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## Message from the President

The Czechs entered the European Union on May 1. By coincidence, this date fell right in the middle of my stint on a co-taught course called “The Countries of Europe and the European Union,” where I give freshman modern languages students several lectures and seminars on the Czech and Slovak Republics as examples of so-called “accession countries.” This year, I conducted a pop quiz on basic facts. Through it, I learned that, of the 19 students who bother to attend the seminars,

- twelve knew that of five listed cities, Prague was the second closest to Brussels;
- five correctly placed Prague west of Vienna;
- virtually the same five were able to name the capital of Slovakia (other answers included Sophia [sic] and Wellington);
- three identified Germany as the country to the west of the Czech Republic (other answers included a few Slovakias, one Poland, one Slovenia and one Albania);
- no one was in the correct ballpark when guessing the distance between Bratislava and Vienna (most said 100-200 miles; one, whose paper was otherwise blank, said 10 miles, and thus came closest, although he clearly had not meant it seriously).

Does it make me a hopeless optimist if I say the glass was a quarter full? Frankly, I had expected far worse. Even more hopefully, an anonymous opinion survey failed to turn up any strong prejudices against the accession countries, with students resisting the urge to label their citizens as less educated or desperate to steal British jobs.

But all this proves is that the Czechs are a cipher to Britain, a sort of blank spot in the heart of Europe. So how do we fill in that blank with a nation, a tradition, a heritage that might interest students and spur them to try a language, literature or culture course with us? The signs are not, in fact, all gloomy.

Accession has meant a spate of articles in British national newspapers rediscovering the prominent cultural figures of the region. This month, Czech authors are even being featured on some sort of book-based popular TV quiz show (don't ask).

At the very local level, my final-year students staged a play in Czech this May. By using subtitles, we were able to pull in non-speakers as well, and drew an audience of about sixty over two nights. Several other students approached me afterwards and declared their intention to study Czech next year. In the throes of sleep deprivation due to excessive rehearsal time, I had completely neglected the fact that the performance might serve as a recruitment exercise.

But the thing that is now doing more than anything else to fill this gap is completely beyond our control: low-cost airlines. There are now three airports within fifty miles of us that offer flights to Prague from around \$75 return. All of them fly packed flights seven to twelve times a week. Paradoxically, for everything we can do on the ground here, the Czech Republic itself may prove to be our best recruitment tool, now that it's both politically “accessed” and financially accessible.

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