Conclusion – Prospects for the EU

If communism represented the starting block from which the Czech and Slovak peoples broke free in 1989, membership of the European Union was the finishing line to which their leaders said they would take them. The consolation prize of NATO membership was bestowed on a not altogether grateful Czech Republic in early 1999 while Vladimír Mečiar saw to it that Slovakia was left on the sidelines. But the EU was the rich man’s club everyone wanted to join. The prospect of membership represented the closest thing to an objective reference point by which progress in eliminating the baggage of four decades of communism could be judged. For the average citizen it meant elevation from the status of second class European, required to prove his honourable intentions at every border crossing to the West. For the businessman it offered up the hope of free access to some of the richest markets in the world. And for the politicians it loomed as both a carrot and a stick, promising a place among equals inside an emerging power block with real clout, and conversely the threat from the EU of public criticism if they failed to live up to the standards expected of them.

Asked to judge the preparedness of both countries for EU membership just after the middle of the last decade, most observers, including the author, would have put the Czech Republic somewhere near the top of the list and Slovakia inside the no hope zone at the bottom. By the end of the decade, the gap between the two countries appears to have narrowed drastically. Slovakia continues to rise from the ashes of Mečiarism while a growing realisation of the full extent of Václav Klaus’s mismanagement of the reform process in his country has
knocked the Czech Republic far from the pedestal so many were once prepared to put it on.

In so far as the transition from communism involved the move to a market economy and the creation of a democratic political environment it is possible to argue that the Czech Republic moves into the next decade with at least as many questions unanswered as its one-time federation partner. There is one key problem.

The Czech political system, unlike most others in the region, has not been tested under the strain of high unemployment and the social dislocation which arises from it. Czechs, Poles, Hungarians and Slovaks think they have suffered hardship since 1989. This is broadly true in all of the above countries apart from the Czech Republic, where unemployment stayed below 5.0 per cent for most of the decade and only in the late 1990s moved sharply up towards the 10 per cent level. Undoubtedly many pensioners have failed to sustain even the relatively low living standards they had under communism. Others have had to retrain, change jobs, and cope with the dislocating effects of inflation. But families have not often seen their main bread winner thrown out of a job with little hope of finding a new one. Their teenage sons have generally not left school with nothing to do but idle their days away in bitter rejection from a labour market which can’t accommodate them. The failed Klausian economic reform project has postponed the day when real social pain would be felt. It has postponed it, moreover, to a time when calls for patience in the aftermath of a glorious revolution against communism could no longer be effectively used to mollify social discontent.

We have seen how the core failing of the Czech party political system has been its inability to produce viable coalitions with majority support in parliament. This was placed firmly within the context of a country in transition from communism. The left was unable to unite because of the presence of a hardline, unreconstructed communist party with which neither the Social Democrats nor the centrist KDÚ-ČSL could work. Despite sharing much in common ideologically, the right was unable to cooperate effectively precisely because of opposition within its ranks to Václav Klaus’s political personality. It was argued that in the absence of strong loyalties to parties, and in the presence of a neo-liberal ideology which was difficult to sell to the masses, the temptation to construct the largest Czech party around