

### Highlights

- ★ The Czech Republic has moved from being a pro-EU country focused on benefits it can reap, such as the freedom of movement, to a more sceptic country in recent years. The critiques against the EU date back to the accession and do not focus on the integration process, but rather on the conditions of membership - especially those discussed during the negotiations on the Lisbon treaty and after on the euro adoption.
- ★ The country feels that the current level of integration is adequate and would favour deepening cooperation in existing policies, such as the single market or the Energy Union. The Czechs also consider that a multi-speed EU is in their interest.
- ★ The Schengen Area is a cornerstone of the EU. Its preservation is crucial to fostering a European public sphere. Other policies or instruments could be further enhanced in the Czech Republic, such as the Erasmus and Europe for Citizens programmes. While this may point to long-term solutions, a change of attitude cannot happen instantaneously.

### Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



### About the author

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### About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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## **What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?**

The Czech Republic has benefited from its membership of the European Union both politically and economically. According to the study, "Economic evaluation of the Czech Republic's membership in the EU after ten years" commissioned by the Czech government, its EU membership helped the Czech economy grow by an extra 1.1% annually than if it had been outside.<sup>1</sup> The government estimates that the economic benefit from the first ten years of Czech EU membership equate to around 115 billion euros. The net budgetary position of the country during this period has been positive by more than 12 billion euros. The first five years of the Czech EU membership represented the period with the strongest economic growth in the history of the country, coupled with fast convergence to the EU average, which was put on pause by the economic crisis and consequent austerity measures between 2009 -2013.

Politically, the country has benefited from its EU membership in many areas. Already during the accession negotiations, the country had to align its legislation with the Copenhagen criteria and EU standards. Many such reforms that led to the raising of standards of human rights protection and the rule of law were therefore EU driven (such as anti-discrimination legislation, reform of the judiciary, state administration reform, consumer protection legislation etc.). Additionally, through the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the country has been better able to promote its foreign policy interests, mainly in its neighbourhood.

In the first years of its membership, the country focused on its strategic interest to become a fully-fledged member of the Union.

Its aim was to integrate into the Schengen Area, thus allowing its citizens to travel without any barriers within the EU. This aim was achieved in 2007, less than four years after accession. Since then, the country has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the Schengen system, because similarly to Luxembourg for instance, it does not have any external (non-Schengen) borders - except for those at international airports. Free movement of workers was another priority for every Czech government in this period. With the exception of Austria and Germany that utilised the maximum seven year period to protect their labour markets, all the other EU Member States lifted barriers to the free movement of labour after a relatively short period of time.

Businesses, the political leadership of the country, and citizens alike benefited significantly from the EU membership. The freedom to travel across Europe; the possibility to work, live and study in other EU Member States; and new infrastructure, educational and social projects are the most visible direct benefits of the EU membership for Czech citizens.

On the other hand, there are diverging opinions on the pros and cons of EU membership among the Czech political leadership. This is a relatively new phenomenon in the Czech political discourse. Support for EU integration was a top priority for all the governments ruling the country in the 1990s and there was a nationwide consensus among all the relevant political parties about the importance of EU membership. The roots of the division date back to the negotiation process, when part of the political elite started to challenge not the integration process as such, but the membership conditions negotiated by the government. The most vocal critic of the EU membership conditions was former President

Vaclav Klaus. He absolutely refused to acknowledge the Lisbon Treaty, arguing that it represented the end of national states in the EU. He became the symbol of Czech euroscepticism and his opinions inspired part of the political leadership of the country. When he lost his fight and the Lisbon Treaty entered into force he turned his attention to fighting the introduction of the euro, where he was much more successful than in the case of the Lisbon Treaty. Relatively weak governments ruled the country between 2010 and 2013 that did not oppose him on EU issues. To the contrary, the country refused to participate in mechanisms such as the so-called “fiscal compact” or the banking union. He managed to absolutely dominate the public debate on EU issues, fostering a growing negative sentiment towards the EU membership within public opinion.

When the current President, Miloš Zeman, came into office, he promised a completely opposite attitude towards the EU. One of his first decisions was to raise the EU flag over Prague Castle. He claimed to be a euro-federalist, supporting a strong EU with a common foreign policy and a quick introduction of the euro in the Czech Republic. Contrary to this proclamation, he has increasingly adopted very critical stances towards the EU. For instance, he strongly opposed the introduction of sanctions on Russia, and in the current migration crisis he plays the role of one of the most vocal critics of the EU response. Many of his public statements have the potential to incite hatred towards refugees and undermine more and more citizens’ trust in the EU and its core values.

Public opinion on the membership of the European Union is extremely negative. According to the regular survey conducted by

the STEM agency since 2000, in September 2015 only 39% of Czechs were satisfied with the membership of the country in the EU.<sup>2</sup> This represents the lowest number since the survey began. Until 2011 there were always more citizens satisfied with EU membership than those who were not. The satisfaction reached its highest level during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2009 – 69%, but it has started to decline since then. Current dissatisfaction can be attributed to concerns about the current refugee crisis and the way in which the EU is handling the issue. More than 65% of Czech citizens are afraid that refugees could be granted asylum in the country. Opinions on the EU membership differ widely according to people’s age, level of education and political preference. EU membership is supported among young people with higher education that are very well aware of the benefits it brings. On the other hand, elderly people and those who have a lower level of education are opposed to the membership. The same difference can be observed between the voters of the left wing parties, who mainly oppose the EU membership, and voters of right wing parties that mostly support it.

In the past eleven years, the Czech EU policy frequently looked like an accounting operation – the country was promoting policies and measures that would bring the biggest profit. First was the cohesion policy. It enabled fast development of public and social infrastructures to the extent that it would not have been possible to finance them only with national resources. On the other hand, the Czech Republic disapproved of measures that would bring additional economic or political costs to the country. This was the case during the Eurozone crisis when the country remained passive and refused to participate in the mechanisms leading to the stabilisation of the Eurozone and the EU

economy. Recently, this attitude was visible in the Czech position towards the refugee relocation mechanism, when the country refused to accept part of the “burden” that lies on other Member States of the Union.

### **Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?**

As evidenced by the lack of understanding about the EU in the Czech Republic, the Union does not appear to be a clear project. The level of understanding of the EU among citizens in the Czech Republic is among the lowest in the EU Member States. According to the Eurobarometer 83 survey, 48% of people declare that they understand how the EU works (only 6% responded “totally agree”), while 50% declare the opposite.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, only 44% of respondents know what their rights as citizens of the EU are, while 54% of Czechs do not. The earlier Eurobarometer 80 survey showed that only 27% of Czechs said they felt sufficiently informed about European affairs, while up to 71% said the opposite.<sup>4</sup> A similar picture is offered by national opinion polls, for example research carried out by the MEDIAN agency asking citizens whether they are informed about the activities of the European Parliament, and of the work of Czech Members of the European Parliament (MEPs, showed that only 1% of Czechs consider themselves very well informed, and another 13% only quite well, while 37% of Czechs consider themselves to be poorly informed and 49% quite poorly.<sup>5</sup> This research also provided alarming information that 68% of Czechs cannot recall the name of even one MEP. A particular consequence of the absence of basic information about the EU became evident in a survey by the PPM Factum agency in September 2013, which recorded that only

32% of Czechs knew that MEPs are directly elected, while the majority of the people thought that they were nominated by the government, or by the President, or chosen from among the members of the Czech Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of understanding and interest in EU matters resulted in the extremely low participation of citizens in the last elections to the European Parliament in May 2014. Voter turnout was only 18.2%, which was the second lowest recorded participation within the 28 Member States of the European Union after Slovakia. A survey conducted by the STEM Institute attributed the causes of low voter turnout to a lack of interest in the EU (78%), a lack of information about MEPs’ work (75%), a lack of understanding of what EU membership brings (76%), a lack of understanding of the European Parliament competences (75%), and the fact that the media failed to explain the importance of the elections (60%).<sup>7</sup>

It would be easy to blame the media for not providing enough EU information and thus not contributing to the citizens’ understanding of the EU. A focus group, conducted by the Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS) in 2014, showed that Czechs do receive enough information on the EU, but they are not very interested in it because they consider the Union and its policies to be a mostly technical, rather than political, project. They do not understand why they should vote in the European Parliament elections if they do not vote, for example, for officers in the Czech state administration. This can be regarded as a failure of the political elite to explain to the citizens the role and impact of the EU in their everyday life.

**Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?**

The prevailing opinion among the political leadership of the country is that the current level of integration is reasonable. The government's EU strategy refuses to entertain further complicated treaty changes in the foreseeable future, yet proffers deepening the cooperation in existing policies. The country's biggest priority is the further development of the single market, especially in the area of services, digital union, energy union and free trade treaties with third countries. The newest policy in which the country asks for deeper cooperation is the migration policy where it calls for the common protection of external Schengen borders (with the exception of the relocation mechanism).

The country prefers the community method with full participation of the EU institutions, rather than intergovernmental negotiations. The intergovernmental method hides two pitfalls: first, the domination of the biggest Member States in the decision-making process negates the interests of smaller countries like the Czech Republic; second, it increases the danger of strengthening the reality of a two-speed Europe, especially the detachment of Eurozone countries from the rest of the EU. On the other hand, when the community method was applied in the decision on relocation quotas, the Czech government demanded that the European Council decide the issue, thus invoking the intergovernmental method.

There is a consensus that multi-speed EU or multi-level EU concepts are in the interest of the country. The Czech Republic is especially afraid of the cleavage between the Eurozone Member States and the rest of the EU. Although its EU

strategy sets Eurozone membership as a matter of strategic interest for the country, the government is reluctant to take any steps in this direction, because one of the coalition parties (ANO 2011) does not agree with the introduction of the single currency.

Although most businesses and economists acknowledge the benefits of the single currency and support its introduction, there is a strong opposition towards it among major political forces in the country. There are no strong advocates of the single currency; however, there are many opponents. They argue that the Eurozone instability has not yet ended and that the Czech Republic would have to participate in the rescue mechanisms should it join. Furthermore, they praise the preservation of the national monetary policy that helped to restart growth in the Czech economy. The introduction of the euro is also extremely unpopular among citizens. According to the newest Eurobarometer 83, 73% of Czechs are against membership of the Czech Republic within the Eurozone, which is the highest number in the EU.<sup>8</sup>

There are also no advocates of political union among the political leaders, with the notable exception of President Zeman, who declares himself to be a euro-federalist. Contrary to his declaration, as mentioned previously, his concrete positions and steps, especially in the area of foreign policy, are in contradiction to the common positions of the Union. On the other hand, a substantial part of the political representation can be labelled as eurosceptic, with the extreme left, the Communist party, on one side, and the conservative Civic Democratic Party on the other.

**According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?**

It is extremely difficult to think about the European public sphere given that the 'community' does not share a single language. However, the growing quality of education has helped language barriers to slowly disappear, especially among younger generations. Education is the area where most work can be done in an attempt to create a European public sphere. In many Member States, the understanding of the EU is not an integral part, or it is only a marginal part, of the educational curriculum. The clear exception is the Erasmus programme, which has proven to be a great tool for young people to interact with other Europeans. However, only a very low percentage of university students takes advantage of it. Fresh ideas are therefore needed to encourage more students to participate in the programme, by travelling abroad for at least one semester.

Others outside university campuses should also be encouraged to participate in direct interaction with citizens from different Member States. The EU's main tool to support citizens' interaction and cooperation is the Europe for Citizens programme. This programme supports citizen-based projects and the twinning of EU cities. Its funding is, however, very limited. Its overall budget in the current multiannual financial framework 2014-2020 is only 185 million euros, from which about 60% is dedicated to civil society projects and cities twinning.<sup>9</sup> It is absolutely negligible in comparison with the overall amount of the EU budget for the same seven year period (around 1.1 trillion euros), and, if substantially increased, it could also help in the efforts of creating a common European public sphere.

A certain potential to create a European public sphere also lies in the ability to initiate and participate in a European Citizens' Initiative. This new instrument, created by the Lisbon treaty, aimed to enable EU citizens to request the European Commission to propose new pieces of legislation within its competence. Unfortunately, this instrument has been far from successful until now. Only three initiatives fulfilled the conditions for the European Commission to deal with them. However, none of the initiatives resulted in a new legislative proposal from the European Commission. Moreover, this right of EU citizens suffers from very low awareness. According to the Eurobarometer 83, only 27% of EU citizens (23% in the Czech Republic) were considering to make use of the initiative. As a result, none of the successful initiatives collected a sufficient number of signatures (16,500) in the country.<sup>10</sup>

In the end, it is important to mention that despite the recent negative tensions in the EU and insufficient effort from EU institutions and Member States, most Czechs and other Europeans feel themselves to be citizens of the EU (67% in the EU and 62% of Czechs). On the other hand, we get a much worse picture if we ask whether people know the rights associated with their EU citizenship (only 50% in the EU and 44% of Czechs). The first of the two most visible parts of EU citizenship - voting in the European Parliament elections - is not exercised by most European citizens. And the foundations of the second one - the Schengen Area - are currently on unstable ground due to the migration crisis and subsequent reintroduction of border controls between the various Member States. The preservation of the Schengen Area is a key element in fostering a European public sphere, and the freedom to travel should be

regarded as a unique achievement of the European integration process.

### **Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?**

Until the onset of the economic crisis in 2009, membership of the Economic and Monetary Union was also one of the key goals in Czech EU policy. However, instability in the Eurozone, together with growing opposition towards the membership from parts of the political elite as well as society more broadly, led to the suspension of all efforts towards Eurozone membership.

Removal of the remaining barriers and obstacles in the single market is an absolute priority for the Czech government. The Czech Republic is a small, industrial and export oriented country that is extremely dependent on its involvement in international trade. The deepening of the single market in the area of digital services and energy is a long-term priority for the country, together with the further removal of all obstacles in the area of free provision of services. The country also strongly supports all free trade agreements the EU plans to conclude, as they could further strengthen the Czech capacity to profit from its involvement in the global economy.

As most public investments are financed from the EU Structural and Investment Funds, the Czech government wishes to ensure an adequate level of finances for this policy within the EU budget. The country also acknowledges that protection of the environment and climate cannot be achieved at the national level, and therefore supports policy making at EU level in this field.

Another government priority is the common policy of the EU in the fight against tax evasion. The Czech Republic demands the introduction of the reverse charge mechanism because it is the most effective instrument for tackling VAT fraud in the EU. The government is even prepared to support the harmonisation of rules via the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base.

In response to the migration crisis and terrorist attacks, the Czech Republic supports the need to find solutions at the EU level, including a joint asylum procedure, the common protection of external Schengen borders and the creation of an EU intelligence agency.

That being said, most Czech citizens do not want more decisions to be taken at the EU level – 48% against vs 44% in favour.<sup>11</sup> But if we analyse individual policies, with the exception of the euro, Czechs are in favour of more decision-making at the EU level in all other areas. According to a special Eurobarometer from January 2014, the absolute majority of Czech citizens support more decision-making at the EU level in the areas of protecting the environment, tackling unemployment, immigration issues, health and social security, economic policy and taxation. They also support the direct election of the President of the European Commission and the designation of the EU justice minister.<sup>12</sup> According to Eurobarometer 83, citizens also support common foreign, defence and security policies, as well as energy and immigration policies, and the creation of an EU army.<sup>13</sup> This logical inconsistency between people's feelings and the government's relative opposition to further integration can be explained by the fact that, although people are rather sceptical towards the growing size and competence of the EU, they understand that there is a need for European solutions in diverse individual policy areas.

## Endnotes

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