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Anti-government protests in Kiev, 2014

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Czech Republic - 'Putler' or Banderists? Czech Reactions to the Events in Ukraine

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The situation in Ukraine is the subject of an intense discussion in the public sphere and the media across Europe. But what do we know about how our neighbouring countries are reflecting on the crisis, its historical background and its meaning for the relationship between our countries, Ukraine, Russia and the European Union? During 2014 and 2015 the Cultures of History Forum asked historians and sociologists from more than 15 European countries, the US, Israel and Turkey to reflect on the media coverage and public debates regarding the Ukrainian crisis in their countries. This article focuses on the Czech Republic.

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Czech Republic - 'Putler' or Banderists? Czech Reactions to the Events in Ukraine

In order to understand the attitudes of the Czech public to the crisis in Ukraine and the public debates on this topic, we need to take Czech-Ukrainian relations in the last century into consideration. Both ethnic groups - Czechs and Ukrainians - were characterized by strong, culturally-oriented nationalist movements in the nineteenth century, and they were often sympathetic towards each other.

The traditional picture of nineteenth-century Czechs as strongly Russophile has been questioned by historians in recent decades. Shortly after its foundation in 1918, Czechoslovakia became the destination of Ukrainian post-revolutionary migrants and a Ukrainian exile university was even founded in Prague. A Ukrainian-speaking region that had formerly been part of the Hungarian Kingdom - Sub-Carpathian Rus - was incorporated into Czechoslovakia as an expression of the wish of local representatives. While its ethnic affiliation was divided between Ukrainian, Russian and Rusyn orientations, in the interwar years Sub-Carpathian Rus became a region where Ukrainian culture could develop more freely than in the Soviet Union, Poland or Romania. When the region was annexed by the Soviet Union after 1945, Ukrainian culture continued to be represented in Czechoslovakia by the Ukrainian minority in north-eastern Slovakia.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Czech Republic became a popular destination for Ukrainian labour migrants.^[1] In 2010 Ukrainians were the largest group of foreigners living in the Czech Republic, numbering 134 000, about 1.2 per cent of the population or one third of all foreigners living in the country. Slovaks, by comparison, numbered only 71 000. Ukrainians, however, tend to work in menial jobs on a temporary basis and do not, therefore, form a homogenous minority as yet. Most Ukrainian migrants to the Czech Republic come from the former Sub-Carpathian Rus (today Zakarpacie). As this region is not involved in the current conflict, a dramatic increase in Ukrainian migrants to the Czech Republic is not expected. The Ukrainian minority organized several pro-Maidan demonstrations in Prague^[2] in December 2013. In addition, a mobile symbolic cemetery of victims was set up in the Czech capital in the spring of 2014, but it does not seem to have drawn much Czech attention.

In Czech public opinion after 1990, Ukraine as such was perceived as belonging to the former Soviet territory characterized by instability, poverty and social crisis, and it was not seen as a possible candidate for EU- or NATO-membership. By contrast with Russians, for whom the stereotype of nouveau riche soon emerged, Ukrainians became stereotyped as unqualified labourers. The increasingly common racist nickname for a Ukrainian - účko from the letter 'u' - sounded like the name of a machine and indicated the low esteem in which Ukrainians were held by the Czechs. In public opinion polls^[3], the Ukrainian minority is perceived rather negatively: only 18 per cent of Czechs are sympathetic towards the Ukrainians living in the country. However, Ukrainians do fare somewhat better than the least popular ethnic groups associated with criminality or religious fundamentalism: Romanians, Albanians, Arabs and Roma. Interestingly, when asked about their attitude to the Ukraine minority^[4] in the context of the current crisis, 62 per cent of Czechs described their attitude to Ukrainians as "rather positive" and 6 per cent "very positive".

Czech public opinion on the events in Ukraine

Until the autumn of 2014, Ukraine was not very prominent in the Czech media, with the exception of the Orange Revolution in 2004. With the first images of the Maidan, most media and most of the Czech public interpreted the events as a people's protest against the pro-Russian and corrupted regime embodied by the brutal police and President Viktor Yanukovych and read the events through the glass of the velvet revolution. Very quickly, however, a counter-narrative developed, which stressed the presence of right-wing extremists among the protestors and raised doubts about which side the snipers shooting to the protesting people represented. An opinion poll conducted in March 2014 showed that most of Czechs held President Viktor Yanukovych mainly responsible for the situation. In seeking a solution to the crisis, 55 per cent preferred the involvement of the UN, while 40 per cent were in favour of EU involvement. Twenty-eight per cent, however, accepted that Russia also had a right to be involved. By contrast, there was very little support for the involvement of the USA^[5] (17 per cent) or the Czech Republic (14 per cent). According to opinion polls conducted in April, most Czechs opposed the Russian invasion of Crimea. Sixty-six per cent considered it an occupation; fifteen per cent saw it as an act to defend Crimean Russians; and thirty-five per cent thought that the Russian invasion was a response to a provocation.^[6] The Czech public also opposed any possible NATO intervention in Ukraine^[7]. While 32 per cent were opposed to such an intervention under any circumstances, 27 per cent would support it only if Russian invasions "would threaten the sovereignty" of NATO member states.

Pro-Western and pro-Russian voices

The official political line of the Czech government does not differ much from that expressed by other NATO and EU members. The Czech prime minister and minister of foreign affairs both voiced their support for the Maidan and condemned the military action taken by Russia. Czech President Miloš Zeman sided with them^[8], although his cordial connections to Russian business and government circles are well known. He denounced the invasion by Russia and warned Putin that he is "digging a ditch which will take a generation to overcome." According to Zeman^[9], the West and Ukraine should accept the secession of Crimea, but he called for NATO presence in the Ukraine in the event that Russia attempts to extend its military actions to the east of the country. On the other hand, he supported the federalization of the country, condemned the abolition of language law shortly after the overthrow of Viktor Yanukovych, and argued against the isolation of Russia.

The liberal right around Karel Schwarzenberg, the former minister of foreign affairs and a kind of spiritual heir to Václav Havel, is viewed as the most anti-Putin camp in Czech politics. The most pro-Putin line is taken by the former president Václav Klaus, small right-wing groups, and several politicians in the Czech Communist Party. Klaus accused the EU and the USA of prompting the crisis in Ukraine and defended Putin. According to him, the EU and the USA tried to challenge Russia and used Ukraine as their tool. They irresponsibly shored up the illusions of Ukrainian nationalists. In Klaus' view the country^[10] is "an artificial entity deeply embedded in the post-Soviet space." Putin is "a politician like any other"^[11], with no significant difference; like everybody else he aims to pursue his political goals" and he is "acting rationally". By contrast, Karel Schwarzenberg^[12] (ironically) called Vladimir Putin "gosudar" (the Russian term for tsar), expressed his gratitude that "he made us conscious of the importance of NATO", and warned against cuts to Czech military expenditure. He also condemned the tendency to return to the first half of the twentieth century, when "the Great Powers could do everything they wanted" and called for a "revision of the Czech policy towards Russia." In his view^[13], Western states should signal that they are not afraid and should "strengthen sanctions against Russia". The leading government party, the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD), seems to be somewhat divided on

this issue. Although the party leader and Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek side with the Western position, the anti-American and leftist wing of the party - represented by the sociologist and the leader forthcoming European elections Jan Keller - is more critical. According to Keller, "the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not a football match and we cannot be the fans of one team and wish the enemy would be defeated 10:1." He claimed^[14] that only Ukrainians, and not the West or Russia, should decide on the Ukraine's destiny, and that the EU had been wrong to offer integration to Ukraine, compared to which Greece is a real economic tiger."

With regard to the instrumentalization of memory in the discussions, both camps have different strategies. The anti-Putin camp has compared the Crimean events to the Czechoslovak events of 1938 and 1968, sometimes likening Putin to Hitler and going as far as using the compound Putler. From the perspective of those in the anti-Putin camp, once again a small country is threatened by a great power and it is the moral duty of the West to side with it, just as it is the moral duty of Ukraine to respond to the aggression with force, i.e. to act differently than the Czechs did in the past, because not fighting only brings oppression. In this narrative, the Ukrainian public participates in the eternal clash between Western and orthodox civilizations: the Maidan protests are against the pro-Russian and corrupt government and they aim to create a pro-Western and democratic government. The inhabitants of eastern Ukraine are thought to be misled by Soviet nostalgia.

The pro-Putin camp also view the Maidan in the context of fascism, warning that the Ukrainian nationalists are the heirs of Stephan Bandera, and that their pro-Western attitude and values are dubious. It points to the anti-Semitism of some Ukrainian nationalists and the connections between Svoboda and other right-wing parties in Europe. The events are sometimes even perceived as another attempt by the West to destroy Russia. The West is perceived as an instigator and sponsor of colourful revolutions Maidan. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 is interpreted as a time of laying the foundations of the current crisis, as nobody asked the inhabitants of Ukraine whether they wished to remain in the same state as Russia or not. This camp also points to the fact that Crimea was only incorporated into Ukraine under Khrushchev, thus legitimizing its recent annexation.

The first camp sees the Maidan as a pure manifestation of democracy and authentic revolution, but for the second camp, democracy can only be manifested in an election or referendum and the Maidan represents the voice of a minority. On the question of the unity of the country, the first camp stresses the indivisibility of Ukraine and the necessity of pursuing its pro-Western orientation, while the second camp has raised the possibility of the federalization or even division of the country.

Most Czech media adopted a pro-Western, anti-Putin stance, sometimes in a way that their critics accused them of "russophobia". For example, the leading Czech journalist and expert on Central and Eastern Europe Luboš Palata commented^[15] on the mass killing in Odessa in May 2014 with following words: "The Russians have started to pay for their aggression. In Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, Ukrainian security forces rightly liquidated un-uniformed armed men. Russian security forces would have shot such "terrorists" on the other side of the border within five minutes. The only criticism we can have against the Ukrainian anti-terrorist action is that it took such a long time to start it. [...]. The earlier Ukrainian Russians realize that Putin does not bring a better life, but destruction, oppression and downfall, the better for them." The civil rights alternative media warned^[16] in this context against xenophobia, which is particularly shocking in the statements of many Czech cultural elites. Cases where Russian tourists were verbally attacked^[17] on public transport or Russian students were ridiculed by their professors have also been criticized here.

The events in Ukraine also became a clash over the symbols in the Czech public space. In Liberec, a city of 100 000 inhabitants in northern Bohemia, a 15-meter long poster of Putin, with a Hitler moustache accompanied by the symbols of Nazism and Communism was put up at the town hall. However, the police ordered that it be taken down after a few days. The Russian embassy made an official protest, stating: "Such an action does not correspond with the high level of mutually advantageous bilateral Russian-Czech relations, which have been greatly supported by the Czech side in recent years." Surprisingly, the University of Liberec reacted to the poster controversy and declared that it would not be promoting itself further in Russia because the university does not agree with Putin's politics in Ukraine. Another case was recorded in Ostrava where the owner of a hotel stated that he would no longer accommodate Russian citizens since the occupation of Crimea. However, he changed his mind later on and said he would continue to accommodate Russians who sign a statement condemning the occupation. Interestingly, there have been no recorded cases of such symbolic violence against Ukrainians from the side of pro-Putin camp.

Conclusion

All in all, it seems that the Czech debate on Ukraine is in line with Czech history and the country's existing foreign affiliations. Czech politics is characterized by a strong Western orientation, which ranges from the liberal and conservative right to Christian democracy, greens, and social liberals who call for the moral support of pro-Western Ukrainians and sometimes even for the use of force. But there is also a 'Eurosceptic', nationalist right and a Stalinist and anti-American left calling for temperance or direct support of Russia. The events of 1938, 1968 and 1989 are still important in historical memory and are often instrumentalized in the interpretation of international politics. The terms 'fascism' and, to lesser extent, 'communism' are still powerful historical tools with which to delegitimize opponents.

The ethnic minorities living in the Czech Republic have not featured much in Czech discussions of the situation in Ukraine, as they are not numerous and there is no movement demanding their autonomy. No parallels have been drawn between the division of Czechoslovakia in 1992 and the contemporary crisis in Ukraine, possibly because the Czechoslovak split was not marked by the involvement of external powers and it went smoothly. In one article, it was argued that the Czechs should be thankful that Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar, the prime ministers at that time, divided the country in a peaceful way^[18] in contrast to contemporary Ukraine. Other readers, however, objected that the situation in Czechoslovakia was much easier to solve^[19] and that the Czech and Slovak political elites had decided to divide the country over the heads of the people, so it is not an example that should be followed.

Footnotes

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