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**New Europe's Civil Society, Democracy and the Media  
Thirteen Years After:  
The Story of the Czech Republic**

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# New Europe's Civil Society, Democracy, and the Media Thirteen Years After The Story of the Czech Republic

*Tomáš P. Klvaňa*

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In terms of the quality of democracy, the Czech Republic is underperforming. Czech media are a significant factor in the process. Recently, most of the formerly serious Czech journalism has moved into infotainment. Moreover, it is influenced by the nostalgia for communist times. Complicit in perpetuating the communist taste, the media harm the nascent civil society. The most relevant aspect of civil society in this article pertains to its ability to provide citizens with a broad range of resources to develop their talents. By promoting and further developing the cultural expression infused by communist taste, the media flatten public life around the stale mainstream. In a small, relatively poor, and culturally homogeneous market and society hampered by a residual civic passivity, the media deprive citizens of a broad range of cultural resources and slow down their pursuit of a greater equality and freedom.

**Keywords:** *Czech Republic; civil society; democracy; media; journalism; communist; postcommunist; infotainment; equality; freedom*

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The Czech Republic is regarded as one of the most successful postcommunist states. Nevertheless, it is useful to turn a critical eye on the country. Its inadequacies might help to illuminate what makes most Western civil societies, far from flawless though they may be, strong and vibrant. My position grows out of a conviction that the Czech Republic is underperforming, that the quality of its democracy leaves a good deal to be desired, and that the media are a significant factor in the process.

Recently, most of the formerly serious Czech journalism has moved into infotainment. Many relevant media have traded a comprehensive, analytical coverage for a soft-news, entertainment approach driven by television culture and

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heavily influenced by the nostalgia for communist times. They have been complicit in perpetuating the stale communist taste, harming the evolution of the civil society in the process.

For the purposes of this article, civil society is a normative concept measuring the quality of democracy and society's openness. It need not be in opposition to the state and business, both of which can play a role in civil society. To me, civil society makes politics and business meaningful. Václav Havel once discussed it as a prepolitical or metapolitical dimension of public life—endowed with a strong moral component—and said, “From a transcendental order grows the moral order, from the moral order the civic order emerges, and only from this civic order the political order originates.”<sup>1</sup> Understood this way, civil society is a concept conditioning the quality of democracy, a means to advance an open society.

The Scottish Enlightenment thinker and political philosopher Adam Ferguson saw it as having emerged over centuries as an effect of the cumulative human action, not produced by human design. It is an uncontrolled interplay of human activity's intended and unintended consequences. As Fania Oz-Salzberger (2001) notes, Ferguson's civil society was about the spirit, excitement, business, but also about conflict and use of force. The unintended character of the outcome (human action rather than design) and Ferguson's reminder of the unavoidable presence of conflict, force, and even violence in human relations provide a more realistic understanding of civil society than the slightly Boy Scoutish theorizing of it as an unqualified good occasionally seen in academic publications of today.

Civil society is crucial, but it is no panacea. Its most relevant aspect in this article pertains to its ability to provide citizens with a broad range of resources to develop their talents. In a liberal society, people do this in their own way, a process that does not always result in social good. Discussing the relevance of common meals in ancient Greece to the development of the public space and democracy, Albert Hirschman (1998) takes notice that such “commensality” can also generate externalities of a socially negative kind. The other extreme of a Greek banquet, Hirschman observes, could be found in the Nazi beer hall commensality so vividly described in Heinrich Mann's novel *The Subject (Der Untertan)*. The hope is not that civil society abolishes conflict and violence but that it can, on the whole, mediate and channel them and, hence, aim at greater equality and liberation.

## I. “Back to Europe”: On the Impossibility of Return

The past two decades witnessed a rapid, near-global spread of communications technology, which brought about the conditions called the information age, referring to the postindustrial stage of capitalism. The free-market idea gained widespread approval and became the basis upon which the growing

numbers of democratic states, and many nondemocratic, too, organize their affairs. The third wave of democratization, as Samuel Huntington (1993) puts it, started with the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974 and continues with some setbacks to this date. Theorists argue whether many of the democratic states are really democracies or whether democracy is the right form of government for some societies in a certain stage of development (Zakaria 2003). However, there seems to be consensus that democracy is on the rise and that the world is better off as a result.

The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991 marked a major acceleration of the third wave. It also introduced a qualitatively different element of transition. Although the transition theory is being questioned and probed by scholars and observers due to the emergence of so-called illiberal democracies (Carothers 2002),<sup>2</sup> which have shown that the transitional period does not automatically lead to liberal democracy, there is a substantial difference between illiberal democracies—like Slovakia under the nationalist leader Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s and unabashed dictatorships. Illiberal democracies are characterized by system instability, which at times points them to the road to open society. That is not the case of most dictatorships.

Unlike conventional authoritarian regimes, most communist states fell under the rubric of the totalitarian dictatorship. Influenced by Lenin's interpretation of Marx, the communist ideologues believed they were building a society of a different kind, that they had made a revolutionary break that gave them the right "to mold a new man." The resulting dictatorships, at least in initial phases of ideological fervor, aimed at total indoctrination of their subjects. For Marxist-Leninist governments, it was imperative to tear down cultural traditions and to indoctrinate their people with the idea that nothing would ever again be as it used to be.

New forms of art were supposed to appear, new entertainment content was devised, new journalism traditions were started. All of this was antithetical to the values of open, liberal societies. Communist totalitarianism compared only to that of the Nazi Germany in its social depth and scope. The communists, however, did the Nazis one better: Bent on eliminating private property, they subjected national economies to total state control.

Thus when, say, Spain emerged out of Franco's reign, or Chile from under Pinochet's, they possessed relatively well-functioning economies to build a liberal society upon. That was not the case of the devastated economies of the Soviet Bloc, where the economic transformation became the top priority. They emerged out of their isolation at a time when capitalism itself underwent dramatic transformation. The demise of communism helped speed up the capitalist economic globalization in two ways. First, it provided a final discrediting of the socialist planned economy. Second, it enlarged the market area for goods and services. Suddenly, politics and economic development, especially in

communications and information technology, conspired to significantly modify the rules of the game.

A motto of the anticommunist revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and 1990 was “Back to Europe.” Unlike many other former Warsaw Pact countries, Czechoslovakia was democratic between 1918 and 1938 and was part of a liberalizing Austro-Hungarian Empire before 1918. Czech lands especially, also known as Bohemia and Moravia, prided themselves on being an integral part of Western civilization for centuries dating back to the Christianization of the region in the ninth century. The Soviet domination with its distinctly Eastern cultural accent was humiliating to many Czechs. “Back to Europe” meant back to civilization. European communities, and later the European Union, became the institutional embodiments of that striving. The goals were a free-market economy and a Western-style liberal society. These mechanisms were supposed to ensure an open, prosperous society that many Czechs felt was stolen from them by the Nazis and communists.

History, however, knows no entitlement rights, and the right of return is an elusive concept. The globalizing European Union of the 1990s was an impossible place to return to—it did not exist only fifteen years before. The capitalism the Czechs were entering in the 1990s was different from the capitalism their grandfathers had lost decades earlier.

The media play a prominent role in the kind of society the Czechs embraced in the 1990s. The early part of the decade saw an avalanche of new newspapers, magazines, and privately owned radio stations. In 1994, a commercial television channel was launched. Internet journalism and entertainment media followed in the second half of the decade, gaining force as Internet penetration grew.<sup>3</sup> All major newspapers now have their Web pages and there exist many webzines. The media have become an important social force.

With some justification, the Czech Republic’s transition from communism to democracy is considered successful. The political system is stable and democratic. The country holds regular and free elections. Freedom of speech, the press, and association is not in question. The living standard, steadily rising, is second to that of the somewhat exceptional Slovenia. The region of Prague is the wealthiest of former postcommunist regions, scoring 20 percent above the EU average standard of living. In recent years, the country has benefited from an influx of foreign direct investment. The banking industry, which was in crisis seven years ago, has stabilized. In May 2004, the Czech Republic entered the European Union.

## **2. A Tenuous Attachment to the New Democracy**

Despite the successes, Czechs are not satisfied with the state of public affairs. They perceive politics as corrupt, and several times over the past several years

they have vented their disillusionment—by organizing demonstrations and civil society petitions and also by withdrawing from electoral politics. Voter turnout has been dropping, with the general election in 2002 having a turnout of only 58 percent of eligible voters. Like people in surrounding nations, many Czechs have been experiencing nostalgia for the communist days.

In 1990, Miloš Forman, a Czech film director living in the United States, likened the communist societies to a zoo that broke out from behind bars. Today, many a former inhabitant of the zoo yearns for a simpler life that was not free but in which government took care of basic needs. The Czech nostalgia manifests itself in two ways—in pop culture by a persistent, deep-seated popularity of “the communist content,” and in politics by the rise of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy [KSČM]).

Far from harmless, both phenomena are signs of a social pathology afflicting the Czech society and betraying the as yet unfinished transition. By supplying communist content, Czech media of journalism and entertainment have helped to perpetuate the communist taste and created a social climate in which it is not unthinkable for voters to vote communist. The Czech Communist Party is an ideological descendant of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa [KSČ]) that ruled the country until 1989. Its leadership never apologized for communist crimes. Unlike its counterparts in neighboring countries, the party did not change the name to a more innocuous-sounding one. Many party members, including parliament deputies, use a rhetoric similar to the rhetoric of the totalitarian period.

After 1989, the Communist Party was in semi-isolation. No democratic party dared coalesce with it except in a few district councils. President Havel did not negotiate with its leaders. The times have changed, and the current Czech political leadership is increasingly pressed to cooperate with the party on some level. The reason could be found in the parliamentary elections of 2002 in which the Communist Party gained forty-one seats out of two hundred in the lower house of Parliament. It was the only party that gained votes compared to previous elections. There were 220,000 more communist votes in 2002 than in 1998, many of them from young people. The communists can now block legislation, and the democratic parties find it impossible to isolate them as they did in the past. The party gained representation in the parliament leadership and in major parliamentary committees, and the newly elected president felt compelled to invite the party chairman to a political roundtable about the European Union.

Each democracy must accommodate the tension between the demands on justice and the prudential imperatives derived from liberalism, such as the protection of individual freedoms and property. A healthy liberal democracy with decades of natural evolution and structured civil society possesses mechanisms that mediate the tensions. Like any people grappling with communist baggage,

the Czechs, who were starved for justice for five decades, have been sensitive to real and perceived injustices over the past thirteen years.

The large transfers of property in the first years of the democratic decade created a new wealthy class. Some of its members hail from the higher tiers of the former Communist Party. The former communists-turned-capitalists, some of whom were secret police agents or collaborators, took advantage of the network of contacts at home and abroad and benefited from their privileged knowledge and know-how. The landscape of Czech entrepreneurship of the 1990s is stained by several highly visible scandals and corruption cases. All major parties except the communists went through financing scandals. Few new entrepreneurs were tried and sentenced for economic crimes; few politicians felt a need to resign.

Against this background, and as a result of enforced egalitarianism in the past, the current communists benefit from the resentment of wealth. Some measure of such resentment occurs in any society. The established liberal democracies possess several means to deal with such resentment. They include a functioning judicial and law-and-order system ensuring that wealth is gotten in a legitimate way, legal incentives for the wealthy to benefit the public good, and cultural norms restraining such resentment and encouraging a positive attitude over envy.

None of these restraining, channeling, and mediating mechanisms work particularly well in the Czech Republic. The judiciary is perceived as inefficient and corrupt. Police credibility is low, and the police are not seen as capable of protecting citizens from sophisticated organized crime. Czech NGOs depend on state and foreign donations as the habits of private sponsorship are weak. The Czech Republic now gets less foreign aid, and the widespread fear that the non-profit sector might collapse made the European Union establish a trust fund that supports the NGOs.

It has become clear that for an alarmingly high number of Czechs, the injustices or perceived injustices are at the core of the new democracy's identity. The resulting sense of helplessness contributes to their weakened attachment to the democratic regime.

### **3. The Communist Content and Taste**

What do I mean by the communist taste and communist media content? Admittedly, these are slippery concepts. They defy exact definition, but in the aggregate they clearly are present in Czech media and society and are a forceful factor influencing culture. The communist content refers to the pop culture content featured by the Czech media that originated in communist times. These are either entertainment formats and genres developed mostly in the 1970s or pop culture stars who made their name in official media in the period from the 1960s to 1980s.

The 1970s and 1980s are known to Czechs as normalization. The word comes from the communist newspeak but gradually caught on in general usage. Normalization was a policy of the communist hardliners who took over after the Soviet military invasion in 1968 ended the period of liberalization. The hard-line clique put in power by Moscow in 1969 considered the 1960s liberalization as times of ideological revisionism, which was tantamount to heresy. Normalization was a return to the “normalcy” of the rigid totalitarian rule.

In pop culture, the normalization ushered in a new era. The rulers knew that after the cultural explosion of the 1960s, they could not simply go back to mindless ideological brainwashing that permeated every single cultural event in the 1950s. Normalization was not a heroic period, and the rulers did not really want to change people’s consciousness—the era of molding a new man was over. The new formula was in: The governing class essentially struck a bargain with the majority, giving it bread and circus providing that the circus was devoid of anti-government messages. The communists occasionally required that their movie and TV stars appear on ideological forums to remind them and the populace who the boss was, but by and large they did not mandate that each TV program bear an ideological message.

That is not to say that there was no ideology in pop culture. Each year, Czechoslovak TV and film studios produced a quota of “committed” programs in which star actors participated. And when the regime needed help, it forced its stars to voice the message directly, as was the case in early 1977, after the anti-government dissident group Charter 77 was formed. The regime orchestrated a massive response popularly called Anti-charter, a document denouncing the dissidents. Thousands, including prominent singers, actors, producers, and film and theater directors, were forced to sign it. The best-known official stars appeared on TV denouncing the Charter.

By the late 1980s, there was an officially sanctioned pop culture, populated by a protected elite with earnings above the nation’s average. In 1990, some culture critics predicted that these entertainers would lose their audiences, unable to compete with Western imports and new, talented artists who would enter the liberated market. As the hunger for formerly banned authors and performers peaked, it looked for a while that they were correct. However, gradually the former official stars, media shows, and formats staged a comeback. They were helped mightily by the launch of the first private commercial television channel in Central and Eastern Europe in 1994, TV Nova.

During the license tender—in which the license was given away for free only on the basis of a project evaluated by the broadcasting council created by Parliament—the bidders on behalf of what would become TV Nova promised high-quality television with cultural and arts programming, serious news content, educational programs for children, and original Czech dramas and series. They were awarded the license with listed conditions that were supposed to secure the



promises. Instead, the conditions were dropped one by one after aggressive lobbying by the management in the first years of broadcasting.

From its inception, Nova's broadcasting strategy is low-fare, aggressively down-market programming. Its tabloid news and current affairs programs are modeled on the local U.S. TV news with a premium put on crime reporting, although crime rates are negligible. It gathered all the usual suspects of commercial television: the loud afternoon talk shows, lots of high-ratings sports, erotica at night (it used to broadcast a "strip" show masquerading as weather report by having naked women, and occasionally men, dress up on camera according to the next-day forecast), action films, cheap romance "tele-novelas," and commercial cartoons for kids.

Nova also perfected the communist entertainment formats—the so-called *estradas*, a hodgepodge of low-brow humor and mainstream pop music with an occasional animal trick. In normalization, the *estradas* broadcast several times a year, most prominently on New Year's Eve. Nova now features them several times a month. From the start, Nova has been a commercial success, disabusing Czech elites of the widely held illusion that Czech people were too educated, well read, and enlightened to fall for such blatant commercialism. Immediately, Nova grabbed the largest market share and soon had revenue of approximately \$100 million per year. According to the chief financier of the project, U.S. entrepreneur Ronald Lauder, Nova's parent company Central European Media Enterprises returned to the U.S. equity markets, raising an additional \$220 million in equity in 1995 and 1996 and selling \$170 million in bonds in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

Nova spawned an imitator in TV Prima, the second private channel that is now well established with similar, although less edgy and racy, programming. Nova has also influenced the content of the first channel of the public Czech TV, which consists of an uneven mix of commercial-style broadcasting and true public service. Only the second channel of the Czech TV features noncommercial quality broadcasting—when it is not preempted by sports. The second channel market share is, however, in low single digits (it shoots up during sports broadcasts), the market being dominated—practically owned—by the three aforementioned channels.<sup>5</sup> They combine in perpetuating and further developing the communist entertainment content, including reruns of heavily ideological TV series from the 1970s and 1980s.

The nadir was reached in 1999 by the decision of public television to rerun *Třicet případů majora Zemana* (The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman), a thirty-part TV drama inspired, guided, and coproduced by the communist police. The series originated in the mid-1970s as a tribute to the founders of the communist-led police corps that celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 1975. It was produced between 1974 and 1979 in Czechoslovak TV as its largest project ever. Each installment ran for one hour, blended propaganda with murder mystery, and was set in a postwar year whose atmosphere it was supposed to capture. The

production enjoyed unusually generous budget, and major communist-sanctioned movie stars were involved.

The decision of the management of Czech TV in 1999 to rebroadcast the series provoked a major outcry as it was clear that the initiative was intended to prop up the sagging ratings of Channel One. But as civic groups, commentators, and the Confederation of (former) Political Prisoners protested loudly, Czech TV announced a compromise. The series would still go ahead, but each part would be followed by a short “explanatory news story” and discussion of experts.

Commercial channels do not make a pretense to educate—they simply broadcast whatever communist fare raises their ratings. The extent to which the channels collude to perpetuate communist entertainment content illustrates the intent to build on the popularity of the most successful TV series of Czech television history, *Nemocnice na kraji města* (Hospital at the Edge of Town). Originally, Nova conceived the idea to film a sequel, the twenty-years-after series. Later in the process, it was Czech TV that bought the rights to the series. The production was reported extensively by major Czech media including daily newspapers. They turned the 2003 premiere and the first few installments into an event that, in their view, warranted front-page coverage.

The story of the largest quality daily, *Mladá fronta DNES* (MFD), captures key moments of the entire market’s evolution. The MFD came into being by a transformation of the communist daily *Mladá fronta* (MF), which was founded in 1945 and which, during the totalitarian regime, was the official paper of the Communist Youth League.<sup>6</sup> It was always slightly more liberal and less orthodox than other official newspapers. During the Gorbachev perestroika, MF reporters were cautiously pushing the envelope on cultural issues. In November 1989, they were among the first to switch sides and support the changes. In 1990, the newspaper—in defiance of the law—was privatized. It was turned into a shareholding company with shares distributed among its employees. The name was altered, adding the word *DNES* (Czech for *Today*) to be distinguished from the former communist mouthpiece. The MFD became the most successful newspaper of the first half of the 1990s, with quick and comprehensible domestic and international coverage and an opinion page that supported the economic and political transformation. At times, the circulation hovered around five hundred thousand copies—a remarkable achievement in a market of 10 million people.

MFD suffered from the ills of postcommunist Czech journalism, namely, from political activism on behalf of friendly groups and parties. Too often, reporters and editors saw themselves as political players instead of independent observers. This has some grounding in the Czech tradition. Virtually all important journalistic figures since the nineteenth century were also major political personalities—in the Czech National Awakening, the fight against German

domination, the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic, the state building in the 1920s, the anti-Nazi struggle, and finally the anticommunist resistance.

MFD's success was emblematic of what was going on in the society at large. While many former dissidents struggled, people who went by or to some degree collaborated with the communist regime took advantage of their positions, experience, and connections and converted these into success in the newly capitalist economy. Unlike its main competitor, *Lidové noviny* (LN), MFD benefited from its network of subscribers and its know-how.

LN had an important presence in the Czech lands ever since its founding in 1893. During the first Czechoslovak republic (1918–38) and then briefly after World War II, it was the newspaper in which leading journalists, writers, and intellectuals published. In 1952, the communist government abolished it. The dissidents renewed LN in January 1988 as a monthly underground (*samizdat*) publication. In January 1990, after four decades, it resumed publishing as an independent daily newspaper. Unlike MFD, LN had to start from scratch, with no significant technology, know-how, and list of subscribers. To their credit, MFD reporters and writers proved faster and more adept at creating a modern daily than the more ponderous intellectuals and former dissidents at LN.

Eventually, the MFD owners sold the company to a French publisher. It is now owned by a regional German publishing house.<sup>7</sup> The owner's strategy is profit maximization at the expense of quality. MFD pushed to compete with the tabloid daily *Blesk*. When the staff resisted, a new editor was imposed who restructured the paper according to the owner's wishes. MFD, like all Czech dailies but one,<sup>8</sup> now goes down the infotainment path. It has abandoned serious, comprehensive, analytical reporting in favor of soft news, human interest, and dramatic stories. Its coverage of politics has moved closer to the way sports get covered, with emphasis on winners and losers, personalities and conflict. Much of its coverage, sometimes even the front-page coverage, is driven by television entertainment.

Czech society has not been able to produce a high-quality, financially strong daily newspaper like *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Poland, whose publisher, Agora SA, has been listed on the Warsaw and London stock exchanges since 1999. Estimates put the value of Agora around half a billion dollars (Ash 1999).<sup>9</sup> *Gazeta*, like LN, started out as a newspaper run by former dissidents with experience in underground publishing. Obviously, it enjoys a market four times the size of the Czech market. MFD was close to developing similarly strong quality and independent financial viability but in the end did not succeed.<sup>10</sup>

The journey from political activism to infotainment, a key trait of postcommunist Czech newspaper development, was accompanied by a search for professional standards. Two conditions affected the search. The internal one consisted of the interrupted tradition of free, independent journalism. As a result, there is today no generation of writers and editors older than forty, and the average age in newsrooms is low compared to that in the West. With no deep

institutional memory, Czech reporters and writers have looked to the West, especially the United States, for inspiration. However, with the emergence of cable TV news, the Internet media, and the rise of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the professional standards of Western journalism have themselves changed. The external guidance was therefore ambiguous and created confusion. Infotainment got the upper hand. By virtue of this development, most national and regional dailies are increasingly irrelevant at best and harmful at worst to Czech democracy.

#### **4. Journalism and Civil Society**

A daily newspaper in the era of globalization that makes itself relevant to democracy consciously aspires to be a tool of navigation—it seeks to help the reader-citizen navigate the public waters. It does not—indeed, mostly it cannot afford to—forgo commercial success, but it also sees itself as something other than a provider of commercial goods. It is aware that information is both a commercial and a public good, relevant to democracy as well as to the market. A newspaper conceived as such helps readers distinguish what is relevant from what is merely entertaining. It provides a map by which readers can see the occurrences and events in their society through a prism of the value hierarchy essential to open society.

A newspaper fashioned and managed that way is not a boring civics seminar in print. The democracy function is not automatically a money loser. It involves many traits that can enhance interest and sales, for example, the clash of ideas and personalities. And the writers and editors know they have to properly balance market and democracy functions. If the balance is tipped too much in favor of democracy, the newspaper risks making itself irrelevant and out of touch, an elite enclave. If the market function overwhelms everything else, the newspaper becomes just another item of commerce.

Due to proliferation of the electronic media, people are faced with a deluge of information. Attention, for which marketers compete, becomes the most precious commodity. Advertising and public relations techniques of attention getting and attention keeping have grown sophisticated. Information of all kinds of quality and importance to the democratic process has proliferated. Its abundance and decentralized nature fragment the information space. Instead of helping people to sort out the information noise, a journalistic medium that forgoes its democratic function reduces itself to being part of the noise. It may augment its market value, but it will lose over time something more precious, its reputation and credibility. And it is an open question whether writers from such a medium will be able to claim indefinitely the special privileges that derive from a special civic status.

The 1990s in the Czech Republic were characterized by emphasis on economic reform, which overshadowed the development of the civil society. In such an environment, the *exit* is preferred to *voice*. As Hirschman (1970) noticed three decades ago, people can manifest dissatisfaction with a product or the organization either by switching over to a competition's product or quitting the organization (*exit*) or by raising their voice in criticism to alert the management or the organization's leadership (*voice*). Allowing for some complicating factors, the impersonal mechanism of *exit* belongs to economics, while the messy voicing out of one's unhappiness and pursuing one's interests belongs to politics.

Because of the influence that Czech economists wielded in 1990s politics, a preference for the impersonal *exit* mechanism over *voice* was clearly felt. When civil society organized in the late 1990s against corruption, and then again in 2000 and 2001 in protest against perceived political manipulation of public television, it was common to hear influential politicians criticizing the activists as alien to the democratic process. To them, the civil society activists were unelected and therefore without legitimacy. "Let them found their political party and face voters," political elites were heard to say. They tried to channel the boisterous civil society into the kind of supermarket politics where people choose and desert parties according to their predilection. This feature, betraying the political elites' distrust for the nascent civil society, is common to other new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. It is a sign of a political culture's immaturity.<sup>11</sup>

This approach, together with media coverage of politics as spectator sport, strengthens civic passivity, a trait echoed by modern Czech history. During the Nazi occupation and then during the communist regime, most Czechs exited the public space. During normalization, owning a small country cottage (*chata*) symbolized the mass escape. Each Friday afternoon, tens of thousands Czechs would leave their jobs early and head for their chatas. Passivity and a lack of concern for things public, a residue of the past, is still strong today. On a broader scale, it is reinforced by homogeneity and isolationism of Czech culture.

As a result of its historical development, the Czech Republic is ethnically homogeneous. During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Czech ethnic element lived in one state alongside many other cultures and nationalities. The Czechoslovak Republic of 1918 to 1938 contained a diversity of cultures, languages, and minorities. Before World War II, Prague had three strong cultural elements, Czech, German, and Jewish. The Jews were exterminated in the war, the Germans expelled after its ending, and postwar Czechoslovakia lost its eastern Ruthenian territory, which was annexed by the Soviet Union. Finally, in 1992, Czechoslovakia split into two independent countries. The history of a Czech state is therefore a story of a continuous shrinkage of its cultural and ethnic diversity. The new homogeneity has been accompanied by cultural isolationism,

which is a reaction to the travails of history in the region. Czech culture and the national outlook have been inward looking.

Such culture is in need of impulses that would open it up and supply a spirit of self-confidence. By providing not much beyond infotainment and communist content, the major journalistic media do not disturb the passivity, they reinforce it. They contribute to cultural homogeneity, fortify cultural stagnation, stifle creativity, and impoverish imagination. If the media do not help navigate and foster alternatives to the mainstream, communist-nostalgia-influenced pop culture, if everything converges on a flattened cultural mainstream, the media in the long run foster a society that deprives itself of new ideas.

The solutions to problems afflicting postcommunist Czech culture and society are not primarily market-based solutions. They rest on seeing the limitations of the market, on making use of it for the benefit of the open society. Heavy reliance on the market was understandable in the 1990s as a reaction to decades of suppression, but it poses serious dangers for Czech society now. The journalistic media need to transcend the gravitation of the market forces and see themselves as contributing to the civil society. They are not only commercial goods but also part of the public good. Their function is to help citizens to navigate the public space, broaden their attention beyond the mainstream expression, and provide alternatives.

## **5. Equality**

The argument goes to the heart of democracy. It concerns the ideal of equality, or more precisely, the understanding of equality that is most relevant for the postindustrial age—equality of opportunity for each citizen to pursue and develop to the fullest his or her talent. If this ideal is to be properly pursued, citizens must have the broadest possible range of educational, informational, and aesthetic/artistic/cultural options available to them. These options cannot be provided solely by the market. Clearly, the larger and stronger the market, the more plentiful the resources for citizen development. With 10 million inhabitants and a GDP six to seven times smaller than the gross city product of New York City with a comparable population, the Czech Republic is in no position to provide highly varied and comprehensive market resources to its citizens. But even the civil societies anchored to the largest Western markets do not rely on market mechanisms only. The free market has a tendency to flatten the range of resources and to coalesce around mainstream expression, which in our time is associated with mass entertainment.

In small and poorer markets, as in the Czech Republic, it becomes the task for public leadership to foster civil society and promote nonmainstream cultural, social, journalistic, artistic, and other expression. Where circumstances do not

help (small population, weak market), public leaders will simply need to be better in meeting society's needs. They need to show that the cultural and societal mainstream is not the only option. Smaller and poorer societies require their leaders to make civic liberties and freedoms meaningful. They can ill afford to slacken, as Hirschman (1970) put it.

Alexis de Tocqueville saw equality as a providential fact. He wrote, "[Equality] is universal, it is lasting, it constantly eludes all human interference and all events as well as all men contribute to its progress" (de Tocqueville 1835/1990: ix). It was the quality of equality he concerned himself with. He feared that all too easily the promise of equality might turn to the tyranny of the majority. Just as the young French nobleman in the 1830s preoccupied himself with equality, the Czechs in the 1990s stressed freedom. After decades of enforced ideological egalitarianism, this was expected. So far their freedom has not led to the kind of society they themselves would have wished, partly because they did not take seriously other ideals, including fairness and equality. Without working toward equality of opportunity, without developing a truly civil society where all manners of voice are heard and taken into account, freedom tends to limit itself to the pursuit of personal pleasure. Without being informed by a range of educational and cultural resources, such pursuit gravitates toward the mainstream entertainment and simple accumulation of wealth.

In small and poorer egalitarian democracies, that which de Tocqueville famously described as the tyranny of the majority is a bigger risk than in large and prosperous ones. The strength of civil society, however, is a major factor, too. In an impoverished civil society, the tyranny of the majority takes the shape of a stifling domination by one outlook—the flattened center. It occasionally tolerates diverse voices, but it does not allow a genuinely varied civil society to emerge. In the Czech Republic, this is the dilemma of public leadership. The leaders ought to keep the following de Tocqueville's warning in mind: "It depends upon [the nations] whether the principle of equality is to lead . . . to servitude or freedom, to knowledge or barbarism, to prosperity or wretchedness" (de Tocqueville 1835/1990: x).

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## Notes

1. Havel's speech was delivered at the symposium, "The President-Liberator Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and America," held at Willard-Intercontinental Hotel, Washington, D.C., September 2002.
2. See also several reactions to Carothers and his reply to critics, "Debating the Transition Paradigm" *Journal of Democracy* 13 (2002): 7-38.
3. The Internet penetration estimates in the Czech Republic vary, with the conservative ones putting it at 17 percent of Czech households.
4. Testimony of Ronald S. Lauder, Chairman of the Central European Media Enterprises, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on European Affairs, June 28, 2000.
5. TV Nova's market share in 2003 stabilized around 44 to 45 percent to Czech TV Channel One's 22 to 23 percent, TV Prima's 21 to 22 percent, and Czech TV Channel Two's 4 to 6 percent (source: ATO-MEDIARESEARCH, <<http://www.ato.cz>>).
6. In the last phase of the regime, the official name of the youth arm of the Communist Party was the Socialist Union of the Youth (Socialistický svaz mládeže [SSM]).
7. Ironically, the publisher, Rheinische-Bergische Druckerei und Verlagsgesellschaft that acquired *Mladá fronta DNES* (MFD) in 1994 now owns *Lidové noviny* (LN) as well.
8. The exception is *Hospodářské noviny* (HN), previously a business and financial markets daily. It is now pursuing a strategy modeled after the *Financial Times* template. HN is owned jointly by Handelsblatt and the *Wall Street Journal*.
9. *Gazeta Wyborcza*'s national weekly average circulation in 2002 was 536,000 copies, with 5.2 million daily readers (see <<http://www.agora.pl/im/1440/m1440082.pdf>>).
10. MFD's weekly average in September 2003 was 307,458 sold copies. The average of the tabloid *Blesk* was 486,958; the daily *Právo*, 190,093; HN, 74,156; and LN, 73,435 (source: ABC Czech Republic, <<http://www.abccr.cz/tabperiod/nakper.html>>).
11. Paul Nuti, former democracy promotion worker in Macedonia and my research assistant at the Kennedy School of Government, witnessed similar attitude of the Macedonian politicians to democracy and civil society activists.

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