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'The wall has not completely disappeared'

15 years after the EU's enlargement towards Eastern Europe, then-Czech Prime Minister Vladimir Špidla takes stock

Read this interview in German.

On 1 May 2004, ten Central European countries joined the EU in its largest enlargement round to date. 55 per cent of eligible voters in the Czech Republic took part in the national referendum held in advance in all candidate countries, while 77 per cent of those voted for accession. In the most recent survey on the EU conducted by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in late 2018, only 34 per cent of Czechs questioned were in favour of EU membership, while 29 per cent viewed the disadvantages as greater.

The referendum and the Czech Republic's official entry into the EU occurred while Vladimir Špidla was Prime Minister and Chair of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). Anne Seyfferth spoke to him about the Czech Republic and the EU today and 15 years ago.

On the day the Czech Republic joined the EU, you hoisted the EU flag with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Polish Prime Ministers Leszek Miller at a ceremony held at the German-Czech-Polish border triangle. At that time, the Czech Republic was the country among the 10 new members that expected the least from EU membership. Why were your countrymen so sceptical?

> For many of my countrymen, this was a very happy event. I, too, was very satisfied that we had mastered this step. Czechs approached accession to the EU with a spirit of optimism. Low participation in the referendum had no special significance because Czechs never turn out in great numbers to vote. I think Czechs are fundamentally quite a sceptical peoples. Of course, Communist Party supporters were very dissatisfied about joining the EU because they would have preferred closer ties to Russia.

For a number of years the Czech Republic's economy has been booming and earlier fears that unemployment could rise proved to be unfounded: The Czech Republic has the EU's lowest figures for unemployment and incomes have steadily risen. Why is the Czech population still so sceptical about the EU?

The European financial crisis of 2008 was a major break: until then, people had the feeling that things were going uphill. Suddenly they realised that even EU membership doesn't automatically ensure growth or protect against unemployment. This created great insecurity and increased scepticism.

Beyond that, many people still don't understand how the EU works. Many see Germany and France as the two big members dictating how the EU develops and believe that the Czech Republic can't actively participate. They also expected that incomes would rise to German levels, but 15 years after accession, the average pay is around 1200 euros per month, only about a third of the German average. As a result, many people feel that they're second-class citizens in the European Union.

Some high-ranking Czech politicians have adopted a Eurosceptic position in the past 15 years. Has this influenced the population as a whole?

Yes, particularly the negative attitudes of the two Czech presidents, Václav Klaus (2003-2013) and Miloš Zeman (2013-today) have strongly affected my countrymen. Although Czech presidents only have a representative function, their influence is significant because our political parties are relatively weak.

What's the ruling party ANO, led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš', approach to European politics?

Prime Minister Babiš's approach differs fundamentally from that of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). The oligarch Babiš primarily pursues his own interest in his European policy. As a wealthy capitalist he needs a functioning domestic market – and since neither China nor Russia can offer him such a market, he needs the EU. He's not interested in other topics related to the EU and its development.

What about the Social Democrats, who are junior partners in the current government?

The Czech Social Democrats count on Europe. For the past 15 years, they have been calling for social Europe to be strengthened.

30 years ago, we saw the beginning of a profound change in Central Europe. Although the region is now more prosperous and free, fear continues to play a major role – not only, but also in connection with, migration policy. It's one of the reasons right-wing populists and even right-wing extremist political parties and movements are gaining ground. What are people afraid of?

In the course of its century-old history, the Czech Republic has experienced a series of major political changes: The Munich Agreement of 1938, the German Army's invasion in 1938 and that of the Warsaw Pact troops some 50 years ago. Each of these events was a big turning point for the Czech people. Separating from Slovakia one year before joining the EU felt like an amputation to us. Such experiences have led our people to strive to preserve their independence.

Since Germany has a big say in the EU's development, many citizens have something like a chip on their shoulders. They don't feel that their concerns are taken into consideration or that their opinions count. Czech people tend to be conservative and feel that any change is a threat. This plays right into the hands of the right-wing nationalist parties. However, we are a liberal peoples and I don't believe that we'll go the way of Poland and Hungary.

The EU is experiencing several fractures – one of them between East and West. What do Czechs expect of Brussels, Berlin and Paris?

You're right: The Berlin wall has not completely disappeared and many Czechs feel that they can't do anything about that. My country isn't afraid of Germany, but fears are growing that with Macron, France's president, these two strong countries will dominate. With regard to Paris, the Czech attitude is: leave us alone. However, with respect to Berlin it is: be our partner.

Germany has always been our gateway to the world. Our people have often felt isolated in the past, and some still feel that today. This leads to self-victimisation, and explains why we are generally more passive, especially in the debate about how Europe will develop.



Vladimír Špidla

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Vladimír Špidla was Prime Minister of the Czech Republic from 2002 to 2004. Since 2011, he is Director of the social democratic think tank Masarykova Demokratická Academy. From 2014 to 2017, Špidla headed the Advisory Council of Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. From 2004 to 2010, he was EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.