

EUROBAROMETER 72

PUBLIC OPINION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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NATIONAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CZECH REPUBLIC

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Summary

Eurobarometer describes the opinion climate in member and candidate countries of the European Union. This report presents a survey of opinions held by Czech citizens on various aspects of the EU and their own lives, and compares them with typical attitudes of EU citizens. It draws attention to the most important differences in comparison with other countries. It is the eleventh such report since the Czech Republic became a member of the European Union. The public opinion survey on which this report is based was conducted on 1056 citizens of the Czech Republic between October 30 and November 11, 2009.

Evaluation of the situation in the Czech Republic

As in spring 2009, the current appraisal of the Czech national economy is not at all positive. A mere 16 % of Czechs claim that the Czech economy is in a good state, while 84% claim the opposite. The rating of the national economy was worse in this regard than the average rating in the EU as a whole. Following the decline in ratings in spring 2009, the older EU member countries (EU 15) have registered a mild improvement in the perception of their national economies. The situation is different among the new member countries (NMS 12) – the economy in each is seen as somewhat worse than it was six months ago.

Even the appraisal of the European economy as a whole did not fare well in the Czech Republic – only 26 % of the population rates the situation as good, while 71 % give it a poor rating. The Czechs are pessimists regarding Europe's economic situation – only seven member nations in the entire EU 27 have a worse perception. The different perceptions of the state of the European economy among respondents in different nations create a pattern that is a mirror image of their perceptions of their national economies. New member nations mostly see the EU economy in a better light than the EU 15 nations.

Although the general appraisal of the national (as well as the European) economy did not turn out very positively, the Czechs appraised the personal financial situation of their households as good (62 %.) Thus, as in the last survey in spring 2009, it is evident that neither the domestic situation, nor that on the personal job front, is as serious as the declared general opinions of the public about the country's economic situation.

Future Expectations

Expectations regarding the economic situation of individual nations and Europe as a whole are negative in nearly all EU nations. More faith is shown towards the European and the world economy as a whole, while national economies tend to be a source of concern regarding the future.

In the Czech Republic, only one fifth (18 %) of the population believes the national economy will improve. A worsening of the Czech economy is expected by nearly half (43 %.)

Czechs have more confidence in the European economy – the largest portion (43%) of the population thinks that it will remain the same. The ratio between the percentage of those believing in improvement versus that of those who worry that things will get worse is 25%:29%. In general, though, Czechs are rather more sceptical in comparison with EU 27 nations, and do not have a strong belief that the situation will improve.

In comparison with the last Eurobarometer survey, hopes and worries regarding the national economy have not changed much. As far as the European economy is concerned, a shift in the direction of optimism is observed – the proportion of “the situation will get better” answers rose in comparison to spring 2009 by 5 % points.

Problems faced by the Czech Republic

As in the last Eurobarometer, the Czech population has again expressed most concern about unemployment and the economic situation overall. Both unemployment and the economic situation are cited as a current problem by a half (50% and 53 % respectively) of the Czech Republic poll. This finding corresponds with the above-mentioned conclusions on perceptions of the national economy. After a sharp rise in the citing of these concerns, when only a year ago the economic situation was mentioned as a problem by 25% of Czechs and unemployment by 17%, these problems have climbed to the top of the concern ladder during the period of economic and financial crisis.

The Czechs are no exception in this respect – respondents in most European nations cite these two issues as being the most serious.

Appraisal of EU membership

When Czechs are asked to appraise their country’s EU membership, the largest part of the poll holds the view that membership is neither a good nor a bad thing (46 %.) However, the proportion of those who believe that membership is a good thing (40 %) far outweighs those who maintain that it is a bad thing (13 %.) The overall impression of the population, therefore, is positive.

Nevertheless, a continuing decline in the share of positive answers is observed. A year ago, 46 % took a positive stance, 6% points more than currently.

The situation differs when evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of our membership of the European Union, however — the majority of the population considers that membership has brought advantages for the Czech Republic. This view is held by 63 % of Czechs. A third (32 %) thinks that it does not bring any advantages.

The EU membership of the Czech Republic is generally seen as positive and an advantage primarily by the young, the better educated, those with a higher standard of living, and voters who placed themselves on the right side of the political spectrum. These people also more often trust the EU and its institutions, and are more positive in their responses to questions concerning the future direction of the Union.

Associations connected with the European Union

The most frequently found associations with the EU involve the notion of freedom to travel, study and work. This opportunity is cited by more than half (55 %) of the Czech public. The second most frequent association is the common currency **euro** (32 %.) These two associations are also the most common in the majority of European countries – Czechs, however, cite the freedom to travel, study and work more often and the euro less often than the European average.

Other characteristics often associated with the European Union are a **stronger influence in the world** (28 %), **peace** (25 %) as well as the negative association of a **waste of money** (23 %).

More positive associations overall were reported by people who are positive towards the EU, predominantly those who can benefit from the cited values – the young and the economically active, namely those with intellectually oriented jobs. The reverse is true for older residents who cannot take advantage of EU benefits as much, as they more often cite negative associations of the EU, such as a higher crime rate, money wasting and unemployment.

Confidence in political institutions

Czechs have a tradition of very low trust levels in national political institutions. This was confirmed in the current Eurobarometer wave – **only 15 % expresses trust in the Parliament, which represents half of the EU 27 average (30 %)**. A 5 percentage point fall from spring 2009 was also recorded.

On the other hand, trust in the government continues to rise. The government currently has the trust of 37 % of Czechs, a level which is above the EU27 average. As in the last survey, this expresses the influence of the non-political government of J. Fischer, which enjoys a great level of popular confidence, in contrast to governments composed of political party representatives (the least trusted political institutions in the Czech Republic). Czechs currently trust their government to a greater degree than the inhabitants of the majority of other European countries trust their own governments.

The Czech public regards European institutions as more trustworthy than the Czech Parliament and government. The European Parliament has the confidence of 60% of Czechs, and a similar portion (59 %) expresses confidence in the European Commission.

While new member states trust European political institutions more than EU 15 countries, the opposite is true in the case of national institutions, towards which NMS 12 countries express a much stronger distrust than older EU member states (EU 15).

Functioning of the European Union

In the Czech Republic, people who do not understand how the EU functions predominate. While 42 % of the Czech population claims to understand how the EU functions, 55 % claims they do not. In this regard, the views of Czechs bear a greater resemblance to EU 15 old member countries, where residents exhibit a higher “degree of misunderstanding” than those of new member countries. No marked shift in understanding of the EU problematic has occurred since the research in spring 2009.

When asked whether the interests of the Czech Republic are given sufficient consideration in the European Union, the majority of the Czech public (59%) gives a negative response, while 36 % maintain the contrary view. Here, opinions in the Czech Republic tend to converge with those held in other countries in the NMS 12 group, which more often than EU 15 countries feel that their national interests are inadequately defended in the EU. A falling trend in the view that national interests are adequately taken into consideration in the EU is seen in all EU 27 countries.

Characteristics of the European Union

For the majority of EU inhabitants, the European Union primarily means economic power. This is the primary meaning for 44 % of the Czech population as well. Political influence is also a highly represented perception. In the Czech Republic, it is perceived by 42 % of inhabitants, after Sweden and Denmark, the third highest percentage in the EU 27. Neither in the EU 27 as a whole nor in the Czech Republic is the European Union widely associated with its cultural and military influence.

Czechs take a positive stance towards the further expansion of the European Union. 63 % of Czechs are in favour of it, while 31 % are against it. Predominant among those favouring expansion are the new member states, as the EU 15 countries tend to take a rather negative stance toward expansion. In the EU as a whole, there is thus a lack of consensus concerning expansion.

On the other hand, consensus predominates concerning another characteristic, the single currency union - the euro. Six out of ten Europeans declare agreement with it. **Czechs are in favour of it (55 %), although they rank among the more tepid supporters of the euro.** The greatest optimism regarding the currency union predominates in the euro zone countries, i.e. countries where the euro has already been adopted.

Among the values that the EU represents, the most frequently cited by Czechs are democracy (45 %) peace (41 %) and human rights (34 %.)

Solving the economic crisis

According to respondents in the EU 27 and the Czech Republic, the economic crisis has not yet been overcome. More than half of the poll in the Czech Republic (55 %) and that in EU countries overall (54 %) maintains that the worst is yet to come. This also conforms to the relatively pessimistic view of the future that EU respondents demonstrated in their responses to other questions.

Czechs differ from the rest of Europeans in their confidence in institutions able to handle the economic crisis. Almost half (43 %) of the Czech public cited the institutions of the G 20 countries as the most effective in this respect. This exceeds considerably the overall EU27 average confidence in this institution (18 %). **The European Union was the second most cited institution— it was mentioned by 16% of Czechs.** In comparison with other countries, this is quite a low percentage.

The smallest portion of Czechs believes that the economic crisis can be solved most effectively by the national government. This view is held by only 6 % of the poll. The government is viewed with a great deal of trust in general, primarily in domestic matters; nevertheless, Czechs do not have confidence that it can solve all Europe's economic problems.

Of the largely macro-economic measures presented for appraisal in terms of their effectiveness in fighting the economic crisis, all were evaluated as effective. The most effective measure according to the Czech public was **EU supervision over public funds provided for rescuing financial institutions (79 %).** This was followed by **tighter coordination of the economic and financial policies of the member states (77 %) and supervision over the activities of influential financial groups (74 %).** According to Czechs, the least effective of the four possibilities presented was an **effective strengthening of the EU's role in regulating financial services on a global level (69 %).**

In the microeconomic area, Czechs believe the European Union should concentrate on **supporting small and medium-sized companies** (59 %) and on **support of the unemployed** (26 %). **Support and investments for education, professional training and research** (23 %) came in third place. Czechs exceed the EU 27 average in their call for the support of small and medium-sized companies, but are more lukewarm than the pan-European average in favouring support for education and research.

Influence of the Euro on the economic crisis

The Eurobarometer survey also asked whether the common European currency had helped to soften the consequences of the economic crisis. Europeans did not have clear-cut opinions. Inhabitants of euro zone countries (countries that have already adopted the euro) are more inclined to favour the idea that the euro has generally helped to soften the impact of the crisis. Nevertheless, the level of assent is not particularly high (46 % agree : 44 % disagree). Inhabitants of countries that have not adopted the euro yet are more sceptical, contending that the euro did not soften the impacts of the crisis that much (33 % agree : 46 % disagree.) **Czechs are even more pessimistic in this regard, and with them the ratio of agreement to disagreement at 37 % : 56 %.**

Economic reforms

In the question of reforms, the Czech public is in favour of pushing them through, and believes that **our country needs more reforms in order to face the future** (65 %). More than two-thirds of Czechs (69 %) also think that **reforms bringing benefits to future generations should be undertaken even at the price of certain sacrifices by the present generations.**

Priorities of the European Union

For the Czech public, economic revival is a clear priority of the European Union. It is **cited by more than three-quarters (77 %) of the population.** This priority is at the top for nearly all EU 27 countries (69 %). Czechs mention it more often, however. The second most often mentioned priority is **achievement of stability in the world** (47 % of the Czech population) and the third is **strengthening growth in a sustainable manner** (39 %).

According to Czechs, the EU should focus least of all on fighting against climate change. Only 29% of Czechs mentioned this as a priority area.

Concrete measures

With regard to **economic revival**, the European Union should concentrate above all on **implementing a stronger system of supervision over financial markets and institutions** (44 % of Czechs), as well as on **limiting excessive future public finance deficits** (42 %). On this point, the Czechs are among the five nations advocating such a measure the most. Perhaps this has something to do with current government measures aiming to maintain the public finance deficit at an optimal level.

In comparison with other inhabitants of the EU 27, Czechs are more inclined (47 %) to call for agriculture support as a measure to strengthen **growth in a permanent and sustainable manner.** Czechs realise that agriculture in the EU is a very controversial subject, and they place the maintenance of Czech agriculture at the top of the ladder of measures. **A third of the population (34 %) suggests encouraging people to start up businesses as a means of achieving permanent sustainable growth.**

In regard to ***fighting climate change***, Czechs think the EU should focus mainly on **development of environmentally friendly industries, services and technologies** (44 %). According to Czechs, another important means of fighting climate change is the **reduction of CO₂ emissions of transportation and electricity production** (38 %). **The smallest segment of the population (14 %) advises a focus on nuclear energy usage.**

Level of decision-making

The last group of themes examined whether various spheres of Europeans' lives ought to be solved on a national or a pan-European level. Given that people in nearly all countries trust EU institutions more than national ones, it comes as no surprise that EU 27 inhabitants think that most themes ought to be solved on a pan-European level. This primarily means **scientific and technological research, defence and foreign policy, fighting crime and environmental protection**. Foremost among issues which Europeans would rather solve at a national level are taxes and retirement pensions.

Czechs are no exception, and their views as to the level at which decisions should be taken regarding the individual spheres do not significantly differ from the views of other EU 27 inhabitants.