

## 'EU membership threatened more than ever' from the Prague Business Journal (21 May 2001)

**Caption:** On 21 May 2001, the Czech economic affairs magazine Prague Business Journal outlines the difficulties involved in the negotiations for accession to the European Union and considers the problem of the free movement of workers.

**Source:** Prague Business Journal. 21.05.2001. Prague: Prague Business Journal.

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## EU membership threatened more than ever

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So Austrians and Germans still don't want us Czechs to get a job in current EU member countries after we have acceded, and they seem quite serious and firm on the issue. Moreover, these two countries have recently proposed restrictions on setting up businesses for Polish, Czechs and Hungarian companies that employ Czechs, Poles and Hungarians abroad — for example construction companies. Austria and Germany now have the support of all EU countries but Spain.

What are the consequences? The chances look bleaker than ever for Czechs, Poles and Hungarians to achieve, after accession, equal status with the same liberties as other EU members. They are heading for second-class status. However temporary this may be, should it be acceptable?

And even more disheartening, how will local political leaders sell this compromise to voters. This development threatens the whole process of EU enlargement itself.

### Fiasco of Czech diplomacy

Czech diplomats and politicians are feebly protesting these proposed restrictions. The Polish and Hungarian political establishments are quieter still. The whole unexpected turn in EU policy was not foreseen by the Czech side. It was neither lobbied nor fought against, and voters were not informed about this looming crisis on the horizon.

The trouble is that the Czech EU contingent is not fighting for an ideal or for the principle of liberty. (It's not surprising, because this government is lacking both ideals and principles). For example, those in the Social Democratic Party (CSSD) who really want to bring this country into the European Union are selling EU membership to voters on the grounds of increasing living standards and a few material goodies.

But fighting for ideals and principles often tends to be practical as well. Ideals and principles do not exist for the sake of professors of philosophy or ethics. CSSD affiliates in the government and diplomatic corps now tell EU representatives that Czech workers will never pour into their countries, so there is nothing to be afraid of. For example new CSSD boss and labor minister, Vladimir Spidla spoke at the recent pan-European convention of social democratic parties in Berlin. He met with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder for 30 minutes. He said a couple of times that worries of any large-scale westward movement of labor are completely unfounded and unrealistic. Spidla is definitely right. There is no danger of Czechs flooding the West. But what kind of response did he get at the conference from the other participants? OK, if these worries are so unfounded, why not put these restrictions in place just to be sure. Since nobody would mind, then why should it bother Czechs?

Czech politicians are now complaining in Brussels that with these restrictions their constituents will not support EU enlargement in a referendum. "It's your matter," they must be hearing in Brussels.

They should have been defending the free movement of labor as a fundamental principle, which they will never give up for their citizens. Like liberty, it is something they should fight for, even if not one single Czech wanted to take advantage of it.

This freedom is one of the few truly noble ideals of a unified Europe. The European Union, which lacks a constitution, doesn't have many. It is more or less pragmatic and technical reasons that bind it together — for example, the move to a common currency. Human rights and liberties are guaranteed in the member countries' constitutions.

Last month Czech deputy foreign minister Pavel Telicka told journalists repeatedly that this Austrian-German initiative is technically a part of one special "chapter" of EU entry negotiations. It had nothing to do

with the Czech demand for a similar transitory period for EU citizens to purchase land and real estate here, which is part of another "chapter."

No horse-trading will take place between these chapters because it's technically impossible, according to Telicka. The exactly opposite was said by EU Commission chief Romano Prodi recently. Prodi said that Czechs shouldn't be surprised about these proposed temporary restrictions because they themselves still insist on the land-owning restrictions in a different chapter. So who is bluffing whom?

Who is happy about it?

EU enlargement has both forthright and shadowy opponents — within the union and in candidate countries. Some of them mask themselves as neutral or pragmatic. Until now most of the voters in the EU are against enlargement, mainly because they don't really care about it. It has not been pushed and proclaimed by their political representatives and leaders as an important goal.

This is an example of a topic that needs political leaders who are able to see beyond one electoral cycle. EU enlargement needs leaders, who don't decide according to the polls and shifts in the moods of the public. It needs explanation, public justification and real political leadership.

EU enlargement has enemies, chiefly among trade unions and some services and industries who feel threatened. These interest groups are happy about the current development.

In the West, EU enlargement is defended by a lobby of investors, multinational companies and businessmen who want a larger, more stable market. It's defended by politicians who really believe in a greater common Europe. It's defended by those who honestly believe it will help European stability and security. Those politicians in the West who still sincerely support enlargement in all probability have underestimated what kind of reaction the current developments will have in Central Europe and specifically in the Czech Republic.

A referendum on Czech EU membership will definitely take place. Support for enlargement has almost always been less than 50 percent. How to mobilize support? Even without the proposed restrictions popular support has been diminishing recently. Populists, extremists, communists and those who don't want to give up their economic superiority are successfully feeding the fears that foreigners' buying our apartments is driving up prices. Just listen to people in small towns and villages. Czech trade unions have recently started to protest certain practices of foreign investors. The popular private TV channel Nova doesn't approve of Brussels legislation on broadcasting.

Local anti-EU political forces now have new and easy targets, and in many respects their catchy rhetoric will be hard to argue against. The issue of these temporary restrictions smells of an Austrian-German dictate on other EU countries. People here do not care much for a dictate from these two in particular. It's too much like the 1938 Munich Agreement. The results of that dictate denied us freedom to travel and work in Europe freely for 50 years, and these are the ideals that people really value. Moreover, those who locked us into the "ghetto" 61 years ago were German occupiers and only later Communists. We can be sure that these resentments will be heavily used by local opponents of accession.

Those political parties who remain in support of EU membership will come under fire for too much compromise, not defending national interests, kowtowing to Brussels' whim, and for selling us to Germany as a colony instead of achieving full membership, etc.

These last developments shouldn't compel decent Czech politicians to abandon a pro-EU policy. They shouldn't give up negotiations. They should do everything to fasten legislative harmonization and improve economic growth. They should unilaterally liberalize our labor market toward EU citizens as a gesture and give up our stupid demands for a provision against foreigners owning land and real estate after EU entry.

Non-EU scenarios seem catastrophic. Czech politics doesn't seem to be very decent, but the goal of joining

the European Union has rendered it somehow more decent, disciplined and streamlined than it would be otherwise. Besides legal harmonization with EU legislation, the current results are just a mess, a fight of partial interests, corruption and a fight for power. On the other hand one needs to win voters to be EU friendly. It's going to be very hard to politically defend these goals now and successfully sell them to voters.

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