

EUROBAROMETER 2004.1

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY CZECH REPUBLIC

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Executive Summary

LIFE IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Czechs are more satisfied with their personal situations than with the economic situation in the Czech Republic. They primarily expect a worsening in the economic situation (46%) and unemployment (41%). These are followed by fears of a reduction in the standard of living or, specifically, a reduction in the financial capacity of their households.

When comparing the situation in the Czech Republic with the situation in the EU as a whole, we can see that Czechs are rather reserved in their expectations. More Czechs expect that their **lives** will not change much in the months to come. The percentage of those who assess the overall situation positively has remained steady, while the percentage of those who are not satisfied is slightly rising.

Czech citizens are less pessimistic **about the economic situation** than the average citizen of the new EU member states or even the entire EU. However, optimistic expectations can only be found in 10% of the Czech population. The trend in the data shows a decrease in the number of respondents who think that the situation in this area will continue to develop the same way it is now. However, the percentage of those with an optimistic perspective of the future is not rising.

A similar trend can also be seen in the case of **household finances**. Compared with the EU, Czech citizens express more fear about a possible deterioration of the financial situation in their households. These fears were acknowledged by 36% of the respondents, which is 12% more than across the EU. The same situation is generally expected in the following 12 months by 44% of respondents, while 10% expect an improvement.

One of the most sensitively perceived issues in the Czech Republic is unemployment. A worsening in this area is expected by 41% of the respondents. Uncertainty is seen by 17% of the Czech population, and only 9% hope for an improvement. Nevertheless, compared with the EU, including the new member states, Czechs demonstrate fewer fears. The Czech people express even more uncertainty about their expectations of positive development in their personal situation than in the unemployment trend. A third of the respondents said that they did not know how this situation would develop, which is 22% more than in the EU. Of the respondents, 45% expect the same situation as this year, while 14% expect a worse situation, and 9% a better one.

The answers to the above mentioned questions depend significantly on the gender, age, and education of the respondents. Generally, it can be said that men are more optimistic than women. Young people and people with a university education are also relatively more optimistic. The influence of the respondents' age on their appraisal of the areas studied is quite clear. In every case (the overall evaluation of life, the evaluation of the economic situation of their country and households, opinions on the trends in unemployment), the percentage of respondents expecting improvements corresponds to age.

Comparison of current personal situation to the situation five years ago

When the respondents were asked to compare **their present personal situation with their situation five years ago**, 37% agreed that it was worse, while 35% declared that their situation remained, more or less, unchanged. It only said to have improved in a quarter of the respondents. Compared with the other new member states, there are more optimists among the Czechs; compared with the European Union as a whole, Czechs are, however, still slightly more sceptical. **Considering their retrospective opinion on the last five years**, men, young people, and people with a university education were more satisfied. Their hopes for the next 12 months thus have a real basis in their previous good experience.

Expected personal situation in the five-year horizon

Expectations for the five years to come significantly correspond to how the respondents perceive the last five years – i.e. those who report past improvement are more optimistic for the future. The same percentage, 26% of the population, is optimistic and pessimistic about the future. The same situation is expected, more or less, by 30% of respondents. The others are not certain what life will bring on the medium term.

Issues facing the Czech Republic

The three most pressing issues facing the Czech Republic, as viewed by their citizens, are unemployment, crime, and the economic situation.

In the Czech Republic, in comparison with the other new member states as well as with the EU as a whole, crime (31%) is a higher concern, and ranks among the main issues facing the country. However, this figure may reflect, in addition to the “classical” crime, economic crime that occurred during the transformation of the economic system and bank sector as well.

The economic situation and the healthcare system in the Czech Republic are not perceived as problems as often as in the other new member states. Maybe in connection with the continuing media attention on the national taxation reform, taxes are identified as a problem more often than elsewhere in the EU. Immigration and terrorism are viewed as less serious in both the Czech Republic and the other new member states.

Differences in the perception of individual problems are, in some cases, influenced more significantly by the respondents’ age. Young people aged up to 24 more often regard housing and the education system as more serious concerns, while for people in the working age group it is taxation and for respondents over 55 it is healthcare and pensions.

Level of trust in various institutions

The mass media are the most trusted institutions by Czech people: radio, television, and the press (59%). The other institutions are trusted by less than half of the citizens. Political parties are the least trusted.

Compared with the EU average including the other new member states, Czechs are significantly more sceptical about the police, army, charities and volunteer organisations, and in particular, religious institutions. Only the Swedes trust religious institutions less than Czechs.

Czech citizens, along with the citizens of the new member states, have less faith in the police, courts, trade unions, and parliament. However, Czechs trust the government more than the average in these countries. The European Union is trusted by 42% of Czechs.

The approximately 10% who trust political parties has not changed much since 2001, while the trust in the parliament and the government is declining very slowly. However, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is not declining; it has risen slightly compared to autumn 2003.

INFORMATION ON THE EU

Perceived and actual level of awareness

Czechs think they have been informed very little about the European Union, both compared with the average in the new member states and in the EU as a whole. Men, people aged 25 to 39, people with a higher education, and people from households with higher incomes think they are better informed.

According to their own opinions, respondents with a positive attitude towards the EU also have broader knowledge. This includes those who have answered that they trust in the European Union. They consider joining the EU a good thing, and they think the CR will benefit from accession to the EU. **The respondents who consider themselves better informed, express fears about the various potential risks related to accession to the EU less often. The citizens for whom this institution represents a stronger position in the world, economic prosperity, and social protection think they have a broader knowledge of the European Union.**

The Czechs who look for facts about the EU in EU info-offices and info-centres, as well as those who obtain information at public meetings, consider themselves best informed. However, there are not many people like those (less than 4%) among the Czech population.

Information about EU: actual level of knowledge

The actual level of knowledge of individual facts about the European Union is, in most cases, higher in the new member states than in the EU as a whole, which is caused, most probably, by the current campaigns before the accession of individual countries to the EU and, in general, by social discussion on this topic.

Czech citizens have correct knowledge of the appearance of the EU flag more often, of the fact that the members of the European Parliament are elected directly by citizens, and that the president of the EU is not elected directly. As opposed to this, they are least aware (14%) of the fact that not all countries have their stars on the EU flag. **Compared with the other countries joining the EU, the level of awareness of the EU is lower in the Czech Republic.**

Information about enlargement

Six out of ten citizens of the Czech Republic **feel they are not well informed about general issues associated with the enlargement of the European Union** and about the Czech Republic's accession to this organisation. The percentage of people who think they are little informed about the enlargement of the EU and about their country's accession to the EU is higher in the Czech Republic in comparison with the average of the other member states. Information about the enlargement of the EU and about this country's accession to the EU differs between men and women, and it also depends on the respondents' education. Men more often feel that they are informed; the same is perceived by people with a higher education.

Preferred sources of information about the European Union

The information sources for the EU that are used most often are the mass media – television (77%), the press (61%) and the radio (47%). Compared with the other new member states, Czechs use the press and the internet more frequently (+4%). Men and people in the working age group use the individual types of mass media and information sources more often. Respondents who have no interest in information on the EU can be found more often in the youngest and oldest age groups – among people aged up to 24 and over 54.

Presentation of the European Union in the Czech media

Czech citizens assess the amount of information on the EU presented by the mass media quite favourably. Half of the population think that there is an adequate amount of information on the EU in

the media, one tenth think there is too much information, while three tenths think there is too little information. Compared with the averages in the other new member states, Czechs are more satisfied with the amount of information about the EU in the mass media. Thirty-eight percent of Czechs consider information in the mass media about the EU too positive, one-third objective, while 6% consider it too negative. When answering this question, Czech citizens are significantly uncertain more often compared with the other new member states. With regard to the gender, age, or education of the respondents, there are no dramatic differences among the Czech respondents.

EU institutions

European institutions known of by more than half of the Czech citizens include the European Parliament (90%), the European Commission (72%), the European Central Bank (62%), and the Council of the European Union (54%). The least known to Czechs are the European Court of Auditors and the Committee of the Regions (both by 21%). Czech citizens are rather sceptical as regards relations to these institutions. None of the above mentioned institutions has gained the trust of the majority. The level of trust corresponds to the level of knowledge – the more well known the institution is, the more trust it receives. However, this correlation does not apply, as indicated above, to the assessment of the importance of the individual institutions.

SUPPORT FOR THE EU MEMBERSHIP

Changes in the level of support of the membership in the EU

The support for the membership of the Czech Republic in the EU by the Czech population remains, from a long-time view, more or less constant. In the period after the campaign supporting the accession of this country to the EU, we can see a slow fall in the preferences of accession. In the current wave of poll, support is at the lowest level – only two fifths of those polled.

The highest percentage of support for accession is in men and young people. People aged to 24 are the only age group in which support for accession exceeds 50%. The difference in the support for accession among the youngest and oldest people is almost 40%. There are more opponents to accession to the EU, and also more people in older age groups are uncertain. The level of acquired education has also an influence on the positive opinion on accession to the EU. (The longer studies, the higher support for accession). Students express clearly the highest support for accession (64%).

Expected advantages of membership in the EU

In the view of **expected advantages and benefits** provided by the EU membership, Czech citizens are, along with Poles, Lithuanians and Estonians, rather sceptical. Among the ten accession countries, Czechs show the least expectations of benefits from the EU.

Support for the key EU policies

Support for introducing euro as the single currency is expressed by more than half of Czech citizens (56%). The European Security and Defence Policy enjoys the highest support from Czech citizens (78%). A possible explanation is a general perception of an external threat in relation to the current political situation in the world. Also the common European foreign and security policy shows a steady percentage of support (57%).

As regards the question about the **future enlargement of the EU by new members**, Czechs do not have a positive attitude. Less than half of the respondents are for a further enlargement of the common European space, and nearly one fifth of them are clearly against it. The percentage of those who do not know is considerably high (31%).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EUROPE

Image of the EU

For Czechs, and also for the citizens of the other new members, the dominant association related to the EU is **freedom to travel, work and study** (62%). Compared with both the “old European 15” and the average of “the whole European 25”, this is a significant element. For more than half of Czech citizens, the EU means also a **unified monetary policy** (53%) represented by euro as the European currency. Generally, the EU has more positive associations (*freedom to travel, work, study; democracy, peace, economic prosperity*).

We can find the specific of the Czech Republic with regard to the EU mainly in a stronger perception of the EU as a guarantor of **democracy and economic prosperity**, however, at the same time as a symbol of **bureaucracy, higher criminality and unemployment**. However, a **loss of cultural identity** is a problem perceived least of those offered – but also in this case Czech citizens show a higher level of fears, which is probably given by associating the EU with a fear from a stronger influence of Germany.

Understanding the EU and benefits of membership

Almost half of those polled in the Czech Republic state that they do not understand the way of how the EU functions; only less than a third of Czech citizens (29%) declare they understand the way of organisation and work of the EU. A higher percentage of those who are sure they understand the functioning of the EU is among those who support the accession of the CR to the EU.

In the Czech Republic, similar to the rest of EU, the opinion prevails that large countries have a stronger influence within the European Union – 80% of those polled are sure of this.

The highest level of expectation is perceived in **the area of security** – almost half of those polled (48%) have a sense of safety in relation to joining the EU. This also corresponds to **a high level of support for the common European Security and Defence Policy** (78%).

The highest percentage of expectations from the EU membership is found among young people up to 24. With an older age, there is a tendency in being more sceptical towards benefits from the EU.

The role of the European Union

The positive role of the European Union can be seen by Czech citizens particularly in a general area – the fight against terrorism, the environmental protection, foreign policy, and defence. By contrast, the everyday sphere is not considered a field that could improve substantially by incorporating in the EU structures. In particular, the specific economic impacts of the accession, which those polled will perceive as one of the first effects of the EU membership – i.e. the influence on taxes or inflation – are viewed negatively.

Fears related to the EU membership

The great fears of Czech citizens in the context of the EU membership are the problems of local farmers, fears from job losses and from organised crimes. These are problems with which fears are associated most frequently also at the national level. Only less than two fifths of the respondents perceive a potential threat as substantial.

Expectations falling to economic problems are relatively interesting. Relation to the European Union as a guarantor of economic prosperity is perceptible in the Czech Republic. Its citizens perceive possible economic problems in relation to the EU membership less than the citizens in other countries. This is,

among others, a result of the picture of the EU as a generous donator providing a number of programmes and advantages for economically less advanced member states. Within this logic, the EU membership must thus bring only economic advantages.

Budget of the European Union

From the view of Czech citizens, the largest portion of the EU budget is designated for agriculture and administrative or staff expenses. The Czech respondents assume less expenses in these sectors than the other EU accession countries.

Among Czech citizens, the percentage of those who cannot judge to which sector the largest portion of the EU budget is given is clearly the highest.

European Identity

With the approaching accession of ten new countries to the European community, the percentage of those who see themselves as being mainly citizens of their nations rather than Europeans has increased. **If we look at the self-perception of Czech citizens in detail, it is clear that national identity prevails significantly over European identity.** This does not only mean declaring solely a national identity (51%), but also among those who declare a “dual” identity, there are considerably more people who put national identity above European identity (37%).

The growth in the preference of national identity in this survey in comparison with the autumn 2003 amounting to 10% in the Czech Republic does not differ from the situation that has occurred in the other new member states.

With regard to the age of those polled, it is evident that European identity is declared by the youngest respondents most frequently. As regards the influence of education, then we can find the most “Europeans” among students; generally, it applies that with the growing level of education, being a European is more important.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The attitude towards support for the institutional reform of the European Union completed by adopting a European constitution is relatively inconsistent among Czech citizens compared to support for the EU key policies. While agreement with the key policies is above 50%, the percentage of support for a European constitution is currently below this limit (48%).

Last year the support for a constitution jumped up to 57%, which was probably caused by the fact that it was a period of completion of the process of accession of the CR to the EU. However, currently an agreement with the existence of a European constitution has fallen to the above-mentioned 48%. This fall may be explained by the unsuccessful negotiations on the final wording of the constitution at the end of last year and the subsequent discussion on its impacts on the Czech Republic. People could acquaint with the draft content and also with the objections regarding a further limitation of the Czech Republic's sovereignty.

Compared with the other countries, the attitude of Czechs towards the constituting a European constitution is very suspicious. Only Denmark (36%), Turkey (41%) and United Kingdom (42) express less support. This, however, does not mean expressing a general aversion to this institute, but the rather insufficient amount of information that people have encourages the growth in fears from an excessive influence of Brussels on national interests. These fears are encouraged by some domestic political entities.

Only half of Czechs think that the extent of the national right to veto should remain unchanged as it secures the protection of essential national interests. A fifth of those polled think that the veto should be limited to a few basic areas and only a tenth think that it should be totally abolished. According to socio-demographic characteristics, these attitudes do not differ significantly.

As regards the question about the best method of elections to the Council, Czech people have a relatively clear opinion that seems to be the most suitable for the Czech Republic with regard to the number of its population and representation in the EU authorities. The system securing one equal vote to each member state regardless of the real number of the population of a particular country is preferred by 64% of citizens. The opinion that the number of votes for one member state should be directly proportional to the number of the population of the relevant country is shared by 15% of those polled.

The question regarding the length of presidency causes rather a confusion and a division of opinions. In the last six months, no consistent attitude has been established as to whether or not the six-month presidency period should be kept or whether this period should be extended.

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

One tenth of the Czech citizens think that the activities of the European Parliament directly influence their lives a lot, 27% speak about some influence, and 38% about no influence. Respondents attribute a higher influence to the European Union as a whole, and even higher to national legislative institutions. Still, more than a half of respondents rather or definitely agree with the statement that the European Parliament is more powerful than the House of assembly of the Czech Parliament.

Twenty-three percent of the people definitely and 42% rather agree with the statement that the elections to the European Parliament are really important.

The most frequent means of contact with the European Parliament members is television (like in other EU countries). Following are other mass media (newspaper, magazines, radio). Printed media in the Czech Republic serve as a contact means with the EP members more often than is the average in European Union countries. In addition, Internet is used more often. The highest potential for the contact of European Parliament with the voters can be found at flyers and bulletins (it is preferred by more than 18% of citizens than really took advantage of it).

European Parliament elections

Twenty-five percent of respondents expressed their willingness to take part in the elections to the European Parliament 4 months before the actual vote took place. This is less than the average in the new member countries as well as in the whole European Union. The most effective motivation for taking part in the elections to the European Parliament according to the respondents would have been concurrent national elections – this is the opinion of almost half of the respondents.

The Czechs say they focus mainly to the personality of the candidate when making decisions about the candidate's personality (63%). Compared to the other EU member countries, the candidate's personality has higher priority only for the Slovaks (70%). The Czech respondents think that the topics of election campaign should mainly be employment, rights of the EU citizens, criminality and specific national issues.