

EUROBAROMETER 70

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CZECH REPUBLIC

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The Eurobarometer report describes the climate of opinion in the member and candidate states of the European Union. This report delivers an overview of the opinions of the Czech population on various aspects of the EU and their own lives and compares them with the attitudes of typical citizens across the EU. In addition, it highlights the most important international differences. It is the ninth successive report since the Czech Republic joined the EU. The public opinion survey, on the basis of which this report was prepared, took place among 1026 citizens of the Czech Republic between 6th and 22nd of October, 2008.

Satisfaction with their life situation

Czech citizens are generally satisfied with their lives and they can be ranked among the "rather satisfied" group of EU citizens. Czechs are, just after Slovenes, the most satisfied citizens out of the ten post-communist countries. **83% of Czech citizens declare they are "very" or "rather satisfied".**

Generally, the most satisfied citizens are those of Netherlands and Scandinavia (Sweden, Denmark and Finland). The least satisfied are the Bulgarians, Hungarians, Portuguese and Romanians.

Review of the situation of the Czech Republic

Between spring and autumn 2008, **the overall perception of the economic situation of individual member countries and the EU as a whole became worse as the result of the financial and economic crisis.** There is a difference of an average of 19 percentage points in regard to the national economy and 25 percentage points for the European economy. **This downswing was actually felt to be much lower in the Czech Republic** – the national economy is judged 3 percentage points worse than in the spring 2008, whereas positive judgments of the state of the European economy dropped by 17 points.

The Czech economy continues to be judged in a relatively equal manner: 39% of the population think it is in good shape, while 60% consider it to be in a bad state. Overall EU attitudes in this respect are worse: the ratio of positive to negative perceptions is 29% to 69%. Czechs rate the European economy better than their national one. About a half of Czechs (51%) think the situation of the European economy is good, while 45% think it is bad. Nevertheless, 33% of Europeans on average think the state of the European economy is positive and 58% that it is negative. The worst perception is that of the world economy, both in the EU and the Czech Republic. Only about a third of people (32%) in the Czech Republic and only a fifth (20%) in the EU as a whole are positive in this regard. Although the Czechs are rather critical in judging the economy, other than the European one, taking into account the public opinion in other EU member states, their perception of the state of their national, the European and the world economy is above average.

Another important area tested in Eurobarometer is that of employment opportunities. **The employment situation in the EU countries is, like the economic one, considered to be rather bad. In the EU as a whole, 28% of respondents see it as good and 69% as bad. Czech attitudes towards the employment situation are much more positive with 43% seeing it as good and 56% as bad.** The employment situation in their own country is judged best in the Czech Republic among the post-communist countries.

Compared with other EU countries, the Czechs are also more positive in other areas, which influence the standard of living. The affordability of housing in the Czech Republic is bad for a majority (bad for 58%, good for 41%). **It is, however, even lower among respondents in the EU generally with only 23% saying it is good. On the other hand, the affordability of energy is described as good by about two-thirds (76%) of Czechs, which is the**

highest figure recorded in the entire EU. Only about a quarter (26%) of people across the EU on average would describe energy as being easily affordable.

In judging three remaining areas: the cost of living, health care provision and the way public administration runs, Czechs are close to the European average. The cost of living is described as bad in most European countries (proportion of positive and negative attitudes in the EU is 21% to 78%) and **the proportion in the Czech Republic (23% positive and 77% negative) is not a significant exception. At the same time, the Czech Republic occupies the best position among the 12 new member states of the EU. Health care is considered to be good by 58% and bad by 42% of the Czech public.** Across the EU, the situation is similar: 55% of Europeans say their health care system is good, whereas 43% say it is bad. **The majority of Czech citizens (58%) are not satisfied with the way public administration runs. Satisfaction was expressed by 39% of Czech citizens and 38% of EU citizens.** The level of satisfaction in these three areas is clearly higher in the EU 15 countries than in the 12 new member states. As for healthcare and the way public administration runs, public opinion in the Czech Republic is closer to that in western countries than in the 12 new member countries.

Expectations regarding the future

Expectations for the coming year, as well as perceptions of the situation since spring 2008, fell considerably across the whole EU. Although perceptions of their country's situation are above the European average and the decline less dramatic than in the rest of the EU, Czechs' expectations for the next year are distinctly worse than six months ago and figures are close to the European average.

People in the Czech Republic are most afraid of a worsening in the national economic situation. Almost a half of respondents (46%) are convinced that the economy will get worse in the coming year, whereas only one in every ten people in the Czech Republic believes it will improve. As regards employment, almost four times more people expect the situation to get worse (40%) than to get better (11%). Also expectations regarding the future development of the economic situation in Europe and worldwide are more pessimistic than optimistic. The proportion in the case of the economic situation is 36%:14% for the EU and 47%:13% for the world economy. **As regards their household's financial situation and the state of the environment, no major changes are expected.**

The world financial and economic crisis only appeared in the Czech Republic at the time this research was being carried out. It did not have a major impact on the actual perception of the Czech economy, although, the results reflect the pessimistic expectations of Czech citizens. On the other hand, Europeans in the EU15 countries were already feeling the impact of the crisis, and this is expressed in their negative perceptions of the current situation rather than that of future prospects.

Issues facing the Czech Republic

The most important issue facing our country is rising prices. 44% of people cited this as one of the two most important issues. This may seem somewhat of a paradox, in view of the current situation, given that, in recent months, the inflation rate was dropping. However, this may be connected to concerns at the beginning of last year, when inflation was around 7% and people felt the repercussions of higher housing prices, prices of fuel and energy. **Inflation is seen as an important issue throughout the European Union with 37% of the poll considering it to be the most important problem.**

Long-term and the second most serious problem is healthcare with 28%. In last two years, around 40% of people in the Czech Republic cited healthcare as one of the two

most important issues. Despite intense political and public discussions prior to the elections to the Senate and regional councils in October, the seriousness of the issue dropped 11 percentage points from 39%. This fall in levels of concern is possibly caused by the increased concerns of people about signs of an economic crisis, which have an immediate impact on people. There was an **increase in the perceived concern regarding issues related to the economy – inflation (44%), the economic situation (25%), and unemployment (17%).**

In the long term, the issue of crime concerns a quarter of people. It was cited as one of two main issues by 26% of Czech citizens.

The most important issues across the EU are rising prices (37%), the economic situation (37%) and unemployment (26%).

Attitudes towards EU membership

A plurality in the Czech Republic thinks that the Czech membership of the European Union is a good thing. This attitude is expressed by 46% of the Czech public, although 12% think the opposite. 40% consider that EU membership is neither good nor bad. About 53% of EU citizens on average think that their country's membership of the European Union is a good thing; citizens in new member states think this even more often, in 57% of cases. In the European context, the Czechs are rather critical in this regard.

However, opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of membership are different. The majority of the Czech public (62%) is convinced that the EU membership of the Czech Republic is a benefit. Opinion across the EU is slightly different: fewer people think that the EU membership of their country is beneficial, but they are still a majority (56%).

Citizens in most European countries have a positive attitude towards the EU. For almost half EU citizens (45%), it conjures up positive images, for 17% negative. **The image of the EU is good in the Czech Republic as well: the EU conjures up a positive image for 44% and negative one for 19% of people.**

Generally, attitude towards the EU is more positive among younger and more educated people. Political tendencies are of significant influence as well. Difference in attitudes with regard to political leanings show that citizens of the Czech Republic have, in the long term, opinions different from those of their political elite: **right-wing voters have a distinctively more positive approach to the EU than left-wingers.**

Situation in the EU

Czechs are rather sceptical as regards their opinion on the degree of influence of their country in the EU. A half of the people (49%) would disagree with the statement that voice of the Czech Republic counts in the EU, whereas 44% would agree. This proportion is the contrary of that in the EU as a whole (60% agree: 31% disagree). The most convinced citizens who think their country has influence in the EU are the French, whose country became an international force at the time of their EU presidency in the second half of 2008. The opinion that their country's voice counts in the EU is supported by 83% of French. Out of the new member states, it is in relatively small Slovenia, where citizens feel the influence of their country in the European context – again, likely to be due to its recent presidency of the EU Council. Therefore, we can expect a more positive attitude in the Czech Republic in this regard in the first half of the year 2009.

Czech citizens only rarely feel that the interests of the Czech Republic are well taken into account in the EU. Only 36% would agree with that statement, while a majority

(54%) tends to disagree with this. Opinions of people across the whole of the EU are balanced in this matter: both stances are supported by 43% of the population.

Public opinion in the Czech Republic tends to think, that the EU imposes its views on their country. This view is supported by about two-thirds of Czech citizens (67%), while about a quarter (26%) would disagree. An average of 60% of people across the EU would agree with the statement.

A new question was included in this Eurobarometer about the EU enlargement to 27 countries in 2004 and 2007. **Almost a half of European citizens declared that the “eastern enlargement” strengthened the Union (48%). A bit more than a third (36%) disagrees and states that it weakened the EU. Czechs’ view is even more positive: 65% of people see the enlargement as strengthening the EU and only 24 % as weakening it.**

Trust in institutions

In the long term, Czechs have low trust in their national political institutions. Only a fifth of Czechs trust their own Government, 16% trust the Parliament and only 12% would trust political parties. Nearly half (49%) of people in the Czech Republic trust in local or regional representatives. Low trust in political institutions in the Czech Republic is generally lower when compared to the rest of the EU: a third of people in the EU (33%) would trust their national governments and parliaments and a fifth (20%) would trust political parties.

The less trust in national political institutions that Czechs have, the more trust they place in the international institutions. **A majority of Czech citizens trusts the EU (58%), the UN (59%) and NATO (53%).** In the EU as a whole, the figures relating to people trusting these institutions are about ten percentage points lower.

Generally speaking, trust in local political institutions is lower in the new member states, but in the case of the EU and NATO, the situation is reversed. The EU and NATO are trusted more by citizens of 12 new member states than by those of EU 15. Citizens of the new member countries see the EU as a well performing and trustworthy body, compared to their national political institutions. Moreover, NATO is seen by people in post-communist countries as a guarantee of the freedom which was gained after the fall of the “Iron Curtain”.

Trust in particular institutions of the EU – The European Commission, The European Parliament, The Council of the European Union and The European Central Bank – is comparable to the trust in the EU as a whole in the Czech Republic. The European Parliament and the European Central Bank are the most important institutions for both Czechs and Europeans.

Attitudes towards selected issues of the European agenda

87% of Czech citizens and about three-quarters of people in the whole EU approve of common defence and security policy of the EU member states. The common foreign policy of the EU is also approved of across the continent. In both the Czech Republic and in the EU as a whole, it is supported by 68% of the population.

Acceptance of the European monetary union with one single currency, however, is not so clear, although in a **definite majority of countries the euro is mostly approved. On average, in the EU 27, 63% are in favour and 32% are against the euro. The euro is supported by fewer people in the Czech Republic but they still constitute a majority (53%).** The fact that Czechs are more sceptical about the euro may be influenced by the

negative attitude of the Czech president, Václav Klaus, and of a part of the biggest ruling party, the ODS. Strangely enough, when the profiles of the euro supporters in the Czech Republic are more closely examined, the euro-optimism of right wingers will become evident. Two thirds of right-wing supporters (66%) agree with the single currency, whereas the same attitude is shown only by 43% of leftists. **In the countries that already introduced the euro as their currency, support for it is distinctly higher (70% for, 25% against) than in the countries with their own national currencies (46%:44%). The euro seems to be successful and generally accepted by the public where it has been introduced.**

Further enlargement of the EU in coming years has similar number of supporters and opponents, namely 44%:43%. A majority of Czechs are for further enlargement (57%), while one third of them are against it. Further enlargement is favoured more often by citizens of the new member states (62% for and only 20% against), whereas, in the EU 15, a negative attitude prevails (opponents prevail 49%:39%).

Decision-making competences of the EU

The prevailing opinion among EU citizens is that the EU decides on issues in too many areas. 39% of people support this view, whereas 22% of people would say that the EU in which the EU makes decisions are too few. **The feeling that the EU makes decisions in too many areas is even stronger among the Czech public. This view is supported by 58% of Czech citizens, which is the third highest figure in the EU.**

Czechs have an ambivalent attitude towards the EU. On the one hand, they express dissatisfaction with the fact that someone else decides for them while, on the other hand, they show trust in the Union and its institutions and support most of the EU policies.

Essential tasks of the EU in coming years

People are regularly asked in the Eurobarometer about aspects, which should be emphasized by the European institutions in the coming years, to strengthen the European Union in the future. **The highest proportion of people in the Czech Republic suggests the EU should focus on social issues (41%) and the fight against crime (38%). Other areas they want to see being taken into account by the EU are energy issues (28%) and environmental issues (24%).** Europeans on average tend to emphasise social issues (27%) and the fight against crime (29%) less frequently; however, they cite the issues of energy (30%) and the environment (27%). There is also a difference between the Czech and the European public opinion as regards immigration issues. These are important for 29% of Europeans but for only 18% of people in the Czech Republic.

It is interesting to compare these results with the previous ones that show that people approve of the common foreign and defence policy. Even though these issues are still supported, they are not of prime importance. Fewer than 20% would describe them as essential.

Czech Republic's presidency of the Council of the European Union

As expected, the best informed about the Czech Republic's presidency are most often Czechs themselves. More than two-thirds (69%) noticed information connected with the presidency in the media. On the European level, the Czech presidency is relatively less well known: only 19% of EU citizens had some information about it and a full three-quarters (75%) had none. In the other EU member states, it were mostly the citizens of the

neighbouring Slovakia (41%) and Slovenia, Austria, Hungary and Germany who had noticed information about the Czech presidency.

The Czech presidency is important for 78% of Czech citizens, 27% of whom would say it is very important. 14% of the population think it is not very important and, for 4%, it is not important at all.

Review of developments since the fall of the Iron Curtain

Czechs appreciate the fall of the Iron Curtain the most out of the whole EU. 83% of the Czech public would describe it as having been beneficial for the Czech Republic, 84% as beneficial for the EU and 71% as beneficial for the people personally. The EU as a whole is more sceptical in this regard. About a half of Europeans (52%) as a whole consider the fall of the Iron Curtain to be beneficial for their own countries, 65% for the EU and only 26% for the citizens themselves. Apart from the Czech Republic, the most positive attitudes towards the fall of the Iron Curtain are seen in Slovakia and Germany. Citizens of the 12 new member states perceive the fall significantly more positively than people in EU 15.

Czechs and Slovaks are the most positive Europeans in judging the integration of the Europe after 1989 (with the exception of the citizens of new federal states of the former East Germany). People there and in Slovakia are well aware of the possibilities that were opened to them by the fall of the Iron Curtain and how they have benefited.