

The heretical Czechs

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The pragmatic sceptics who will have the next European-Union presidency



THROUGHOUT history, heretics have faced unusually horrid punishments—and it is no mystery why. Most faith-based systems can withstand the threat from non-believers, sinners and the like. But heretics are a menace from within: dissenting believers, who question key articles of faith. When it comes to the faith-based project of European political integration, the Czech Republic is a dangerously heretical place. This does not mean that the Czechs are hostile to the European Union—though many in

Brussels lazily put them high up in their lists of “Eurosceptics”. Rather, the Czechs have a taste for something more subversive: the questioning of big planks of EU conventional wisdom.

This matters a lot right now. On January 1st the Czechs will take over the rotating presidency of the EU, chairing all meetings and setting the agenda for the following six months. The future of the Lisbon treaty is sure to come up on their watch, as the Irish government scrambles to find ways to overcome the no vote cast by its electorate last June. And in foreign policy, it is a safe bet that Russia will muscle its way up the EU’s agenda in 2009.

On both fronts, the Czechs are guilty of heterodoxy. British Conservatives like to claim the centre-right Civic Democrats, known by their Czech initials as the ODS, as their closest ideological allies in Europe. (We are identical, a Tory member of the European Parliament supposedly boasted, except that they don’t understand cricket.) This is not strictly correct. The British Tories say they will try to scupper Lisbon if it is not in force by the time they come to power. In contrast, the ODS-led Czech government is committed to ratifying the text, probably by the end of the year.

That said, Czech ministers do not buy the French or German line that Lisbon is a vital treaty that will magically transform the union into a world power. Some big EU countries depict the loss of Lisbon as a catastrophe, comments the foreign minister, Karel Schwarzenberg, but “of course it is not.” Losing Lisbon would “make life difficult”, he concedes, and would be hard to explain to voters after so many years of fuss. But the EU works with its current rules “quite well”, so the Irish vote is “not the end of the world.” Some fervent Europeans want Ireland to be threatened with expulsion from the EU if they do not ratify Lisbon soon. A Czech presidency would not stand for such bullying.

When it comes to Russia, the Czechs are heretics, too. They are less vocally hawkish than Poland and the Baltic states. But Czech leaders do not, deep down, believe in the EU's common line on Russia, which amounts to the rationalisation of impotence. The current consensus is that proffering the hand of friendship is a sound strategy because Russia will one day realise that co-operation is in its interests. Senior Czechs say this is not a strategy, it is just verbiage. They also suspect the EU will need a real Russia strategy quite soon.

On a 2007 visit to talk over EU affairs, the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, said the Czechs reminded her of modern-day Hussites—followers of Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415 for challenging the Roman Catholic Church. This was a shrewd observation, says Alexandr Vondra, a deputy prime minister. The Hussite movement was crushed amid bitter in-fighting, and the Czechs remained Catholic. But Hus remains a national hero, and his legacy helps to explain why Czech views of the EU differ from those of such neighbours as Germany or Slovakia. Mr Vondra suggests that Czechs think like "classic reformation countries", such as the Netherlands or Sweden.

The Czech president, Vaclav Klaus, is an arch-critic of the EU (he has called the Lisbon treaty "detrimental to freedom and democracy"). Mr Klaus's powers are mostly ceremonial, but he has influence. The Czechs have yet to ratify Lisbon, after Mr Klaus's ODS allies in the upper-house Senate demanded that the text be sent to the constitutional court for vetting. But Mr Klaus's clout has limits. The court is expected to approve Lisbon, paving the way for a tight parliamentary vote at the end of the year (a three-fifths majority is needed in both houses: perhaps a quarter of the Senate are Eurosceptics in the Klaus mould). There is also a big gap between Mr Klaus and the voters. Two-thirds of Czechs told the latest Eurobarometer poll that their country has benefited from membership, above the EU average. And ODS voters are more pro-European than most others.

Jiri Pehe, a one-time aide to Mr Klaus's predecessor, Vaclav Havel, explains that Czechs see their presidents as philosopher-kings, whose strong opinions may not have concrete implications for everyday action. Many Czechs adored Mr Havel, he notes, and they loved hearing him denounce consumerism. Then they went shopping, because they were "consumerist as hell".

Mr Schwarzenberg, in private life a prince with roots in both the Czech Republic and Austria, draws a revealing comparison between the two countries. Both feel what he calls "fed-upness" with EU rules that impinge on local traditions, such as hunting. But Austrian grumpiness goes much deeper. Both countries gained when the EU enlarged to take in countries from the former communist block: the Czechs because they got in, and the Austrians because they made a mint in the east. Yet Austrians have never accepted that the EU helped secure these eastern markets for them. They think they were "so good, and so modern" that they would have cleaned up anyway, says Mr Schwarzenberg.

Czechs see what they have gained, and accordingly want the EU to work. It is just that they are not interested in how. History has taught Czechs to think sceptically, says Mr Vondra. As a much-invaded people, Czechs "have problems approaching anything with excitement." Czechs believe in Europe, but not in the grandiose visions of the project: the endless treaties and institutional changes that will solve all problems. In Brussels such pragmatism is heretical. Next year promises to be interesting.