Czech Republic, equality is guaranteed by the Constitution and guaranteed by law. Both sexes have exactly the same possibility of representing voters. Quotas are discriminatory measures, which seek to skew elections in favor of one gender. They are also a violation of the principle of free competition and would result in our filling our political sphere according to all kinds of special-interest guidelines.

Let’s ask ourselves a basic question: in whose interest is this? Anyone who has the least bit of interest in the backstage arena of politics knows that the task of a representative or senator is only the tip of the iceberg of what a political party actually does.

Ruthless battles are waged over electoral seats within the parties, and the contested seats are allocated as the result of either a victory or a compromise. The path to gaining a seat in parliament is paved with committees, conferences, meetings and setbacks. A seat in parliament, therefore, is also a reward for predominantly unpaid and unseen work, which is often thankless, unpleasant and, most of all, very time consuming.

Because I am the representative of a large city, I know this from personal experience. Perhaps it comes as a surprise, but I want to see as many women as possible in politics. But it is difficult, in these commercial times, to find a citizen who would want to do battle, without getting paid, for the good of others.

In the midst of this general malaise, men in general devote more of their interests and time to politics. They devote their time to seemingly banal political skirmishes and to asserting their opinions, which they must do strenuously. Even at the lowest levels of representation, there are more men than women. The higher the politics, the more abstract and difficult to grasp the problems become.

Of course we could designate women to be candidates, but what if they don’t want to run? What then? Will we punish political subjects because women don’t want to go into politics? Or will we dissolve a party, which doesn’t manage to attract a sufficient number of women?

Incidentally, did anyone ever ask the women? I often get the feeling that a few ambitious representatives are trying to speak for all women. I’m not sure that most women would want to trade family life for the brilliant but treacherous political path, which will rob them of their time and privacy. If they do, there is nothing to stop them now.

Quotas would dictate results without changing the fundamental nature of the problem - and only at the top, of course. It is tempting to be a representative with all the visible advantages. Many people would probably like to enter into high politics without having to fight their way up from the bottom; without accomplishing anything in the public sphere. But nobody who is simply installed into office will ever be a good politician.

More than fifty percent of voters are women and every party must, in its own interest, make their ballots as attractive to women as possible, in order not to lose decisive votes.

Free and democratic competition should always give the best individuals the chance to advance – ones who know how to strike the right chord with voters and have something to offer, regardless of gender. Quotas are a shining example of the saying: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”
As of going to press, Czech president Václav Klaus faces certain re-election by parliament, ushering in a second four year term. Throughout his first term, Klaus often mused publicly about his own sense of powerlessness in his purely ceremonial post.

The Czech head-of-state is expected to visit nursing homes, award medals and lift the spirits of the nation – and that’s it. But arguably, Klaus gives himself far too little credit. Yes, he has no real powers, and even his vetoes can be overturned by a simple parliamentary majority, but what of the symbolic role played by the Czech president? In that regard, Klaus’s power to affect the mood and spirit of the nation cannot be understated.

Throughout its short history, the Czech Republic and the former Czechoslovakia has had a mixed bag of statesmen, yet somehow, for a small country, they always managed to help bring the Czech lands to the attention of the world stage. Czechoslovakia’s first president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk travelled the world to bring the plight of the burgeoning Czechoslovakia to the attention of the major powers. Today, he is viewed with an almost unchallengeable reverence – he was a thinker, an intellectual, a statesman and a leader. Masaryk’s successor Edvard Beneš produces far more mixed responses. Was he a hero that led Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia from exile in Britain? Or was he a confused and naive fool who allowed the Czechoslovak communist party to seize control of the nation for forty years following his triumphant return from exile? And what of that eternal Czech taboo – the often violent and unjust expulsion of Sudeten Germans from the country following the end of WWII initiated by Beneš? Again, opinions remain divided. Undoubtedly the most painful and humiliating icon of a president was Emil Hácha, the puppet president installed by the Nazi regime soon after Beneš went into exile. The story of his humiliation by Hitler has become something of a symbol of the Czech experience: On 14th March 1939, the Czechoslovak president was essentially summoned to Germany and told that his country was to be occupied. If resistance was offered, Prague would be levelled to the ground. The man nearly had a heart attack and ultimately agreed not to resist. Hácha’s foreign Minister M. Chvalkovsky later declared “Our people will curse us, and yet we have saved their existence. We have preserved them from a horrible massacre.”

Through increasing ill health and eventual senility, Hácha walked a tight- rope with the German authorities, trying to preserve some semblance of dignity for his nation. He died in 1945 soon after the end of WWII, yet the image of a broken and kowtowing president continues to cause discomfort to the Czech self-perception to this day. Perhaps an equally severe self-inflicted wound came on June 7th 1948 with the resignation of the restored president Edvard Beneš in the face of communist agitation. At this time, the Czech government had a theoretical majority to defeat the revived communist party, which only had 40.17% of the vote and 93 out of 231 parliamentary seats. As with Hácha, there are more than two sides to this story, but Beneš’s failure to rally the other political parties in the face of an increasingly militant communist movement represents yet another act of Czech presidential folly. Beneš died three months after his resignation.

The next Czechoslovak president remains an icon of ideological narrow-mindedness and craving for power. A former cabinetmaker and lifelong communist, Klement Gottwald had been an anti-Nazi fighter based in Moscow throughout WWII. Throughout his presidential term from 1948 till his death in 1953 (Gottwald had served as Prime Minister from 1946-48), his time in office was marked by purges, show trials and general obedience and subservience to Stalin’s Soviet Union, all under the umbrella of economically reviving war torn Czechoslovakia. When Gottwald died in 1953, only a few days after the death of Josef Stalin (yet another humiliatingly symbolic fact) he was replaced as president by his former Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocky, one of the co-founders of the Czech communist party in 1921 following its splintering from the Czech Social Democrats. Zápotocky, a former concentration camp intern, acknowledged some minimal mistakes in the past, but collectivisation and the communist grip on power carried on unabated.

Under Zápotocký, the climate of absolute fear dissipated somewhat, but again, the path was being blazed in Moscow under Kruschev’s post-Stalinist thaw, rather than through self-determination back in Czechoslovakia. Following Zápotocký’s death in 1957, Communist Party general secretary Antonín Novotný (who won a beauty contest as the world’s most physically attractive leader), yet another anti-Nazi resistance member and former concentration camp intern was appointed president. Novotný, a hardliner, served for 11 years right up to early 1968 before being ousted by the Party for his poor handling of ever increasing student protests. He was replaced by Ludvík Svoboda, who served until 1975 and managed to survive the purges that followed the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. Svoboda was a particularly interesting figure in that he had been a victim of the notorious
1950s communist purges, even being imprisoned by the Gottwald regime. Svoboda was regarded as something of a national hero, a fierce anti-Nazi resistance fighter that had established underground units in Poland before becoming head of the Soviet-led Czechoslovak military on the Eastern front. During the 1948 communist putsch, he served as defence minister, refusing to unleash the national army in order to quell the communist People’s Militia that had taken to the streets and were causing increasing chaos.

By the time of Svoboda’s presidency, the strength of the office had dissipated, with real power lying in the hands of the General Secretary of the Communist Party (in chronological order 1948-1989 Klement Gottwald, Antonín Novotný, Alexander Dubček, Gustav Husák, Milouš Jakeš and Karel Urbánek). Svoboda’s actions during the Prague Spring were also controversial. Despite seeming opposition to Brezhnev’s invasion of Czechoslovakia, Svoboda again supported those that refused to allow the Czechoslovak army to resist the Warsaw Pact troops, essentially sealing the future of his country. In 1975, Svoboda was finally forced to retire, having passively overseen the normalisation era that Czechoslovakia was subjected to in the years that followed 1968. Svoboda was succeeded by the Slovakian communist Gustav Husák who had served as Communist Party General Secretary since the ousting of reformist Alexander Dubček in 1968. Husák served as president for a record 14 years, right until his ousting following the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

Similarly to Svoboda, Husák had also been persecuted by the communist old guard, spending 1954–60 in prison. Ironically, it wasn’t until the later “thaw” that Husák was released and his party membership restored. Despite his reprieve by progressive forces, Husák not only oversaw the post-invasion normalisation era, but also the rise of so-called consumer socialism, with Czechs encouraged to concentrate on a narrow personal interests – repairing their cottages, focusing on work and family etc. In 1987 he stepped down as leader of the communist party, in favour of so-called “young blood” in the guise of Milouš Jakeš. By 1989, Jakeš and Husák seemed like isolated dinosaurs as the Velvet Revolution swept playwright dissident Václav Havel into power. For the first time in a generation, Czechs felt that one of them had reached the pinnacle of the Czech power structure – so long the exclusive domain of subservient apparatchiks. Havel’s era was characterised by both optimism and disappointment. His inexperience in politics was often unintentionally charming – such as when he famously wiped the sweat off his hand before shaking hands with the British Queen. Yet, for all the fine inspirational words, under Havel, the Czech parliament was soon transformed into a festering nest of corruption, intrigue and self-serving machinations. Despite this, as a purely ceremonial figure, Havel, like Masaryk before him, promoted the image of the Czech Republic around the world, while continuing to press Czechs to shun apathy in favour of responsibility and engagement.

Throughout its short history as an independent state, the Czech Republic (and Czechoslovakia before it) has certainly had far more poor and misguided leaders than great or even adequate ones. Yet the overriding emotion that remains embedded in the Czech psyche is – how could we do this to ourselves? A far more forgiving analysis would remind Czechs that between the period of the Munich agreement in 1938 and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, global geopolitics made any real self-determination irrelevant. If any Czechoslovak leader learned this fact the hard way it was Alexander Dubček, whose liberal Prague Spring was crushed by an invading Soviet-led army, with the Czechoslovak Communist Party leader soon dispatched to a meaningless ambassadorship in Turkey. While arguably, if Emil Hácha had acted any differently, it is entirely possible that he would have simply been shot and replaced by another puppet leader – and with that, Prague may well have ended up like Warsaw – levelled to the ground. And even in the
case of Gottwald, the Soviets would easily have found another agitator; another man to seize power in a country that had been occupied/liberated by a Red Army that wasn’t about to leave anytime soon.

So how does current President Václav Klaus rate in relation to his mostly less-than-illustrious predecessors? Going back to Klaus’s invoking of his own powerlessness, it is difficult to see how history will view the current president as anything other than a tragic embodiment of centuries of Czech humiliation. Indeed, Klaus shares many traits with his former predecessors. Primarily, his embracing of extreme “neoconservative” theories closely mirrors the misguided view of communism that Gottwald held following the end of Nazi rule. Right-wing parties in countries such as France and Germany have learnt that neoconservative ideology is a misguided dead end. The British Conservative party, after more than a decade in opposition has learnt that lesson too. The US Republican party, which faces political annihilation in 2008, will also be forced to shun this extreme ideology. Yet, in the post-communist east, leaders like Klaus continue to embrace and promote these muddled theories. And in doing so, the global humiliation of the Czech Republic in the eyes of the world continues. Klaus as the head of the Czech state addresses the UN and throws doubt on man-made climate change – meanwhile, the rest of the world snickers and reinforces its prejudices about the idiotic and backwards beliefs and practices of those in Eastern Europe. What could be more humiliating?

Further, Klaus’s “do nothing” message to Czech citizens closely mirrors the normalisation message promoted by Husák’s government. Following the Prague Spring, the authorities were desperate to return Czechoslovakia to its isolated, inward looking path. Klaus’s anti-civic protestations present a similar non-challenge to Czech citizens, essentially asking them to turn their backs on the spirit of change that characterised the Velvet Revolution and instead re-embrace the free-market teachings of Friedman (submit to the market), which, despite past mistakes, still offer a bright future for all. Yet the ultimate irony of Klaus’s leadership is one that has dogged all of the weaker Czech leaders – namely powerlessness. If Klaus really feels so frustrated by environmentalists, NGOs, former dissidents and the EU bureaucracy, why doesn’t he have the guts to abandon the trappings of power and resign in protest? Or why doesn’t he call for members of the Green Party and all members of NGOs to be thrown in jail? And why doesn’t he openly call for the withdrawal of the Czech Republic from the EU? Either he is protecting the nation according to his beliefs or he isn’t. If all the Czech head-of-state has to offer are words, then the comparison must lie between Klaus and Emil Hácha – a broken, humiliated and powerless leader who can do little else but talk, and even then, no-one really listens. For all his flaws, at least Edvard Beneš had the conviction to go into exile. Can one imagine Beneš whining about the growing threat of the Nazis, but merely sighing and saying “Oh well, what can this powerless president do?” Can one imagine Masaryk really believing that environmentalism was the new communism and then simply doing nothing about it while the world foolishly signed up to the Kyoto Treaty and its successor? And would the Czech populace really buy the fraud that he was somehow “protecting” their nation by staying put and simply quietly moaning about it all? Klaus’s nonsensical theories continue to damage and humiliate the nation, all the more so because of the simple fact that he hasn’t the conviction to really support their undiluted implementation. Today, the Czech president talks and nobody listens except for nationalists and necons – while history, sadly repeats itself.

The truth of the matter is that the Czech president is only powerless when what he or she promotes is palpable nonsense. If Gottwald were head-of-state today, he too would be lamenting his powerlessness, desperate to get someone to pay attention to his Marxist gibberish. He would probably go off and give speeches in North Korea. Contrary to his own beliefs, Klaus does have a great deal of power. He has the power to challenge each and every citizen not just to quietly complain, but to actually get up and do something about it. He has the power to represent the people and unceasingly demand efficiency, transparency and effectiveness from the Czech parliament. He has the power to promote and represent the country abroad and he has the power to make each and every Czech feel good about where this nation is heading. More than anything, that is what the nation needs, not another dose of powerless depression.
The Czech coalition cabinet is going through an existential crisis. While current Czech Premier Mirek Topolánek has reporters locked up in airport restrooms so they can’t ask him questions, and uses a government airplane to go on private skiing trips, former Czech Premier, Jiří Paroubek barrels down the roads at almost twice the speed limit and refuses to go on the air unless he is going to be the only guest. Prague Mayor Pavel Bém lives in luxurious conditions in a villa owned by an influential businessman. Recent Vice Premier and Minister of Local Development Jiří Čunek is suspected of corruption and welfare abuse. And the reaction of the main players? “Is there a problem? No, only the media have one.”

This is how our political elite celebrated the eighteenth anniversary of November 17th, and the tenth anniversary of one of this country’s biggest “kauza,” the so-called “Sarajevo Assassination,” which led to the displacement of then ODS leader Václav Klaus and his party while Klaus was in Sarajevo. What will happen this time?

At the time of this writing, the outcome of the spat between the Greens and the Christian Democrats over Čunek’s return to the government is uncertain. In any case, Mirek Topolánek’s cabinet is shaken, and that is good news, since it may be that politicians won’t get away with everything so easily.

Six Rules
Whatever the outcome of the Čunek affair will be, we have to pay close attention to the general details even more, since we are at the ten year point after the fall of the Klaus government, whose fate was sealed by fraudulent financing and exemplary arrogance toward the public. Even though much good has been achieved since then (legislation has become stricter and voters more critical) it seems that in the last few months the unpleasant arrogance of politicians and ethical and moral violations are on the increase. The same mistakes continue to be repeated but the actors are different.

For the average reader, here is the list of activities to watch:
1. The financing of living quarters
2. Aggressive speeches
3. Above-standard privileges supplemented by frequent violations of traffic laws
4. Battles with the media
5. A narrow connection between politics and business
6. Embarrassing obfuscation and lying

If you cut these six points out and tape them to your desk, your freedom from negative attention is virtually assured. In reality, however, politicians do have these six points on their table so they know what they can get away with.

The affair over just how he got the money to buy his house, (supplemented by the more serious affair of doing business with the bordello-mistress Libuše Barková) cost Stanislav Gross his Premiership. Because of their grandiose personal apartments Jiří Paroubek and Mirek Topolánek were also taken to task. In spite of that, Pavel Bém lives in highly exceptional conditions in the villa of an entrepreneur who is interested in maintaining good relations with the magistrate. The Mayor assures us that if the entrepreneur enters into a public tender, he will not vote. But given his status, this is like the father of a family saying he will not vote and leaving it up to the rest of the family to decide. Bém even bragged that he is saving tax-money because he doesn’t live in a house or apartment which belongs to the magistrate, so that he pays for everything himself. But this is wrong. If he lived in a house belonging to the municipality, we would know the conditions under which he does so, instead of having no idea of just what is behind the arrangement between the mayor and the businessman.

As for Jiří Paroubek, once again he was caught barreling down the road at over 200 kilometers per hour. He always has the same excuse: he says he was sleeping and not watching the driver. It’s an interesting syndrome when his brain shuts down every time the hand on the speed-gauge moves up. All kidding aside, Paroubek has no qualms about lying to the public and doesn’t see the slightest problem with it.

And finally, we get to the recent top contender, Mirek Topolánek, who calmly uses a government airplane to go skiing in Austria, and then cooks up a story about a meeting with the Czech ambassador. On top of that, as revenge, he prohibits Czech television from filming the start of government talks, since they caught his arrogant display. And as if that weren’t enough, his body guards lock the television staff up at the airport to prevent reporters from asking questions. And we still haven’t forgotten his emotional tirade against the media and threats about limiting freedom of speech.
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if things continue in the same vein. In many respects he is catching up to his predecessor Jiří Paroubek, and that’s saying something.

But nobody can beat the Chairman of the Christian Democrats. Čunek, whose affairs have become a never-ending story on the political scene. Yes, he did decide to leave his ministerial post, but only after many months of a culminating investigation into allegations of corruption coupled with him having far more money in his bank account than he could ever earn as a politician. Moreover, after a mere few weeks away, Čunek wants to return. The Chief State Prosecutor has pronounced him innocent, but there are far more questions than answers left in his case. The Greens wanted to prevent his return, which angered Čunek substantially to the point where he stated that if the Greens wish, they can leave the government themselves.

**Coalition woes**

An examination of the current coalition of Greens, ODS (Civic Democrats) and KDU (Christian Democrats) shows numerous cracks in each party. The Christian Democrats buckled under the weight of the scandals of their Chairman, Jiří Čunek. After he left the government, it seemed that Čunek-related woes were a thing of the past. But it turned out that Čunek is the golden calf of the Civic Democrats. Since Mirek Topolánek offered him the chance to come back as long as he can procure more votes from his party for Václav Klaus in the upcoming presidential election. And so, Čunek was already celebrating his comeback, but the Greens got upset. Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg started by telling Topolánek that if Čunek came back, he would leave, and the remaining Greens chimed in. That was a blow to the Christian Democrats who had supported their chairman.

The Greens also had their problems. After Martin Bursík became the party leader, he indirectly forced deputy chairman Dana Kuchtová to leave the post of Education Minister, on the grounds that she failed to obtain money from European funds. A strong opposition formed inside the party, especially because two members of the party board had to leave the ministry along with Kuchtová, because Bursík suspected them of using the ministry to make money on the side. The opposition joined forces with Matěj Stropnický, a vehement critic of the Green leadership, and Bursík started losing ground. The “rebels” wanted their man, Dušan Lužný, whom Kuchtová had brought to the ministry. But Bursík rejected him due to his Communist past, lack of distinction and, last but not least, his footing in the enemy camp. Bursík pulled the emergency brake and decided to name the 30-year old deputy Ondřej Liška, who has a good reputation with both warring camps and is known as a decent administrator and negotiator, one with experience with European institutions. And that is exactly what the Greens and Education Ministry needs.

**A weak Premier**

There was no peace in the ODS camp either. The party held one congress after another, and though it may have appeared calm, in the back rooms, there wasn’t much evidence of unity. Mirek Topolánek started to shut himself off within his team and lose visibility inside the party. ODS is in free fall with no clear leadership or direction. As a result, ODS politicians like Pavel Bém or the local governor of the Central Bohemian Region Petr Bendl are fortifying their positions.

Similarly, the government is wavering and doesn’t even know if it is still pro-reform or not. In the midst of all this, the Premier is doing fierce battle with the media and is losing the support of the public. In spite of this, within ODS, he is the only one advocating a coalition government: “Within a government, especially a coalition, you must be able to compromise. And the actual power structure means that those compromises are often bloody. But thanks to these compromises we can achieve most of our goals. Even a small change for the better is infinitely better than no change at all.” Topolánek is correct.

The fact that Pavel Bém and others are pressing the coalition partners to commit to voting for Klaus for president proves that they have no idea what a coalition partner is. These are not vassals who will blindly follow orders the way it once was in the unified post-war “National Front” government, in which the Communist Party set the tone. The situation is all the more absurd, since Klaus’s support is already ensured.

Topolánek’s biggest mistake is his inability to solve the Čunek affair quickly. Had he intervened energetically, the Greens and the Christian Democrats would not have argued so ferociously. The fact that Topolánek invited Čunek back into the government one day and changed his mind the next due to pressure from the Greens shows he doesn’t know what he wants. At this moment, either Čunek comes back and the Greens leave (and Schwarzenberg, who is certain to keep his word), or Čunek will stay out, and then no one knows what the Christian Democrats will do.

**The voters**

It’s a long time until the next elections and a change of government is not likely to bring about a change of behavior. The influence of the media is also relative, and politicians continue to ignore their voters, who don’t speak up enough. Perhaps that’s the key. The continual lack of activity of the public vis a vis politicians.

Czech politicians often say they want a political system like the one in the United States. It would be useful to give it to them from time to time. They would be surprised how often they would be contacted by public representatives, lobbyists and various non-governmental organizations that monitor the voting patterns and behavior of politicians and mail the results to all the voters.

Here in the Czech Republic, politicians can be put under pressure. All one needs to do is call or write one’s deputies and tell them that their voters are not happy. The more people who call, the harder it will be for elected representatives. In his memoirs, Ronald Reagan wrote about his start in politics: “I found out that if the public understands your intentions, the rest will take care of itself. People will start writing letters to their congressmen and putting pressure on them. Congressmen will realize that sooner or later they will have to address their voters.” It’s time to start doing this here. If not, then nothing will change.

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November 17th is an important day in Czech history, a national holiday that celebrates anti-government protests in 1989 that ultimately brought an end to the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. So why has cynicism and apathy managed to pervade the Czech perception of the “Velvet Revolution?”

Gia Emilia Castellano
and Dominik Jůn
The Awakening Revolution

On a cold, damp Saturday in November 2007, perhaps two hundred Czechs gathered at Prague’s Národní Třída in the centre of the city to mark the 18th year of freedom from Communist oppression. It was a far cry from the quarter of a million that had filled Wenceslas Square at the height of the revolution. The “celebration” was somewhat muted with a mixed bag of demonstrations, from opponents of Czech plans to approve a US radar base on its territory, to nationalists demanding more autonomy for the Czech Republic. Former Czech President Václav Havel once spoke about the country suffering from a “bad mood.” Looking around the streets of Prague on what was meant to be a day of celebration, his words sounded painfully understated.

A False Hope
Why has the sense of pride, finally uncorked after centuries of oppression and disappointment not solidified in the years following 1989? Jiří Dienstbier, a former dissident and Czech Foreign Minister, believes that for Czechs, distrust of the powers that be is nothing new. “This is the way it has been always for Czechs, they are used to political disappointments and have been able to survive despite them.” Following the events of 1989, “A lot of people just disappeared into their private lives. I understood it well because they didn’t have the nerve to challenge the state security,” noted Dienstbier referring to the perceived sense that those who perpetrated the crimes of the communist regime were not brought to justice by the new democratic order.

According to former Civic Forum dissident Jan Urban, the answer is far simpler, “We were naïve. We thought Communist oppression was the only reason why the government didn’t work. We automatically believed that once the oppression was gone, everything would reverse. Essentially, we thought the ending of communism was a solution in itself.”

Today, many of the dissidents that fuelled the Revolution have retreated from politics. The vacuum that this left has been filled by political opportunist, who many believe robbed the country and ushered in a new era of corruption and greed. The result is a distinctly gloomy national mood.

Remembering the powerful feelings that surrounded the Revolution, a blogger on the samizdata.net website noted: “I was there in Prague on November 17, 1989 [the day the revolution began]. I remember it as if it were yesterday. The most dominant feeling was that I (and my friends) felt no fear whatsoever, because once the revolution was complete it was “mission accomplished.”

According to Urban, a particular Czech trait has played a crucial role in slowing progress: “Passivity goes back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For a hundred and fifty years this has been a constant feature in Czech politics.” Indeed, since the days of the Hapsburg Empire, the Czech people have had to deal with many, often involuntary, transformations of national identity. Urban adds, “Czechs are typically distrustful of any government anyway…It is a normal mood, spurred on by incompetence and corruption.” Reiterating why it is so easy to fall back onto cynicism, Urban poses “Cynicism is the cheapest and easiest way to escape responsibility. You feel responsible, you act, but that could be too risky. So it is easiest to be cynical and do nothing.”

The Revolution
In the autumn of 1989, the anti-reformist hard-line communist Czech government was living in a bubble. The Berlin Wall had already fallen and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika was providing the catalyst for the downfall of Soviet communism across Europe and beyond. Jiří Dienstbier explains a number of reasons why the revolution played out when it did: “First of all, it was a change of the geo-political situation. And it was clear that if Russians will not send tanks—then the regime cannot be kept in this country.” On November 17th, around 15,000 demonstrators gathered at Prague’s Národní Třída to mark International Student’s Day. The protest soon turned into an anti-government rally. Czech riot police responded in a particularly heavy-handed manner, sealing off the demonstrators and ultimately attacking several of the participants. This incident, in an echo of the Soviet invasion of 1968, again stripped the regime of any semblance of credibility – with images of one particular police officer beating demonstrators transmitted across the
world. Soon, those within the Czech media began to openly report the truth as they saw it, often openly opposing restrictions that had been in place for decades. In the ensuing days, demonstrations turned into strikes, and students were soon joined by much of the country. The communists attempted a false “revolution” purging many of the old guard such as Communist Party leader Miloslav Jakeš and installing a moderate reformer (Karel Urbánek) in his place. But the Civic Forum organization, led by Václav Havel would not retreat from its demands for free and fair elections. In the end, the communist government had to concede, and forty years of one-party rule came to a peaceful end. Jiří Dienstbier reveals that when he spoke with Gorbachev in 1991 it was clear to even the communist leaders that their end was imminent and unavoidable: “I think Gorbachev understood it very well,” Dienstbier smiles. “He told me a very nice sentence—he said ‘we thought we had been strangling the Prague Spring, but we were actually strangling ourselves’... It was a clever evaluation.”

By unanimous vote of the Federal Assembly, the leader of the Civic Forum Václav Havel was elected president December 29, 1989. His dissident credentials were unquestionable, and his background as a playwright seemed to perfectly embody the cultural awakening that provided the backbone to the Prague Spring of 1968. Havel gained world respect in his early years as President, championing civic duty and the responsibility of the citizen to remain politically active. Although his role was largely a ceremonial one, Havel used his platform to press the people to achieve the vision set forth by the Velvet Revolution. The image of the robust, progressive and determined society seen by the rest of the world during 1989 was, in essence, a false one. But Havel’s world prestige, and emphasis on civic participation, did much to push the reality towards the dream. Sadly, Havel’s grand ideas for the Czech nation were weakened, not only by waning Czech resolve, but also by the split of Czechoslovakia in 1992. “The first crack [in the early years of the Czech democracy] was the split of Czechoslovakia—right there, the euphoria ended,” insists Urban.

Furthermore, Havel lacked the necessary political know-how to keep a firm grip over the inner-workings of the Czech government system. His unpolished political style alienated him from the parliament, making it nearly impossible to transform the country into a truly open and transparent democracy. And while his ideas sounded laudable, Havel lacked the loyalty or respect of the parliament necessary to see them through. Havel simply did not understand the importance of democratic institutions and working within them in order to manifest his vision into a reality. Soon, the president’s lofty words and visions were being undermined by greedy opportunists and shady businessmen. Corruption scandals and “affairs” soon became the order of the day, a state of affairs that has continued unabated to this day.

A Troubled Transition

Could the dissidents have done more to prevent the political vacuum in the country being filled by these corrupt opportunists? Jan Urban admits, “Yes there were plenty of mistakes made.” The biggest was the fact that dissidents “didn’t know what they wanted.”

Another mistake that understandably left Czechs feeling they had been duped once again was that there was no punishment offered to those who left the Czech state in ruins (president Gustav Husák was given amnesty from prosecution on 8th December 1989 and many other key figures also escaped prosecution). How could it be that a movement, driven in the name of human and civil rights, would allow Communist leaders, who so clearly violated those rights, to go unpunished? “We never gave people a sense of justice,” confirms Urban, “you need to give people a sense of justice, marking [communism] evil and our vision good.” Had this been done, Urban believes that Czechs might have felt like something had been done to right the wrongs against them. But this wasn’t the case, and the Czech people were instead left with a growing sense of resentment and cynicism.

At the same time, Prague Radio journalist Jan Richter reminds us that the times leading up to the Velvet Revolution were very different from the communist persecution committed in the 1950s. “People were not being treated as badly as they had been before, and it would have been impossible to punish all those that were guilty. How do you choose, who is the worst, and then should be punished? If you wanted to prosecute communists who were in positions of heads of state, then you would have had no one left.” Jiří Dienstbier agrees, “The persecution was not like it was in Stalin’s time. The interrogators and security people of the 50s were believers in the communist future,” while the people that were part of the Czechoslovak state apparatus in the 70s and 80s, “the new generation,” as Dienstbier puts it, were “just pragmatic.” The communist system had done its utmost to make as many people complicit in its functioning – “If I joined, I will get an apartment, I won’t have to go to the army, and I will get 75,000 crowns to buy a car.” Dienstbier reaffirms “it was clear the regime no longer had its heart in it.”

Questions of just who was guilty of what continue to dog all post-totalitarian societies. Jan Urban explains “Czechs are always reviewing their past, and using it
in present politics. Right now, the majority of the political elite doesn’t want to remember what they did before 1989. For example, you have former communists in right-wing parties. Unfortunately for them, the Revolution was organized and led by dissidents and students who are not in politics anymore. So no present political figure was involved. But ultimately it wasn’t the fact that many communists weren’t punished that has put the Czech government in the state it is in now. As journalist Jan Richter poses, “It was the fact that they messed up the transition in the early years.”

**The anti-Havel?**

If one figure embodies the complete antithesis of Havel’s notion of a civil and civic Czech Republic, then that figure is the country’s current president, Václav Klaus. “Klaus will do anything to help himself in the polls,” argues Urban, “We are witnessing the disease of Czech politics: ideological slogans, catch-phrases, and theories based on non-fact.”

If Havel was at the centre of the dissident-led transformation of Czech politics, then without question, Klaus found himself at the centre of its more political core – the Czech parliament. Serving as Prime Minister from 1992-97, Klaus oversaw a period in Czech politics that was marked by botched privatisations, corruption and scandal. In 2003, he was elected by parliament to succeed Havel as president. In direct opposition to Havel, Klaus came to embody not what Czechs should or could aspire to, but what Communist rule had made them – defeatist, small-minded, ignorant, nationalistic and ever in search of simplistic answers. Whereas Havel had asked, in true JFK style, what Czechs could do for their country, Klaus instead offered a cocktail of new answers – all of which demanded nothing from the Czech populace other than compliance. Environmentalists were now the threat; civic organisations were anti-democratic; Friedman-omics were the answer, etc, etc. Unsurprisingly, this appeal to the basest instincts has given Klaus a surprising level of popularity in the country. But the price may have been the mood, if not the soul of the nation.

**Recipes and cures**

Some claim that the civic responsibility Havel so incessantly advocated needs to come into play once again, be it via grassroots organizations, determined investigative journalism, modern and new political parties, or education oriented towards much-needed public awareness and concern over political issues. In an interview with *Prague Leaders Magazine*, Jiří Nekovář, President of the Chamber of Tax Advisers acknowledged that “15 years after the Velvet Revolution, the prevailing view is to keep public affairs outside our personal responsibility in the Czech Republic. Citizens are not really willing to enter political affairs, and therefore they are mostly the province of people who are unsuccessful in other professions.” Nekovář aptly deduces that this situation “might change” if “people with professional skills in other areas go into politics.”

For only the second or third time in history, Czechs have the opportunity to determine their own destiny. As such, the cure to the current Czech malaise lies with the Czechs themselves. More civic participation, more political activity, greater awareness and perhaps even, a new revolution of sorts – one that clears out the political “dead-wood” that has been clogging and sinking the Czech psyche for more than a decade. The alternative is summarised by a letter written by Václav Havel to then-president Gustav Husák in 1975 – one that appears as true today as it was back then: “If a self-defensive fear underpins our attempts to preserve what little we possess, then the main motivator for self-advancement becomes little more than selfishness and careerism.” Perhaps those words should be displayed above the heads of today’s Czech MPs.

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When on October 28th 1918 Czechs in Prague were tearing down the Hapsburg eagles and other statues of hitherto powerful functionaries, it was a symbolic turnaround for a part of Czech society. The empire that had prevented them from connecting with the modern world – mainly of the Anglo-American and, later, French orientation – had collapsed.

**A Despised but Useful Monarchy**

After 1918, the old Empire was largely viewed pejoratively as an embodiment of all that was old and irrelevant. However, the last Emperor, Charles I (reigned 1916-18) was young, and was thus unsuitable to this particular stereotype. His unsuccessful attempt to renew the monarchy in Hungary – (Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and encouraged by Hungarian nationalists, Charles sought twice in 1921 to reclaim the throne of Hungary, but failed due to a lack of support) was soon dismissed as a "reactionary episode". The label of "old" hung far better on his predecessor, Franz Josef I (reigned 1848–1916). It was his rule that was soon characterized as the embodiment of a bygone bureaucratic era. Simply put, he had kept his subjects imprisoned in an archaic system.

Everything that didn’t fit into this picture was soon discarded by the collective mindset. Viennese modernity at the start of the 20th century, which in the realms of architecture, art, literature and music was a truly progressive force in the world, was simply ignored. Austrian steps towards self-determination and democratization of subject states (see article page 22) became an inconvenient truth that ill fit the new narrative of the Republic. Large-scale manufacturing projects (including both the Škoda and Baťa companies), were falsely viewed as icons of independent Czechoslovakia, even though both were essentially inherited from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Simply put, the main foundations of the political, cultural and economic successes and prosperity enjoyed during the era of the First Republic were all the legacy of the detested old monarchy.

**From Masaryk to Beneš**

One of the leading proponents of antipathy towards "old Austria" among the ruling politicians was the Francophile and later (after being disappointed by that country’s stance towards Hitler’s annexation of the Sudeten territories in 1938) the Russophile Edvard Beneš, who went on to become Czechoslovakia’s second president. His pan-Slavonic na-

The first Czechoslovak Republic prided itself on being the very antithesis of the old, backward-looking Hapsburg monarchy.
alism of the Beneš variety. His notions of social equality in a modern democratic state were built upon ethical ideals – Christianity and even the American Revolution. Meanwhile, he continued to view Russia critically and later rejected the Soviet system as strongly as other Western politicians.

Masaryk also did not hesitate to go against the currents of the times. For example, at the end of the 19th century, during the so-called “Hilsner Affair” (a series of anti-Semitic trials following an accusation of blood libel against a Jew called Leopold Hilsner in Bohemia in 1899 and 1900 – Ed.) he stood up against the growing trend of aggressive anti-Semitism with its prejudices about “ritual killings.” As a result, he was almost lynched by Czech nationalist students. Masaryk had a powerful ally – Emperor Franz Josef I. It was Josef, who around the same time officially pronounced that Jews were “one of the most cultivated peoples within my nations”.

During the beginning of the 1920s, Czech extremists occupied the Prague Estates Theatre, which, until then had been in the hands of German Czechs. Masaryk reacted angrily to this negation of a prior agreement, and, in protest, never returned to the now “Czech” theatre.

**Big Pictures, Small Truths**

The populace, still bathing in the success the new modern Republic, largely ignored these conflicts and disagreements, which clashed with the popular perception of the Hapsburg past.

Prague, formerly a provincial capital became a prosperous and growing metropolis. Modern architecture (in places such as Zlín) quickly changed the character of such towns from sleepy backwaters to forward-looking hubs of technology, manufacturing and transport.

Very few people realized that the leap of technical development of the 1920s was also the result of the First World War and that, for example, jazz and other icons of progressiveness would have reached the Czech lands even under the Hapsburgs.

Even the ultimate counter-argument that the First Republic was the democratic opposite of the former monarchy fails to hold true. Czechoslovak post-war parliamentarianism only developed as a result of the political culture founded during the era of the Hapsburg Empire. Even the personnel that staffed modern Czechoslovakia (Masaryk himself was an MP in the Austro-Hungarian Empire) had been trained under the former regime.

**Changing Perceptions**

The annexation of Czechoslovakia by Hitler’s Germany helped to cement the perception of the former Republic as an icon of self-determination. Even before that, Czechoslovakia had maintained its democratic nature while all around it, totalitarian dictatorships were coming into power – the most dramatic form being Hitler’s National Socialists in Germany. The Czechoslovak Republic then became not just a last bastion of democracy and freedom in central Europe, but also an icon for proponents of cultural and political modernism in the western sense. A devastating fifty years followed, beginning with the tearing apart of Czechoslovakia at Munich, followed by WWII and culminating in forty years of material and spiritual communist decline in the country. It is no surprise, that the re-emergence of freedom has been accompanied with a strengthening of the idealistic picture of the First Republic in the consciousness of the Czech people. But this is an over-simplification, which has often usurped the true traditions on which Czechoslovakia was built.
This year, marks a hundred years since the head of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Josef I approved a series of laws, which led to partial voting rights in the Czech lands. All males above 24 were allowed to vote and participation in subsequent parliamentary elections in 1907 was huge – 84% of voters took part. Did democracy spring from the events of 1918? Indeed not.

However unpleasant it must have been to the patriots of the First Republic, Czechs began their political education within the framework of an Empirical monarchy. Simply put, they went to Austrian political school. The calls for systematic “de-Austrification” during the 1920s failed to take this undeniable fact into consideration. Indeed, many of these calls often came from places that did not mask their confidence about Czech “natural” democratic leanings.

But is there objective historical proof of these leanings? There are two examples which everyone points to of how, in times of crisis, modern Czech society maintained and consolidated its inherent democratic leanings. First, there is the peaceful formation of a democratic Czechoslovakia in October 1918. Second, there was the equally peaceful and orderly change of regime in 1989, known as the “Velvet Revolution”.

Following WWI, the officials of the numerous foreign consular offices in Provincial Prague could not hide their awe and admiration for the smooth transfer of power from Austria to the Czech National Committee. The first act of the National Committee after its formal recognition as a governing organ was that “all prior laws and regulations remain in effect until others are formulated.” In other words: no “stunts” or purges, just the calm establishment of a new state and new democracy.

Seventy years later, the very name of the Velvet Revolution (for Slovaks it was actually the “Gentle” revolution) again underlined the perception of Czechs as naturally democratic. During that crucial November week, the trams and metros still ran, people went to work and in their free time they demonstrated. Elections soon followed, and forty years of communist rule came to an end.

These facts illustrate the ability of Czech society to act in a civilized manner in extreme political circumstances and by doing so, to make their management easier. We could also add one other example, which was also “velvet” in its way (and it is even often described as such) – the break-up of the Czechoslovak Republic in January 1993. With a couple of signatures and a handshake, a political union came to an end, and two new countries came into existence.

However, this historical overview would not be complete if we did not also mention other events in modern Czech history, ones which tend to demonstrate the weakness of the national whole in the face of tough times. The violent mass reactions after years of foreign occupation, humiliation and pressure following World War II not only illustrate this, but also highlight traits of being unable to act responsibly and with foresight at crucial junctures. The often violent and brutal reprisals against Czech Sudeten Germans after the war represent a blot on the Czech record. Another blot is the results of the first – and for a long time, last – free elections in April 1946. Perhaps the results were influenced by naive sentiments of pan-Slavonic gratitude to the Soviet Union, or a belief that the most anti-fascist of political parties offered the brightest future, but whatever the reasons, the result was clear for all to see – the communist party gained the largest share of the vote. Despite this, it lacked an overall majority – in other words, the non-communist parties could easily have formed a coalition. Instead, in the face of growing communist agitation, the non-communist parties withdrew from the coalition and by February 1948, the country slid into one-party totalitarianism. Could and should
our politicians and even voters have been smarter in preventing such a fate?

Perhaps, ultimately, the fate of Czechoslovakia as a Soviet satellite was a forgone conclusion. But to this day, historians and ordinary Czechs still argue about what might have been. Twenty years later, during the era of the Prague Spring, those, who perhaps naïvely, advocated democratic change, were later quashed by a regime propped up by an illegitimate Soviet occupation. But unlike 1948, this was a defeat that came with a touch of pride. The burned out tanks and the numerous victims of the invasion proved that passivity in the face of crisis was not a natural Czech trait. Yet, despite such noble, yet futile efforts, the Czech puppet government soon sent the former reformist leader Alexander Dubček into effective exile in Turkey as it “thanked” its foreign occupiers for coming to the assistance of this troubled burgeoning democracy – and for helping to extinguish it.

Though Czechs may marvel at their natural democratic traits, ever since the time of the protectorate and the meaningless presidency of Emil Hácha, they have never grown tired of being frustrated, ashamed and despondent at those who lead them. Today, similar emotions greet the seemingly endless crises that accompany the post-election constructing of coalition governments, as well as their often shaky functioning – something which we have been witness to for more than ten years. The problematic (and often corrupt) under-the-table agreements, which underline their functioning, also give rise to much consternation.

However, even countries with greater experiences of democratic systems have their problems. One such example is Germany, whose democratic Weimar constitution of 1919 opened the doors to one of the darkest totalitarian regimes on the history of Man. Equally, a very liberal Italian democracy soon turned to fascism. Even France, which inspired democratic movements across the West, fell under the spell of Napoleon. Indeed, in terms of the ineffectiveness of its governments, it was in a worse state than Czechoslovakia right up to the middle of the last century. The McCarthy experience in the US, in which mass psychosis caused by an external threat led to countless innocent victims, remains a dark blot on the country even today.

Nations and societies do not create democracy in a methodical manner. Nor can democracy be cultivated for all time – the price of freedom being eternal vigilance. In each new critical situation, the functionality of democracy must be newly consolidated, rather than weakened. Democracy is a way of business, in which the social whole administers and refines the process, but remains wary to never undo it. If democracies are to survive crises, they must primarily be wary of individuals and groups in power, who in unusual or extreme circumstances may seek excessive power, suspend the rule of law and undermine the very democratic foundation of a country. Czech society, similarly to others that have shared in the experiences of the last hundred years, cannot yet afford to award itself the title of “naturally democratic.”

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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. Now, like then, the significance of populism cannot be doubted, though now, like then, it is unclear just what populism is.

On the one hand, the concept of “populism” goes back to the American farmers’ protest movement at the end of the nineteenth century; on the other, to Russia’s narodniki around the same period. Later, the concept was used to describe the elusive nature of the political regimes in the Third World countries.
governed by charismatic leaders and applied above all to Latin American politics in the 1960s and 1970s. This transformation in the concept’s use only re-enforced Isaiah Berlin’s claim that it suffers from the Cinderella complex: there is a shoe in the shape of populism, but no foot to fit it.

What is striking about the current use of the term is the almost incalculable diversity of policies and actors it attempts to cover. Is it not an affront to common sense to lump together Hugo Chavez’s leftist Bolivarian revolution and the ideology and politics of the current anti-communist government in Warsaw? What could be more confusing than to describe the politics both of Silvio Berlusconi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as populist? But commentators and political theorists who insist on using “populism” as a generic name for such diverse political players have a point. Only a vague and ill-defined concept such as “populism” can enable one to grasp the radical transformation of politics underway in many places around the world. 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 conservatism 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 and 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 per cent 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 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.

At heart, the defining feature of populism is the view that society falls into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: “the people as such” and “the corrupt elite”. It proceeds to argue that politics is the expression of the general will of the people and that social change is possible only via the radical change of the elite.

Two tendencies correspond to this: the implementation of populist majoritarianism and growing manipulation by the elite. The revolutionary regime in Venezuela – a textbook illustration of Tocqueville’s notion of the tyranny of the majority – and the manipulation-based regime in Moscow are just two sides of the same populist coin. The goal of populist revolution in Latin America is to block the return to power of the corrupt minority; Putin’s system of “sovereign democracy” prevents the dangerous majority being represented politically.

**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/Oct...
tober 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 into 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 Slat'a 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 traditionally 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 an undesired party or candidate might win elections.

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. 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 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 people; neither pays the taxes that it should pay; and both are supported by foreigners – Brussels in particular. Anti-elite sentiments were an important ele-
ment 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 in the global “war on terror” Washington allows discredited 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.

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The Sinking of the Pamir

The mystery of a sunken German boat is finally solved and reveals that old regimes and the ties associated with them do not die, but instead linger on for years.

Fifty years ago, on the 21st September 1957, the German commercial sailing ship Pamir sank in mysterious circumstances in the middle of the Atlantic. From a crew of 86 sailors, only six men survived. At the time, the four-masted vessel, weighing more than 3 000 tonnes and spanning more than 100 metres, already had 52 years of sailing behind it.

After WWII, the Pamir was confiscated by New Zealand to pay for war reparations. It was not until 1951 that it found its way back to German travel operators – bought from a scrap yard by a German owner in Belgium, along with another German ship, the Passat. The cost of the boat was not high, since it was clear that sailboats were no longer an effective or efficient way to transport people or cargo. Both ships were then outfitted as cargo-carrying training ships for young sailors. Outfitted with auxiliary engines, the Passat and Pamir were expected to make money. In 1954, a German shipping consortium set up a fund and bought the ships, hoping to utilize them for commercial cargo transportation. But the consortium became indebted and not even state funds proved sufficient. Meanwhile, the ships began to deteriorate and soon money for even basic maintenance or a fresh coat of paint had dried up. Between 1954-57, both ships made five more voyages, after which it was decided that they would be decommissioned.

An ex-nazi captain
In the summer of 1957, the Pamir left port to pick up a rye consignment in Argentina. The ship travelled there without a cargo, while the cadets that manned her were forced to work in dangerous and tropical conditions – inhaling toxic dust while repainting the interior storage cargo spaces en route. Because of a strike in Buenos Aires, the rye cargo was loaded onto the Pamir without the necessary extra wrapping in place. The more than 3000 tonne load was then secured with only a few layers of bagged rye placed on top. But rye “leaks” very quickly and as a ship tilts at sea, this motion is intensified. On the 11th August 1957, the Pamir set out from Buenos Aires to Hamburg on what was to be its final voyage. As it crossed the Atlantic, the Pamir sailed in an “S” formation to take advantage of the prevailing winds. Yet, at this time, hurricane Carrie was brewing slowly, crossing the Atlantic from Africa towards the Americas, and on the morning of September 21st, the Pamir was hit by the hurricane, while its sails were still up. It soon sank. The Pamir catastrophe was caused by a strange lack of professionalism of the part of the captain. A lack of attention to weather reports, as well as poor communication with surrounding ships simply meant that the Pamir was caught off-guard by hurricane Carrie.

German author Johannes K. Soyener recently undertook a study of documents...
related to the Pamir catastrophe (published in the book *Sturmgliende*, Lubbe, Bergisch Gladbach, 2007). Thanks to new evidence, a more detailed reconstruction of events has emerged. Soyener suggests that the authoritative atmosphere of the former Nazi regime (then, only twelve years past) was a crucial factor in the sinking of the Pamir. This meant that despite war-crimes trials in Nuremberg, de-Nazification, and the undertaking of modern political education under the auspices of the occupation forces, old habits were still rife. Nazi-era methodology was clear: listening and obeying was more important than thinking for oneself. The captain of the Pamir, Johannes Diebsich, was, by all accounts, stubborn in his leadership and rarely accepted other viewpoints. In such a climate of fear, the telegrapher chose not to “trouble” the captain with news updates and weather reports. In the end, he didn’t even bother to turn his communication device on for several days. The ships which the Pamir encountered en route noted that telegraph communication with the Pamir was all but impossible.

Ironically, the 1950s were a period of intense development in the field of observing, studying and monitoring hurricanes. In 1955, the US created the National Hurricane Research Project. Prolific hurricane observer Jack Harper found himself observing hurricane Carrie from this institute. Indeed, the NHRP sent out reports about the path and intensity of the hurricane on several occasions. Ships that regularly listened to these reports could easily avoid the storm in time – and did. But the captain of the Pamir, was singularly focused on one goal – arriving in Hamburg on time and as a result, making a good impression on his superiors. And that was part of the reason for his authoritative approach and rejection of cooperation from his shipmates. His dispatches from the journey as well as the testimonies of the six survivors clearly show how counter-productive and even dangerous, one-sided and unchallenged authority can be.

**War buddies and their network**

Soyener also analysed the findings of the official German investigative commission, which went over the case in December 1957. The potential culprits — the captain and crew — were all dead, yet this commission, argues Soyener, still managed to carry out a thoroughly sloppy and shallow investigation into the tragedy.

What Soyener demonstrates is that the shipping consortium, associated travel companies, as well as the investigating commission were all riddled with people who had a strong Nazi past. For example, during WWII, Captain Diebsich had served on ships which transported looted booty from Eastern Europe across the Baltic. According to certain sources, some of Diebsich’s partners escaped to Argentina to avoid the post-war trials. After a change of name, many former Nazis became businessmen — but they still relied on their old contacts. The majority of these were orchestrated in a conspiratorial and secretive manner. In 1960, former Nazi Adolf Eichmann was abducted by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad and placed on trial in that country.

According to Soyener’s investigation, (Pamir-related documents can now be viewed at www.pamir-sturmgliende.de) the very fact that Diebsich became the captain of the Pamir was as a result of his Nazi ties. Diebsich seemingly wanted to gain some of the luxury that many of his contemporaries living in Argentina had found. Thus, it was only logical that the network of wartime friends did not want during the investigation to unveil these relationships. The Pamir incident was thus left unresolved.

In Soyener’s book, we learn of the development of the hurricane warning system (in the 1950s, the naming of hurricanes such as “Carrie” was initiated), the huge Pamir rescue operation, and the history of the German commercial sailing sector. But most importantly, we also find out about a Nazi past which, contrary to popular belief, was still active. Even though the christening of the new consortium that launched the Pamir and Passat was attended by German president Theodor Huss – certainly no Nazi – there were still facets of the old regime in place well into the 1960s, exploiting old ties, and still causing tragedies like that of the Pamir.

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The Rise and Fall

The model of a social state is one of the founding pillars of modern Europe, oddly enough, history shows that such a state is a construction of conservative economists.

Martin Zika

From Babylon to Poor Laws

The beginnings of the social state – a state guaranteeing the right to a basic quality of life for its citizens, can be traced to the demographic changes and the start of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. However, the concept of government-sponsored social security can be traced back to the ancient despotic regimes. In Babylon the Code of Hammurabi included directions to protect widows, orphans and the poor. In Ancient Rome, public servants, upon retiring, received a government annuity and farm rents.

In Europe, the first comprehensive framework for social politics was conceived by the Roman Catholic Church. In the 6th century, in addition to reminding the faithful of their philanthropic obligations, the Church built shelters for the poor and encouraged mendicant orders to care for them.

The plagues in the 13–14th centuries caused unprecedented growth of poverty. The Church was only able to take care of the neediest beggars, and caring for the poor became the duty of the nobility and municipalities. Charity turned into a government responsibility. "Care" for the poor became institutionalized, first through regulating beggary, later codified into local legislation. Over time, the right to get help in times of need became implicit.

The unification of land ownership in the 16th century drove peasants from the land. They compensated for the loss in income through handicrafts until the advent of machine production in the 19th century. England's Poor Law, passed during the reign of Elizabeth I in 1601, was the first to attempt to address the resulting social problems systematically. It stipulated that those poor unable to work would be taken into the care of poorhouses; those able to work would be sent to work; those that did not want to work would be forced to work; and poor children would be sent to school.

In his book Sociální stát, úvod do studia (The Social State an Introduction) Martin Smutek writes that population growth in rural areas in the 18th century, caused by a fall in child mortality and the gradual extension of the life-span, created a widening poverty gap between those who worked and those who did not. It became clear that inability to work would bring consequences in case of illness or old age.

The Industrial Revolution caused a decline in agricultural jobs, extensive urbanization, the creation of a class of landless hired laborers, a rising demand for qualified, literate and reliable workers; and increasing employment of so-called white collar workers.

One of the first attempts to address the problem of the poor was the Speenhamland System, devised in 1795 to mollify a growing rural population faced with soaring food prices, due to the Napoleonic Wars. Under the system, wages of poor families were subsidized according to the number of children they had and the price of bread in the parish. Unfortunately, the system actually aggravated the causes of poverty. It allowed employers (often farmers) to pay wages below subsistence level because the parish would make up the difference to keep its workers alive. As a result, the workers' low income was unchanged and the parish contributors were actually subsidizing the farmers.

In 1834, the Poor Law Commissioners' Report called the Speenhamland System one of "bounty on indolence and vice" and a "universal system of pauperism." Among its foremost critics was Thomas Malthus. According to his "Iron Law of Wages," (in his 1798 Essay on the Principle of Population), workers' wages should not exceed their existential minimum. If they do, the population, i.e. the number of available workers, will increase and wages would drop. If wages fall below the minimum requirement, the process will be reversed. One of the results of Malthus' theories was the underestimation of economic disputes...
and strikes and the growth of organized labor, as workers struggled to come to terms with the Industrial Revolution. During the 19th century, as the growing number of poor began to congregate to towns and cities, perceptions radically changed for the worse.

Malthusianism gained a foothold in mainstream political and economic circles and resulted in the draconian Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Devised by Malthus’ followers, it was based on the principle of “less eligibility.” The destitute could only get aid in workhouses, where conditions were deliberately made as harsh and degrading as possible. As a result, they often chose to bypass this assistance. According to Jakub Rákosník from the Prague Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, this scheme was a result of the prevailing sentiment in the mid-19th century, shared by theoreticians like Malthus, Jan Baptiste Say or David Ricardo, that economics was a “clean science,” with no room for human empathy. This attitude hearkened back to the Enlightenment conviction that society, like nature, was governed by iron laws.

**The rise from Bismarck to the crisis of today**

A profound social crisis, which occurred in central Europe in 1873, was the impulse for the far-reaching social reforms of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and Eduard Taaffe. Gradually, the trend turned to social security. In the 1880s, Bismarck introduced social insurance as well as laws about health insurance, accident insurance and insurance in invalidity and old age. The system was intended primarily for workers and employees, who paid a portion of their wages in order to protect them and their family if they lost their jobs. Taaffe followed his example in Austria-Hungary. Paradoxically, both statesmen initiated these reforms in order to counter the threat of socialism and to limit the influence of social democracy on farmers. It is therefore no surprise that the
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The economic crisis of the 1930’s and the Second World War hastened the acceptance of another series of measures, which would have been very difficult to pass otherwise. In his book *Unemployment as a Social Problem*, sociologist Petr Mareš notes that, until the 1930’s, there was a widespread belief that unemployment was the result of laziness, incompetence and lack of effort. “Even though such a perception still prevails among classes not affected by mass unemployment, in the 1930’s the notion that unemployment was a result of social circumstances resulting from forces over which the individual had no control began to prevail,” he writes.

To a large degree, this fundamental change of attitude came about thanks to the theories of John Maynard Keynes, a British economist whose book, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, published in 1936, gave a new foundation to the modern science of national economics. Keynes said that high unemployment was the result of two factors: technological advances replacing manual labour and a chronic shortage of demand caused by the weak purchasing power of the population. High unemployment was caused by poor fiscal politics of the state, he claimed. His theories lead to the blossoming of the modern social state after the Second World War.

In his book *Social Politics, Theory and International Experience*, Igor Tomes explains how William Beveridge, a proponent of Keynes, devised a daring, universal, reasonable and integrated system of social insurance which substantially influenced the socio-political thinking of the 20th century. Guaranteed minimal living standards, national publicly funded healthcare, politics of full employment and unemployment benefits, development of the school system, and housing supplements protected the individual from the cradle to the grave.

The sixties and seventies were the golden years of the social state. During this period of social expansion, unemployment almost disappeared in western countries, living standards improved and the percentage of public expenditures as a part of GDP went up. Then came stagnation. Set off by the oil crisis, an economic malaise brought on unemployment growth to a degree the post-war generation hadn’t experienced. Public expenditures grew at a rate of about five percent, but the productivity of OECD countries fell. The average growth rate between 1974 and 1984 was lower than two percent. Government spending continued to rise due to growing unemployment and expenditures, while an ageing population demanded more social services. At the same time, new revenues were getting harder and harder to find.

This was the start of the modern crisis of the so-called welfare states. Since then, problems have grown worse, while Europe struggles to find a remedy.
Jan Urban is a former dissident, a participant of the inner-circle of Civic Forum, the Havel-led organisation that helped bring down communist rule in Czechoslovakia during the Velvet Revolution. Today, he has turned his back on politics and instead works as a journalist and author. In 2002, he was the recipient of the Czech Ferdinand Peroutka prize for outstanding contribution to journalism. Urban also teaches at New York University in Prague. Recently, Urban opened a Pandora’s Box with the publication of an investigative book about the well-known and considerably protracted scandal known simply as “Diag Human”.

The Diag Human affair is the prototype of the shady business-political climate in Czechoslovakia of the 1990s. It has all the elements of a detective story or an action film: lying politicians, corrupt state officials, investigative ineptitude, tortured heroes and sly criminals.

The book is entitled A Tunnel Full of Blood, and has met with largely positive reviews. It can be described as a singularly rare and unique case of investigative journalism in the Czech Republic. Though the reader may become somewhat lost in the maze of intrigue, scandal and the various players that revolve around the case, the early years of Czechoslovak privatisation are documented here in such detail, that the reader will likely get a chill down their spine. Ultimately, argues Urban, post-revolution euphoria, inexperience and lack of professionalism, mixed with dishonesty, corruption and criminality created a scandal that epitomises much that went wrong with the post-communist transformation of the country.

For years, the Diag Human affair seemed to be a clear-cut case, at least according to the official version. Suspicious emigrant Josef Stáva was selling tainted blood across the world, and also acted as an arms dealer and drugs smuggler having amassed a fortune of hundreds of millions of Crowns. In Czechoslovakia he allegedly attempted to export blood plasma. By the Spring of 1992, his blood-plasma operation, called Diag Human, was stopped by a well-intentioned, but not very cleverly written letter from the Health Minister Martin Bojar to one of Stáva’s businesses partners. The result was that the partner withdrew from dealing with Stáva and eventually his business collapsed. Stáva later filed a lawsuit against the Czech Republic based on its actions. The entire case ended up in arbitration, in which Stáva could get billions of Crowns in compensation, making it the single biggest money-loss case that the Czech Republic will have ever sustained.

Apart from the positive reviews, there have also been whispers that you were paid by Stáva to write this book.

Normally, the accusation goes like this: “I haven’t read the book, but I’ve heard that Stáva paid for it.” Let anybody who says that go to the archives, as I did, and find a single document or fact that I omitted or misrepresented in order to create a favourable picture of anybody involved in the affair. Then we can talk.
THE DIAG HUMAN CASE

**1984–1989:** Josef Stáva, who emigrated from Czechoslovakia in 1970, only to return two years later as a businessman, offers a complex project of modernization of blood transfusion services in Czechoslovakia.

**1990:** Diag Human in Denmark, as the first in the field, co-founds the Czechoslovak company Conneco in order to further the project. It provides credit for the modernization of transfusion stations totalling at least 170 million Crowns, and Stáva becomes the Czech partner in the joint company.

**Autumn 1990:** Following protests and a defamation campaign by the competition, the Ministry of Finance cancels the results of a public tender which Conneco had won.

**1991:** Conneco is prevented from competing for a new public tender and the Czech blood-plasma market is subsequently handed to two foreign companies, which do not fulfil the conditions requested by the original tender. In the meantime, Conneco signs contracts with more than 20 transfusion stations and exports a total of 4 shipments of blood plasma for processing to Denmark.

**March 1992:** A personal letter by the then Minister of Health Martin Bojar to an exclusive partner to Diag Human in Denmark states that the company is unreliable. This leads to a termination of cooperation between the two companies.

**1995:** After three years of attempted reconciliation, Diag undertakes a lawsuit against the Czech state.

**1997–8:** The senate, which arbitrates the case, repeatedly confirms that the Czech state caused damages, must compensate Diag Human and publicly apologise. The last remaining unresolved question is the level of compensation.

**2000:** The government decides to end the dispute in lieu of mounting interest payments.

**2001:** An expert analysis places damages at 3.6 billion Crowns, but Health minister Bohumil Fišer refuses to accept this figure.

**2002:** The senate orders the Czech government to pay Diag a first instalment of 327 million Crowns.

**2007:** A new expert analysis, which factors in interest, estimates the required compensation at 13 trillion Czech Crowns.

What made you decide to go into this case?

Chance. I really didn't know anything about the case, other than what was in the papers. Stáva was a villain for me. When in 2003 they threw me out of the Czech Radio service, I went to a lawyer named Jan Kalvoda, to ask if he would defend me.

When we discussed my situation, he had just been on the phone to Stáva. I made fun of Kalvoda as to the type of clients he was consorting with. He defended himself by saying that things were different than they appeared. He began to make explanations, but I just shook my head and he knew I didn't believe him. So he said that since I wasn't doing anything, he would sit down in the archive soon became captivated.

What do you think of Josef Stáva today, now that you have studied the affair? From your book, it isn't entirely clear whether you believe he was a crook or not.

What I am interested in most is that the law applies equally to all citizens. Because if it doesn't, then anyone can be called a crook in the media and public servants can just get rich.

For me, the most interesting point about the Diag Human case was not so much Stáva, but that it was seen as necessary to liquidate his project in order to privatize the whole Czech pharmacological sector. In order to steal property, primarily in buildings and plots in Prague, which had a value of billions of Crowns. And that was successfully achieved. But so that I don't avoid the question, – I don't know if Stáva is an angel or a devil, all I know is that he is a remarkably capable person. He was a world-renowned businessman and expert in his field. The fact that he has a great art collection does not automatically make him an angel or a crook. I think that he would have forgotten about the whole case, but when the government repeatedly put the police, authorities and intelligence services on him, then his position hardened. He is convinced that the whole affair, primarily the media circus around the 1990s, caused the death of his wife. Since then, the conflict has become very personal. He says that he was once respected in his field and he wants the world to know that he is innocent.

On what basis did the conflict begin? In order for someone to be compensated for losses, they must show that they had an opportunity to make the money. That means that there would surely be a legal contract.

At the start, I asked myself the same question. During the first police investigation in 1993, the police confiscated a large amount of paperwork. From what has been preserved, it can be proved that Stáva had contracts with more than twenty hospitals and transfusion stations in the former Czechoslovakia. This was done on the basis of a system which he had set up.
in East Germany in the 80s. Stáva filled a niche in the market by investing into the modernization of this field. Basically, with credit that he himself paid in the order of 190 million Crowns, he provided equipment, trained people etc. He had a Czechoslovak company, all the necessary permissions, and a modern inventory – all of it a year earlier than his competition. It is also proven that this system worked. Four consignments of blood plasma were shipped from the Czech Republic to a Danish processor. So it wasn’t just a speculative relationship, it was a functioning legal relationship, from which a lawsuit later emerged. In fact, the notion of compensation for failed contracted business arrangements has been around since Roman times and is a common pillar of every manifestation of business law in Europe.

My interpretation of the documents and testimonies of related people is that the then Health Minister Martin Bojar, with undoubtedly good intentions, found himself under the influence of an interest that may have just realized that health is such a purely political perspective rather than as a professional police investigator or lawyer, who first collates all the facts and only then begins to analyze. Instead, they approach it from the position of their own power. And because of politics, no-one wants to admit that the fault of the state has been irrefutably proven and was decided as far back as 1998 – and that even back then the state was sentenced to a written apology.

Who of the many health ministers carries the greatest blame for the whole affair? It seems that you blame Bohumil Fišer [Social Democrat Health Minister 2000–2002 –Ed.] the most.

Without question. The scandal is a textbook example of inexperience. It begins with minister Pavel Klener (first post-communist health Minister 1989–90. From 2002–2007 the head of the Czech Hematological and Blood Transfusion Institute –Ed.) and Martin Bojar. There is no way that they could not have made a mistake in this case. But no-one is accusing these two of deliberate wrongdoing. But what happened under them is inexcusable. Not until 2000 did Pavel Rychtecký (then deputy PM) and Vladimír Špidla

This is the longest running business dispute in the history of the country, isn’t it? The whole affair is actually so multifaceted and complicated that after seventeen years of functioning [of the company], and 12 years of the actual dispute, so many layers and factors have come into play that it has had two effects: in this country, it always happens that new ministers, governments and their various people decide that with their tenure, everything must have a new solution and that in effect, history begins anew. The second effect is that everyone approaches things from a purely political perspective rather than as a professional police investigator or lawyer, who first collates all the facts and only then begins to analyze. Instead, they approach it from the position of their own power. And because of politics, no-one wants to admit that the fault of the state has been irrefutably proven and was decided as far back as 1998 – and that even back then the state was sentenced to a written apology.

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No-one wants to admit that the fault of the state has been irrefutably proven

(then Minister for Labour and Social affairs) first begin to look at the case rationally. They said, “do a few independent legal analyses, and if we find that we cannot win this, then let’s just try to distance ourselves from it”. But then Health Minister Bohumil Fišer stepped into the case with his secretly paid legal advisor and today’s deputy state procurator Zdeněk Koudelka (also a former Social Democrat MP – Ed.). Those two decided that the case should be postponed till after the 2002 parliamentary elections. Those 11 months of waiting cost 400 million in interest alone. Not to mention the useless and overpriced legal assessments, given without tenders to close friends of these politicians. Since then, another six tears have passed. Koudelka and Fišer did something so dishonest that I don’t know of any other example of the misuse of power like it.

What reason did they have? Money and power.

How do you think it will all end? If it goes the route of the rule of law, then I don’t know of any document or argument by the state that could not result in an award for the plaintiff. The way that the Health Ministry has acted can only be described as damaging the interests of the taxpayers.

When is the final decision due? It should be at the end of 2007, but if the Office of the State (which since 2004 has had independent jurisdiction in this matter) goes mad and decides to withdraw from the case and if the senate will want to review it again, the whole thing could take another two or three years.

During which time, interest continues to accumulate, presumably? Yes, by two million Crowns a day.

Why has the media taken so little notice of this case? I think that it is too complex for them. Some journalists feel guilty because they let themselves be enamoured and manipulated with the promises of politicians, which have today been found to be little more than lies and corruption.

But some things have changed. This August, the Ministry of Health released more than two hundred pages of documents pertaining to the case.

Hats off to them! What the Health Ministry press spokesperson and even current health Minister Julinak are doing is laudable and almost revolutionary. I hope it lasts.

What has led them to do that? Your book? I would like to think so, but actually they may have just realized that health is such a huge industry which is intertwined with so many other public spheres, and was in the past so full of lobbyist interests and corruption, that it is about time to civilize it a bit. Openness and honesty is one such way.
Do you want to find out more about Czech culture in your own country?
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Are you thinking of visiting the Czech Republic and do you need information about tourist and or other attractions?

Visit or contact our Czech Centres!
The former communist political regime prevented people from realizing and pursuing their dreams. As a result, today’s Czech seniors are often unable to create a satisfying and independent life.

During the last 100 years, average life expectancy has doubled. The combination of rapidly falling birth rates and a longer life span are becoming a test for the status of the elderly. Not just grandparents, but also great and even great-great grandparents will be a notable part of society.

Perception of the elderly is cultural. North American culture loves the young, while the Japanese look at the elderly as containing a wealth of traditions and wisdom, and treat them with a great deal of respect. In Latin-American countries, old people help by caring for their grandchildren. They are highly valued and have an important role in the day-to-day lives of their children and grandchildren. The elderly also often live with their offspring in one household – something replicated in other parts of the world, such as in Ireland and France. In India,
land is the main family possession, and so children live with their parents until they pass on and a new generation inherits the family’s property. The view of the Chinese is very similar, but among two hundred million new inhabitants of towns belonging to the middle classes, times are quickly changing. Just as in the Czech Republic, new trends that view old people as unconnected to the new reality are emerging.

In North America, the elderly are more isolated, living in institutions and spending their time with their contemporaries while the generations do not interact as much. At the same time, they maintain great economic strength, which gives them independence and even allows them to financially support their children and grandchildren. A natural suspicion towards government institutions of the European style and an aversion towards hierarchies has led to a greater independence among older people both from the government and their own families.

In a large part of northwestern Europe, older people also head their own households for as long as it is physically possible, and only rarely and with apprehension do they choose to move in with their son’s and daughter’s families. But they do often move in with their parents at the point when they can no longer be independent for health reasons. North European Middle Age folklore has no illusions about inter-generational relations, and warned old people of the dangers that come with entrusting their property to the care of their children.

The Austrian sociologist Leopold Rosenmayr (born 1925) characterised the northern European family as “care from afar.” Members of families from all layers of society support each other and help with various tangible and emotional issues, even though these acts are often not expressed through touch or emotional expression and not even regular visits. However, modern forms of communication make contact easier even across great distances. In countries such as Sweden, Norway, Holland, Denmark, Canada and the US, it is common for old people to have mobile phones and in the case of Britain, even access to the Internet.

According to the UN, in the Slavonic world, the most desperate situation is found among the elderly of Russia, while the most active and happy pensioners are to be found in Slovenia.

**The Czechs**

After the fall of the communist regime in November 1989, the economic, political and cultural affairs of the nation were, at least symbolically, transferred to a new and younger generation. Older people were often viewed with suspicion – incompetent and unsuited to this new age, spoilt by the former system in which for four decades they were maintained in an almost infant like state of paralysis. As a result, a silent form of age discrimination arose.

In today’s Czech Republic, as some studies show, the level of communication between generations remains low. The majority of adults leave their parents, and personal contact is limited to seasonal celebrations such as Christmas, or to deal with family affairs – but emotions remain muted. Many elderly live alone, with minimal family contact as well as a very low pension rate to ensure a satisfying life.

Because of strict upbringing by Czech mothers and the often nonchalant and self-destructive behaviour of Czech
fathers, it is not uncommon to find that Czech children grew up in environments lacking close parental bonds. Today, the effects often manifest themselves in the emotional severance of children who leave home and minimise contact with their families. The emphasis, which Czech parents put on discipline, is often not compensated for by other forms of communication. Parents not only become symbols of authoritarian forcefulness, but are often unable to live by their own dictates, and thus find themselves out of touch with the new modern age or unable to adapt to the requirements of their children.

Czech upbringing has become more and more similar to the North American model ever since the 1950s. A huge gulf between perception of the older and younger generations, expressed in the iconic James Dean film Rebel Without a Cause, culminated in the fiery sixties. Even though older people in smaller Czech towns have far closer familial ties, their opinions, thoughts and needs are often not taken seriously. Instead of deference to their experience, the elderly are often met with a cold shoulder, except for help around the house for which they are easily available.

Finally, the experience of older Czechs of living within a system that did not enable them to develop independent behaviour, also plays a crucial role. This has led to higher levels of despair and depression among the elderly than in Western European countries. Because the majority never gained a chance to learn leadership or self-sufficiency within the old regime, they lack the psychological strength to be able to construct an independent and happy life. The moral decadence found in both the communist and today’s post-communist world has also left the elderly vulnerable and isolated.

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

On September 1st 2006, META has opened a Counseling and Information Center for Young Migrants (PIC).

Who can use the service of our center?
- parents of young foreigners who need to solve problems related to the education of their child.

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

Only a pumpkin grows lying. 
Become a volunteer!
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The most desperate situation is found among the elderly of Russia, while the most active and happy pensioners are to be found in Slovenia.
For a truly showcase example of the adage that each coin has two sides, one only need turn to pension systems of the world. Improving lifestyles in a cleaner world, advanced diagnostic technology and effective medicines have all meant that people are living longer. That is the upside. However, there will soon be more elderly people than young ones. According to expert EU estimates, by 2050, a quarter of EU citizens will be aged 60-79. The percentage of Europeans older than eighty will double by 2050. This will also be the case in the Czech Republic. Will the younger population be able to shoulder the burden of care for so many elderly?

Recently, the consulting company Deloitte released a study that demonstrated that in 2000 within OECD countries, non-economically active people dependant on the rest represented 25 percent of the population. By 2020, 36% of the EU population will be entirely dependent, since the EU is ageing faster than the US. In 2020, within the countries of the old EU 15, 45% of seniors will be economically dependent on the workforce. In the Czech Republic, according to Deloitte, around 20% of the population is dependent today, by 2020 the figure will be around 41% and by 2060 or so it is expected to cross the halfway mark.

In the Czech Republic, in the last 15 years, the average age has increased by four years – in 1991, the average age of the population was 36.5 years. By the end of last year, it was over 40. Concerns are being raised that the increasing age of the population will have as its legacy the collapse of social, health and pension systems. Is such a catastrophe inevitable? Will pensioners die in destitution and will the economies of the developed world begin to crumble? This does not have to happen – so long as people prepare themselves for it. However, reform of the current Czech pension system is not enough, something already causing heated political discussions. Far more complex measures are needed.
have been unable to agree on how much this factor is predictable today, never mind predicting in twenty or fifty years whether there will be higher or lower birth rates. At the same time, children up to 15 years of age represent part of the problem, because like pensioners, they take from the system without contributing to it.

Some figures estimate that by 2050, around two million fewer people will live in the Czech Republic, while the average age will be 3–5 years higher. These estimates are drawn from the fact that today, on average, a woman has 1.5 children. This is not expected to improve. In fact, this ratio is the worst in the entire EU. However, and somewhat surprisingly, last year proved to be particularly good year – in the Czech Republic, almost 106,000 children were born, a record in recent years. But the Czech Statistical Office predicts that by 2010, fewer than 100,000 babies will be born and in the ensuing years, that figure will be even worse.

Such prognoses of course, need not be correct. Birth rates in this country are dependant, among other factors, on economic growth. The fact that current government incentives are not working is clear. Immigration may offset the trend slightly, but compared to the US for example, the immigration factor is not significant. However, even if birth rates in the Czech Republic were to remain at last year’s rate, the costs necessary to support the ageing population will still not be covered in the future.

Working longer
Reforming the Czech pension system will be crucial. However the Czech Republic has yet to undertake any meaningful reforms at all. From the point of view of the EU and several other institutions, the Czech Republic belongs among the more “risky” countries, when it comes to pension programmes. As Brussels has warned, public finances have not been adequately consolidated or prepared for the ensuing increased burdens of an ageing population. Healthy finances, low interest rates, and strong and stable economic growth are crucial for fixing the problem.

The World Bank has also expressed concerns about the Central European region. People of a productive age are in decline, and current social systems are arguably not ideally placed to deal with these changes. If we continue to maintain the same system in which people
of productive age pay for the pensions of seniors via their taxes, it will soon be necessary to lower the actual pension amount. If the pension of one retiree is paid for by two productive citizens today, and the pension itself represents 56% of the average wage, when the worker-pensioner ratio falls to 1:1, the pensions paid out will have to drop down to a mere 28% of the average wage. This assumes that the government of the day does not find other financial sources to plug the gap. Even so, this money will always have to come at the price of something else – education, environment, etc. Clearly, a better solution is a change in the overall financing of the Czech pension system.

The simplest step is to increase the age of retirement. However, one can imagine the political and social repercussions. Not only do most people not wish to work for longer, but problems will also arise from the fact there won’t be enough places for seniors because employers will prefer to seek out younger people. Yet, as life spans increase, it is clear that in the future a person who retires at 65 will still spend more years in retirement than someone retiring today. In line with this, Civic Democrat Minister for Labour and Social Affairs Petr Nečas has made a number of recommendations, which include moving the retirement age forward by a few months each year. With this, Nečas is hoping that by 2030, men will retire at 65 (instead of 60), while women will be allowed to retire in relation to the number of children they bring up. Whether this plan will be approved in the current political climate is difficult to say. Another suggestion is extending the time that a working person must contribute towards a pension, from 25 to 35 years. At present, the opposition Social Democrats are against this recommendation.

Seniors instead of immigrants
Currently, Czech society is very poorly prepared to cope with an extension of the retirement age, certainly far worse than countries in Western Europe. What to do with working seniors, especially when they could just as easily gain access to unemployment benefits? Even today, many Czechs are going into early retirement in their fifties, often as a result of not being able to find work.

Petr Nečas has stated that he is willing to discuss making it advantageous for employers to find work for those over fifty, or to lower the drain of pension insurance after a certain number of years have been worked. Nonetheless, the political climate must change. At present, the majority of companies do not have much interest in employing older workers. The commonly held prejudice is that they simply don’t have the same grasp of modern technology as young people, nor are they as adept at learning new skills. Older workers are viewed as more of a burden than an asset. At the same time, one can say that the present and continuing shortage of qualified staff in the workplace could easily be filled with older workers instead of bringing in more immigrants. But will seniors be able to plug the gap and what about old and new prejudices?

Supplemental pensions
The age of retirement is undeniably the main factor that affects the functioning of current social systems across Europe, which are founded on inter-generational solidarity, with pensions being guaranteed by the state. In a static state, such a mechanism can function endlessly without reform, and only the amount of money in it will change. But in a situation where there are fewer economically active citizens, the trend is clear.

But there is also good news. Last year, insurance incomes exceeded expenditures on pensions and this year, it is expected that there will be a 9-10 billion Crown surplus in the state pension coffers. However, this does not alter the need for long-term change.

Another factor to ease the burden is that of “supplemental” pension systems. Such a system is based on voluntary payments in which capital is saved, with the state contributing to the fund as well. Today, the vast majority of Czech pensions – 95 percent, work via the primary system. That should change, though Nečas has remained reluctant to discuss what the future share of voluntary insurance should be. However, Nečas did state that today’s thirty year-olds should only derive 70-80% of their pensions via the regular state system with the rest coming from supplementary systems.

How and when such supplemental systems will be made more effective and attractive remains unclear. One option being discussed is that pension insurance itself could be voluntarily funnelled towards these supplemental savings accounts.

At present, Czech citizens largely lack the motivation, means and incentives to save for the future. Though studies do demonstrate that younger people are thinking about the future more, saving for one’s pension is still viewed as something that will be put off “for later.” At the same time, private pension plans are being offered to Czech employees by many companies. If Czech businesses were further motivated by a lowering of insurance costs (which is being considered), there may be more employees willing to save for the future.

In the end, no one anywhere has yet devised a pension system that is entirely risk free. It is always difficult to settle the question of to what extent private pension funds should be regulated, and just how much the state should serve as guarantor for such ventures. To come to terms with an ageing populace will require more than new legislation and the guaranteeing of future payouts. Other changes in healthcare, education and indeed all social sectors will also be required.

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The human brain is neither prepared nor capable of crossing a certain age limit without a gradual deterioration of mental faculties. The older a person gets, the greater the threat of dementia, which is defined as a terminal decline in intellectual faculties, mainly associated with cognitive functions—thought, memory, and behavior. Even if it were possible to find a cure to stop human ageing, such a discovery would simply not come soon enough to prevent the ultimate fate of mankind.

Dementia presents a serious pandemic in this millennium. Since the 1960s, the incidence of dementia has doubled every ten years: in people around sixty-five, the rate is 6 percent, at 85 years, it is 25 percent. With the extension of the human lifespan, dementia is becoming the most common medical condition.

In the Czech Republic, precise figures are hard to come by, but on the basis of European data, one can assume that today, around 120,000 people are afflicted with medium or severe dementia. Dementia has tremendous medical, sociological and economic consequences. In 2003, the global costs of caring for people with this affliction were approximately 160 billion US dollars. One can only speculate how high these costs will rise by 2050.

No Cure

Dementia ultimately causes a worsening and eventually a complete loss of functionality in both work and social spheres. In more advanced cases, a person not only cannot remember names and facts, but also forgets also how to dress and eat. Such patients become completely detached from physical and mental reality and thus become completely dependant on external care.

Dementia is actually a symptom of a process which has many pathological causes. However, all of them have one thing in common—they affect the parts of the brain, which are important for memory and behavior. Only 15% of cases of dementia can be cured. Examples include the removal of certain toxic chemicals which damage the brain i.e., CO₂, correcting a lack of B12, compensating for a dysfunctional thyroid gland, or surgically removing a blood clot under the skull. The other 85% belong to a category called neuro-degenerative diseases, in which a certain part of the brain begins to gradually lose its functionality. These processes can be combined with other diseases, or they can arise by themselves.

Into this unfortunate category belongs a disease which in the industrialized world represents the largest share of all forms of dementia—namely Alzheimer’s disease. At present, Alzheimer’s has no clear cause, simple diagnosis, or satisfactory cure. Estimates suggest that around twenty million people suffer from Alzheimer’s disease globally. In the Czech Republic, around 76,000 people are afflicted.

The first symptoms are unspecified—a slight loss of memory, problems with undertaking routine domestic chores, worsening orientation, a change of personality and mood. The disease is usually age-related. With age, for reasons that we do not entirely fully understand, certain parts of the brain begin to degenerate with certain pathological proteins that begin to embed themselves around nerve cells, disrupting the neurological connections between them. At the same time, there is a corresponding loss of acetylcholine, which is the main chemical responsible for the transmission of impulses between brain cells. The brain begins to slowly die, while at the same time shrinking.

For people older than 85, every fifth person is affected. Smoking, alcohol, head injuries, depression, high blood pressure, high levels of cholesterol or lipids and diabetes all increase the risk of the onset of dementia. A recent discovery of a group of drugs that increase the level of acetylcholine only slows down the process. In the end, the result is the same—after five years, the patient ends up needing full-time care. There is some evidence that there are other drugs that may protect the nervous system against such a fate, such as those that lower cholesterol, and maybe even non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. However, no dramatic effect of their usage has yet been proven.

Taken purely scientifically, we are a biological organism which has as its main goal to survive, transfer its genes and then die. Dementia thus serves as another evolutionary mechanism. To die at the “right” time is as advantageous as being born.
In matters of aging, things used to be pretty clear to me: old age was a universally sad, unpleasant, and avoidable affair. It was characterized by hopelessness, dementia and the widespread apathy of those around you. Worn-out people with ashen faces, a catalogue of illnesses and cracked glasses were a strange life form. They seemed to have been old ever since they were born. During the seventies, apart from the day-to-day reality full of miserly-looking and thoroughly worn-out seniors, I was also influenced by a strong Czech cultural tradition of looking at the elderly as an entirely different entity, as profiled in Babička. (Grandmother, an iconic story by famed Czech author Božena Němcová from 1855. The story recounts a young girl’s childhood spent living with her grandmother in the countryside –Ed.)

The communists were as black-and-white about old age as I was. Their
As a woman and as a Czech, I will carry with me her story for the rest of my life. There will be details I remember, such as the descriptions of the buttons on German uniforms, and the hours spent sitting during the war in hospital while her daughter received therapy for her cancer. But the main legacy for me is a renewed sense of a certainty – that no threat is ever so bad that a person cannot shake out of it and retain a strong character. Sometimes, in the short term, this may have drawbacks, but in the long term, it will be worth it – I had met living proof of that.

After that, my view towards old people changed. I began to take them very seriously, especially those who managed to see their own lives from the outside and pass that information on to others. It didn’t matter if they had been dustmen or presidents, what mattered was that apart from children, material possessions and debts, one should leave something else for future generations. People should send their stories out there – into the eternal realm of human history.

**Telling Stories**

For eleven years, along with Zdeněk Tyc, I have been producing a Czech television series entitled "Still Here". The episodes are mainly comprised of interviews with Czech and Slovak seniors. Initially, we had wanted to ask elderly people what it means to be old at the end of the 20th century. Was there actually anything good about it? Even in the 1990s, a person older than 70 essentially belonged in the scrap heap, and so we were interested how people cope with being written off so easily.

As a writer, salespeople, doctors, teachers and we listened carefully to their stories. After a few months, we observed a change in ourselves: We were no longer talking with our subjects merely because they were old, but also because we knew that on a personal level, we could gain much from these discussions. Each of the subjects was majestic in their own right, and during the expression of their past experiences, they flowered as people. They were attractive to us to listen to and be with. The wrinkles on their faces suddenly represented experience and endurance rather than mere old age. And old age suddenly stopped being just a label and instead became a quality in and of itself.

In 2000 we went out to film a few episodes in New York. The Americans with Czech origins whom we went to film could not find out that we were making a programme about old people, because in America only a car or ancestry can be old, but not people. New York was full of octogenarians in tennis shoes with rucksacks on their backs. How could one explain to them about what being old means in the Czech Republic? As soon as we rolled the cameras, they were all as fascinating and majestic as their contemporaries in Prague.

I flew home with the belief that our perception of old people and old age is merely a construction. It is a ghetto, where we are placed by our arrogant children and by a social system, because we can’t "continue" in the real world anymore. But what the elderly can still do is perhaps greater than what time allows. We are not mere old age.

**Tereza Brdečková is a writer, screenwriter and journalist.**
R
cent scandals concerning the ap
parent lawless activities of the US
private security contractor Black
water in the killings of innocent Iraqi civil
ians have shed light on a larger dynamic –
the outsourcing of government operations
to the private sector. The trend towards
privatizing governmental operations can
be seen in all regions of the world, includ
ing Central Europe.

According to the Wall Street Journal,
US private federal contractors now total
more than 7.5 million, which is four times
greater than the federal workforce itself.
With federal contracting expenditures
approaching half a trillion dollars a year,
having doubled during this decade, the US
national debt has now surpassed $9 trillion
for the first time ever. Outsourcing is sup
posed to save money, but the New York Times
found that less than half
of the government's private contractor ac
tions in 2005 were even subject to open
competition.

Government contracting
“Government is not the solution to our
problem; government is the problem,”
Ronald Reagan proclaimed in his 1981
inaugural address, thus christening an
era of populist anti-government politics.
In the 1990s, the Clinton administra
tion cut the US federal workforce to its
lowest level since 1960 and streamlined
outsourcing. Now, George W. Bush, the
first MBA President, viewing his role as
a CEO, has taken the privatization of
government to unprecedented levels.
Simply put, his administration holds the
basic view that government can do no
right, and business can do no wrong.

The Wall Street Journal reports that
more than 40 cents of every dollar paid
by US taxpayers now goes to private con
tractors, performing functions including
oversight, security and tax collection.
Even the most secret and politi
cally sensitive govt. jobs, such as gathering
intelligence, legal compliance, budget
preparation, and counting the votes in
elections are increasingly contracted out,
subsequent to the outsourcing of “inherent
ly governmental” duties. The US governmen
t spent $43.5 billion on intelligence gathering operations in

The US has spent
twice as much in
inflation adjusted
dollars to rebuild
Iraq as it did to
rebuild Japan

Blackwater
The September 16, 2007 killings of 17
Iraqi civilians in Baghdad by private
security guards of the US govt. provides
a useful case study of the pitfalls of out
sourcing traditional military and other
governmental functions.

A lawsuit filed in US federal court on
November 26th on behalf of five Iraqis
who were killed and two who were
injured during the shootings accuses an
estimated dozen Blackwater bodyguards
of ignoring a direct order to stay with the
official they were assigned to protect, and,
under the influence of steroids, going on
a crazed shooting rampage in a section of
Baghdad known as Nisoor Square.

Investigations by the US military, FBI
and also the Iraqi government found no
The hidden contractor workforce is politically convenient for officials, enabling them to claim that they are reducing the size and cost of govt.

Competency and Corruption
In 2003, Blackwater was awarded a $27 million no-bid contract to provide bodyguards for US staff in Iraq. A year later, the State Dept. expanded that contract to $100 million. Blackwater now holds a contract worth $1.2 billion. Over the past 4 years, State Dept. spending on private security firms has risen by 400%, to $4 billion a year, yet few officials act to oversee the contracts. Private contractors are paid up to 7 times what US soldiers are paid, yet, according to the Times, “The State Dept. has said that it will continue to rely on contractors because, for now at least, it has no choice… the military does not have the trained personnel to take over the job.” An official inquiry by the Special Inspector General for Iraq reconstruction found that the State Dept. was unable to say what is was receiving for much of the money given to Dyn-Corp (whose employees were implicated in sex crimes committed in the 1990s in the Balkans), the second largest private contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 3 years.

Ultimately, Blackwater continues to prosper because the State Dept. and the armed forces have become depleted and anemic. An early 2007 Wall Street Journal report found that due to its increasing tendency to outsource, the US govt. is rapidly losing its expertise and competence in vital areas such as security and defense, leading to what the author calls “the outsourcing of its brain." FEMA’s (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) feeble response to Hurricane Katrina and the Coalition Provisional Authority's dismal performance in Iraq are but two of many examples of incompetence and corruption.

Author and columnist Naomi Klein notes that when contractors – including Blackwater – descended on New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, “FEMA was already so hollowed-out by then that it had to hire a contractor to help manage all the contractors… It still looks like government – with impressive buildings, presidential news briefings, policy battles. But pull back the curtain and there is nobody home.” When the Dept. of Homeland Security solicited bids on a recent multi-billion dollar project it announced to contractors, “We're asking you to come back and tell us how to do our business.”

But at least we’ve saved money, right? Wrong. Competition, essential to realizing the purported efficiencies of free market solutions, has been lacking. The Times reports that less than half of all “contract actions” – new contracts and payments against existing contracts – are subject to full and open competition. Just 48% were competitive in 2005, down from 79% in 2001. The recent trend has been to use sole-source contracts which combine the dangers of a monopoly with the waste and inefficiency of a bureaucracy. The lack of oversight in accounting for the use of public monies has been well documented. For instance, following the invasion of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disbursed more than $23 billion, of which some $10 billion has vanished and gone unaccounted for in a frenzy of mismanagement and greed (See “Billions over Baghdad,” Vanity Fair, October 2007).

As Congress gave money to the CPA, few realized that it was neither a US, nor Iraqi, nor a UN agency. The bizarre truth, noted in an opinion of a US federal
judge, is that "no formal document . . . establishes the CPA or provides for its formation." Thus, it was legally unaccountable in giving away billions of dollars. When asked by a BBC reporter what happened to all that money airlifted to Baghdad, the CPA's director of management and budget replied: "I have no idea -- I can't tell you whether or not that money went to the right things or didn't -- nor do I actually think it's important . . . what difference does it make?" A private contracting company using a Bahamian PO box, experienced only in home remodeling, was given the contract to audit the billions disbursed by the CPA.

As for the efficiency of such contracting, consider this: as of October 2007, the US has spent twice as much in inflation adjusted dollars to rebuild Iraq as it did to rebuild Japan -- an industrialized country comparable in size to Iraq, two of whose cities had been incinerated by atomic bombs. A November 20th Center for Public Integrity report finds that US contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan more than doubled from 2004 to 2006, to over $25 billion, yet "[w]hile the billions of dollars involved and the complexity of these war-related contracts has only grown, the lack of oversight has been staggering." A December 2007 report of the Pentagon's Inspector General finds that more than 90% of its contracts in Iraq lack sufficient paperwork to determine how the funds were spent.

**Government diminished -- meaner, not leaner**

Blackwater's September 16th shooting rampage is not an isolated incident. Atrocities have also occurred at Haditha, Abu Ghraib, Bagram, "black site" secret prisons, and elsewhere. Yet there has been no reckoning, due in part to willful denial, but also because military operations have largely been outsourced to private contractors who have escaped the law -- because current US and international laws do not adequately address contractors. Notably, the Coalition Provisional Authority installed in Baghdad following the US invasion of Iraq decreed that US forces and agents are immune from Iraqi prosecution.

As Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights stated, "These legal loopholes amount, in prac-

...
the Times “is supposed to be the consumers’ advocate, [yet] has more often echoed the views of the manufacturers’ lobbyists,” recently joined lobbyists of toy manufacturers in opposing an increase in her own agency’s budget (!), banning lead from toys for kids, and stiffening penalties for violators. It was subsequently revealed that she and her predecessor took free trips from the toy industry to China, Spain and a golf resort at Hilton Head Island. The Times opined, “President Bush came into office promising relief for industry, which he claimed was overburdened by government regulations. Too often, however, that policy allows unscrupulous businesses to put workers and consumers in danger. . . .In recent months, millions of toys have been recalled because of their brightly colored – and very toxic – lead paint.”

Citizenship and the Social Fabric
JFK famously implored Americans, “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” Yet at a time of war in Afghanistan and Iraq Americans have been asked to do little more than go shopping and watch Fox News.

As reported in the International Herald Tribune, “Without public debate or formal policy decision, contractors have become a virtual fourth branch of government.” And such contracting almost always leads to less public scrutiny. Companies, unlike govt. agencies, are not subject to disclosure laws. Congress has spent two years trying in vain to get the Army to explain the contracts for Blackwater’s work in Iraq, which involves several layers of costly subcontractors. An early 2007 study by govt.-appointed experts concluded that the surge of contracting “poses a threat to the government’s long-term ability to perform its mission [and could] undermine the integrity of the government’s decision-making.”

So why use contractors? The hidden contractor workforce is politically convenient for officials, enabling them to claim that they are reducing the size and cost of govt. It also enables officials to reward friends and patrons, and to establish ties to contractors who may hire them in lucrative positions someday -- the public-private revolving door (e.g. former CIA counter-terrorism chief Cofer Black is now vice-chairman of Blackwater and an advisor to presidential candidate Mitt Romney). And in war-time, private armies allow politicians to avoid a draft and reduce the political damage caused by troop casualties since the deaths of contractors are not counted (There are now 180,000 individual private contractors in Iraq while the total number of US troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan is 156,247). An October UN report on human rights notes several stories of “killings carried out by privately hired contractors with security-related functions in support of US govt. authorities” and warns that an increasing reliance on heavily armed private contractors risks eroding the distinction between civilians and combatants.

Govt. contractors have become powerful special interest groups which, through their campaign contributions and lobbying activities, exert an inordinate influence on policy. The billions spent on missile defense programs which do not work, for instance, is driven by the aerospace industry. The top 20 contractors have spent more than $300 million since 2000 on lobbying and have donated $23 million to political campaigns. Contractors have formed their own lobbying association, the Professional Services Council, which pushes for the further corporatization of govt. Lockheed Martin, the biggest contractor, receives more federal money each year than either the Energy or Justice Departments. Congressional earmarks also serve to directly benefit select private businesses at public expense. This non-transparent legislative “pork” which allows lawmakers to fund projects to benefit their large campaign contributors has tripled over the past decade, totaling $31 billion last year. For instance, House lawmakers tacked on 1,337 earmarks adding some $3 billion to go to 580 private companies in its most recent military appropriations bill – all for projects which the Pentagon did not even request.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), established as a new govt. agency in 2003, offers prime pickings for contractors. Nominated in 2004 to head DHS, Bernard Kerik has pled guilty to ethics violations and was recently indicted on 16 counts of federal criminal
fraud, conspiracy and obstruction of justice. DHS maintains an “Open for Business” website section and a private-sector office headed by a former JP Morgan Chase banker. This office held a corporate seminar in 2007 on “The Business of Homeland Security” offering “tips, hints and directions” on how to win contracts. In 2003, the US govt. issued 3, 512 security contracts to companies. In the 22-month period ending in August 2006, DHS issued more than 115, 000 security related contracts.

All the wrong incentives
US govt. contracts for work in Afghanistan and Iraq have grown from $11 billion in 2004 to more than $25 billion in 2006. Comptroller General Walker notes the acute problem of lack of oversight for military contracting. The Center for Public Integrity cites the lack of competitive bidding, missing contracts and unidentified companies as some of the key problems. In its list of the top 100 private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004 through 2006, the largest beneficiary falls into the category of “Unidentified Foreign Entities” — those not identified in US govt. contracts – which have received some 20.5 billion dollars for services.

According to US attorney Alan Grayson, the amount spent on contractors in the four-plus years of war in Iraq is now over $100 billion, and through a combination of inflated bids, waste, kickbacks and inflated subcontracts, some half of the value of every contract he has seen “ends up being fraudulent in one way or another.” (See “The People vs. The Profiters,” Vanity Fair, November 2007).

Patrick Leahy, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has introduced a War Profiteering Prevention Act to hold corrupt contractors accountable. But it is the very deals the govt. awards contractors that fosters waste and corruption. Halliburton spin-off KBR operates under a LOGCAP 3 contract which is a sole-source (giving KBR sole responsibility for the maintenance of US troops in Iraq) “cost-plus” agreement, meaning that the govt. commits to reimburse whatever KBR spends, plus a fee of some 3%. So the more money KBR spends, the more money it makes; thereby giving it the incentive to jack-up its expenditures by any means. KBR is thus encouraged to be inefficient, and to falsify cost-related records.

According to former employee Linda Warren, KBR regularly falsified records. For instance, its official 2006 statement of “73.5 million patrons served in Recreational Facilities” was more than 565 times the number of troops stationed in Iraq. Former employees have also recounted how KBR over-orders equipment on a huge scale, much of which is then left to rot in the desert. The LOGCAP contracts are written and administered in such way that there is no way to track how the money has been spent. Yet LOGCAP 4, to be awarded to DynCorp, Fluor and KBR, is another cost-plus, indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity contract. This time a private contractor has been hired to assist the govt. agencies responsible for oversight. But outsourcing govt. oversight merely abdicates duty to an unqualified business rife with conflicts of interest.

The Department of Defense [DOD] is the largest govt. agency with a $460 billion budget this year [not including almost $200 billion in supplemental funding for war funding], a 90% increase since 2000. On November 13th, Congress estimated the actual cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to total a staggering $1.6 trillion – roughly $20, 900 per US family of four. DOD private contracting expenditures have risen from $106 billion in 2000 to $297 billion in 2006. Attorney Alan Grayson says, “In my mind, one of the basic reasons, maybe even the basic reason, why the war has gone badly is war profiteering. You could say that the only people who have benefited from the war in Iraq are al-Qaeda, Iran and Halliburton. America has spent so much money that we literally could have hired every single adult Iraqi and it would have cost less than what it has cost to conduct this war through US military forces and contractors.”

Halliburton’s govt. contracts have risen by 600%, including more than $10 billion in DOD contracts, while its spin-off, KBR, has been the top contractor in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2004 through 2006, with contracts exceeding $16 billion. With 2006 profits of almost $2.5 billion, Halliburton’s overall profits have increased by more than 368% since 2001. Like Halliburton, DynCorp, Blackwater, L-3, Titan, Custer Battles, Triple Canopy, etc. are also reaping billions of dollars of public monies doing work outsourced by the Bush-Cheney (The latter, the former CEO of Halliburton) Pentagon. Of course, nearly all of these companies are major donors to and are run by executives with close ties to the Republican Party.

Blackwater revisited (a Blackwater whitewash?)
Under public pressure, in December new rules and guidelines were agreed to giving the military in Iraq greater control over Blackwater and other private security contractors. At best this reform may improve oversight, yet it does little to fix the larger problem of a system of bad incentives. At worst it is purely cosmetic, and likely to be overseen by the very contractors it is purported to control.

The International Herald Tribune opined on November 17-18, “the FBI is reaching the same horrifying conclusions as the Iraqi authorities did: that the deadly September shooting spree by Blackwater security guards in Baghdad was unjustified [and] has fed Iraqi fury at the American occupation... Contractors have been involved in some of the most shameful incidents in this war, including the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. But not one contractor [among the 100, 000 American contractors working in Iraq] has been prosecuted for crimes against an Iraqi. That shameful record cannot be allowed to stand.”

Bush officials have consistently employed the “few bad apples” defense to discount the corrupt practices and atrocities of US contractors, such as the Sept. 16th killings at Nisoor Square. As the disgrace and waste continue, that explanation is clearly inadequate. The Blackwater scandal provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the institutions and incentives at work and to question the wisdom of turning state functions into for-profit enterprises. If we fail to do so there will surely be more Blackwaters in our future.

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If one were to ask a layperson what the Czech Republic has given the world, most likely the answer would be beer. But although the Pilsner form of the amber nectar was first brewed in West Bohemia, it was actually a Bavarian by the name of Josef Groll that invented the national tipple. So what does that leave the residents of this small republic? Surprisingly, quite a lot.

**The contact lens**

Many of you will be reading this magazine blissfully unaware of how much you owe Czech chemist, Otto Wichterle. While working in the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, Wichterle produced the first hydrogel contact lenses, the same kind that are used today. Previous incarnations had been constructed from brown glass and were neither particularly effective nor were they particularly comfortable and could only be worn for an hour or two at a time. Today, about 125 million people wear contact lenses across the globe.

Fate and coincidence often play a large role in inventions. The Czech chemist Otto Wichterle, born in 1913, already had a successful career behind him, with synthetic fibres, being his most notable discovery. Wichterle was born in the Moravian town of Prostějov and studied at the Faculty of Chemical and Technological Engineering (ČVUT), where he later went on to work as a research assistant. The occupation of Czechoslovakia and the ensuing closure of Universities by the Nazis led Wichterle to seek work at the research and development department of the Bata shoe company. It was here that he succeeded in developing a stretching polyimide silicon fibre. After the war, this material was sold as Silon (Czechs today call stockings "silonky"). In Czechoslovakia, this discovery represented a breakthrough in synthetic material production. Wichterle soon became a professor at the Technical University in Prague, from where he continued to experiment with polymers. In 1953, he patented a method used for the production of hydrophilic gels for medical uses. And it is this material that would later be used for Wichterle’s most famous invention, the contact lens.

Wichterle was by no means a darling of either the Nazi or communist regimes. During the war, the Nazis imprisoned the chemist, and life under the communists, despite his anti-Nazi credentials was also not rosy. In 1958, Wichterle was forced to abandon his position as a professor, but his indispensability was soon recognised, and Wichterle was given another “chance”. He was soon entrusted with creating an Institute of Macromolecular chemistry, and became its first head. The Soviet invasion of 1968 marked the decline of Wichterle’s career. The chemist openly criticised the new puppet government and signed a petition opposing its actions. The onset of President Gustav Husák’s normalisation led to Wichterle being stripped of all of his positions. He was only allowed to continue working as a researcher, and his name was not allowed to feature on any lists of Czechoslovak professors.

But let us return to Wichterle’s most famous invention. Back in 1952, on a journey from Olomouc to Prague, Wichterle saw one of his fellow passengers reading an article about metal artificial eye implants. He began to talk to the reader and soon started to think about a synthetic material that might be better suited to the eye. By coincidence, the passanger was the secretary of a health ministry commission, which was studying the usage of synthetic materials in healthcare. Wichterle did not immediately know of any particular material that could be used in the eye, but the idea of hydrophilic polymers was soon coalescing in his mind. Directly translated “water-loving” material would be ideal for this purpose. In such
A look at some of the Czech Republic’s most famous and infamous inventions.

A material, interwoven chains of organic macromolecules create a mesh and are surrounded by molecules of water. When the material dries up, it loses its properties and becomes as fragile as thin glass. The more water is present, the softer the material and the less it irritates human tissue, particularly the eye. For a contact lens to be feasible, the material also had to be porous in order to allow the eye to breathe.

Wichterle experimented by trying out his lenses on himself. Initially, they were unrefined, and they burned his eyes, but the inventor soon realised that despite the setbacks, he was definitely on to something. But Wichterle was greeted with apathy back at his place of work. The Institute of Macromolecular chemistry was still under construction and so Wichterle chose to do much of his hydrogel work at home assisted by his wife Lydia, a doctor by profession. By Christmas 1961, Wichterle built, with the aid of some of his son’s toys(!) a prototype mould from which he fashioned four particularly uniform lenses. This proved that contact lenses could be mass-produced – indeed, in the ensuing months, Wichterle produced more than five thousand of them.

Of course, Wichterle was not the first to toy with the idea of a contact lens. Such esteemed names as Leonardo da Vinci and René Descartes can claim that credit. But the former never had the means to even attempt to create such an invention; the latter merely focused on the mathematical complexities of such a device. The first glass lenses were created in 1887 by the German glassmaker F.E. Müller, but it was Wichterle who created a functional design that could be worn far longer, and was far more affordable.

Wichterle travelled around the world with his invention, and demonstrated its usage and functionality on himself – he took a lens out of his eye, threw it on the floor and stood on it. Then, he washed it in his mouth, and put it back in his eye. Naturally, such an unhygienic approach would raise eyebrows today. The presentations were successes, yet, for a long time it seemed that contact lens was far more of an attractive gimmick that would simply not catch on. Then, a company expressed interest in purchasing the patent. The Czechoslovak academy did not waste any time, and without the knowledge of the inventor, it sold the patent to the US company National Patent Development Corp. for a mere million dollars. When one considers how many billions of dollars have been spent on contact lenses, this sum seems all the more laughable. Further, Wichterle only received a paltry cut of this sum. As a person who spent his whole life carrying the burden of his talents in the face of the various Czechoslovak regimes, Wichterle remained philosophical, telling the British Guardian newspaper “I would have had problems with what to do with that sum of money.”

But Otto Wichterle did finally receive some recognition for his efforts. After
1989, he was elected to serve as the head of the Czech Science Academy and during the nineties, he remained active in the field of synthetic lenses for patients that had undergone cataract removal. Among many other rewards, in 1993 Wichterle was honoured by having an asteroid named after him in recognition of his work. In the Czech Television series “The Greatest Czech” Wichterle was voted number 23. He died in 1998.

The Sugar Cube
There is something about the sugar cube that makes one believe that it is such a logical invention that it must have always been in existence. Not so.

Dačice is a Czech town of around 8000 people not far from the Austrian border. The locals are proud of their clean air, largely achieved through a preference for gas power as well as a lack of industrial pollutants. They are also proud of their historical landmarks scattered densely across the town. But more than any of that, Dačice’s inhabitants are proud of their sugar cube.

In fact, Dačice even has a granite sugar-cube shaped memorial (constructed in 1983) to the town’s most prolific invention. During the 19th century, Karl Dalberg, an earl from the town, invited the Grebner brothers to hear a proposal to build a beet sugar refinery in the town. František and Tomáš Grebner had credentials and experience in this field in countries such as Germany and France and their plans were eventually accepted.

Dačice lies about 500 metres above sea level, not ideal conditions for the cultivation of sugar beet. In 1829, the Grebner brothers planted three hectares worth of crops, which soon failed. After several more attempts, they were forced to give up on the idea of growing sugar in the region. But in 1833, a sugar refinery opened in Dačice which refined imported sugar from Italy and later also domestic sugar. In the early 1840s, a new manager came to Dačice by the name of Jakub Kryštof Rad. Rad, a Swiss national, expanded the factory and soon it was exporting across Europe. In 1842, it became the first sugar factory to use steam power.

The successful manager was also something of a handyman. In those days, sugar was sold in a solid state and in larger quantities, usually in the shape of a loaf. This was less than ideal for the domestic kitchen, as before each use, the sugar would have to be chipped off the large block. Juliana, Rad’s wife, keenly observed this limitation. Once, while hacking at her sugar loaf, she injured herself. With a bandaged finger, she ran to her husband, imploring him, as the manager of a sugar factory, to come up with a better solution.

The end result of this marital squabble was a mould for a sugar cube, which Mr Rad built himself. The mould contained 400 small holes and would then be pressed between two plates, which shrunk the sugar to half its size. The cubes would then be dried for around twelve hours, and then they could be wrapped up and sold.

Soon after, Juliana received her first box of sugar cubes. All this occurred some time around 1841. Within two years, Rad managed to gain a licence and patent for the manufacture of sugar cubes. Soon, the cubes found their way to Vienna, and from there, the rest of Europe. The Dačice refinery was highly successful during the 1840s. However, the problem of its less than ideal altitude and location soon became an issue again. Specifically, costs were increased due to the need to import raw materials from afar. As a result, and despite the lucrative sugar cube, the refinery closed in 1852, and Rad soon returned to Vienna, where his part in the sugar cube was soon forgotten. It wasn’t until 20th century sugar...
historian R.E. Grottkas pointed to Rad’s contribution during the 1930s that this invention was again highlighted. Thus, the citizens of Dačice continue to be proud of their invention, even though its inventor was in actuality a Swiss citizen from Vienna.

Semtex

One of the most famous Czech inventions is also, by definition, one of the most notorious. It is certainly an invention that Czechs are not particularly proud of, namely the explosive Semtex.

When on the 21st October 1988, a Pan Am airplane blew up and crashed on the Scottish town of Lockerbie, a small Czech invention gained notoriety around the world. Results showed that the 259 passengers and a further 11 people in Lockerbie had died because of an explosion on board the plane – traces of Hexogen and Penitrite were found in the wreckage, unmistakably the hallmark of a Czechoslovak manufactured plastic explosive known as Semtex.

Semtex was invented in the 1960s by Stanislav Brebera. The name was derived from the words Semtin and Explosia. The first is the name of a small village near the Czech town of Pardubice where the substance was made, and the latter is the name of the company that created it. Semtex was initially created for industrial usage, but soon its use was extended to military, and later terrorist purposes.

Its use as a terrorist weapon is understandable: Semtex is resistant to high temperatures, pressures and is even waterproof. At first sight, it looks like simple plasticine, and can only be detonated with the aid of a detonator or other explosive. In the Lockerbie incident, it was later discovered that the Semtex had been hidden in a portable cassette player. From 1991, Semtex has been deliberately marked in order to make it more difficult to conceal – a special chemical is added which makes it visible to detectors.

The Czechoslovak government also contributed to Semtex’s bad name by exporting it to countries such as Libya and Vietnam. However, the precise amounts exported by the communist government are almost impossible to calculate. From Libya, Semtex made its way to various terrorist groups, for example the IRA and was also used in the Middle East. Semtex was also sold on the black market by members of the Czechoslovak army, and was even stolen by workers where it was manufactured.

Even today, Semtex remains accessible to members of the Czech underworld. It was used in the case of the so called Orlícký Murders (a series of murders committed by competing business factions in the 1990s). It was also allegedly to be used by the former Czech ministerial adviser Karel Srb to murder the investigative journalist Sabina Slonková. Today, only small amounts of Semtex are still produced, but the fact that this explosive remains so durable, means that old stocks are still a threat.

The greatest of the great

Any article on Czech inventors would be amiss if it did not mention one of the greatest historical figures of all time. Indeed, this particular Czech is so prolific that it is difficult to find a single invention that he himself did not discover or create. Who is this figure? His name is Jára Cimrman, actually a fictional character created by the comedians Zdeňek Svěrák and Jiří Šebánek. The Jára Cimrman phenomenon has become something of an ongoing joke in Czech society. Performers Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeňek Svěrák give presentations in which they try to piece together the mystical and elusive details of this great Czech’s life. Very little is known about Cimrman beyond the fact that he is truly the greatest historical figure of all time – and in that lies the quintessentially Czech comedy. In the aforementioned Greatest Czech competition, Cimrman received a huge number of nominations. However, the organisers of the competition were forced to strike him from the list, because he was, after all, a fictional character. But the myth continues: In a recent poll by the news server iDnes.cz, on who would be the ideal candidate to oppose Czech president Václav Klaus in upcoming elections, Cimrman’s name again dominated the list.

Sonia Kalausová is a freelance journalist.

Other Czech inventors

- Václav Prokop Diviš – inventor of the lightening rod & Denis dór – first electrified musical instrument
- Jakub Hnusik – inventor of photolithography
- Josef Ludvik František Ressel – inventor of the ship propeller
- Jaroslav Heyrovský – inventor of polarographic effect and father of electroanalytical canistry – nobel prize winner
- Karel Václav Klíč – inventor of photogravure
- Otto Wichterle – inventor of the contact lens
- Miroslav Sedláček – inventor of stream hydro-electrics
- The Veverka cousins – invented a turning plough, an advanced form of plough that not only ploughed but also turned the soil
- Viktor Kaplan – inventor of the water turbine – ‘the Czech edison’
- František Klížik – first arc lamps
- Johan Gregor Mendel – founder of genetics
- Jan Evangelista Purkyné – author of cell theory
- Sigmund Freud – inventor of deep psychology, born in Moravia.
- Johannes Evangelists Purkinje – pioneer of fingerprinting
- Jan Janský – classification of blood groups and proponent of blood donation
- Georg Franz August Graf von Buquoy (Jífi Buquoy) – synthetic hyalite
- Jan Hajek – development of TCP/IP protocol
- František Koláček – first to describe electromagnetic theory of light dispersion
- Jiri Procháská – wrote first genuine textbook of physiology, created the concept of nerve conduction
- Carl Freiherřa von Rokitsansky – method of autopsy still used today – 70 000 autopsies, and personally performed over 30 000, averaging two a day, seven days a week, for 45 years
- John Zeleny – inventor of electroscope
Rising Waters

Alena Müllerová

He sat in his chair, head bent backwards, trying to think of his name. An unknown girl entered the room. It could have been his daughter or granddaughter – she was too young to be his girlfriend.

“Do you need anything?” she asked.

“Time is running out and the waters are rising,” he blurted out somewhat randomly, as if he could think of nothing else to say. Recently, his brain had begun to work in rather mysterious ways. He remembered many details from his youth and childhood, but at the same time, he had difficulty recalling what day it was, or what year, or the identities of people around him, or even his own name.

Granddad sat in his old chair and mumbled something to himself. Katka didn’t understand a word. After Katka’s mother had taken him home from the hospital, his bones creaked, he barely ate and he couldn’t even stand up anymore. They told her that he wouldn’t be around for much longer. But after being released, his condition improved slightly.

“Where am I?” he suddenly asked in a loud and lucid voice.

“Home.” Katka answered, amiably.

“Home, where?” replied the old man.

Katka almost believed that her grandmother wasn’t deserving of such care. His whole life, he had just shouted at people. When his wife had served him some soup, an apple from a basket on the table. He didn’t understand a word. After Katka’s mother and had just moved into a roof. Granddad recalled how he beat his younger brother was killed when he fell off a roof. Granddad recalled how he beat his sister Fanca a few days after it happened. He had never done anything similar to that before. She covered her eyes with her hands, begged for mercy and then just went silent. Later, it became easier for him to administer such punishments. If his brothers or sisters annoyed him, then he beat them. Later, it was the same situation with his own kids and also his wife. But only when necessary, of course…

Katka looked at Granddad and took an apple from a basket on the table. He looked at those apples with a clear sense of longing, but he couldn’t have chewed them up anyway. Before, he would have certainly found the energy to hurl some kind of abuse at her. Today, he looked more confused than ever. He didn’t even recognize her. Only yesterday, he scolded her for wasting time studying film and theatre at university. Granddad was certain that girls shouldn’t study at all. At least if she had chosen some useful school instead of studying film and theatre. He had never even once been to the cinema, and only once had he visited the Czech National Theatre.

Granddad had forbidden both of his daughters and also his wife from attending high school. She finished grammar school with distinction, but that was it. He wanted her to work, but only because he was unwilling to go on supporting her. Mother told stories of how, along with Grandmother, they had both begged him to allow her to study further, but he remained as rigid as stone.

Grandmother and Granddad both worked in a factory. As a child in a working family, the authorities would have let mother into any high school she had wanted to attend. Instead, she went into accounting, even though office work bored her.

“He ruined my life,” said Mother very often.

Katka could never understand why Mother was unable to stand up to her father. The same with Grandmother. But they were afraid of him. It seemed that the cold lack of empathy within him had just been allowed to fester unchallenged for all these years. Katka could never forget how when she was very small, Granddad deliberately trampled on a birds nest, killing all the baby birds inside.

Katka stood in front of Granddad chewing on her apple. The old man couldn’t remember what that round, juicy green fruit was called. He had a dry feeling in his mouth. In his view, that woman next to him did not even try to understand what he wanted. She looked at him coldly and indifferently. She looked at him as if he were a strange insect. He detested being pitied, and this seemed just as bad. In his head, dark imaginings surfaced, which only made his mood more sombre.

He was only a young man, but already had a family and had just moved into a new home. He found himself walking along his big garden with its ripening fruit trees, laborious vegetable plots and endless bushes. Before he managed to reach the apple trees, his thoughts drifted elsewhere. Suddenly, he was much older,
wearing dirty boots, and in a foul mood. Next to him danced his young granddaughter. He lifted her up so that she could see a nest full of young blackbirds. The birds looked so fragile and innocent. But blackbirds were not welcome here. He thrust the nest to the floor and stamped on the birds until they were no more. The little girl started screaming and banging her fists on her grandfather’s chest. He pushed her away and went for a cigarette into his small wooden garden hut filled with stores of hazelnuts and apples. He could smell them all around him. It was funny how clearly he could remember the brand of cigarettes he smoked.

“Squadron” said the old man suddenly.

Katka jumped, before pondering whether Granddad had ever flown a plane during his life, but she knew that he probably hadn’t. He had certainly experienced the Second World War as a boy, but he surely never fought in it. In fact, Katka knew almost nothing of his life. They had never really spoken with each other properly. She only knew the fragments that Mother had told her. The old man had come from a poor family and his favourite topic was to bring up how as a child he had to eat anything to survive, even pigswill, or how he and his sisters were made to collect their fallen out hair so that it could be platted and sold.

Straight after the War, Granddad became a communist and in the Fifties he created a village farmer’s co-op. His wife’s family had a plot of land and apparently, he helped to ensure that it was confiscated by the authorities. Grandmother’s sister Katka tired to persuade him otherwise, but instead he reported her to the authorities too. She spent a year being interrogated. Katka was very fortunate because the procurator was an acquaintance of her father and arranged for her to avoid conviction. She returned from incarceration grey and broken –young Katka was named after her.

“Kateřina” he remembered. “That girl is my granddaughter and is called Kateřina, the same as my sister-in-law. She has the same wild eyes.” Unlike her sister, his late wife Maria, was as meek as a lamb – she even looked like one. Maria had remained thoroughly subordinate to him throughout their marriage. In fact, the more he made her suffer and the more he berated her, the more subjugated she became. But her sister was completely different.

He remembered very well how back in 1953, she came to him with her black hair and strong dark eyes. She was much prettier than his wife, and far more rebellious. Back then they argued about the co-op, whether the right people had gotten into power.

“You are trying to destroy old Mr Mazura.” She shouted at him. “Because you had to work as a labourer under him before. But he was never bad to you.”

She didn’t want him to enable the authorities to take their plots, especially since they were relatives. But for him, this was impossible.

“Now we will all be equal.” He told her, coldly.

She laughed in his face.

“You are stupid. But I could forgive that far more than the way you behave towards our Maria. You abuse the fact that she is so kind and innocent and the fact that she is not used to people like you. You haven’t in you even a drop of empathy.”

His sister-in-law carried on her rant, but Granddad couldn’t remember what he told her. But what he could not forget is how she suddenly jumped up and grabbed him by the neck. That was too much for him. He took her by the hair and shoved her to the ground. Then he had her arrested. When after a few months they released her, her hair had turned completely grey.

“Kateřina” he said suddenly. “Could you please get me something to drink?”

She understood that her grandfather was having a lucid moment and passed him a cup of tea. She even helped him to hold it so he wouldn’t spill it.

“I have to go. My lessons start soon.” He said, trying to get up. “It is quite far away.”

He sat home in the room, staring vacuously. Suddenly he saw his mother, wearing a flowery dress while he, now a young boy, was getting ready for school. He asked her if he could go, but she said that he could not, because it was snowing outside and he didn’t have the right shoes. Until the snow outside thawed, his mother spent most of her time in bed ill. He promised her that if anything happened to her, he would take care of his brother and sisters. But he didn’t manage to look after Josefík. One day, he took it upon himself to climb up on the roof of the house. But he lost his footing, and fell, head first, straight down onto the stone path below. His brother told his sisters that crying for him was futile. But they were beyond comforting. Since then, he hated to see people crying, and absolutely forbade it in himself.

He tried to explain to the others why he didn’t fulfil what he promised. But somehow he couldn’t find the right words. They remained hidden somewhere deep inside him, appearing for a second before simply vanishing. It was like pressing the muted keys of a piano.

Grandfather asked Katka for forgiveness. He said that he always did his best.

“I am really very sorry.”

She didn’t know whether he meant how he had hurt his sister-in-law, his wife or his daughter. She so wanted to question him more, but knew that it was too late.

“No one is angry at you,” she said unusually, because she knew that she was not really speaking for herself. If only Mother were here, she thought. It seemed that Katka’s reply had calmed him a little. But then, she noticed him weeping.

He sat in his chair, head tilted back, tears running down his eyes, right down into his ears. After all these years, it was the only real sound he had the energy to make.

Alena Müllerová is a writer for Czech Television. This story was written for our sister paper Přítomnost as part of their issue dealing with old age. Translated and slightly edited from the original Czech.
Democracy: Binding the Nation Together

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

Přítomnost, 23rd September 1936

Former Czech President Masaryk often warned that our political parties do not yet clearly understand the kinds of social and political opportunities presented by democracy. Masaryk considered democracy as a crucial tool, which we can use to tackle numerous pressing issues – if only we would learn how to use it. He also warned that a democratic constitution only represents the essential building blocks of that process. Democracy, as he viewed it, was a positive opportunity for all, a path towards the future, and if people protested, he simply pointed out that even here, they could organize, petition, and simply use democracy as well!

If this approach is applicable to our political parties, then it is doubly so for our German population, who have recently flocked en masse to support the nationalistic Sudeten German party. We must not be confused by the fact that this party claims to support the Czech democratic process and constitution. Its most basic flaw is that it views democracy as a tie that binds the Czech state to Sudeten Germans, but not necessarily one that binds the Germans towards the Czech state. It uses democratic means to demand all rights for German Czechs, but internally, it acts undemocratically, often according to totalitarian and authoritarian principles. Simply put, the party seeks to use democratic means in order to extinguish them.

The question is, how to respond? In Czechoslovakia, we continue to grapple with questions of nationhood. Our democratic constitution offers us a good base for addressing and solving these issues, but we still remain ill-equipped to use these tools. Ironically, those that have most at stake in the national question are usually the least skilled in applying democratic processes. Similarly to the old communists, they use democracy only where they sense gain. They use it as a blunt tool, preferring to rely on authoritarian dictates. In the case of the Sudeten German Party, democracy is only used to conceal the fact that at its core, the party is reactionary and utterly fascist. Theirs is a path that will eventually lead all of us towards tough times.

There is one way in which Germans and Czechs could reach national peace in this country – and that is through the continued rise of democracy. It is certainly the most effective way for Czech-Germans, because no other regime can give them as much as a democratic one.

While Czech nationalism eventually morphed into a peaceful, democratic path towards national self-determination, German nationalism found no such fate. Defeat of both the German and Hapsburg Empires should have caused German nationalism to mature – instead, as Czech-German Sudeten agitation shows, nothing of the sort appears to have occurred. Indeed, in the German state, we see the threat of a new Empire, organized through National Socialism in the traditions of Prussian imperialism. No doubt, this is contributing to the irrational sentiments of our German population.

German nationalism has already had one negative effect for Czechs. In the formative years of our victorious Czechoslovak democracy, we forgot that the Germans still exist and in no small number. The defeat of their brand of nationalism in 1918 has created the illusion that it has been forever defeated. Today, Czechs, further strengthened by Slovaks, far outnumber our Germanic population. But the most important fact is this: for the first time in history, democracy has found a foothold and a voice in the Czech lands – as has the German minority – something that neither we nor they initially realized. Czech-Germans remain of the belief that this new experiment represents a threat to their way of life.

Both Germans and Czechs are presented with the task of consolidating democracy. However, in the current climate of Germany as well as our own Sudeten lands, this seems a more and more remote possibility. We Czechs, thanks to our social and historical development, have fared far better than they. Thus, we can say with full confidence, that nationalistic politics lead absolutely nowhere.

Zdeněk Smetánek

Dear Friends,

The Italian city of Verona will always be a very important city in the story of my life, even though I only visited it for two brief days in November. London is my home town, which like most Londoners I have an intense love/hate relationship with. I went to university in Manchester, where I met my girlfriend Lucy – but it was in Verona, ten years after first meeting her, that I finally asked Lucy to marry me.

I only knew two things about Verona before we flew: it’s the home of Romeo and Juliet (a fact the locals like to remind you of) – a text I’d studied at school, and kind of enjoyed, and also it is a city famous for its summer season of open air opera – music I enjoy when I hear it but know little about.

Rather than shout and show off and pout and preen about how great they are, like most cities I have fallen in love with, Verona quietly shows you a way of life that is slower, more self-contented and perhaps strangely more assured than big city life, certainly less cosmopolitan but none the poorer for it.

Verona is a small Italian city, close to its far more popular neighbour, Venice in the wine growing Veneto region to the north of Italy. More modern suburbs surround the ancient city centre, but nonetheless it has seemingly avoided or missed unnecessary modernization and has a slightly run-down but beautiful, distinctly Italian look and feel. The people are not the cosmopolitan glamour pusses of Rome – they seem slightly shabbier, a bit lived-in and more real, but there is still a nice air of people quietly living a good life to be had on the streets, and tasted in the uniformly excellent standard of food and drink to be found seemingly everywhere.

We stayed at a hotel to the north of the city that was huge but almost totally empty, giving a slight feeling of the hotel in Kubrick’s The Shining. After a long day of travel, we spent Friday night relaxing in our room, drinking great wines and watching what seemed to be 700 channels of the worst television ever. It was truly awesome to see how much junk was out there, from inane Italian game shows to German infomercials.

Next morning we finally hit the town, a bit hung-over but hyped up on the day of our anniversary. There was first a minor embarrassment when I wondered downstairs to order two café lattes from a lady who clearly spoke no English. Feeling a bit smug about how most communication is non-verbal anyway, I pointed to the menu, not realizing that I was actually ordering two hot milks, not coffees; but instead of saying something right there, I instead boisterously nodded to signify to anyone who might be watching that, although perhaps unorthodox, this was the drink I had wanted all along to set me up for the day ahead – two hot milks. “Those crazy English!” I imagined them saying, eyes rolled merrily upwards, while back in my room I was grumpily drinking them while Lucy laughed at me.

Tourism in Verona seems quiet compared to the sheer overload of Venice, particularly in the off-peak winter season, but nevertheless alongside our own English voices we heard American, French and Japanese being spoken. After an amazing lunch of red wine risotto in a very romantic small restaurant in the city centre, we went to see the Romeo and Juliet balcony, at what they call the “Verona Museum”. The museum should clearly just be called the “Romeo and Juliet Museum”, as it features literally nothing but their story, featuring various artistic representations of the couple, the bed from the Zeffirelli movie and even a bizarre bank of computers where you can e-mail Juliet your romantic hopes and dreams.

I had a diamond ring burning a hole in my pocket; I knew that I wanted to propose sooner rather than later, but the museum just felt so cheesy, and lunch had seemed too soon. So, wondering around aimlessly, merry from wine, I suggested we visit the amphitheatre. Inside, it was somehow smaller than expected but beautiful and atmospheric, and as we sat on the stone steps, I sensed my moment. Opting for a controversial side-by-side proposal (why is everyone so hung up on the one-knee thing?), I asked Lucy to marry me, and happily far more shocked than I had expected (if you go out with someone for ten years, everything you do becomes a potential proposal site), she said yes.

From then on, we spent the day wrapped up in our own world, drinking champagne and wine at different bars, soaking up the late Saturday afternoon bustle as good-looking Italians stopped for coffee, then back at the hotel avoiding fat naked men in the sauna and back out at another incredible restaurant, eating seafood. Verona seemed dreamy and charming and pleasant, part of the bigger story.

The next day we woke up and flew home. No matter what happens, Lucy and I will always remember Verona.

Matthew Clifton
In the Czech Republic's upcoming presidential elections, for the first time, incumbent president Václav Klaus has a real challenger in the way of Czech-American economics professor Jan Švejnar, who was active as president Havel's advisor and who remains active as Chairman of the Czech Republic's most prestigious economics institute as well as of the Supervisory Board of one of the country's largest banks. Švejnar is running on a platform of EU integration, economic reform, and open dialogue. Klaus is not running on a platform based on anything, but instead claims that we should all be "familiar with his positions" based on his "previous statements and actions." Those statements consist of a mélange of vague populist jargon, such as "protecting our national interests" (without once stating what they are) and strengthening Czech xenophobia by labeling the EU a "threat." Klaus appeals to the base instincts of many Czechs, who like most Russians, prefer a "strong leader." Klaus refuses to debate any intellectual opponent, including Švejnar, stating that "it is not in my best interests," thus turning his back on the words of Czechoslovakia's founding president T.G.Masaryk, who stated that "democracy is dialogue." "The fact that his position is even tolerated speaks much for the lack of maturity of Czech society.

Will the country be willing to – albeit warily – embrace a new president who is willing to lay out the true specifics, pitfalls and rewards of a path culminating in the emergence of a national identity, something that the Czechs were never granted in their history? As former president Havel once told me, "every twenty years or so, we Czechs build up enough courage to aspire to do something politically good." If my math is correct, that time may be now.

Martin Jan Stránský

In Russia, President Putin, through systematic suppression of the free press and opposition, engineered a rigged election to guarantee the continuation of his autocratic rule and the oligarchic structure that goes with it.

In France, the recent presidential elections produced a different result. At stake was the battle between proponents of the status-quo with its bloated laissez-faire socialist state and reformers pointing to declining economic production and rising racial and societal dis-harmony. Unlike the election in Russia, the election of Nicolas Sarkozy is an attempt to break with the past.

With less than one year to go, the election in America is unprecedented: no clear front-runners have emerged in either party. But even in a very diverse field, the candidates can still be divided into two groups – those who represent true change, such as Barack Obama, and those who represent a continuation of the status quo, such as most of the Republicans along with Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton. For America, this election will define the future of the nation and of the world.