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On the first of May, 2004, having been transformed in less than 15 years from a one party communist state into a democratic market economy, the Czech Republic was formally admitted as a member to the EU. 10 years on, academics, politicians, diplomats, students and others all gathered in the Collegium Maximum of the Faculty of Law of Charles University in Prague to attend a conference discussing the Czech Republic's relationship with the EU. Entitled "10 years of Czech EU membership: Expectations and Visions", it offered participants the opportunity to evaluate the impact of the EU on the Czech Republic, and the impact of the Czech Republic on the EU. The event was split into two panel discussions, both covering different aspects of the topic.

Introductory speeches were made by Prof. Lenka Rovná, Vice-rector for European Affairs at Charles University, Prof. Tomáš Zima, Rector of Charles University, and Prof. Jan Kuklík, Dean of the Faculty of Law of Charles University respectively. Professor Rovná spoke of the role Charles University has played in the Czech Republic's European journey, from educating civil servants to becoming a Jean Monnet centre of excellence in 2001. Professor Zima in his speech also focused on education, citing the importance of programs such as Erasmus in facilitating the movement of both students and teachers between institutes of higher education. Professor Kuklík, conflicted between whether to be brief or funny, went for brief, and welcomed the conference to the Law Faculty and stated how we should be ready to both praise achievements and criticize the failures of the EU and Czech Republic.

The members of the first panel were charged with discussing 'Expectations'- their own expectations or those of the country, whether they were realistic, whether they have been fulfilled and so on. The first to speak was Dr. Vladimír Špidla, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic between 2002-2004 and Czech Commissioner to the EU from 2004-2010. He emphasized the significance of the history of the Czech Republic. Not only has the Czech Republic historically been at the heart of Europe for centuries, but it has also spent most of its existence as a part of bigger, transnational bodies, from the Austria-Hungarian Empire to the Communist bloc. The Czech Republic has spent very little time alone. However, when it came to joining the EU, the Czech Republic did so this time on its own terms, as an equal member and with the capacity to shape its own destiny. EU integration has not only been a success on a transnational level, but also on a domestic level, with Dr. Špidla expressing the belief that membership in EU institutions had helped the Czech Republic structure its own internal recovery from Communism.

The second speaker was Dr. Pavel Telička, Czech EU Commissioner in 2004. He again re-emphasized the significance of the Czech Republic's position in the centre of Europe. In terms of expectations he said that membership in the EU was expected to anchor the Czech Republic in the safety, security and prosperity of Europe, and to reintegrate the Czech Republic based on their shared history and culture. On a more critical note he suggested that the Czech Republic had not understood what its own expectations of EU membership were, and that this had caused opportunities to be missed for the country.

Last to speak was Gisela Stuart, British Member of Parliament for the Labour Party, but with Bavarian roots. She spoke of her joy at seeing Prague back at the heart of Europe, and identified 4 key risks facing the EU in the coming years. These were the rise of anti-European parties and the threat they pose to the free movement of labour, a freedom she saw as being key to maintaining peace in Europe; the continued economic crisis and the future role of non-Euro countries within EU economic structures; the seismic changes that upcoming referenda in the UK may bring to Europe, be that in the upcoming Scottish referendum on independence, or in the possible in/out referendum on EU membership; and lastly the problems facing the countries on Europe's borders, and the ability of both the EU and NATO to protect their member states.

The second panel was comprised of candidates for the European Parliament from the 7 main Czech political parties, who were tasked with describing their vision for the EU. They were confined to 5 minutes each for their speeches, but it is a curious ailment that seems to affect both politicians and academics alike that they struggle tremendously to keep within timeframes.

First to speak was Prof. Jan Keller of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). He criticized what he saw as a two-tiered Europe, where the rich exploit the poor and the poor rob the rich (drawing from the work of Vilfredo Pareto). However, he was hopeful that the EU has the ability and potential to solve the social state crisis facing many European states at the moment. He was followed by Ing. Kateřina Konečná from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) who expressed a wish for the EU to return to its core values: human rights and peace.

Dr. Luděk Niedermayer of TOP 09 a Starostové (TOP 09 and Mayors) said in his speech that the Czech Republic is moving closer to Europe and that the understanding of EU in the Czech Republic must be improved. Competitiveness and employment should be the focus.

In a speech that elicited a divided response Dr. Klára Samková of the Úsvit Party spoke of how her hopes in 1989 for a more fair post-communist world had not materialized, and how instead the Czech Republic has been left with a bureaucratic dictatorship from Brussels.

Assoc. Prof. Pavel Svoboda of the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), gave an impassioned account of his vision of a 'Bavarian Europe' – a flourishing Europe that is big on big issues and small on small issues. He also warned of the risk from what he termed 'the populists and nationalists' all over the EU who, according to him, are threatening to turn the European Parliament into the Anti-European Parliament.

Pavel Telička then made a reappearance, this time representing the political party ANO. He again looked back to the Maastricht Treaty and the development of the EU, and how there is a need to assert what the real goals of the EU are – goals that are not static, that are achievable and which fulfil the wishes of the electorate.

The last to speak was Ing. Jan Zahradil of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). He expressed dissatisfaction with the process of European political integration, and was sceptical of the ability of Europe to ever speak with one voice. He did however see some potential for a business policy and common energy policy on the EU level, but did not think this had been achieved yet.



Elan Grug Muse is in her second year studying for a BA in Politics at the University of Nottingham, and is studying for a year at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Charles University, Prague. She is interested in international politics, music and literature, and was motivated to write for iForum because it offered a good opportunity to improve her journalism skills.