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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CZECH REPUBLIC

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The Eurobarometer report describes the climate of opinion in the EU Member States and candidate countries. This report provides an overview of opinions of the Czech population on various aspects of the EU and their own life, and compares them with the typical attitudes of EU citizens. The report also points out the most important international differences. This is the eighth successive report since the Czech Republic joined the EU. The public opinion survey, on the basis of which this report was prepared, was carried out among 1014 citizens of the Czech Republic between 2 and 17 April, 2008.

Opinion on the living situation and future expectations

Czechs are, for the most part, satisfied with their lives. The proportion of Czechs who consider themselves satisfied is over 80%, which is 5 percentage points below the European Union average. Among the most satisfied Europeans are, on a long-term basis, the citizens of Denmark, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Finland. On the other hand, the least satisfied are the Bulgarians and Hungarians.

Regarding the prospects for the next 12 months, Czechs are slightly optimistic. 26% of the population believe that their living conditions will improve, while 19% believe that they will deteriorate. However, positive expectations are predominant in the areas of employment possibilities in the Czech Republic (24% to 21%) and economic progress in the EU (22% to 18%). Rather negative expectations dominate the evaluations of household financial situation (17% to 28%) and the national economic situation (21% to 36%).

In most of the European Union countries (mainly in the western ones), views on the prospects for the future have deteriorated significantly since the last Eurobarometer. **In the Czech Republic, however, expectations have remained rather stable and evaluations of the national economic situation and of life in general have even improved.** The current favourable progress of the national economy probably plays a major role in the public's expectations. The Czech gross domestic product has been topping a growth rate of 5% for several years and the unemployment rate has been in continuous decline.

The opinion of the Czech Republic when compared to other countries is critical. **The majority of the public assumes that the situation in the Czech Republic is worse than in other EU countries. However, similar views in regard to their respective countries is common to the inhabitants of a major part of the EU countries. Czechs, thus, are no exception to the average.**

Living expenses are perceived with greatest concern in the Czech Republic. The evaluation of the employment situation gains the most positive outcome, with 42% of the population viewing the employment situation as better than elsewhere in the EU. One-third of citizens perceive the national economy and the quality of life as better than elsewhere in the EU.

Issues the Czech Republic is facing

The two biggest issues faced by the Czech Republic, according to its citizens, remain the same as in autumn 2007, those being healthcare and rising prices. Almost 40% of the population identify these issues as the most challenging. Healthcare is twice as likely to be acknowledged as a problem area in the Czech Republic than in the EU as a whole, where 19% of the public rank it among the top priorities. The issue is topical in the Czech Republic with the ongoing reform of the healthcare system and the intense political and public debate on its future structure. **On the other hand, rising prices are a pan-**

European issue, with the EU average at 37%. Compared to the last Eurobarometer, there has been an increase of 11 percentage points concerning this issue.

The second most preoccupying issue within the EU is unemployment, which was mentioned by every fourth European. However, unemployment is not among the top priorities in the Czech Republic. The severity of this issue has fallen considerably in the last three years and, **currently, only 14% of the Czech public rank it amongst the two most important issues.** According to the Czechs, issues that are more relevant than unemployment are crime (chosen as one of the two most important issues by 24%), pensions (20%), and the economic situation (16%).

Evaluation of EU membership

The evaluation of the Czech Republic's EU membership has improved slightly and moved closer to the opinion of EU citizens as a whole. EU membership is considered as a good thing by 48% of Czechs and as a bad thing by 11%. The EU27 average of positive views is 52%. The reason for the more critical view of the EU by the Czechs may be due to the frequently announced opinions of Vaclav Klaus, the President of the Czech Republic, who has, according to various surveys, gained the confidence of approximately two-thirds of the population, and is part of the biggest conservative ruling party, ODS. **Czech right-wing supporters are, nevertheless, more in favour of the EU than those who are left-wing oriented.** 64% of right-wing oriented people view EU membership as a good thing, compared to 39% of left-wing oriented people.

The majority of citizens see the Czech Republic's membership in the EU mostly as advantageous. Almost two-thirds (64%) of Czechs are convinced about its benefit, while only a quarter believe that the Czech Republic does not benefit from membership. Young and educated people are more likely to appreciate the advantages of EU membership for the Czech Republic, in addition to right-wing supporters.

The main reason why people in the Czech Republic think that their country benefits from EU membership **is a belief that the EU offers new opportunities for work.** This belief is expressed by 45% of the people who indicated that EU membership is beneficial. **Other relevant reasons are an improved collaboration between the Czech Republic and other countries, and the fact that the EU contributes to economic growth and to strengthening national security.**

The perception of the benefit of working opportunities differs greatly between the public opinion of new and old Member States of the EU. **45% percent of citizens of the new Member States, as well as in the Czech Republic, mention the benefit of working opportunities, while in the old Member States less than one-fifth (18%) of the population are of this opinion.** The reason for this difference is due to the different economic conditions in these countries. Eastern European countries can benefit from the advantage of cheaper labour and often lower taxes than in the "West" and, thus attract foreign investors from the EU15 states, where the drifting of companies to the "East" is, of course, viewed differently. This is why there is a growing belief that the EU endangers employment in these countries.

A major reason put forward for believing that a country does not benefit from EU membership is, in both the Czech Republic and in the EU as a whole, arises from feelings of discontent with decision-making in the Union. More than one-third (36%) of EU citizens, and nearly half of Czechs (47%), think that they have very little influence on decisions that are being made at EU level. Furthermore, more than a quarter of

citizens (26% in the EU27, 29% in the Czech Republic) state that the questions most relevant to their countries are best solved at national level.

Attributes connected with the EU

People in the Czech Republic most often associate the EU with freedom to travel, study, and work anywhere in the EU, Such was the answer of 58% of the public. **The second most frequent attribute is the common currency, the Euro**, cited by 28%. **Within the EU, the attributes connected with the EU are mentioned in the same order**, although freedom to travel, study, and work anywhere in the EU is mentioned slightly less often, and the Euro is mentioned more frequently. It is understandable that the common currency should be associated with the EU more often in countries of the Eurozone (42%) than in those in which it is not yet used (22%).

Conditions in the EU

Czechs are very sceptical with regard to the perception of their influence on public life, both at national and European level. **The proportion of people who consider their voice to be significant in the Czech Republic amounts to 22%, which is almost the lowest figure in the EU. Similarly, Czech citizens seldom feel that national concerns are adequately considered in the EU.** 36% of people agree with this statement, whereas the EU average is 10 percentage points higher. **According to more than half of the people, the voice of the Czech Republic is not given enough importance in the EU. In many EU countries, though, more than three-quarters of citizens are convinced about the weight of their country's voice.**

It is possible that the perception of the country's significance is related to the length of its membership in the EU. All of the new Member States (with the exception of Poland, Malta, and Cyprus) remain below the EU average, while the top rankings are occupied by the countries that have been integrated in the European Union for several decades.

Attitudes on specific issues of the European agenda

The EU policy with the greatest support of people is the common defence and security policy. Support for this policy is expressed by 85% of Czechs and by 76% of EU citizens. **The common foreign policy enjoys support from two-thirds of citizens both in the Czech Republic and in the EU.** On the other hand, further enlargement of the EU does not enjoy balanced support. **Almost two-thirds (63%) of Czechs are in favour of the enlargement**, the average in the new Member States is even slightly higher (69%), but **in the countries of the EU15, as little as 42% of the population are in favour of further enlargement.** In the Czech Republic, as well as in the EU as a whole, support for enlargement decreases with the increasing age of citizens and increases slightly the more educated they are. In terms of political orientation, it should be noted that 53% of left-wing oriented citizens, 67% of centre-oriented and 69% of right-wing oriented support enlargement.

However, minor differences between the opinions of Czech respondents and EU citizens occur when discussing the issue of the **common European currency. The Euro is supported by 53% of Czechs, whereas the EU27 average is 60%.** The citizens of the new Member States also support the common currency more than Czechs (by 6 percentage points). It can be assumed that the public opinion in the Czech Republic on this particular project has been influenced by Vaclav Klaus and other prominent politicians, who openly

oppose the idea of the Czech Republic adopting the Euro, since Czech support for the Euro has dropped by 7 percentage points since spring 2007.

In this case, as before, we see the "Euro-optimism" of Czech right-wing supporters, since two-thirds of them support the common currency, while only 42% of left-wing oriented people do so. **Most support comes from the self-employed, managers, and white-collar workers. However, the party that should defend and advocate the concerns of these people has a different outlook on the common currency, which is a paradox of Czech politics.**

The European Monetary Union enjoys more support from young Czechs (15-24 years) and from educated people. People with elementary education support the Euro in 29% of cases, people with secondary education in 50% of cases, and university-educated people support the Euro in 61% of cases. Greatest support is demonstrated by those currently studying – 80% .

Trust in institutions

In the Czech Republic, people have very little trust in national constitutional institutions. The Government is trusted by one-fifth of the population, the Parliament by 16%, and the political parties by as little as 11%. Quite a different attitude is adopted towards the European Union. The ratio of Czechs who trust the EU to those who do not trust is approximately 60% to 30%. Higher trust in national and European institutions is shown among young and educated people and among right-wing voters.

Citizens' frustration over the standards of political culture and the on-going political and corruption scandals may be a significant cause of the low trust in the Government and the Parliament. Nevertheless, a comparison indicates that such low trust in constitutional institutions is common to many other countries of the former "Eastern Bloc". We can, thus, infer that issues facing the Czech Republic are also encountered in other former socialist countries on their way to becoming a developed, stable, and democratic state, and that their citizens think of these issues in a similar manner.

Of the other institutions, the army enjoys the highest trust. It is trusted by two-thirds of Czech citizens. The level of trust in the police is 40%. The Courts and legal system is trusted by less than one-third (32%) of the population.

The most trustworthy of the European institutions is the European Parliament followed by the European Central Bank and the European Commission. The Council of the European Union is considered the least trustworthy. Differences in trust, though, are very low, and all four institutions are trusted by approximately half the population and distrusted by a quarter of people. This is caused by the fact that more people cannot express their opinion on the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. It can be assumed that people are not able to clearly distinguish the individual European institutions.

Czech public opinion is, furthermore, critical with regard to the transparency of state administration. **Only 17% of citizens deem it transparent and as many as 74% of citizens deem it to be opaque.** However, it needs to be said that citizens of other EU Member States do not consider their situation very much differently. As for the EU average, the ratio is 24% to 68%. Nevertheless, the EU15 countries evaluate their state administration better on average by 10% percentage points.

The European institutions are evaluated rather better, although still only a quarter of Europeans deem them transparent. The difference is more poignant in the new Member States. Twice as many citizens in the new Member States deem the EU institutions transparent when compared to their own administration. This fact is related to a higher

level of trust in the EU institutions in these countries. **In the Czech Republic, the EU institutions are considered transparent by 26%, and opaque by 54% of the public.**

In contrast, Czechs are very trustful towards the media compared to other countries. **Their level of trust in the radio, television, and the press ranks among the highest and their trust in the Internet is actually the highest in the EU.**

The radio is trusted by almost three-quarters (73%) of Czechs. Slightly fewer people trust television (70%). While for the EU as a whole, the press is ranked in third place, in the Czech Republic, the Internet and the press share the same position with the trust of 56% of the population. However, trust in websites is not evenly spread throughout the population. The biggest differences reflect the age and education of the people. Young people (under 25 years) trust the Internet in 73% of cases, whereas this is true for less than one-third of people (30%) aged 55 years and above. Nearly 50% of people of the oldest age group were not even able to answer this question. Similarly, only half of people with an elementary education were able to respond to this question and only every fifth person of this category deems the Internet trustworthy. People with a university education trust the Internet in two-thirds of cases (68%).

Opinion on the EU future

As to the future of the EU, there is an important proportion (66%) of optimists and more than a quarter (28%) of pessimists. The young are strong optimists, while among those aged 55 years and over there is only little more than 50% of them who are optimistic. Comparing with other countries, the most optimistic citizens are in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Poland (more than three-quarters); the least optimistic (less than 50%) are in the UK and Austria. Czechs are 3 percentage points above the EU average (63%). New Member States are even more optimistic – the NMS12 average is 71%.

Key tasks of the EU for the following years

According to European public opinion, the topics that the EU should primarily focus on in the coming years are **fighting crime, environmental, immigration and energy issues.** Such is the opinion of approximately one-third of the European public. **In contrast with the EU27 average, Czechs prioritise social issues, which are considered as a key task by 38% of Czech citizens, compared to the EU average of 24%.** On the other hand, **Czechs put less emphasis on immigration issues which are important for a third of Europeans, but only for every fifth (18%) Czech.**

Opinion on EU enlargement

Regarding the non-Member States of the EU, Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland have the strongest support of Europeans for admission to the Union. **More than three-quarters of Europeans would welcome Switzerland and Norway in the EU and in the case of Iceland, 71% of people would support its admission. Of the countries south and east of the EU's borders, Croatia enjoys the highest support.** Its membership is supported by a slight majority of Europeans. As for the other countries, the share of people supporting their membership represents a minority. **There is least support for the admission of Turkey into the EU (31%),** which is an important indication, since Turkey is one of the three EU candidate countries. Turks themselves are mostly in favour of their membership in the EU, even though support for membership has dropped by 7 percentage points to 61% compared to autumn 2006.

Citizens of new Member States are much more in favour of EU enlargement compared to EU15 citizens. This discrepancy is the most poignant with regard to the Southern and Eastern European countries. **Apart from the three countries mentioned before, Croatia is the only country whose EU membership enjoys the support of more than 50% of the Czech public (73%).** The admission of Montenegro is supported by 50% of the population. High support for Croatian membership originates, admittedly, from the fact that Croatia is very well known by Czechs and they often visit this country. With approximately 700,000 tourists per year, Croatia is the most attractive tourist destination for Czechs.

Opinions on globalisation

Czechs understand globalisation as a process generating many opportunities. Two-thirds of Czech citizens agree that globalisation represents more foreign investment and 58% of people recognise that it is an opportunity for economic progress. In contrast, Europeans on average more often see the dangers of globalisation. For example, they emphasise the advantage that globalisation renders for big companies, but not for citizens, and they more often than not mention poor defence against rising prices.

Another **difference between the Czech and European public opinion is the fact that Europeans perceive the economic as well as the cultural aspect of globalisation.** Compared to Czechs, they are more likely to agree that globalisation allows people to be more open towards other cultures.

In some areas, there are significant differences in opinions between different groups of people in the Czech Republic. **The younger part of the population views globalisation as an opportunity for economic development and as an opportunity to open up countries to other cultures. University-educated people see globalisation as an opportunity for economic development more than those with a shorter education. Right-wing supporters are more likely to be in agreement with statements emphasising the positive aspects of globalisation** (such as more foreign investment, opportunities for economic growth, development of poor countries, etc.), **whereas left-wing supporters tend to emphasise its negative aspects** (it only benefits big companies, an increase in social inequality, etc.).

Role of the EU in the process of globalisation

According to 44% of Europeans, the EU helps to protect them from the negative effects of globalisation, but one-third of citizens do not agree with this statement. Czech citizens are a little more sceptical and their responses are divided exactly half and half (41% agree and disagree respectively).

When comparing the economy of the EU with other major global actors, Europeans evaluate most highly the economies of two foremost Asian countries – Japan and China. The economy of the EU and the USA are evaluated comparably, while the Russian economy is evaluated worse.