

first published in: Reichel, Walter (Ed.): *Political Priorities between East and West. Europe's rediscovered wealth – What the accession-candidates in Eastern and Central Europe have to offer.* (No. 2. May 2002), pp. 55-64.

1 Cf. Drulák, P. (Ed.): *National and European Identities in EU Enlargement. Views from Central Europe.* Inst. for Intern. Relations, Prague 2001. – Regardless the simplification I shall refer to the »European identity« in this text as to the common identity of the West European states which are members of the European Union.

2 However, many scholars from the accession countries, as well as from the member states of the European Union stress that the discussion of European identity and its relation to the national identity – and the European dimension of the respective national identity (e.g. European dimension of Czech national identity) – is currently far more advanced in the accession states than within the member states of the European Union themselves. – Cf. Drulák 2001.

3 The *Maastricht* and the *Amsterdam Treaty* »mention the concept of European identity within the framework of a common foreign and security policy«. In: Lesaar, H.R.: *Semper Idem? The Relationship of European and National Identities.* In: Drulák 2001, p. 184.

1. Introduction

The question of *identity* of an individual, social group, society, nation or a supranational unit is significant for the members of such group. It represents the basic guideline for group members with respect to how to behave and what is expected from them as members of that particular group. Identity reflects usually culturally based standards and norms regarding human life as a part of the given community. Therefore it is also important in relation to the outside world, to the »them«, who are not part of the respective group. For the outside observer identity of a certain group helps him or her to distinguish the members of the group. Knowledge of identity also assists the non-member to predict the behaviour and the standards, norms and practices within the respective community.

In my paper I will examine the European dimension of the Czech identity and its role in the Czech accession to the European Union. The aim is to evaluate to what degree the Czechs consider themselves European and why and how the European dimension of the Czech identity is reflected in the accession process to the European Union. In the first part of my presentation I look at the concept of »European identity« and »Central European identity«, at its foundations and at the way the European identity is demonstrated.

The second part of my paper similarly points out the foundations of the *Czech identity* and how it is reflected in the characteristics of a »typical« Czech. I shall show the main historical, social and political processes which influenced the formation of the specific Czech identity and the ways in which the Czech identity is reflected in the political and cultural life of the Czech Republic. The last part of my paper shall inquire into the *European dimension of the Czech identity* and the question on what grounds the Czech consider themselves Europeans. I shall also discuss how this »Europeaness« is demonstrated in the Czech political, social and cultural life and finally explore what is the role of the European dimension of the Czech identity in the accession negotiations with the European Union.

2. European Identity

In order to look at the »European dimension« of the Czech identity and at its role in the accession process one has to examine first the concept of European identity and its basic characteristics. In the following analysis I shall use the commonly used simplification referring to »*European identity*« as an equivalent of the identity of the European Union, i.e. of the states constituting the European Union. This concept of equation of European identity with the identity of the EU can be seen in the thinking of many scientists especially from the accession countries. They point out that this concept tends to be simplified and reduces Europe only to its Western part.¹

The question of European identity, its relation to the national identity and the problem of enforcement of the European identity was first introduced in the 1970s. Since then the question of a European identity became discussed in the member states and in the institutions of the European Union.² The most important *documents* dealing with the question of European identity, especially in connection with its relation to the national identities of the member states – the problem of subsidiarity – are the *Maastricht Treaty*, the *Treaty of Amsterdam*, the *Treaty of Nice* and documents on common foreign and security policy of the European Union.³ On the institutional level the question of European identity is connected especially with the existence of a supranational, directly elected European parliament. Other practical implications of the existence of a European identity include European citizenship and common symbols of the European Union such as the European flag or anthem.

What is the European identity of the European Union based on and what are the common criteria for the determination of the European identity? The most frequently used criteria include geo-graphy, language, history, economy, political structures, culture and religion. These criteria are, however, problematic when trying to define Europe and the foundations of the European identity exactly. Most useful seems a combination of these criteria stressing especially common historical experience and political, cultural, religious, social and economic similarities of European states. The most common characteristics of European identity include qualities issuing



4 Lehmannová, Z. (Ed.): Cultural Plurality in the Current World. Univ. of Economics, Prague 2000, p. 19.

5 The most significant advocates of common European identity were the former Heads of the *European Commission* Jacques Delors and Jacques Santer.

6 These questions are also among those which should be discussed by the *European Convent* composed of representatives from both the EU-member states and the accession states which met recently in Brussels in February 2002.

7 In: Lesaar 2001, p. 194.

from Greek and Roman tradition, from the influence of Christianity, Arabs, Renaissance, Enlightenment and common historical experience, heritage and values of the European nations. The basic characteristics of the *European identity* are among others rationality, individualism, freedom, activity and humanism.⁴

The *common European identity* is currently most clearly demonstrated in the common foreign and security policy of the European Union, i.e. in the political dimension of the integration process. This dimension was for a long time ignored and silenced by a seemingly more important integration in the field of economy. However, since the direct elections in the European Parliament, and especially after the *Maastricht Treaty* and the introduction of the common foreign and security policy, the political dimension became one of the engines of integration. This also resulted from the need to create a common identity which would support the *common policy of the European Union* towards the outside world.⁵ Currently the most significant questions connected with European identity and the political dimensions of the European integration focus on overcoming the democratic deficit in the European Union and on the questions of a »final goal« of European political integration. Specific problems in this respect include the question of European constitution, the creation of a strong European public opinion and the possibility of federalization of the European Union and the creation of a real functional European government.⁶

A special *Forward Studies Unit* was created to focus among others on the question of European identity and on the methods to support the fundamental elements of the European identity – such as common European values – in the member states of the EU. As Lesaar stresses, it is of crucial importance for the new potential member states of the European Union to participate in the discussion of *future of the European identity* and of the political dimension of the European integration. Only this way it is possible to ensure that the conception also reflects the opinions and positions of the accession states, including the Czech Republic.⁷

3. Central European Identity

3.1. Definition and Significance of Central European Identity

The question of *Central Europe* and its specific identity has been examined by many social scientists in the past decades. There are many ways to define Central Europe. The most significant include definitions on the basis of geography, common historical experience and cultural, political, social and economic similarities of the nations living in the area of Central Europe.

The *geographical criterion* is probably the most commonly used and most important criterion for specification of what is to be understood under Central Europe. However, an exact determination of borders of Central Europe has always been difficult and subject of many challenges like which states should be considered Central European. Different conceptions of Central Europe include states within the geographical space from the river Rhein in the West to the river Bug in the East and from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Alps and Southern Hungary in the South. This space is often known under the term of the German geographer Friedrich Naumann »*Mittleuropa*« which also implies the historically dominant position and political, cultural, economic and geographic interests of German speaking nations in the area of Central Europe.

Central Europe is thus most frequently understood as a geographic and cultural space between the West and East, or as a space which is neither totally a part of the West nor completely of the East. This is often reflected in the conception of Central Europe as a »*bridge*« *between the West and East*, an idea which stresses the similarities between the West and East and the possibility of Central Europe to act as a mediary between the West and East and also issues from the fact that Central Europe was culturally, religiously, politically and historically influenced equally by the states of Western and Eastern Europe.⁸ However, people living in the region of Central Europe consider themselves Europeans, i.e. West Europeans, and point out the cultural, historical, economic, political and social belonging of the region to (Western and thus more civilized) Europe.⁹

Other concepts stress the *cultural, political, economic and social similarities* of the development of the Central European countries in the past and their current similar characteristics in these areas. These characteristics result especially from a common historical experience of Central Europe within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in the 19th century when the concept of »Central Europe« was first used. In this period the area of Central Europe could have been characterized as a zone of secondary importance that was politically and economically underdeveloped

8 Cf. i.e. Kučera, R.: Chapters from History of Central Europe. Inst. for Central European Culture and Politics, Prague 1992.

9 Cf. Druľák 2001.



10 The spiritual and cultural contributions of Central Europe to Europe and its culture include i.e. the heritage of the Hussite movement in the Czech lands or the continuous struggle for freedom in Poland or contributions of various Central European scientists and artists to the heritage of European culture.

11 For more details about the debate about European identity in the accession countries cf. Druľák 2001.

12 Today, the cooperation of countries of the Central European region can be most clearly seen within the Visegrad group and on various regional projects.

significantly in comparison with the far more developed and rich nations of Western Europe.

The economic differences between Central and Western Europe persist up until today and are currently one of the most significant division lines between Central and Western Europe. In this respect it is interesting that the Central European countries, who strive to be integrated into the European Union – their »return to Europe« – understand and interpret the process of integration as a way of modernization and of becoming more developed by integrating themselves to the more developed Western Europe. »Europe« is thus in this context often referred to only as Western Europe and as a symbol of market economy, prosperity and democracy.

However, it is impossible to interpret the desire of the Central European countries to »return to Europe« only as advantageous for them. Central European countries can definitely also enrich the countries of Western Europe. The most significant *Central European contributions* include not only the economic and political advantages, but also their spiritual and cultural contribution to diversity in a united Europe and to the debate of existence and foundations of a *European identities*.¹⁰ Interestingly the debate about Europe and European identity is far more developed in the accession countries than within the European Union.¹¹

To sum up, the common characteristics of the concept of *Central European identity* include especially geographical determinations of Central Europe and common historical experiences of the states of the region – be it within the Austro-Hungarian empire or under the Communist regime – and their cultural, political, social and economical similarities. These include for example strong multicultural traditions in Central European states especially after the first World War, connected with the existence of significant national, in particular German and Jewish, minorities in all Central European countries and with the fact that state boundaries never corresponded to ethnic boundaries of nations living in Central Europe.

»Europeaness« of Central Europe is clearly another important characteristics of the Central European identity. The term »Europeaness« refers above all to common cultural and historical experience of Western and Central Europe and to common values of both parts of Europe, such as for example rationality, individualism, human activity, freedom and common religious and cultural traditions. However, Central European countries also have some common characteristics different from the West European states mostly as a result of *different* historical development chiefly after the second World War. These qualities include i.e. a stronger role of the state in society and politics than in the West, greater tendency to collectivism, less developed tradition of democracy and therefore higher adhesion to traditions with a strong linkage to the past and the »lucid moments« of their nations' history, fear of insecurity, the tradition of humanism and self-perception of their nations as fighting for their own freedom and the freedom of other nations.

»Central Europe« is thus currently understood as a cultural and geographical term in reference to the countries which are trying to join the European Union above all the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Poland and Hungary. These countries are due to their special Central European identity often received as a group with a common identity and similar economic, political, social, historical and cultural characteristics.¹²

3.2. Central European Identity in the Accession Process to the EU

As mentioned earlier, Western Europe – and in particular the European Union – has a tendency to understand and perceive the countries of Central Europe as a *distinct group* with common historical experience and social, cultural, political and economic characteristics. This tendency is for instance reflected in the trial of the European Union to treat the states of Central Europe as a whole group in the accession negotiations and in its usual reference to the states of the region as to one group.

Despite national differences among the states of *Central Europe*, this concept is partially justifiable by the European Union because it serves among others as a platform for comparison of the progress of the states of the region in the accession process and because it is likely that most of the Central European states – namely the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and hopefully also Slovakia – will enter the European Union at the same time and will thus face similar problems and obstacles during their integration process. Therefore the official documents of the European Union dealing with the question of a Central European enlargement of the Union stress the importance of *mutual cooperations* of the states of the region and observe closely the results and ways of cooperation and integration of the states of Central Europe within their regional cooperation blocks, such as the *Visegrad group* or CEFTA.



Close cooperations within these organizations – rather than competition in the accession process – must thus be advantageous not only for its immediate results for the member states in the field of economic, political, social and cultural cooperation. A mutual cooperation of the states of Central Europe is also important for their future membership in the European Union because it proves their ability to overcome national differences and to work together to reach their common goals which also include integration in the European Union. Common problems which the Central European states face in the accession process to the EU and the common historical, political and economic characteristics reflected in the *Central European identity* of the states might thus offer a perfect basis for a mutual cooperation and a common procedure upon integration in the European Union.

4. Czech Identity

The Czech Republic is a rather young European state, established only in 1993. However, the independent Czech state has a long historical tradition. The most significant characteristics of the Czech identity originate from the historical experience of the Czechs especially during the so called First Republic (1918-1938), during the Communist regime and after the establishment of an independent state in January 1993. The question of Czechoslovak, and later Czech, identity became vivid especially after the fall of Communism in 1989 in connection with opening of the Czech borders, relief of censorship and general feeling of freedom and democratization in the society.¹³

If the Czechs are asked about their typical characteristic, about the *Czech national identity*, they most frequently characterize themselves as a democratic, civilized, well-educated and cultured nation that always belonged to Europe.¹⁴ Other positive characteristics include the typical Czech craftsmanship – referred to as »golden Czech hands« –, their friendliness, sense of humour and the ability to protest in their unique way against authorities.¹⁵ However, forty years of Communism also had a negative impact on the Czech character and introduced qualities such as atheism, lack of morality, corruption and envy, passivity, apathy and lack of interest in political and civic life, the feeling of unimportance and inability to influence the course of events due to the geographical littleness of the Czech Republic which still persists in the Czech identity.

One of the main function of identity is to define the significant »others« against which an identity is constructed. In the case of the Czech identity, the current significant »others« include Eastern Europe and the Russians, mostly as the result of the previous forty years of forced Communism. Eastern Europe is often understood by the Czechs as a backward area in opposition to Western Europe as a guarantee of modernity, stability and free market and as a developed, modern and civilized place where the Czechs naturally belong to historically, politically as well as culturally. In the early 1990s and especially around 1993, the significant »others« also included the Slovaks due to their increasing nationalistic ambitions. The current significant »others« also include the Romas and other national minorities that are not integrated in the Czech society. For the older generation the significant »others« also include Germans.

5. The European Dimension of the Czech Identity and Its Role in the Accession Process to the European Union

One of the common characteristics of the Czech identity is its *European dimension*. Most of the Czechs consider themselves Europeans and list a variety of geographical, historical, social, political, cultural, economic and religious reasons why the Czechs are part of Europe. These reasons stress in particular the common historical experience (especially under Charles IV., under the Habsburg monarchy) and the common cultural heritage and values of the Czechs and other Europeans.

However, it is interesting that the Czechs tend to understand »Europe« as *Western Europe*, and more specifically as a synonym to the European Union, and tend to emphasize their belonging to the Western part of Europe. This moment was especially evident after the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 when many analysts pointed out that by the establishment of an independent Czech Republic we »moved towards West where we always belonged« and stressed the idea of Slovakia as a border area from the »dangerous East«.¹⁶ In general one can thus argue that the Czechs consider themselves more as »Europeans« than »Central Europeans« because »Europe« is in the interpretation of the general public connected with the more civilized and developed

13 The process of democratization in the Czech(oslovak) Republic after 1989 became strongly personalized and deeply connected with the person of President Havel.

14 Brodský, J.: The Czech Experience of Identity. In: Drulák 2001, p. 23.

15 This characteristic is often referred to as »Schweikism« according to the main character of the book of Josef Hasek *Good Soldier Schweik*.

16 This notion is evident in the journals and magazines publ. at the time of the split of Czechoslovakia.





17 This attitude is typical especially for the realists, such as the former Prime Minister Klaus. Its result was for example almost the end of cooperation within the *Visegrad group* under Klaus' government because Klaus felt that the less developed Central European states prevent the Czech Republic from faster integration in Europe. However, despite this skepticism about Central Europe, it is undeniable that the Czech Republic is undoubtedly geographically as well as socially, politically and culturally part of so called Central Europe. The Czech identity also reflects some characteristics common to the states of Central Europe which constitute part of the Central European identity. These characteristics include especially a larger tendency to collectivism and a strong role of state, underdeveloped democratic structures and lack of democratic traditions reflected in a lack of interest in public life, strong emphasis on traditions and history and fear of insecurity. – Cf. Brodský 2001, p. 29.

18 Ibid., p. 28.

19 These two different approaches correspond to and reflect the two different approaches to the future of the political dimension of European integration. Whereas the position of Mr. Klaus is a clear example of the inter-governmentalist approach, Mr. Havel's position reflects the approach of supranationalism.

20 Brodský 2001, p. 33.

Western part of Europe – »where we naturally belong« – whereas »Central Europe« has a more negative connotation and is often understood as a less developed area which prevents the Czech Republic from a faster economic development and integration to the West European structures.¹⁷

In the *accession process to the European Union*, the European dimension of the Czech identity is used by many politicians to demonstrate the need of a Czech accession to the European Union where the Czech Republic belongs culturally, politically, economically and socially. One can in general observe two main – highly personified – tendencies in the *relationship of the Czech and European identities* represented by President Vaclav Havel and by the former Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus.¹⁸

The former Prime Minister Klaus is a realist in international politics and stresses the importance of the Czech identity and Czech national interests in the process of the Czech integration in the European Union. He supports Czech integration in the EU with some major reservations concerning the speed and scope of integration as well as the EU approach to the integration, only as long as the integration enables the Czechs to support their own national interests. He therefore emphasizes the need to preserve the unique Czech identity in the integration process to the EU.

On the contrary, President Vaclav Havel has his own idealistic vision of a future European Union based on the principles of common European citizenship, European constitution and federation with a common European government. He belongs to one of the strongest advocates of a united Europe, common European identity and peaceful coexistence of the Czech and European identities. Still, his influence on the political debate concerning the Czech integration in the European Union is limited by his presidential powers and by his slightly declining support in the eyes of the Czech general public.¹⁹

However, the question of relationship between the Czech national identity and the European identity is after all not discussed in the general public. Most Czechs show little interest in this question and in the European integration in general. This *passivity* is partially connected with the Czech »littleness« and the feeling of inability to change anything and with a general lack of interest in public life in the Czech Republic. Many Czech citizens perceive the »Czech European identity« as being »pre-arranged for them« and they are mostly indifferent to it.²⁰

6. Conclusion

There is a strong European dimension of the Czech national identity. Czechs consider themselves European on the basis of the geographical position of the Czech Republic in the center of Europe and with other common historical experience of European nations. There are also many political, economical, social, religious and cultural characteristics which make the Czechs »European«.

However, in the process of the Czech accession to the European Union, the question of *relationships of the Czech and European identity*, i.e. the question of political dimension of the European integration, seems to be of secondary importance. For many Czechs, the most important questions connected with integration in the European Union are of economic, political and social character. The question of the future of the Czech identity within a united Europe thus so far seems to be of more concern to intellectuals and politicians than to ordinary people.

Nevertheless, if the Czech Republic wants to integrate in the European Union as an equal member and if it wants to share equally in all dimensions of the integration, i.e. not only in the economic aspects which are the most dominating in the accession process, the question of *relationship between the Czech and European identity* has to be subject of further detailed discussions also with the general public. Only by making people understand the foundations of a united Europe and of a common European identity we can achieve their acceptance of the European Union and their full participation in the political Union as an equal member.

