

Looking Forward: U.S.-Czech Relations

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Americans and Czechs can work together on global issues, and I'll suggest later how we can best use our interests and talents to do so. But first, I want to address the basis of our relationship, since our cooperation needs a strong and self-conscious basis: how do we deal with one another as we purport to deal with the rest of the world?

As we reflect on the events of the last 25 years, we can justifiably be proud of what we have seen in U.S.-Czech relations. An extraordinary Czech contribution to the end of the Communist dictatorship. An outpouring of goodwill from the U.S. government and people in the 1990s, resulting in assistance programs ranging from the Peace Corps to stipends for top students. Cooperation in the military field leading to membership in NATO and our soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder in peacekeeping commitments around the world. And greater contacts between our peoples from all walks of life.

Yet rather than delve into these achievements, I choose to focus on what we do next: how we conceive of our task, and where we need to go. In fact, there is a sense that we need to renew the relationship, that the expectations of friendship that both countries have for one another are somehow unmet, and even that, in some ways, we have grown apart. Symbolically, it didn't help that the position of ambassador from the United States to the Czech Republic went unfilled for nearly two years recently. I believe that we now have

the opportunity to build a greater sense of purpose in the relationship by renewing our efforts to define common tasks and a common vision—and not allowing ourselves simply to coast on the self-congratulation of our achievements of past years and the establishment of institutions to channel our work together.

Part of the reason for this vague disquiet—this sense that the relationship needs a bit of a push to move forward—is, I believe, that both countries have rather quietly backed into believing that they do not need a policy for each another. The Czechs, and especially those Czechs in positions of political authority, spend a lot of their time in their roles as members in good standing in the European Union, and their immediate tasks are defined by that institutional affiliation. Europe is close, Brussels is demanding and if there is a policy toward the United States, well, it will most likely be a pan-European project.

The Americans, for their part, look at the world in 2014 somewhat differently than they did in 1989, and according to which pundit you listen to, they think about the rise of China, the terrorist threat, nuclear proliferation or even questions of inequality at home and abroad. Today's date—9/11, the anniversary of the attacks in 2001 in New York—reminds us that the attitudes and priorities of American policy have indeed undergone extraordinary changes in the last ten years. In that sense, even though Europe is close, Europe is not



the Europe of yesteryear, and those larger, intractable problems mean that there is not a lot of extra capacity to understand the details of the lives of friends, even good friends like the Czechs.

In this sense, then, we are the victims of our own success. In the last 25 years, the underlying policy guiding diplomats from Washington and Prague, myself included, was erasing the line that Stalin had drawn across Europe and integrating the countries once behind the Iron Curtain into the broader world, most notably through accession to institutions like NATO and the EU. What would naturally follow, we believed, was a kind of magical deepening of affinities, cultural identification, civic virtue and rule of law and democratic depth. For Americans, this meant there would be a new Europe, and the idea of Europe—articulated in a famous article in the *New York Review of Books* by Milan Kundera in 1985—would come into alignment with its reality. Kundera's notion was that there was a cultural space to which civilized people in Central Europe aspired (perhaps overly sentimentally, since Western Europeans were no longer the Europeans of pre-war memory). The point was that ideals and institutions would be one.

For American policymakers, the new post-1989 idea behind a new Europe was that there would not be a "Czech" policy any more than there would be a "Swedish" policy or a "Portuguese" policy; Europe was increasingly a unit, and while peripheral issues remained (the future of Ukraine, progress among the Balkan States), the goal was to find a way to work with Europe on global issues. For example,

the United States and Europe on the promotion of free trade, or on climate change or on counterterrorism. The European component states would not be the object of U.S. policy but rather, participants in a process by which we tried to take on problems around the world, global challenges we agreed on.

This called for the integration of such countries as the Czech Republic into the structures of common action, first into NATO (because that was the institution that the United States belonged to, after all) and then the EU (which was, in a more fundamental sense, a true goal of the post-1989 reforms). At the time, in the 1990s, when we debated these changes we considered the first step—NATO enlargement—to be the creation of an incubator, the secure surroundings in which European identity could first be defined as a commitment to the defense of all, or in a way an expression of solidarity and sacrifice as well as protection; and then the next step, accession to the EU, which could have an impact on the daily life of citizens, meaning not only free travel and a higher living standard but, we hoped, a common effort to define citizenship, to build institutions fostering attitudes toward justice and rule of law, and to do nothing less than create a bold experiment in which Western values, in their most basic sense, were not simply layered onto the former communist states but took root in such a way that both parts of Europe, old and new, would synthesize a new way of living and attitude toward public life.

There was another dimension to the relationship, of course, one that is

hard to define but which is probably the most important. That's the cultural dimension. Those of us who spent time as diplomats in what was then Czechoslovakia before the end of communism recall that America was as much a concept as it was a country, a symbol to many of what their own life was not (unreasonable as such expectations might be) and the yardstick by which a kind of normality might be measured. For those few Americans who spent time here during those years, there was, in certain circles, an intensity that seemed lacking back in the States, a series of debates, in kitchens or country homes, about ethics, politics, meaning in the broadest sense. Philip Roth summed it up for many when he said the difference between East and West was that in the East, nothing was possible but everything mattered; in the West, everything was possible but nothing mattered. In other words, there were expectations visited upon Americans and Czechs by each other, in which Americans wanted to believe that a bold experiment at the end of communism might bring a civic movement that renewed democratic ideals; and of course, one in which Czechs wanted to believe that they would again be part of the greater world that had been taken from them decades ago, and would rebuild a public sphere worthy of respect around the globe.

This psychological dimension is the one that has, inevitably, changed the most in the last 25 years. Not that it was flawed or wrong; indeed, it drew young Americans to Prague in droves in the first years of the 1990s, and inspired a steady stream of Czech students in





the United States to this day. But it has matured, and the expectations are, with the passage of time, somewhat less. For many Americans, the passing of Václav Havel (and his colleagues like Rita Klimová, Zdeněk Urbánek or Jiří Dienstbier) illustrates this change. And, I imagine, for many Czechs, the realization that American politicians like George W. Bush or Barack Obama are perhaps not the towering figures that previous generations considered the likes of Ronald Reagan to be was also part of a maturing process, a process of gaining insights into the real elements of the way politics works in both countries.

So in that, when we reflect on the last 25 years, we can say, rather wistfully, that much of the passion has left the relationship, passion based on rather romantic expectations that could only be kept when we didn't know one another as well as we do now. Czechs can look at the 2003 Iraq War and wonder what the Americans were thinking, or perhaps reflect on the zigzag of American policy toward missile defense or the "reset" with Russia and find it difficult to comprehend how American friendship and respect for the Czech Republic fit in. After all, America is the land of Wilsonian ideals! For their part, Americans can look at the persistence of corruption in the Czech Republic and wonder, these many years after the exuberance of the masses of key-jinglers in Wenceslas Square, why such puzzling remnants of a nontransparent system should prevail in a country that, after all, is the land of the philosopher-king Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk!

It is reasonable, then, that the outgoing American ambassador to the Czech Republic has listed the achievements of his time here modestly and straightforwardly: that in the realm of security ties, we work together against Russian aggression in Ukraine and have cooperated, through NATO, on multilateral programs based here; and that in the realm of commerce and business, we have six billion dollars a year in bilateral trade, up 100 percent over the last four years (admittedly, from the bottom of an economic trough). These are not the sweeping changes we remember from 25 years ago when, a year after the events of November 17, George H. W. Bush stood in Wenceslas Square and spoke of the New Europe and its possibilities. But perhaps it's fitting that the love once new has now grown old, and that our expectations of one another are modest, achievable and (one would like to think) honest in their understanding of what's possible.

If that is true—if we have come to the end of the beginning of the post-1989 era, symbolized by the concept of a generation that has passed through those days of wonder—should we aspire to reforge the relationship in new ways that reflect not only the immediate questions of how our two countries have worked together since the fall of communism, but what has happened elsewhere in the world during this time?

There needs to be an agreement, among leaders in both countries, that we will do our best to escape the tropes of the speeches and policies we have relied on in recent decades. If America is to mean something

here, it must be on mutually agreed terms: what do Czechs think they want from the United States? Have the Czechs simply concluded that the relationship with America will be one of a smaller member of a European unit with a large and overwhelmingly militarily powerful country, one whose relative power in the world is perhaps declining, even as the relative impact of Europe itself declines? And what is it that the Americans can define as they look at the role the Czechs play in Europe and the world?

We should start with an honest assessment: that Americans recognize that politics in the Czech Republic are hindered by cynicism and inward-lookingness, by corruption and a persistent lack of self-confidence, even fatalism. For a time, after 1989, the Americans imbued in the Czechs superhuman powers; there was a period when we said, "Yes, Czechs are not Švejk!" But an honest appraisal of these domestic issues is due in America, not to make Americans respect the Czechs less but to gain an appreciation of the domestic social issues still unsolved here. That, in turn, could lead to a better understanding of what those American friends of the Czech Republic must do to engage to help their Czech friends. The United States has essentially pocketed the developments of the last 25 years and has largely turned its sights away from the region. That is a mistake. History has indeed not ended, and it is incumbent on us to maintain the effort to understand politics, economics and, above all, the cultural basis on which decisions are made here. Nothing less than



that will work if we want to maintain a level of trust that will allow us to cooperate on issues we both care about.

At the same time, we need to make sure that Czechs remain engaged in American culture beyond what Hollywood produces. Enormous changes are taking place in the United States, in part as a result of demographics and migration, in part as the world economic order reshapes itself, in part as a result of how the United States copes with the post-9/11 era and the winding down of the wars that have defined its world role for the last 15 years even as the challenges that brought about those wars have not yet been solved. It would be wise for Czechs to embark on this reevaluation of the United States with the help of their neighbors, both the smaller countries once referred to in the United States as “the bloc” but also Germany, Austria and others. It will require nothing less than the leveling of long-held assumptions about what the United States stands for, what it can do and how it can play a reasonable role in Czech life in the future.

How is this to happen? The means by which we can reforge our understanding of our friendship is to recognize, in the first place, that the state-state relationship is an artifact of the past and that we are playing to a stronger constituency (in both countries) throughout society. In the 21st century, we need to remember that the price we must pay for all the democratizing we have engaged in is that we have to look to many places to find the road ahead. Or put

another way: just as war is too important to leave to the generals, international relations are too important to be left to the diplomats. The new players will be, in addition, business leaders from both countries. Directors of institutions of higher learning. Leaders of nongovernmental organizations and other institutions of philanthropic giving and foundations. Civic leaders, mayors, others whose international role has often been limited to sister-city formalities but whose potential is now much greater.

Here are the links that need investment and work. Let us go beyond the institutional means of important groups like the Chamber of Commerce and realize that there are ways to bring businesses together that can be narrowed from the broad area of trade and investment to the concerns of specific sectors. What, for example, are the advantages that the Czech Republic offers in partnerships with other firms? We can talk about talented young people in the Czech Republic, but we should dig a little deeper. In which ways are the famous Czech universities reforming to meet the challenges of the future? Do we need to take a closer look at whether Charles University, that fabled institution with such a fine historical pedigree, is adjusting to the needs of the revolution in information, knowledge and wisdom that is sweeping the world? Does the Czech Technical University in Prague (that is, ČVUT) have the facilities, the business links, the faculty and the vision to keep itself on the cutting edge of research in the coming century? Is there a stubborn conservatism that prevents these

and other institutions of higher learning from taking their places as creators of the ideas and, more important, the graduates who will create a world Americans and Czechs want to see? Just this example leads us to ask, “What do we know?” And when we find out, how do we institutionalize the way in which American institutions can reasonably expect to partner with Czech counterparts for the benefit of both?

And if that basic work is under way, what then about those graduates, should they not understand the business world of both countries, the links that innovative business leaders have with one another, the global opportunities of changing economies? Who can foster that, and increase the chances that the best Czech students and the best American professors—or the best American students and the best Czech professors—are working together to create those minds who will build the culture and prosperity we both believe in? Who will be part of that debate on what we have in common and, even more importantly, where our cultures differ on key elements of the vision of society, civic responsibility and lifestyle? Look to NGOs and civic organizations on both sides of the Atlantic to do this, because if we wait for government-sponsored efforts to do so, we may wait a long time.

At the same time, let us take an honest look at the way our economies are structured. When Americans look at the Czech Republic, they look with admiration at how companies like Škoda or Pilsner Urquell have prospered in partnership with foreign firms, and



how Prague has become a major tourist destination. They don't look as closely at the Penta Group or Omnipol, and perhaps do not know the role of rich business leaders (whether you call them entrepreneurs or oligarchs) in Czech life. In other words, now that we have come to the point where we can accurately assess each other—beyond the wild romance of pre-1989, through the changes that have inevitably led to some questions and even disillusionment—we need to take accurate and rather cold-blooded looks at each other, seeing not only the great possibilities for a constructive set of renewed friendships but an understanding of some of the less pleasant sides that both countries can show.

At the end of the day, however, even if the essence of the relationship between the Czechs and the Americans thrives if the social and cultural links are renewed through honest appraisal and creative partnerships, some of the broader international issues will not go away overnight. There were those who wanted to believe in 2004, when most of the countries of the former bloc acceded to the EU, that there would be no more crises in Europe and that history would indeed come to an end of sorts. And that has not happened. The point is to build the fundamental links of our societies so as to strengthen our bonds, but it is decidedly not to allow state functions to atrophy. In classical security policy, in classical diplomacy, we need to work together, primarily but not exclusively through NATO, to face the very real challenge that Vladimir Putin's Russia now presents us; to contribute to

a lasting sense of security in that last area of Europe from which so many problems have come, the Balkans; to grapple with the cultural challenge that the unsettled world of Islam presents to those of us who treasure order, tolerance and security; and to address the challenges the migration from the poorer parts of the world, primarily from Africa, mean for us.

Our responses to these challenges will be clearer, gain more public support and have more sustained impact if we make those efforts to renew our understanding of one another, to come to common positions on the vision we see for our common cultural future. All the more reason to work on that long-term plane, to develop businesses and social ties and cultural affinities; but at the same time, to not neglect the institutions we have fortunately built for ourselves to tackle these issues when we face them immediately.

We should work closely on our responses to the crude Russian nationalism that threatens the stability of Ukraine: the Czech Republic has much to teach the United States about the problem in general and the Eastern European region in particular. And if, in the long run, this becomes a question of resources, including a question of whether natural gas will be available at a reasonable price, then the United States needs to talk with the Czech Republic about the revolution in technology that is rapidly changing the balance of energy holdings.

In the Balkans, we stand on the brink of seeing a region that has suffered greatly in this last 25 years become

an integrated member of European institutions. There is room for optimism about developments in Serbia, and many in the region believe they can work together in a "Yugosphere" if fairness and prosperity are offered. But Bosnia remains a challenge, and the historical resentments of that region have not simply evaporated. In such a situation, the Czechs retain a remarkably high reputation as a friend and honest broker, going back many years, but also based on straightforward understanding and continued contact. The United States and the Czech Republic can bring different strengths to the table there, and it may be in our grasp to encourage others to come to a durable peace in the years to come.

Similarly, one of the great weaknesses of the United States in the Islamic world has been its propensity to see problems there strictly through a lens of counterterrorism. Important as that is, it leaves us vulnerable to misunderstandings of these countries where disorder is rampant, and once again there is much that our Czech friends can teach us as we pool our knowledge about the cultural and historical basis of what is happening in the Middle East.

It will be only with the understanding of societies about what is happening on their borders (whether the Mexican border in the U.S. case, or the Mediterranean Sea in Europe's) that we'll gain an understanding of how we can be secure in an era of mass migration. This will be the work not only of governments, of diplomats and police and militaries, but of those organizations, in development and human rights, that have





an understanding of what this challenge will do to us. Again: Americans and Czechs know many things, and if we know them in common, we are both stronger.

So let us try to do a few things together in the years to come, building on the past but not being a slave to its habits. First, let us try to avoid sentimentality and romanticizing the past. By this I do not mean that we should ignore the past or the achievements we should rightfully treasure or the historical tides that have linked our two countries. America is proud of its Czech-American citizens and their contribution to its development, just as Czechs are probably the greatest preservers of a vision of the American West anywhere in the world. Rather, what I hope we can do is rid ourselves of the predictive stereotyping that has often taken place in these last eight years of great change, and acknowledge the maturity of our friendship, and that it can move ahead on a reasoned basis.

Second, let us focus on defining those social elements that we understand about one another and can serve as the underlying basis for our relationship. By this I mean deciding what our economic priorities are and building links among our business leaders; expanding the reach of education to include partnerships in institutions that allow the young talent in both countries to have opportunities that know fewer boundaries; and pulling together those who work in voluntary association with one another to address the key issues of our societies in ways that governments will not or cannot.

The more we do this together, then the more we'll build the sense of social solidarity, a shared sense of the logic of the efforts we make with one another to address the real difficulties of our age.

Third, let us be resolute and honest in admitting what we can and cannot do in international cooperation, in those areas that are of great concern to us all. I've mentioned relations with Russia and the Ukraine crisis, contributions to Balkan stability and prosperity, relations with the Islamic world and coping with international terrorism, and the challenge posed by economic inequality that leads to mass migration that will change the nature of our societies. There are more issues, some scientific, some cultural, and these too should be the topic of discussion wherever citizens come together.

We need, then, to be honest in our assessments. We need to be modest in our expectations. We need to admit that, in some cases, we each see the world differently. And most of all, we need to make the commitment to pay attention, not sliding away from our interest in one another simply because of our common success in integrating the Czech Republic into European institutions since 1989. I believe that with that set of guidelines, we can take a fresh look at who the actors are in our relationship and look beyond limitations of state-to-state links, important as those may be. Because coming to a broad consensus that, indeed, Americans and Czechs have a fair amount in common and, even more important, face common challenges is the basis for another generation

as impressive as that which we have just witnessed.

