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Limits of Public Debate in the EU Pre-Accession Period: Czech Republic

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Introduction

The current Eastern enlargement of the European Union is a complex matter and can be approached from a number of angles. The focus here will be on some of the features of public debate within the accession process in one candidate country, the Czech Republic. The paper is based on media research and above all on the analysis of Czech government documents and publications within the framework of government information strategy as well as texts published by NGOs.[1]

In December 2001, a reflection group of European scholars invited by the European Commission wrote a report entitled *The Political Dimension of EU Enlargement*. Here, the EU accession with its conditionality and pressure for reforms and

[1] The paper refers mostly to the period 1997-2002. I mention only briefly the Copenhagen summit (12-13 December 2002) where the Czech EU accession agreement was signed, although it was a medially covered and extensively discussed event. This is because the paper was finalised at the end of 2002 and Copenhagen summit chronologically almost fell outside its scope.

compliance is described as the "functional equivalent of war": it gives the executive more power to by-pass parliament and to justify the lack of consultation with the public by the need to avoid crisis. The report also refers to "the de-politicisation of the enlargement process." The situation – which this paper also attempts to address – is described as follows:

> Policy-making is not dependent upon the wish of the electorate and their passivity, and even alienation, is an advantage in the short-term allowing politicians to push through decision without public debate. However, this leads to a democratic deficit and in the longer term may backfire. The state is imposing huge burdens on the population and it needs the population's voluntary cooperation. This conundrum is not easy to solve. The example of the Danish referenda on Maastricht and the euro or the Irish rejection of the Nice treaty only serve to bolster politicians' feelings that the public is not to be trusted with the European project.[2]

Like in the case of other complex governance tasks, it is difficult to accomplish the EU accession and it may prove equally difficult to muster public support for it. Public debate – which is required by certain models of democracy – can then *break* instead of *make* public consensus. Passive acquiescence by the public and "permissive consensus"[3] may then indeed seem to be the only solution to the problem. Moreover, lagging public debate is no exceptional feature of EU-related politics. On the contrary, the Czech Republic has known other debates (or non-debates) about similarly crucial public decisions in the past, such as the decision to implement one particular scenario of economic reform in 1990 or the decision to divide the Czechoslovak federation into two separate states in 1992.

The aim of this paper is not to find the solution to the problem of the desirability and at the same time potential threat of public debate and engagement. Such a solution would be difficult to find indeed. The aim here is to describe some of the prevailing features of the Czech EU-related discourse that may as a result limit public debate. First, I will outline some general aspects of public debate in the Czech

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2 Jean-Luc Dehaene and Ania Krok-Paszkowska. 2001. *The Political Dimension of EU Enlargement: Looking Towards Post-Accession.* Florence: Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute, Florence, with The Group of Policy Advisors, European Commission. <http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/e-texts/Dehaene_report.pdf> pp. 63-4.

3 Karlheinz Reif. 1983. Ein Ende des „permissive consensus"? In Rudolf Hrbek (ed) *Der Vertrag von Maastricht in der wissenschaftlichen Kontroverse*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag.

Republic in particular, and briefly introduce the concept of framing. Then I will discuss the role of several alternative actors that shape Czech public discourse. Finally, I will review several aspects of the predominant framing of EU-related issues and processes by two main actors, the Czech government and the European Commission. I discuss in greater detail government information strategy, since it represents well the prevalent framing of the EU-related activities in the Czech Republic.

Public debate required, expected and missing

Public debate that precedes and accompanies important public decisions is a normative requirement of some models of democracy as well as one of the ideals of "good governance". For example, the importance attached to open discussions by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* could hardly be exaggerated. Even thinkers very skeptical to public participation, like Joseph Schumpeter, recognized the necessity of "freedom of discussion for all" and "considerable amount of freedom of the press" for democracy.[4] In his *Democracy and Its Critics*, Robert Dahl describes one of the six requirements of polyarchy, the regime closest possible to democracy: "Citizens have an effectively enforced right to freedom of expression, particularly political expression, including criticism of the officials, the conduct of the government, the prevailing political, economic, and social system, and the dominant ideology."[5] The concept of a critical public sphere as constitutive of modern democracy is a well known idea of the sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas.[6]

We do not have to look only to theories of democracy for some normative expectation of critical public debate. Some level of public participation and accountability has become one of the preconditions of so-called "good governance" put forward by the OECD, or by the European Commission in its recent *White Paper on European Governance*. Under the heading "Making the way the Union works more open…" the Commission declares that: "Democracy depends on people being able to take part in public debate. (…) The aim should be to create a transnational

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4 Joseph Schumpeter. 1942. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. HarperCollins Publishers. Quoted in Philip Green (ed.). 1993. *Democracy: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, p. 90.

5 Robert Dahl. 1989. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, p. 233.

6 Jürgen Habermas. 1989. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

"space" where citizens from different countries can discuss what they perceive as being the important challenges for the Union."[7]

Public debate can be not only required but also practically expected. Indeed, given that relatively little criticism vis-à-vis the EU and government-EU politics can be found in the Czech newspapers, the question could be posed whether this is not the consequence of the post-communist transformation or of not yet properly learning the job of the 'watch dog' of democracy. This appears not to be so. On the contrary, according to some observers, Czech newspapers try to be *too* critical or critical at all costs,[8] which has repeatedly been the reason for public complaints by the political elite, including the two former Czech prime ministers, and even for the instigation of court proceedings.[9] Apart from that, there always is a further reason to be critical: it sells. To discover a discrepancy in officials' behaviour or to find a broken promise may be the basis for affairs that increase the circulation of papers. In this sense it could be argued that criticism is a matter of market competition.[10]

Finally, the Czech media has proved to be very critical in pursuing particular affairs, such as in relation to the catastrophic floods of August 2002. Several sharp critical lines were pressed in the newspapers, e.g. against the management of the flood by the Prague magistrate or against the operation of the anti-flood system of dams on the river Vltava, claiming that some damage might have been prevented had the "right" measures been taken. All this shows, I believe, that there is a reason to suppose that critical newspaper reporting is, in general, possible and likely. In other words, if there is little of such criticism, it is something to ponder and attempt to explain.

Obviously, there are many possible reasons why the EU accession, as compared to big floods, has excited little critical media coverage so far.[11] The EU accession

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7 Commission 2001. *European Governance. A White Paper*. Brussels COM(2001) 428 final, p. 11.

8 Jefim Fistejn. 2000. "Slovo a blabol", in *Media a moc*. ("A Word and a Babble", in *Media and Power*) Praha: Votobia, pp. 22-28.

9 Court proceedings against Czech weekly paper *Respekt* were instigated by some ministers of the 1998-2002 Zeman government because, it was claimed, *Respekt* incorrectly asserted that the government engaged in corrupt practices.

10 Nikolaj Savicky. 2000. "Moc a bezmoc obrazovky na sklonku televizniho veku", in *Media a moc.* ("Power and Powerlessness of the Screen at the End of the Television Age", in *Media and Power*) Praha: Votobia, pp. 91-98.

11 The Copenhagen summit held in mid-December 2002 was a departure from this trend. There the terms of EU accession agreements were finalised, including bargaining about agri-

process involves few conspicuous events. Rather, it consists of a series of decisions that can more easily slip public attention. It is not something that would directly and presently affect a great number of citizens. It is not something that would arouse emotions easily. It is excessively complex.[12] All of these reasons, of course, pertain to the European Union and EU integration issues in general.

On the other hand, there are issues that are removed from the everyday lives of citizens and yet can excite criticism, such as the asset-stripping of large Czech banks during the transformation period, the so called "tunneling." Moreover, remote and uninteresting issues can be *made* interesting by viewing them from particular angles, by including useful examples or by stressing particular consequences, i.e. by framing them in particular way (for the concept of "framing," see Goffman, below). Analogously, important and close issues can be framed as distant and neutral. This paper addresses some of these strategies.

The concept of frame

As I have said in the Introduction, lagging public debate in case of EU-related activities is not exceptional and I am therefore not going to treat the accession/EU debate as qualitatively different from other public debates. Indeed, the decision to join the EU and the chain of decision about the "particularities" of the accession can be considered similar to other complex decisions with wide and often unpredictable impact. It may be in the strategic interest of some actors to channel and structure public debate. This does not have to mean excluding some participants of the debate or even suppressing, delaying or fabricating information. It may mean simply a decision not to actively initiate such a debate. There are many ways in which actors normally shape interactions – from the very selection of vocabulary to strategic use of arguments.

The concept of "frame" was introduced in the 1970s by an American sociologist, Erwing Goffman,[13] and it is similar to more frequently used concepts in interpreta-

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cultural quotas and the amount of EU financial contributions. The event was extensively covered by the Czech press.

12 For more on some of these and other reasons for lacking critical media coverage of public issues and therefore reduced accountability see Mark Bovens, Paul 't Hart and B. Guy Peters (eds). 2001. *Success and Failure in Public Governance. A Comparative Analysis.* Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

13 Erving Goffman. 1974. *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

tive sociology such as definition of situation. According to Goffman, particular framing of given social activity by its participants has consequences for the way they interpret the situation as well as for the way they become involved in it; in other words, framing organizes the meaning of and involvement in an activity. Any framing can then be broken, misframed or reframed, with the following frame clarifications and disputes.

Susceptibility of frames to reframings (and reframings to new reframings) is the fundamental feature of the organization of experience. Frames can be shifted several times. Moreover, some types of framings, such as fabrications, are especially vulnerable to discrediting and disruption when new facts are introduced. When we apply this, for example, to the government EU information policy, *both* the relatively cautious government information policy *and* its declared effort to inform the public can be explained. First of all, EU accession is a complex governance task and it certainly involves fabrications vis-à-vis the public; therefore new facts may pose a risk of discrediting one or several particular fabrications or the whole project. Secondly, the government may wish to inform the public either because it *is* open or because it wishes to *appear* open; there may be no way of distinguishing, and even the practical consequences may be the same.

Actors will always attempt to frame an activity in a strategic manner, and at the same time it may be difficult to tell whether the frame is a clear frame or a fabrication. Goffman theorizes face-to face interactions and individual experience of the social. In politics, particular framings may be more intentional and perhaps more often fabricated. On the other hand, fabricators often become caught up in their own fabrications, as it is often impossible to change frames too dramatically without losing the integrity of actor's identity.[14] It is in no case my intention in this paper to distinguish "clear" and "fabricated" frames since, whether "true" or "untrue", they have *real* consequences for participants in the situation.

NGO Sector

The Czech government and the European Commission are the two most active information providers for EU-related issues. This is obvious, since they are the two main actors of the accession process, and it is in their interest to frame the accession

[14] Frank Schimmelfennig. 2001 „The Community Trap: Liberal Norms, Rhetorical Action, and the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union", *International Organization* 55(1): 47-80.

process "correctly" and to make sure that other participants and the public share their particular framing. Apart from the activities managed within the communication strategy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, activities of other ministries, and other sources of information such as the Czech Agricultural Chamber and Chamber of Commerce, alternative information could be expected from the non-governmental sector.

In general, the existence of active NGOs is considered as a measure of civic engagement and as proof of substantial democracy. Since NGOs are supposed to provide "a form of critical monitoring of the evolution of democracy",[15] we might be justified in looking there for possible critical discourse on the EU-related issues. However, is it so justified indeed? Since the 1990s, foreign financial assistance has had impact on the growth of the NGO sector in Central and Eastern Europe.[16] For example, one of the conclusions about the impact of the EU Phare and Tacis Democracy Programme (PTDP) was that "The most significant impact of Western democracy assistance in general, and the PTDP in particular, has been the contribution to the growth of a lively NGO sector in all countries."[17] While the EU probably has not been by far the largest donor to NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe,[18] it has nevertheless supported many NGOs financially. The question may be asked to what extent these organisations are in fact likely to challenge and question integration to the EU.

Nevertheless, NGOs set themselves the task of supporting public debate about EU-related issues. One of the largest projects was the all-national PR campaign "30 Days for the Civic Sector," held in February 2001 under the motto "Meet the European Union, please" and organised by the Information Centre for Non-profit Organisations and European Movement in the Czech Republic. The aim was to

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15 Mary Kaldor and Peter Wilke et al. 1997 (November). Evaluation of the PHARE and TACIS Democracy Programme (1992 – 1997). Final Report. Brighton and Hamburg: ISA Consult, European Institute (Sussex University), GJW Europe, p.5.

16 Thomas Carothers. 1996. *Assessing Democracy Assistance: The Case of Romania*. A Carnegie Endowment Book. Brookings Institution, Washington DC; Kevin F. Quigley. 1997. *For Democracy's Sake. Foundations and Democracy Assistance in Central Europe*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press, John Hopkins University Press; Mark Robinson. 1996. *Strengthening Civil Society through Foreign Political Aid.* Escor Research Report R 6234, Institute for Development Studies. Brighton, September 1996.

17 Mary Kaldor and Peter Wilke et al., 1997, op. cit., p. 5.

18 Exact figures are difficult to estimate, but it appears that much greater contributions were given by private American foundations, among them above all the Soros foundations. Mary Kaldor and Peter Wilke et al., 1997, op. cit., p. 30.

address the public through NGOs as well as the NGOs themselves. Let us take as an example another project, "Eufonie", financed by the Open Society Foundation. Its aim is to bring together Czech non-government non-profit organisations around EU accession issues and to "create an information and communication base for the support of public debate about the questions of Czech Republic's accession to the European Union and for the preparation of the public and the non-profit sector for the prospective Czech membership in the EU."[19] Rather than a dramatic alternative, however, it is to be the "*natural complement* of other activities that run above all within the frame of the pre-accession communication strategy (particularly of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and entrepreneurial sector (Chamber of Commerce CR)."[20]

The project's website is called "*Eufonie –Neziskovky a EU*" ("Euphony – NGOs and the EU"); the unusual term "Euphony" is explained on the introductory page as a "pleasing sound" but above all "teaching about the quality of sounds and their combination." It is hard not to wonder about the symbolism of this title of Greek origin, referring even in the Czech language to activities and effects that are harmonious, pleasing and sweet[21]. Obviously, this impression was thoroughly intended: "When we consider cooperation in the non-profit sector over the subject of European integration, and even the very integration of Europe, is it not possible to express the main question, task or issue precisely so?"[22]

One section of the website is called "We're going to the EU," and it opens with a picture of a train stopping in a train station called "Euphony." After clicking on its three thematic parts, the train is given a green light and moves on away from the screen. When we review the projects and events that "Euphony" informs about, they all concern getting ready for a situation that is about to arrive or that has in many respects *already arrived*. It seems as if the Czech NGOs already are in the EU. One has the impression that the aim of the project is above all to contribute to the smooth accomplishment of whatever remains of the train's road to Europe. By de-

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19 <http://www.eufonie.cz/okno.shtml> Translations from Czech sources are by T.V. unless indicated otherwise.

20 Ibid.

21 EUPHONY: 1 : pleasing or sweet sound; *especially* : the acoustic effect produced by words so formed or combined as to please the ear; 2 : a harmonious succession of words having a pleasing sound (Source: Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary On-Line, <http://www.m-w.com>)

22 <http://www.eufonie.cz/proc.shtml>

scribing their task as the "natural complement" to government information activities, the project expresses a rather fundamental approval of the government framing of both the accession and accession process.

Unlike pro-EU oriented NGOs, those that express opposition or criticism are much harder to find. This is not surprising, given that almost half of the population supports the EU accession and only about 20 per cent are against it. Moreover, NGOs gain their decisive financial support either from the state budget, from foreign and domestic foundations, or from EU programmes. This all means that the predominant framing of the Czech Republic EU accession process is shared by a great majority of the NGOs.

Oppositional actors

The most visible oppositional force in the Czech EU-related public discourse is the main opposition political party since 1998, the Civic Democratic Party[23]. Civic Democrats have so far more or less supported EU accession, and they present their stance as "euro-realist". They claim their aim is to discuss and contest the various aspects of EU accession and to initiate public debate. It is obvious that such claims can be used strategically. There are also many possibilities for disqualifying and countering such attempts, for example by labelling them unreasonable or irresponsible or by emphasizing that there is no alternative to the EU accession; we will review some of them later. The Communist Party has been perhaps more EU critical than the Civic Democrats, although their stance has been changing recently towards more approval of the EU. However, since the early 1990s, the Communist Party has been effectively isolated and marginalized within Czech politics, and its EU-related critical discourse has been marginalized as part of this general trend.[24]

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23 Obcanska demokraticka strana (Civic Democratic Party) is a conservative party with strong emphasis on market liberalism; it was founded in early 1990s and lead government coalitions in 1992-1998.

24 This marginalisation is not the result of low electoral results: the Communist Party (CP) has had around 10-11% in the 1996 and 1998 elections and 18,5% in the 2002 elections; it is the third largest party on the Czech political scene. There has been, however, a decision not to let this party into government, enforced by the so called Bohumin Declaration of Social Democratic Party, that prohibits this largest party and most likely collaborator with the CP to enter into coalition with the Communists. Similarly, Vaclav Havel, Czech (Czechoslovak) president since 1990, consistently implemented the policy of not dealing with the Communists; he has for example never invited them to talks on forming new governments after elections. Even when the Social Democratic government in coalition with two smaller parties

There are very few NGO actors that could be labelled oppositional, and their visibility is low. Some of the more conspicuous ones can be traced to the ideological milieu of "liberal conservatives" of the former Czech prime minister and founder of the Civic Democratic Party, Vaclav Klaus. Organisations and think tanks such as the Liberal Institute, the Civic Institute and the Eurosceptical Initiative are all based on the view that the European Union is an overly bureaucratic, socialist and interventionist organisation that left its "correct" path and "right" level of integration in 1992, after the Maastricht Treaty.

Of the three organisations, the Eurosceptical Initiative is most clearly oriented towards EU issues. It was founded in October 2002 as a "warning against thoughtless accession to the EU"[25] with three declared aims: "To inform as many citizens as possible about the ever strengthening negative aspects of the European Union"; "to refute the argument of eurodogmatics that there is no other alternative to the EU membership and to open debate about other alternatives, with the knowledge that choice between alternatives is the necessary precondition of freedom"; "through open and matter-of-fact discussion to persuade the majority of Czech citizens about the disadvantages of accession to EU in its present state and under the present conditions".[26]

Although they put forward a number of arguments against the EU and EU accession on their website, so far the activity of Eurosceptical Initiative has focused on fighting the government approach to the pre-accession information campaign. It is not coincidental that it was founded at precisely the time when government information efforts are about to be stepped up in anticipation of the EU referendum to be held in June 2003. The group's activities started already in May 2002.[27] To challenge the perceived monopolisation of public space by the government, Eurosceptical Initiative requested that the Government Office give 40 million Czech crowns of public finances for "managing the campaign against the accession of the Czech

faced problems shortly after the 2002 elections and some actors brought up the collaboration with Communists as a possibility, the Bohumin Declaration was upheld.

25 Vilem Barak, David Hanak and Benjamin Kuras. 2002. *Euroskepticka alternativa*. <www.euroskeptik.cz>

26 Ibid.

27 At that time called Liga obcanske sebeobrany (League of Civic Self-Defense) but headed by the same person.

Republic to the European Union"[28] and an even higher sum, 140 million crowns, for the same purpose from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs two months later. Finally, it made a complaint in November 2002 to the Council of Czech Television for non-objective broadcasting by Czech Television[29].

Their arguments are based on the claim that half of the Czech population is against the EU accession,[30] and therefore half of public finances on EU-related information campaigns should be spent to support their views. They argue for "maintaining the plurality of opinions"; the decision not to grant them the required resources is interpreted as "confirming the fact that the state administration decided to manipulate public opinion in favour of EU accession." Both requests were at first refused but later partly granted.[31] Ministry officials claimed that objective information is provided on both the advantages and risks of the EU accession.[32] They further argued that the government was granted mandate to pursue pro-European politics in democratic elections and that to use public resources to pursue such majority politics is normal in democracy. They also argued that an average citizen is not easy to manipulate and that "thanks to the existence of the free media such an attempt would, for that matter, probably soon be discovered." Finally, they challenged the claim that half of the population is against EU accession.[33]

It is interesting that this NGO challenged and contested primarily the government information strategy. The information strategy provides perhaps the clearest example of government framing of the EU accession and it was attacked on the features that government and state officials tend to stress most, i.e. objectivity, an un-

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28 Vilem Barak. 2002a. Letter to the Czech Government Office. 20.5.2002. <www.euroskeptik.cz> (Almost identical wording is in a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)

29 Czech Television is a public broadcast medium.

30 This claim does not seem to be supported by any public opinion surveys carried out in the past several years: usually around 45% of respondents support EU accession and only around 20% are against it. (STEM 2001)

31 In the end, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised to finance information campaigns of EU opponents; the approved budget for information campaign in the pre-referendum period is 200 million CZK and a Ministry official referred to hundreds of thousands of Czech crowns for the EU opposition. *Hospodarske noviny* 19.12.2002 "Penize na kampan dostanou i odpurci" (Even opponents will receive money for a campaign).

32 Katerina Hejdova. 2002. Letter in response to official request by Vilem Barak. 2.7.2002. <www.euroskeptik.cz>

33 Ludek Zahradnicek. 2002. Letter in response to official request by Vilem Barak. 6.8.2002. <www.euroskeptik.cz>

biased approach and its claim to represent the whole of the Czech population. This brings us to the final part of the paper – features of the framing of the pre-accession discourse by the two most important accession actors, the Czech government and the European Commission.

Dislocating the political

A certain "apolitical" style of managing the integration project is often ascribed to the European Commission.[34] It has also been argued that the Commission has approached the Eastern enlargement in a technocratic, incremental way that stifles political debate.[35] Antje Wiener,[36] for example, calls for more deliberation and "contestation" as opposed to the logic of "compliance" that prevails in the accession process.

One of the reasons for limited public debate in the Czech Republic has been the tendency of the main actors to cast the problems in terms of having no alternative, being under time pressure, disseminating objective knowledge, building a necessary consensus, and the like. In other words, the pre-accession activities, including the information strategy, have been framed in ways that tend to reduce the political dimension of the activities and have an inhibitory effect on public debate. In the Czech discourse, the crucial actor is the government (state administration). On the other hand, however, Czech discourse does not exist in a vacuum, and as far as the

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34 See Juliet Lodge. 1994. Transparency and Democratic Legitimacy. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32:3, 343-368; Paul Magnette. 2001. "European Governance and Civic Participation: Can the European Union be politicised?" Contribution to *Jean Monnet Working Paper* No. 6/01 Symposium: Mountain or Molehill: A Critical Appraisal of the Commission White Paper on Governance; Marcus Höreth. *1999*. No way out for the beast? The unsolved legitimacy problem of European governance. *Journal of European Public Policy* 6:2, 249-68; William Wallace, and Julie Smith. 1995. Democracy or Technocracy? European Integration and the Problem of Popular Consent, in Jack Hayward (ed) *The Crisis of Representation in Europe*. London: Frank Cass.

35 See Heather Grabbe and Kirsty Hughes. 1998. Enlarging the EU Eastwards. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs; Heather Grabbe. 1999. A Partnership for Accession? The Implications of EU Conditionality for the Central and East European Applicants. EUI Working Papers RSC 99/12; Gerda Falkner and Michael Nentwich. 2000. Enlarging the European Union: Short-Term Success of Incrementalism and De-Politicisation. MPIfG Working paper 00/4.

36 Antje Wiener. 2002. Finality vs. Enlargement: Constitutive Practices and Opposing Rationales in the Reconstruction of Europe. *Jean Monnet Working Paper* 8/02. New York: New York University School of Law.

EU-related activities are concerned, it is of course above all the European Commission that co-determines or even determines the predominant framing.

In the second half of this paper, I am going to review some features of the Czech government and the European Commission's framing of the EU accession process. These framings are not identical but they overlap and support or reflect one another. I deal with the features briefly under four related headings: single alternative; compliance and necessity; dates and deadlines; and objective knowledge. In the last part, I am going to focus on one of these, the "objective knowledge" conception in the frame of the Czech government information strategy.

Single alternative

The documented working style of the European Commission is to solve complex issues through networks of stakeholders, lobbyists and committees,[37] and come out only at the end of the process with a consensus presented as the only alternative; at this stage there is no political debate feasible anymore.[38] The "depoliticization" of conflict and "obfuscation" of political accountability by the Commission has been noted.[39] The "single alternative" pattern can be perceived in the Czech newspaper and government discourse as well, and indeed it is perhaps the hallmark of the EU-related discourse. While in the work of the Commission, solutions are presented as the single alternative at the end of negotiations, in the case of the Eastern candidates, the EU accession was the "only alternative" since the very beginning.

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37 See Christoph Demmke, Elisabeth Eberharter, Guenther F. Schaefer and Alexander Türk. 1996. The History of Comitology, in Robin H. Pedler and Guenther F. Schaefer (eds). *Shaping European Law and Policy: The Role of Committees and Comitology in the Political Process*. Maastricht: European Institute of Public Administration; Josef Falke. 1996. Comitology and Other Committees: A Preliminary Empirical Assessment, in *Shaping European Law and Policy* (Ibid.); Christian Joerges and Jurgen Neyer. 1997. Transforming strategic information into deliberative problem-solving: European comitology in the foodstuffs sector. *Journal of European Public Policy* 4:4, 609-625.

38 Paul Magnette, 2001, op. cit.

39 See Christoph Meyer. 1999. Political Legitimacy and the Invisibility of Politics: Exploring the European Union's Communication Deficit. In Journal of Common Market Studies 37: 4, 617-39.

The beginning of the so called return to Europe was marked by all-national consensus about this "only alternative"[40]. The original general consensual aim of the return to Europe became more and more concrete over time. It can be observed in the government policy statements of 1992, 1996, 1998 and 2002 how the vaguely-conceived goal (which originally encompassed both NATO and EU accession together with accession to other international "western" organisations) became separated only relatively recently, in 1998, as "the" EU accession, and how even this goal itself became defined in more and more specific terms (tasks, requirements, deadlines). In the recent 2002 government policy declaration, EU integration is finally dealt with in a separate section completely *outside* the foreign affairs chapter. All decision-making related to EU accession has been perceived as part of the general mandate to ensure the "return to Europe" and only the end product, the negotiated treaty on accession, is to be presented to the public. By then, however, there will be only a yes or no option in the referendum, constrained by time and other strategic considerations.

Compliance and necessity

As noted by Antje Wiener, negotiating EU accession with new candidate countries is based on the logic of compliance and rule-following.[41] The EU is known to present itself in enlargement negotiations as a club with given rules, and in order to enter, candidates have to accept the conditions without exceptions. This being so, the basic framing of the accession negotiations strongly disfavours debate, even at the level of high-ranking diplomats and officials.

The compliance required by the EU is mirrored in "necessity" on the part of the candidate states. Necessity reflects the logic of compliance, but it goes beyond that. It can be used as a strategic argument to push through or support measures on the national scene; multilevel games are already played during the pre-accession period. EU accession is used as an authority card. However, when it is put on the table to justify sometimes unwelcome "necessities", it in turn undermines the authority of the original source of legitimacy, i.e. EU accession as a desirable and authoritative goal.

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40 By putting "only alternative" into quotation marks I do not want to challenge the fact that it perhaps was and is the only alternative. It is to indicate that it has been so presented in the discourse and, indeed, could have been and *has* been presented otherwise by some actors.

41 Antje Wiener, 2002, op. cit.

Finally, the link of necessity to accountability should be mentioned in this brief overview. When an activity is described as "necessary," it means that there is no other option but to do it. I noticed that when actors are criticised in newspapers in connection with the EU accession, it is often for matters that are in fact unconnected to the fulfilment of accession criteria. The distinction is carefully constructed between a measure the actors had to adopt (and for which they are not criticised) and measures that were not necessary (and for which they receive criticism). Bovens[42] reminds us that justifications and explanations can reasonably be requested only where the condition of blameworthiness – i.e. that the actor was not totally constrained – is satisfied. Also Goffman[43] lists "no other alternative" as one of possible valid excuses for questionable behaviour. As long as the EU-related decisions are presented as a matter of necessity, human agency remains obscured, and so does accountability.

Dates and deadlines

We can notice frequent references to deadlines, dates and watersheds in EU-related discourse in the Czech Republic. The "deadline" discourse is stronger in some areas of the accession process, such as law harmonisation, and almost non-existent in others. Time reference is used as the descriptor of certain activities that need to be done by some particular time. Time pressure then becomes part of the EU-related frame and has consequences for how the EU-related activities and possible participation in them are perceived. Deadlines are a way to "get things done", but under continuous time pressure there is time for nothing apart from the necessary tasks.

This is partly the result of the Czech government and state administration taking over the usual deadline discourse of the European Commission. Indeed, the emphasis on deadlines and dates is very strong in the Accession Partnerships, as it is their primary function to set tasks (short-*term*, medium-*term*). Similar time referencing is then required in the National Programmes for the Adoption of the Acquis. It could be argued that careful task allocation over time is a sign of good time management and avoids time pressure. This may be so in theory, but in reality, deadlines "create" time pressure as the time draws nearer and tasks are not done. Working under

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42 Mark Bovens. 1998. The Quest for Responsibility. Accountability and Citizenship in Complex Organisations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

43 Erving Goffman, 1974, op. cit.

pressure has been one of the hallmarks of EU political decision-making: delaying decisions until the last moment and then reaching consensus under time pressure.

Lastly, the time pressure and the ensuing "necessity" discourse may be based in yet another fact. It has been noted by Schimmelfennig[44] that Eastern enlargement has been driven by norm- and past promise-capture and that disagreement with enlargement is expressed in indirect ways, often by insisting on the fulfilment of technical criteria. Since open political contestation of the enlargement did not happen, opposition could be expressed only indirectly, often in technical details and requirements, which in turn became "overloaded" with political meanings and became *the* contested ground. It is apparent that it was therefore extremely important, at least in the first half of the enlargement process, to give no reason to complain about non-fulfilment of these criteria, such as the adoption of the acquis. The necessity thus could be "real" in the sense that it would otherwise give strategic advantage to the opponents of enlargement inside the EU.

Objective knowledge

The last feature of the EU-related discourse is by no means specific to the EU topic; or, one should perhaps say that it is "even less" specific than the preceding three features. The claim to objectivity is among the most common ways of managing reality. In politics, however, everything can have a second meaning, especially in official documents, where every recurrent feature must be considered as functional or strategic in some respect.

The European Commission presented its 1997 Opinions on the candidate states as objective evaluations even though this status could have been and has been challenged.[45] For example, the Commission evaluated countries according to the quality of democracy – but a clear set of criteria by which this could be measured did not exist and indeed would be hard to invent. It also made minimal references to the sources used – only in the following single sentence: "During the preparation of the Opinion, the Commission has obtained a wealth of information on the Czech Republic's situation from the Czech authorities, and has utilized many other

44 Frank Schimmelfenning, 2001, op. cit.

45 For example by Heather Grabbe and Kirsty Hughes, 1998, op. cit., pp. 41-3.

sources of information, including the member states and numerous international organizations."[46]

Similar ambitions and problems are also evident in the following Regular Reports. Nevertheless, it has been essential for the whole casting of the enlargement process that there have been "objective" and "hard" criteria and evaluation of the candidates' progress towards accession. EU representatives repeatedly stressed that the issue of what country joins the EU and when was solely a matter of its own progress in meeting the criteria. In the Luxembourg Council conclusions, we read: "The European Council points out that all these States are destined to join the European Union on the basis of the *same criteria* and that they are participating in the accession process on an *equal footing*," or: "each of the applicant States will proceed at its own rate, depending on its *degree of preparedness*."[47] The objectivity construed in the Commission's reports is thus confirmed also from the "outside", as in this Council decision: "(T)he 1999 Commission's Regular Report presented an objective analysis on the Czech Republic's preparations for membership and identified a number of priority areas for further work…"[48]

Similar claims to objectivity can be observed in the Czech government's approach to the information campaign in the pre-accession period. By saying it would provide objective information – the claim to objectivity is contained already in the very notion of information (without adjectives) – it at the same time communicated the belief that objective knowledge about the EU accession is possible and out there to be found. It is the government's EU information strategy that I focus on in the last part of the paper.

Government information strategy

The Czech government attempted to find a middle ground between the persuasive approach to the information campaign, as adopted in Austria before its EU accession, and the "balanced" approach, as adopted in Sweden. The government claimed

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46 Commission 1997. Agenda 2000 – Commission Opinion on the Czech Republic's Application for Membership of the European Union. Brussels: DOC/97/17, 15th July 1997, p. 3.

47 Presidency Conclusions 1997. Luxembourg European Council. Press Release: Luxembourg 12/12/1997 – Nr: SN400/97, paragraphs 10 and 2 respectively.

48 Council Decision of 6 December 1999 on the principles, priorities, intermediate objectives and conditions contained in the Accession Partnership with the Czech Republic 1999/858/EC, introductory remark 5.

to use financial resources to provide "objective" information, and only a small part of it was given to selected non-governmental non-profit organisations to finance their own information projects (in 2001, about 1 million Czech crowns out of a total of 50 million was distributed among 10 NGOs).[49]

The government "communication" strategy, as it was called, was prepared in October 1997 by the government advisory Council for European Integration and consists of three phases, according to Marie Chatardova, the former director of the Department of Communication Strategy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[50] After the preparatory stage in 1998 and 1999, the first phase of "wider" communication strategy began in 2000. The second phase was scheduled to begin six months before a referendum, i.e. approximately in October 2002. The third stage was expected to start after the accession. The strategy is based on an "infrastructure"[51] consisting of around 500 small information points in public libraries, sixteen regional information centres, a publication series[52] with a distribution centre, and the official Internet information provider of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Euroskop, in operation since 1999. The effort to build information points and regional information centres has been described as an "effort to decentralize informing."[53]

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49 The communication strategy was financed until the end of 1998 exclusively by the EU Phare programme and some financial contribution from Phare was received until the year 2000. Czech government allocated 30 million Czech crowns (CZK) from the public budget in 1999, 39 million CZK in 2000, 50 million CZK in 2001 and 70 million CZK in 2002 (approx. 2,25 million euros) (Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2000, 2001b). In comparably large Hungary 79,5 million CZK in 2000 was allocated to communication strategy, and 100 million CZK in Poland (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2001a).

50 Marie Chatardova. 2001. Komunikacni strategie Ceske republiky pred vstupem do Evropske unie, (Communication Strategy of the Czech Republic Before the EU Accession). *Verejna sprava* 25/2001.

51 Ibid.

52 For example: "Citizen's Companion to the EU", "Entrepreneur's Companion to the EU", "Student's Companion to the EU", "Myths and Reality of the EU" etc. Apart from these publications, a number of leaflets was produced, e.g. "Discussion About the Future EU", "Czechs to Europe?", "12 Questions and Answers", "What the EU is", "What the EU Membership Will Bring to Us", "Czech Republic and European Union", "Where to Look for Information About EU".

53 Petr Kubernat. 2000. "Chceme dat lidem argumenty k rozhodnuti v referendu o EU" (We Want to Give People Arguments for Decision in the EU Referendum), interview in *Pravo* (16.2.2000).

In its *Conception of Foreign Policy*,[54] the government made the following declaration: "The government will ensure within the frame of the communication strategy that the wide public and other interest or professional citizen groups get *essential* and *balanced* information about the European Union and about the contributions and impacts of the future membership of CR in EU. This information will enable citizens of CR to *responsibly* prepare for the referendum on Czech EU accession."[55] In a speech to the Foreign Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, the Minister of Foreign Affairs asserted in relation to the *Conception* again that: "It is the duty of the government to provide the Czech citizen with a *sufficient* quantity of *objective* information so that he/she can *responsibly* and *with the knowledge of the case* decide about the future of his/her state."[56]

In another important government document, we read: "The main goal of the communication strategy is to give the wide public as well as specific target groups information – in *sufficient* amount and *suitable* structure – about *essential* aspects of the activity and development of the European Union and the integration of CR into this body. Communication strategy proceeds from the principle of *objectivity* and *balance* of information. Its task is to ensure *sufficient* supply of *suitably* structured information to specific groups (entrepreneurs, education institutions, farmers etc.) about the contributions but also the impacts of the membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union."[57]

We might find more examples, but these three suffice to show the basic logic of the government information approach. There is a clear determination to provide

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54 Conception of Foreign Policy was adopted by the government in 02/1999 and noted by the Chamber of Deputies in 06/1999; the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Kavan, then reported at least twice (in 02/2000 and 02/2002) to the Foreign Committee of the Chamber of Deputies on its implementation.

55 Part B.I. "European Policy of Czech government", section "European Union", subsection "Gaining Public Support".

56 Jan Kavan. 2000. "Zahranicní politika Ceske republiky v roce 2000", Speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan in the Foreign Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, Parliament of the Czech Republic on 3.2.2000, <www.mzv.cz>. The point was in almost the same words reiterated in minister's 2002 speech to the same forum: "Within the frame of the approved communication strategy, the government will provide the Czech citizen with sufficient quantity of objective information so that he/she can responsibly and with the knowledge of the case decide about the future of his/her state."

57 Narodni program pripravy Ceske republiky na clenstvi v Evropske unii (National Programme of Preparation of the Czech Republic for Membership of the European Union). 2000. Praha: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Part 3.1.1. "Communication Strategy".

information, but this information is limited by several qualifiers, such as "essential," "balanced," "sufficient," "suitable," and "objective." The possibility that the definition of "essential," "balanced," or "objective" could be challenged and contested is not considered. The following account is one example where the balanced and objective nature of information was contested.

One of the few oppositional anti-EU NGOs, Eurosceptical Initiative, has recently challenged – as it claims – the biased broadcasting of Czech public television. In a letter to the Council of Czech Television, a leader of the Initiative complains about the perceived manipulation by the government: "I address the Council of Czech Television with a complaint about *non-objective* and *unbalanced* information provided by the Czech Television in the area of integration to European Union…"[58] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also complained about the media: media coverage is too "campaign-like and *unbalanced*" with the media "always looking for conflict topics" and sometimes not avoiding "information deformations."[59] Terms are the same but the aim is different.

The government held against the media only minor cases of non-compliance, and it finally succeeded in concluding a media partnership with the public television station in October 2001.[60] There is no doubt that Czech public television, while upholding the ideals of "balanced" reporting and "objective" information (ideals identical with classical standards of journalistic praxis), will more or less share in the prevalent framing of the EU and EU accession. The more radical EU opposition, however, is very unlikely to find the public television broadcasting in line with its framing of the EU and related events. Here, it is no longer a question of information "deformations" but rather of a substantively different approach. The media will be accused by radical opposition groups of attempting to "take over the state doctrine of joining the EU and purposefully create in viewers the mistaken impression … that there exist no risks in the EU accession … [and] that there stands nobody who would really refuse EU accession."[61]

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58 Barak, Vilem. 2002b. Complaint to the Council of Czech Television. 3.11.2002. <www.euroskeptik.cz>

59 Komunikacni strategie v roce 2001 a navrh pro rok 2002 (Communication Strategy in 2001 and Proposal for 2002). Praha: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 10.

60 Communication Strategy, 2001, op. cit., p. 12.

61 Vilem Barak 2002b, op. cit.

We saw the requirement that citizens "responsibly" prepare for the referendum in some of the previous quotes.[62] In a ministry document, *Communication Strategy in 2001 and Proposal for 2002*, we read that: "We want to achieve that each citizen is, if possible, able to make their *own opinion* on the consequences of Czech EU accession and *responsibly*, that is not on the basis of *superficial emotions*, decide how he/she will vote in the likely referendum. This of course requires certain, at least minimal interest and effort…"[63] This "responsible" preparation, then, seems to consist of forming one's opinion on the basis of true (versus superficial) reasons (versus emotions). The assumption is that *if* one is interested and willing to exert effort, and *if* one uses reasoning based on profound and deep knowledge, then an acceptable decision will be made.

The emphasis on knowledge is a recurrent theme in the government framing of EU-related issues and in the presentation of its information campaign. It implies that knowledge is possible and desirable. Recall the "with the *knowledge* of the case" in one of the previous quotes.[64] Note the inclusion of various popular "*knowledge* contests" in daily newspapers or women's journals as tools of the information campaign;[65] or, "Communication strategy makes an effort to preserve and *deepen knowledge* of active target groups."[66] The idea seems to be that there is one "correct" version of how the EU-related reality "is", about which information and consequently knowledge is possible, and if all citizens were interested enough, willing to exert some effort, get the available knowledge about the accession process and the EU, and rationally make their own opinion, then this "correct" version would be reached.

Government representatives repeatedly reiterated the importance of consensus: "The key role in this decisive period belongs to the political state representation. The absolutely necessary precondition for the success of our European agenda is the highest possible level of consensus ... It is very desirable that in this decisive period doubt is not cast on the achieved level of consensus."[67] "In the final, very demand-

62 Jan Kavan. 2000, 2001, op. cit.; Conception of Foreign Policy, 1999, op. cit.

63 Communication Strategy, 2001, op. cit., p. 11.

64 Jan Kavan. 2000, op. cit.

65 Communication Strategy, 2001, op. cit.

66 Narodni program pripravy Ceske republiky na clenstvi v Evropske unii (National Programme of Preparation of the Czech Republic for Membership of the European Union), 2001. Praha: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

67 Jan Kavan. 2000, op. cit.

ing phase of negotiations, the internal political consensus has great importance for the standing of the Czech Republic."[68] The explicit or implicit pressure for wide consensus has probably discouraged disagreement and public debate. The necessity of consensus, emphasised in the pre-accession period vis-à-vis the national public and, in the effort towards EU enlargement, vis-à-vis the European partners, has been an important strategic consideration. While many actors may have had issues for discussion, they choose to abstain from the debate in order not to break consensus. Thus, the very demand for a political consensus may have de-politicising effects.

The last point that I would like to mention is the presentation of the government information campaign towards the public at large, with the public as one universal and little-differentiated actor. This means that the government never seemed to really admit the existence of different groups of people with various levels of gains and losses from EU accession. As a result, conflict over EU accession has been viewed as something artificially created, as something based on misunderstanding or purposeful problem making, i.e. not as the natural result of the complexity of EU accession.

The government partly did acknowledge the existence of various interest groups with respect to EU accession. This has been reflected in its published series of "Companions to the EU" for various interest groups – environmental NGOs, entrepreneurs, consumers and so on. However, this obvious knowledge did not translate to the concept of the information campaign. In the campaign, we would instead hear most often of various "target groups,"[69] or alternately "specific groups," such as "entrepreneurs, educational institutions, farmers etc."[70] This "target group discourse" can have three explanations. First, it could mean the recognition of the existence of groups in society that are likely to be affected differently than others, and thus the recognition of difference and potential conflict. It could, however, also mean that all those groups, however affected they may be, are in the end part of that one object of the information campaign, the public at large; this would on the contrary stress the superficiality of conflict. Finally, the "target group" discourse can

68 Jan Kavan. 2002, op. cit.

69 Communication Strategy, 2001, op. cit., National Programme of Preparation of the Czech Republic for Membership of the European Union, 2000, op. cit.

70 National Programme of Preparation of the Czech Republic for Membership of the European Union, 2000, op. cit.

be an instrumental discourse taken over from PR agencies and public opinion survey firms that co-operate on the information campaign.

The last two explanations seem most likely. This is because we find nowhere in government documents and texts an explanation of why those groups are "specific," other than the specificity of their information needs. That is, rather than being at special risk from the EU accession, some groups are less informed or passive. On the whole, however, the main target of the information campaign was the citizenry at large, the public or "the Czech citizen."[71] It corresponds with this finding that the first comprehensive study of the possible effects of EU accession was carried out as late as July 2001, commissioned by the government Council for Social and Economic Strategy.[72]

To conclude this part, government framing of the EU-related activities emphasizes the possibility and desirability of objective knowledge. Given this, any "one-sided" approach must be disqualified as unreasonable. It has been argued by Jodi Dean that norms of openness and transparency, embodying the expectation that there is always more information available, are "ultimately depoliticising."[73] The government approach in the pre-accession period, with the emphasis on deeper knowledge and constant search for objective information, while being perfectly justified, may have depoliticising effects as well. It does not recognize legitimate ground for conflict and thus precludes public debate. One can have an opinion because one is *knowledgeable*, but one can have an opinion because one has an *interest* in a particular outcome or because one *feels* threatened. As long as these competing grounds for opinion tend to be disqualified within the predominant framing, public debate can hardly be expected.

Conclusion

I have said in the Introduction that EU enlargement is the "functional equivalent of war". Let me conclude in terms of this slightly over-dramatised but suitable metaphor. In the paper, I attempted to point out several features of the EU-related dis-

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71 Jan Kavan. 2000, op. cit

72 Fassmann, Martin et al. 2001. Study of the social and economic impact of EU accession (New possibilities and possible risks). <www.vlada.cz> (website of the Czech Government Office).

73 Dean, Jodi. 2001. Communicative Capitalism: Why the net is not the public sphere. *IWM Working Paper* No. 9/2001. Vienna: Institute for Human Sciences, p. 13.

course in one candidate country (but probably not specific to that particular country), namely, single alternative; necessity; time pressure; and objective knowledge. These features then contribute to the "war-like" character of the pre-accession discourse. It is perhaps the last one that stands apart from the three. While framing the EU-related events and activities as a matter of single alternative, necessity and time pressure directly discourages participation and debate, and is somewhat reminiscent of the situation of "martial law", emphasis on objective knowledge seems to represent an opposite trend. It does indeed, but the effect may be the same: in the endless search for deeper information, the time may never come when there is enough knowledge to make a decision and take a stance.

The metaphor of "war" may be realistic in one more sense. War is often not a violent suppression of internal rebellions and opposing worldviews, but an activity/decision when the entire nation, or most of the nation, unites behind a common cause. In the situation of martial law people may be silent and stay at home not because they are forcefully prevented from running out to the streets, but because they feel the significance and drama of the moment and, under given circumstances, choose to remain silent. The question remains, of course, what happens after the war has ended, when everyone feels free to speak again and the possible casualties are about to be counted.

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