

# First Brexit, then Czexit? Unlikely – Czech attitudes to Europe are very different



*The president and prime minister of the Czech Republic are both Eurosceptics, and there has been speculation that the country might follow the UK out of the EU. But, argues **Benjamin Whitlock (University of Aberdeen)**, this overlooks a long history of cultivating a ‘European’ Czech identity, in which the country and its predecessors are placed firmly in a European intellectual tradition. This contrasts sharply with ingrained British Euroscepticism.*

In January 2018, Miloš Zeman was re-elected President of the Czech Republic. The openly Eurosceptic and distinctly pro-Russia Zeman seems determined to continue his war of words with the European Union. Last autumn, the populist and anti-establishment ANO emerged as the largest party in the Chamber of Deputies. The rise to power of its leader, the new Prime Minister Andre Babis, bears a striking similarity to Donald Trump’s. Both are billionaire businessmen and managed to take the top job by running anti-establishment and anti-immigrant campaigns. Combine this with the fact that parliament is debating a new law making it easier to hold nationwide referendums, and a [Czech exit](#) from the EU looks increasingly plausible.

But those who confidently predict Czexit may be disappointed. As with the UK, there are clear economic disadvantages for the Czech Republic if it leaves the EU. But that alone would be unlikely to prevent a leave vote. Despite the relentless economic focus of the Remain campaign, economics was not the dominant factor in Britain’s Leave vote. Rather, identity appears to have been key – and it is how Czech identity relates to the idea of being ‘European’ that will shape the outcome of any Czexit referendum.



Part of an altar wing showing the martyrdom of Jan Hus. Photo: [Hussite Museum in Tábor via Europeana](#) and a [CC-BY-NC-SA licence](#)

Writing in 2017, Nicholas Boyle [showed](#) how the 2016 referendum was the result of a sustained crisis of identity that Britain, and in particular England, had faced since the end of Empire. Unable to accept that it was no longer peerless, Britain opted to quit the EU rather than reconcile British identity with the cosmopolitan idea of Europe.

This is in stark contrast to the way Czech identity is constructed. Rather than deny its essentially European character, Czech civil society and the Czech government show a consistent desire to integrate their national story into that of cosmopolitan Europe. They seek to locate the Czech Republic and its medieval predecessor, the Kingdom of Bohemia, within European history, and major historical figures as Europeans.

Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia, is described as the ‘Father of the Nation’ and voted the [Greatest Czech of All Time](#); commentators are keen to stress his international reputation and his role as one of [greatest Holy Roman Emperors](#). In 2016 the Czech Republic celebrated his 700th anniversary with a series of celebrations and museum exhibitions which highlighted the importance of Charles IV to the Czech national story and national identity. He, the Empire and by extension the Czech Republic, become an integral part of the story.

This idea of Czech national heroes playing a leading role in European history can also be seen in the way 13th-century cleric Jan Hus is presented. Hus achieved European-wide infamy due to his attacks on the Catholic church, gaining many followers (known as Hussites) and instituting reforms within the Bohemian church. He was burnt at the stake for heresy and became a national hero whose followers started the Hussite rebellion against the Catholic church and the Holy Roman Empire. While he is often presented as part of the battle for Czech independence, historians invariably [mention](#) his links to the English theologian John Wycliffe and how Martin Luther would draw on his writings a century later when he triggered the Protestant Reformation. (Luther said “We are all Hussites”.)

This desire to locate the Czech nation as an integral part of Europe is in no way a modern phenomenon. Rather, the integration of Charles IV and Hus into a wider European history began decades ago. After gaining independence from the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918, Czechoslovakian politicians and intellectuals engaged in a sustained debate on the international status of the new republic. Drawing on the fact that Czechoslovakia had been one of the victors of the First World War and on the reputation of certain historical figures, the [debate centred](#) on whether Czech-dominated Czechoslovakia should be considered genuinely European, alongside France, Britain and Germany. Surprisingly, the debate focussed not only on the claim that it possessed ‘European’ characteristics such as political and economic power, but also whether it needed to possess a colonial empire. Acquiring colonies was regarded as key to becoming a ‘grown up nation’.

These debates on the European character of Czechoslovakia came to an abrupt end with the Munich crisis of 1938. The subsequent occupation by Nazi Germany and the postwar Communist government suspended the debate on the European nature of Czech identity. But following the restoration of democracy in 1989, Czechs again began to look at how being Czech relates to being European. In the 1990s, this centred on EU membership and the idea of a ‘return to Europe’, picking up many of themes that had been abandoned in 1938.

The end of Communist rule and the transition to a free market economy revealed [hidden tensions](#) between the two halves of Czechoslovakia. For the Czechs, market liberalisation represented a return to the interwar period, and a reaffirmation of their capitalist golden age. Slovakia, which had experienced significant industrial development under the Communist planned economy, viewed liberalisation less favourably. Both populations greeted the breakup of Czechoslovakia with mixed feelings. But Czechs saw it as a way to increase the speed of economic reforms, geopolitically moving the new Czech Republic firmly towards the West and accelerating their ‘return to Europe’.

With the birth of the new republic, Czech nationhood and identity would be understood in civic as opposed to nationalist terms that centred on the country’s accession to the EU. The desire to gain entry to the ‘European club’ shaped the way Czechs viewed themselves, and the construction of a distinct Czech identity was caught up in the economic and political reform process. In 1995 Czechs’ identification with ‘Europe’ was ranked as [the third highest](#) of the countries surveyed, and significantly higher than many established EU members. While tensions between Czech and European identity did – and continue to – exist, the Republic’s accession to the EU in 2004 was seen positively by the majority of Czechs.

Today Czechs continue to debate the relationship between Czech and European identity. However, the two are not generally presented as being incompatible. Czech schoolchildren study both Charles IV and Jan Hus and place them into a wider European context. The experience of the UK referendum suggests that future membership referendums are likely to be emotional affairs based on how people understand their identity. Those hoping for Czexit would do well to remember that Czech identity has arched towards being European for decades, if not centuries.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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