

Polish socio-cultural realities from the perspective of the Czech-Polish relations

Introduction

The diploma thesis *Czechophiles – Polish fascinations with Czechs and the Czech Republic*, which includes the present paper, was written in 2012–2013. Czechophilia, for the purposes of the study, has been defined as an intensive liking and sentiment for Czechs and the Czech Republic as well as for all things Czech. The data gathered in the theoretical part of the study have been taken from the studied literature on the subject, whereas the key material for the entire study consists of individual in-depth interviews. The respondents were volunteers acquired through advertisements on a Facebook page devoted to Czechophiles and on a Czechophile blog. The survey covered 18 people from Warsaw between 24 and 50 years of age. The goal of the study is to describe the history of Czechophilia, the experiences of Czechophiles and their subjective perception of the phenomenon. The basic research question was: “How is the phenomenon of Czechophilia perceived by Czechophiles themselves?” The part titled “The socio-cultural context of the Polish realities” approximates some topics connected with Czechophilia and outlines a possible background of this microphenomenon. In the summary of the thesis, Czechophiles are classified as a subculture with a peculiar rhetorical discourse including myths about the Czech and Polish character and culture.

1.1. Self-characterization of Poles or Polishness

Stereotypes are an inseparable part of social consciousness. Self-stereotypes are subjective stereotypes through which people perceive and judge themselves or their own group. They impact everyday activities and can determine motivations or needs as well as attitude to “the other ones”. Polish Czechophilia should be also examined with regard to its content and origin. The national and state identity of Czechophiles may impact their views within international relations and determine their self-image. The creation of “Czechophile” categories “they – Czechs – Czechness” is done on the

basis of a correlation with the group “we – Poles – Polishness”. The discourse of Polishness perceived by Poles determines the social orientation in the experienced reality, and the views to other people result from this orientation. What features of the Polish national identity are mentioned in various studies?

The project “Nacieszyć się polskością” [Enjoy the Polishness]¹, within which the self-consciousness of Poles was examined in 2012, presents the following conclusions:

The Poles have a relatively small confidence in other Poles. In their opinion, the Poles “lack distance, a wider perspective, a healthy self-irony and an universal language to speak about themselves”. According to the respondents, Poles, both as individuals and groups, show no interest whatsoever in self-reflection. This feature, according to them, is an exact opposite to what they observe in Western countries. They also claim that Poland is “backward”. They consider the next, young generation, mostly school students, as immature individuals unprepared for life. There is also an image of a Pole as a “lazy consumer of primitive content”. According to Poles, the civil society has “low cultural competencies of citizens”. They are used to justify the alternative media limitations and the growing influence of the commercial media. The Poles take themselves overly seriously, they cannot separate themselves from their own judgments or work painstakingly on their own identity and image. Poles, as a nation, feel they are in an ambiguous situation, which gives them a sense of discomfort and has an evident impact on their ambivalent attitude to themselves. In international or multicultural relations, they often feel threatened. Poles perceive their own modernization [as a country – translator’s note] as unfinished, their metropolises as poorly developed, infrastructure as backward, and roads as literally horrible.

The self-characterization of Poles (online²) was a topic of one of the studies of the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS, cooperating, among others, with its Czech counterpart, the Public Opinion Research Center of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic – Centrum pro výzkum veřejného

¹ Wspólny Projekt 2012 [Joint Project 2012] is an initiative which originated in a group of sociologists from the University of Warsaw, financed by the CEE Trust company, established for the purpose of civil reflection and discussion. M. Rogaczewska, A. Gołdys, *W pułapce (auto)stereotypów: Nacieszyć się polskością*, accessed: 25.03.2013, http://www.ps2012.pl/uploads/media/files/raporty/nacieszyc_sie_polskoscia._w_pu%C5%82apce_%28auto%29stereotypy__raport.pdf.

² CBOS, *Stereotyp Polaka i Europejczyka: Komunikat z badań*, Warszawa 2011, accessed: 25.03.2013, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2011/K_033_11.PDF.

mínění při Akademii věd ČR). In early 2011, a survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1002 respondents. One should pay attention to the very structure of questions, which use a (completely unexplained) dualism of concepts: “Pole vs. European”. The respondents were required to determine themselves as Poles, and simultaneously, to separate themselves from the community of other Europeans. Such comparison of Poles and Europeans was later examined from the viewpoint of actions, thoughts and feelings of a group. The results suggest relatively large differences between a typified European and a Pole, at least in the perception of respondents. For example, 40% of Polish respondents claim that Poles live in good conditions, while 85% think the same about Europeans. And vice versa – only 3% respondents say that Europeans have bad living conditions, while 36% claim that Poles live in such conditions. Moreover, the survey shows that Poles think that they lead a more austere life, while the life of Europeans is more “luxurious”. 83% respondents have said that a typical Pole is religious, while, according to 54%, a typical European is non-religious.

It has not been precised in the study to what degree these conclusions are backed by a given autostereotype or, on the contrary, stereotypes of other European countries, yet the Polish self-image surely had its share in the formation of answers.

According to the results of the same survey, a typical Pole cares more for the family, and a typical European – for the work. A Pole is a patriot to a much greater extent. In general, Poland is characterized by extremely strong nationalism. This is largely caused by its history, in which Poland had disappeared three times from the map of Europe. The Partitions of Poland is a period from 1772 to 1795, when, in three different partitions, the territory of Poland was annexed by Russia, Prussia and Austria. Independent Poland did not exist for 123 years, a period which saw an endless struggle on many fronts against oppression, occupation of the land and humiliation of the Polish nation. Therefore, some Poles see the history of Poland as a history of perpetual struggle, not only in the sense of “defense of the Christianity in the sea of heresy” but also in the sense of a painful history of a tormented Romantic hero.³ Logically, the scapegoats that fell into disgrace with Poles in the 20th century were Russia and Germany, being a reason to revive the necessity of struggle for freedom. Collective nationalism can be considered a group therapy here. Each mention of an uprising to defend the territorial existence, or of struggle against foreign oppression, reinforces the nationalist-patriotic

³ R. Zenderowski, *Międzynarodowe stosunki kulturalne*, Warszawa 2010, p. 80.

feelings and brings back the pride to Poles. However, such slogans as “the blood spilled for our land makes us the body of the nation”⁴, are among those that illustrate the extreme areas of nationalism. According to the media, such involved nationalism begins to spread, some even talk about fascism.⁵ The most significant event in this context is the March of Independence, which, according to the media, was attended in 2011 by almost 20 thousand Poles, and according to unofficial sources, by as much as 100 000 people.⁶ Until 2009, this march used to be an event attended, above all, by political and historical organizations, youth unions, and committed individuals. Since 2010, a wide spectrum of people has begun to participate in this march, and in 2011 it became a one-of-a-kind mass action in Poland. The route leads through the centre of Warsaw, is 4 km long and, in its designated width of 20–30 m, was completely filled by demonstrators. Such a big representation, as well as slogans like “Be proud, you’re Polish”, or “Poland, wake up!”, manifest the social attitudes and, simultaneously, the emotionality of a Pole-citizen, which is important for the polarization of the Polish society. The more distinct signs of e.g. nationalism reveal in one group of citizens, the more distinct can be later symptoms in other groups who search for an alternative path or protest against the activities of the original group. In this sense, nationalism can already be outright subversive, rather than therapeutic, to the homogeneity of a community.

In a similar way, ethnic and cultural homogeneity may be subversive as well when excessively heavily guarded. As for the manifestations of national self-determination, one should seek a principal distinction in the Poles’ attitude to themselves, to their neighbours as humans, and, in particular, [to their neighbours] as countries. The studies by Marcin Joźko⁷ and other researchers point out the fact that towards Germans and Russians, as nations, Poles feel both objections and admiration to a similar extent, despite the aforementioned grudge. For example, the respondents who were supposed to name five features of Russians stated a percentage of negative traits, connected mostly with alcoholism and drunkenness, similar to the positive ones, related to Rus-

⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵ See a video: *Tego nie pokazała żadna TV publiczna*, accessed: 25.03.2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W50axHsdM9w>.

⁶ *Prezydent organizuje marsz 11 listopada*. *Deon.pl*, accessed: 19.03.2013, <http://www.deon.pl/wiadomosci/polska/art,15160,prezydent-organizuje-marsz-11-listopada.html>.

⁷ M. Joźko, *Stereotypy narodowe Polaków i Ukraińców*, accessed: 25.03.2013, <http://lokalnebadania.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/stereotypy-narodowe-polakow-i-ukraincow.pdf>.

sian good nature and hospitality. The case was similar with Germans. 77% of Polish respondents have shown, among peculiar features of Germans, such positive properties as diligence, thoroughness, consistency. Nevertheless, in the CBOS surveys, sympathy for Germans and Russians is declared only by one third of those covered, while towards Czechs – by two thirds.

Neighbour relations of emigres living in Warsaw and Polish inhabitants of Warsaw is described in the article “*Sąsiedzi czy intruzy*” [*Neighbours or Intruders*].⁸ Its conclusions suggest that Poles practise a cultural policy of assimilation, their tolerance is merely pretended, and in general, they have an adverse attitude to multiculturalism or ethnic diversity. Poles are intuitively drawn to what is close to their own culture, and Poland is traditionally one of the most ethnically homogenous countries of the world. Polish nationality is declared by 96,7% of Polish citizens – an ethnic and political/national homogeneity, on one hand, guarantees a socio-economic order of the population, but, on the other hand, creates a strong monolithic discourse. Its pressure for unambiguity of civic norms predestines Poland for existence of resistance against the arising [other – translator’s note] groups. Thus, Poland became a cradle of some subgenres of heavy metal and, simultaneously, a country with a very strong punk scene. This may sound as a simplification, but their domination in the scenes is a known fact in Europe. Due to the ethnic composition, but also to the Christian tradition, value standards in Poland, at least on the outside, have a clear and relatively narrow extent. They do not offer as large possibilities of individual approach as those present e.g. in Germany with its declared multiculturalism. This situation is additionally reinforced by the standard of the Church. Approx. 37 million Poles were baptized in various circumstances, 37 million Poles belong officially to the Roman Catholic Church.⁹ Such a “Catholic standard” should be regarded as a naturalized myth as mentioned before. The Church, with its power and universality, is considered a “normal state of affairs” in Poland. Of course, “nothing is normal in its own right (...) and what we consider normal is a construct”.¹⁰ Such arbitrariness, says Sedláková, functions as a tool of regulation of a disciplining power. The arbitrariness of normality is hidden, in this case, in the historic power of the Church.

⁸ *Sąsiedzi czy intruzy? O dyskryminacji cudzoziemców w Polsce*, ed. W. Klaus, Warszawa 2010, p. 143, accessed: 19.03.2013, <http://www.interwencjaprawna.pl/docs/sasiedzi-czy-intruzy.pdf>.

⁹ R. Zendrowski, op.cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ R. Sedláková, *Mediální konstrukce reality – reprezentace druhých*, in *Média dnes – reflexe mediality, médií a mediálních obsahů*, eds. M. Foret-Lapčík, P. M. Orsag, Olomouc 2008, p. 157.

Such informations constitute an important framework for each attempt of study. Habermas calls such remarks a “cultural obviousness”, a “judgment of history”. Such “obviousnesses” attribute views, prejudices and sociopsychological structures to a specific type of society. They fit into the exchange of tastes and tendencies and influence the creation of a sub-genre discourse.¹¹ They constitute a framework of a social space in which a “creative evaluation” is done.¹²

1.2 Background of actual social relations of the Czech Republic and Poland

Cultural and media texts within a discourse present specific data as actual ones, and later these data, through interactions in a society, become a reality for participants of these interactions. This imaginary, divided reality, just as presentation of relations between the Czech Republic and Poland, is impacted by the current social attitude or politics. One should briefly mention what events could shape the relation between the Czech Republic and Poland in the public sphere and how it is presented today.

In late 2010, Karel Schwarzenberg, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, in an interview for the most popular Polish daily newspaper “Gazeta Wyborcza”, answered a question on the problems of the Czech-Polish neighbourhood as follows: “Thank God, we don’t have any more serious problems and our relations are currently the best in our history. Earlier, we used to ignore each other, or were unable to understand each other”.¹³

In the historic perspective, one can essentially speak of a significant lack of understanding in two instances: in case of an unjust, according to the Poles, invasion of the Czech territory by Polish troops in 1968, but also with regard to the issue of Silesia¹⁴ which, in the border regions¹⁵, has been a disputed matter for about a century due to the Czech and Polish claims on the Northern Moravian territories. Many inhabitants of these areas claim to be of Polish nationality. However, according to some politicians, this problem has

¹¹ J. Habermas, *Strukturální přeměna veřejnosti: zkoumání jedné kategorie občanské společnosti*, Praha 2000, p. 362–363.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹³ A. Wolek, *Polsko-české vztahy? V pohodě*, “Revue Politika”, 28.10.2011, accessed: 19.03.2013, <http://www.revuepolitika.cz/clanky/1560/polsko-ceske-vztahy-v-pohode>.

¹⁴ 1919 saw an open conflict for Cieszyn Silesia, the borders would change continuously, and Silesia continued to remain a matter of compensation in the contacts of both countries.

¹⁵ All specialists, when asked, agree that during the long-time dispute over Silesia, or over Cieszyn Silesia, mistakes were made both by the Polish and Czech party. They also claim that in the border regions, the dispute resounds, impacting family situations or individual opinions.

already been solved. For instance, Václav Havel in 1998 said: “Our cooperation... results, above all, from the fact that today we share common values and interests... and are connected with real goals of foreign policy”. Havel said more, stressing that the Czech-Polish relations in recent years have distinctly changed and “reached the highest level in history”.¹⁶

However, such situation has been relatively new. Poland could play the role of a Central European leader after World War II, so it was not very popular. Moreover, stereotypes of Poles, connected with negative experiences of cross-border trade and bigoted Catholicism, were spreading in the border areas. As politologist Josef Mlejnek jr. says, “an epochal change was brought in by the year of 1989. It was then when Czechs and Poles became equal neighbours. Territorial disputes did not revive; moreover, both countries became connected with mutual sympathy of cultural and political elites (...)”.¹⁷

The claim that the 1980s had an essential impact on the modern shape of the Czech-Polish relations is also confirmed by Marek Stawski, a Polish historian, Czechophile and specialist in cross-border cooperation. According to him, this results from several factors:

1. political changes, i.e. overthrow of the communist power in both countries and contacts of the dissident opposition,
2. travels of young people and students for trips and holiday camps to Czechoslovakia,
3. intensification of academic contacts,
4. activity of John Paul II. According to Stawski, he used to clearly reveal his sympathy for Czechs as a national hero and model for the majority society, giving an example of a very warm attitude towards Czechoslovakia.¹⁸

This opinion is complemented by Marta Chwalińska-Stach: “An essential aspect that binds us together and draws closer to Czechs are the same social problems, resulting, to a large degree, from the status of post-communist countries”.¹⁹ Jiří Musil also claims that this status affects mutual relations. He has determined several axes determining, in his opinion, the historical and social consistency in various regions, which are not constrained by national

¹⁶ J. Mlejnek, *Sterilní aliance?: Sonda do vztahu Čechů a Poláků*, “Revue Politika”, 11.04.2011, accessed: 19.03.2013, <http://www.revuepolitika.cz/clanky/1453/sterilni-aliance>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Correspondence with Marek Stawski on the Polish-Czech relations, winter 2012.

¹⁹ Personal conversation with Marta Chwalińska-Stach on Czechophilia, Warsaw, 17.08.2012.

frontiers and may also be binding for the entire Central European region, or for the relations between neighbouring countries.²⁰

Musil speaks about:

- consistency based on the experiences of defense, adjustment, as well as persecution and discrimination of specific categories of citizens, both during World War II and under the communist regime,
- consistency of this part of citizens of the country which has adopted and internalized the goals of the communist regime,
- consistency created by the values and way of life of a traditional Central European society.

The consistency of political and economic programmes, acquired in such a way, had been maintained both by the Czech Republic and Poland long after the anti-communist breakthrough. Both countries worked very actively on the accession to the European Union and both were admitted in 2004. According to Zenderowski, this was the crowning moment of the stage of the “Polish return to Europe”, mentioned by Tadeusz Mazowiecki in 1989 as one of the key goals of the Solidarity movement.²¹ For the Poles, the accession to the EU was a key compensation in their aspiration for getting closer to the European standards of living, but also with regard to culture. Therefore, Europe is technically a geographic, civilization/cultural and economic/political term, while the European Union constitutes a synthesis of all these aspects. Elżbieta Skotnicka-Illasiewicz claims that Poles were aware of this significance of accession: in their opinion, it was not a political and economic process, but also a cultural process to bring deep changes in the spiritual search for common connections and roots.²²

Such common relationships of positive nature also existed between Czechs and Poles in the unofficial sphere. Interviews with historians and participants of cultural life clearly show that there were more reasons for mutual sympathies in the past. Marta Chwalińska-Stach, a native Pole working as a Programme and Culture Clerk at the Czech Centre in Warsaw, explains that the modern positive reception of the Czech culture cannot be considered a new phenomenon.

²⁰ J. Musil, *Současná pojetí sociální soudržnosti a Česká republika*, Praha 2005, accessed: 19.03.2013, http://veda.fsv.cuni.cz/doc/KonferenceRCS/plen_musil.doc.

²¹ R. Zenderowski, op.cit., p. 378.

²² Ibid, p. 379.

We, Poles, are bound with Czechs with a fair chunk of history, underlying the fact that the Czech and Czechoslovak culture was available in Poland. In part, it is a result of communism and the so-called official culture of exchange of that time... In practice, it looked like this: Poles, Czechs and Slovaks used to meet and jointly create cultural programmes which were later well promoted and easily understood. Another branch of cultural cooperation was the illegally smuggled literature.²³

According to Chwalińska-Stach, Czechs experienced a more loose regime, more freedom and a better access to the world literature.

Czechs had a very efficient semi-legal and illegal distribution system, [the literature – translator’s note] was also transferred to us. Thus, many people have learnt Czech language, discovering a key to understand your culture. This is why Hrabal or Kundera enjoyed so much popularity at the time. They used to be read even before the translations were made.

She also points out the fact that Poles used to help the Czechs gain access to religious literature, so even at the illegal level the cultural help was mutual.²⁴ The case was similar with television programmes after the anti-communist breakthrough. Chwalińska-Stach reminds that in Polish homes near the border, both on the Polish and Czech side, as late as 10 years ago, it was a completely normal thing to watch Czech television channels, such as NOVA, ČT1 or ČT2. It was due to television programmes that people of the middle and older generation know the Czech popular culture well and consider it “positive” and “joyful”.²⁵ Miroslav Karas, a foreign correspondent of ČT, who had lived in Poland for many years, says in addition that the language proximity is an essential factor in building of positive relations. He also confirms the fact that in view of expansion of the media environment, primarily in case of television channels, increasingly more Czech films and shows are broadcast.²⁶ Another reason of Czech-Polish sentiments, mentioned many times, is geographic closeness, which is also agreed by Mariusz Surosz. “One goes on holiday through the Czech Republic, almost in every direction, so this country is generally close to the Polish people”.²⁷

²³ Personal conversation with Marta Chwalińska-Stach on Czechophilia, Warsaw, 17.08.2012.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Telephone conversation with Miroslav Karas on the Polish-Czech relations, November 2012.

²⁷ Personal conversation with Mariusz Surosz on the subject *What do we know about Czechophilia?*, Prague, 12.06.2012.

Travels to today's Czech Republic used to be organized in Poland as early as in the 1980s. "The generation of the eighties has literally grown up on Czech songs, animations, families would go to Czechoslovakia for shopping and bought commodities unavailable in Poland. There is a lot of sentiment here".²⁸ Hostovská, a historian, offers a view from the other side. In her writings, she says:

In the 1980s, I had visited Poland three times. (...) For the first time, I was there with my colleague Jana Kokočnickova in early 1982, after the martial law had been imposed, in order to open an exhibition in our cultural centre in Warsaw. We brought gifts not only to our friends but also to our friends' friends. There was an incredible poverty in Poland at the time. I think it was worse than in our country during the war, since we had a rationing system then, and with the German thoroughness, people had at least a minimum of food. The situation in Warsaw could rather be compared to Leningrad under siege...²⁹

A situation so different could cause envy, but, as explained by Miroslav Karas, this is not the case today due to the egocentric media content, due to "self-celebration". National pride, as mentioned before, also applies to the media discourse. The Polish media, for instance, stressed many times the stability and independence of the Polish economy that has survived without greater changes, even in the period of a crisis in Europe. In a similar way, any possible envy towards the better quality infrastructure preserved in Prague is overcome by elements of the national identity. Karas says that Poles claim to be those who have overthrown communism in Europe. The most influential people were, according to the Poles, Pope John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa as the leader of the Solidarity, "and then a really big gap".³⁰ They may attribute partial deficiencies in the field of development and achievement of economic prosperity to the effects of their previous heroic attitude in the period of the hard struggle against communism. Similarly, it is claimed that the Czechs have gotten Prague almost intact, while Warsaw had been completely destroyed during World War II. The Polish version of events stressed that it happened because the Poles had not surrendered like cowardly Czechs, but fought in an uprising to save the honour of their nation. This is connect-

²⁸ Personal conversation with Mariusz Bujnowski on the subject *What do we know about Czechophilia?*, Warsaw, 15.08.2012. The fact that Poland is successful in other fields was not stressed by Poles, they spoke about what they lacked.

²⁹ Olga Hostovská is a literature historian, translator and publisher. O. Hostovská, *Vzpomínky a úvahy*, "Listy" 2012, no 2, p. 89.

³⁰ Telephone conversation with Miroslav Karas on the Czech-Polish relations, November 2012.

ed with a central factor which, according to Karas, has the greatest impact on the mutual warm Czech-Polish relations. Poles have never regarded the Czech state as a power. Poland was never seriously threatened by Czechs. The Czech Republic, in comparison with the problematic relation with Russia, Germany and Lithuania, is the only certain friend. The Czech Republic is not a potential enemy of Poland. Slovakia, to which this principle could also apply, is, according to Karas, already [perceived – translator's note] as an Eastern country and neglected by the media and public opinion.³¹

The Polish interest in the Czech Republic could have arisen due to insufficient neighbour relations with other countries. Mariusz Surosz agrees with Karas, simultaneously perceiving this interest as a continuously recurring process, originating, above all, in cultural circles. He mentions three waves. The first wave of interest arose in the 1960s. After the establishment of the so-called Polish School of Cinematography in the 1950s, the Czechs have come up with the Czechoslovak New Wave cinema which mostly gained the interest of the culture-oriented part of the Polish intelligentsia. Due to this, the news of the Prague Spring and Dubček reached Poland in the 1970s, books by Hrabal, Škvorecký etc. began to be published. The second period of interest was, according to Surosz, the 1970s. First due to the Charter 77, then due to Václav Havel who became a leading figure of the Czech opposition for the Poles. In Poland, martial law was declared, Solidarity³² was established, and cross-border dissident contacts were established. As pointed out by Surosz, very few books were published during the so-called Polish Night, yet many of them were Czech. The third, most extensive wave of interest occurred after 1989, when the Poles began being interested in the Czech cinema and Czech culture in general. Surosz points out the fact that those who had not published Havel before 1989 surely did it after the revolution – there is nothing of his artistic output in Poland which would remain untranslated.³³ However, Marcin Skarbka, a publisher and establisher of a base of Czech literature in Poland, adds that the modern fascination with the Czech culture

³¹ Ibid.

³² The Solidarity was established in 1980 as a social movement independent from the socialist government. It gained support of the entire society thanks to the anti-regime activities in Poland of the era. It was connected with anti-government petitions, questioned the legitimacy of the government thanks to mass-scale involvement of ordinary people. In middle 1989, it obtained a possibility to negotiate and caused the fall of communism.

³³ Personal conversation with Mariusz Surosz on the topic *What do we know about Czechophilia?*, Prague, 12.06.2012

is much more commercial rather than socio-political as it was, in his opinion, in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁴

1.3. Possible causes of fascination

Author Mariusz Szczygieł perceives the fascination with Czechness mainly as a longing, a current Polish longing for difference. “I think that, above all, the young generation is fed up with our Polish misery, seriousness and pompousness. The Czech culture gives them something opposite. It is an antidepressant. Just as I used to say, it is a culture that doesn’t exaggerate”.³⁵ When 58% of the representative sample of a forty-million Polish nation had stated in a nationwide survey by the CBOS³⁶ that of all nations they like Czechs the most, he commented in “Gazeta Wyborcza” as follows: “My explanation: we, 58% of Poles, like the Czechs because they are who we can’t be. And they act like we’re still unable to act. The things we like in Czechs are those we don’t have ourselves. But we would like to have”.³⁷

Journalist Łukasz Grzesiczak agrees with Szczygieł’s commentary:

When a Pole speaks about Czechs, he actually speaks about himself. When he says he finds Czechs nice, he means that he does not like Polishness. Because, in his opinion, Poles are unnecessarily nervous, Poland is a bad place to live, Polish politicians are awful... The greatest difference between both nations is that in Poland everything is taken too seriously.³⁸

Aleksander Kaczorowski, one of the leading Polish writers, says virtually the same: the beloved Czechness, in his opinion, is an antithesis of Polishness; this antithesis is an attribute desirable since World War II.³⁹ Marta Harasimowicz explains it in a somewhat stereotypical way:

Both cultures, surprisingly, do not have so much things in common, and in some respects they are even opposite. One of them is proud of being deeply rooted

³⁴ Written interview by Marcin Skarbek with Marta Małagocka on Czechophilia, Warsaw 2012.

³⁵ *Czeska kultura jest jak antydepresant*, accessed: 20.03.2013, <http://facet.interia.pl/obyczaje/styl-zycia/news-czeska-kultura-jest-jak-antydepresant,nId,593029>.

³⁶ It is worth noticing that the second place was occupied by Slovaks and the third one by Italians, with a very slight difference between them.

³⁷ *Bycie Czechem nie jest grzechem*, Mariusz Szczygieł, accessed: 20.03.2013, <http://www.mariusz-szczygiel.com.pl/635,blog/bycie-czechem-nie-jest-grzechem>.

³⁸ Quote by Łukasz Grzesiczak, a journalist from Cieszyn, in: “Polsko nám chce vyhlásit válku: (a pak se hned vzdát)”, “Magazín Dnes: Téma Dnes” 2012, no. 23, p. 23.

³⁹ This information was given, after a personal agreement, by Marta Małagocka, a student of the University of Warsaw, author of the thesis “Czechs in fashion”, from a record of her conversation with Aleksander Kaczorowski.

in the Catholic faith, the other one has built a tradition of resistance against the Church. One of them celebrates emotions uncritically, the other appreciates rationality and calmness to the extreme. One of them builds its unity through funerary rituals, the other gathers around a pub table. One of them forces people to get angry in absurd situations, the other encourages you to shrug your shoulders even when it would not be a bad idea to clench your fist.⁴⁰

Chwalińska-Stach agrees: “Poles are already tired with the pathos of their country, they are looking for an alternative. And they need not look for it in a Dutch coffeeshop, since it can be found in the pubs of Prague”.⁴¹

Szczygieł publicly stresses this dissimilarity. In one of his few interviews for the Czech media, in the *Všechnopárty* talk-show, he told Karl Šíp that his book “Gottland” was liked by Poles so much because it described a typically Czech way of experiencing, the Czech mentality. This mentality is also behind the art, it is reflected in the Czech culture, and in a lighter form, it also functions, in Szczygieł’s opinion, as a so-called antidepressant for Poles. In the Czech Television, he also spoke about the Polish national character, as described by Umberto Eco in his humorous statement: “Show an abyss to a Pole, and he will surely jump into it”.⁴² He also reminded that the Polish culture is traditionally occupied with “memory” and “graves”. As an attractive contrast, Szczygieł mentioned films by Zelenka and Hřebejk, filling, in his opinion, the “Polish cultural deficits”.⁴³

The Czechs have not “won” the CBOS poll for the most popular nation, as mentioned above, for the first time; in 2011, the poll also took place in the Euroskop.cz website.

In view of the nature of the Poles’ relations with their other neighbours, it is not such a big surprise, despite the fact that the Polish audience, thanks to several new book editions and a flood wave of Czech films, experiences something like a small wave of Czechophilia.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ M. Harasimowicz, *Směšné lásky*, “Nový prostor” 366, accessed: 27.03.2013, <http://www.novyprostor.cz/clanky/366/smesne-lasky.html>.

⁴¹ Personal conversation with Marta Chwalińska-Stach on the subject of *Czechophilia*, Warsaw, 17.08.2012.

⁴² Account from the *Všechnopárty* show of 29.07.2011, *Všechnopárty, Česká televize*, accessed: 20.03.2013, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/10090925908-vsechnoparty/210522161600009/obsah/105779-mariusz-szczygiel/>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ M. Ehl, *Polsko se vrací k velmocím*, “Hospodářské noviny” 8.02.2011, accessed: 27.03.2013, <https://www.euroskop.cz/8954/18317/clanek/polsko-se-vraci-k-velmocim/...%3C/h...%3C/h...%3C/p%3E%3Cp%3E%3Ca%20href>.

However, the most mundane explanation of today's good relations is discovered by politologist Artur Wolek:

It seems that no Polish politician doubts that Poland is only safe when threatened neither from the east nor west. In practice, this means a painstaking building of relations with Russia and a search for alternatives in the form of friendly relations with countries of the post-Soviet area.⁴⁵

Czechs come in handy as “ideal friends”, since they are unable to threaten the great Polish state anyhow. A stereotype lingering in Poland is a

conformist Czech, a Czech who avoids conflicts and is only interested with preservation of his status quo. Czechs are perceived as a nation incapable of bloody sacrifices or great feats of heroism. This is apparently the greatest difference between the Czech Republic and Poland.⁴⁶

The respondents from the group of Czechophiles, during a conversation, have further confirmed the image mentioned above. The faith in Czechness and the “Czech nature”, as understood by the respondents, is a certain way, which is even rooted. Czechness is located poles apart from Polishness. The surveyed Czechophiles claimed that they would have gladly become a part of a society preferring the values postulated by them. They often mention a will to participate in the Czech culture which, in their opinion, represents what lacks in their native Polish culture. The values they lack but wish to have were formulated as follows:

Polish strained atmosphere x Czech pub lifestyle
Polish radicalism x Czech moderation
Polish bravery x Czech calmness
Polish dramatization x Czech distance and humour
Stiff, hollow Polishness x Czech relax, openness
Polish constrained culture x Czech hot, spiritual culture.

To sum up, it should be said that all mentioned facts and quotes are taken from a specific survey of Czechophilia in practice. The Czech-Polish relations examined from another perspective and for another purpose will not

⁴⁵ A. Wolek, *Polsko-české vztahy? V pohodě*, “Revue Politika” 28.10.2011, accessed: 19.03.2013, <http://www.revuepolitika.cz/clanky/1560/polsko-ceske-vztahy-v-pohode>.

⁴⁶ Personal correspondence with Radosław Zenderowski on the Polish-Czech relations, autumn 2012.

necessarily reflect the “Czechophile discourse” outlined here. The study of one’s own image brings only non-confidential data. A further examination of why such self-characterization takes place would be very interesting.

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera informacje pochodzące z kilku polskich badań zorientowanych na postrzeganie siebie przez Polaków oraz dane zebrane w celu indywidualnego badania do pracy dyplomowej pisanej na Uniwersytecie Palackiego w Ołomuńcu. We wstępie wskazano na bardzo krytyczny względem siebie obraz Polaków, podkreślono najwyraźniejsze cechy polskiego społeczeństwa i przedłożono listę wymienionych cech. Polska homogeniczność i nacjonalizm, które zostały w badaniu podkreślone, są tu pokazane w szerszym kontekście stosunków międzynarodowych, został również bardziej szczegółowo przedstawiony dyskurs w czesko-polskich relacjach. Do ankietowanych respondentów, oprócz warszawiaków, należeli Miroslav Karas, Mariusz Surosz, dr Marcin Stawski czy Marta Chwalińska-Stach. Badani mówili między innymi o specyficzności czeskości i polskości. Tekst stara się przybliżyć charakter tego układu binarnego oraz to, jak autoreferencje Polaków hipotetycznie odzwierciedlają się w aktualnym porządku socjokulturowym.

Summary

The article contains information from several Polish surveys oriented to self-perception of Poles, as well as data gathered for the purpose of individual research for a diploma thesis at the Palacký University in Olomouc. The introduction points out the highly critical self-image of Poles, stresses the most distinct features of the Polish society, and presents a list of the mentioned features. The Polish homogeneity and nationalism, emphasized in the study, are presented in a wider context of international relations; the discourse of the Czech-Polish relations has also been discussed in more detail. The surveyed respondents, beside inhabitants of Warsaw, included Miroslav Karas, Mariusz Surosz, Dr. Marcin Stawski or Marta Chwalińska-Stach. The participants spoke, among others, about the specific nature of Czechness and Polishness. The text attempts to approximate the character of this binary system and the way the self-references of the Poles are hypothetically reflected in the current socio-cultural order.