

## Public opinion and relations between the Czech Republic and the neighbouring countries

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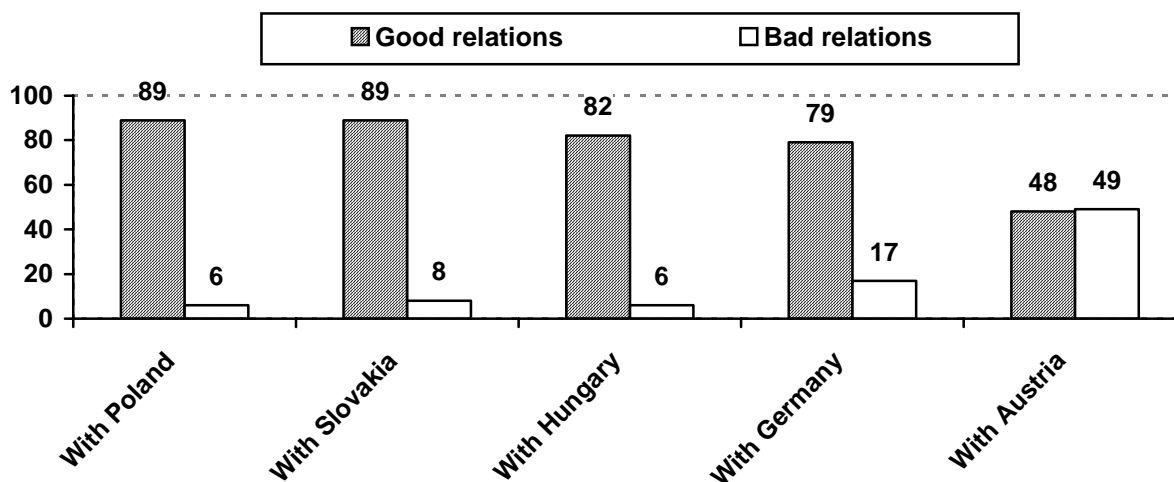
Relations with neighbouring countries are undoubtedly a significant determinant as well as a key indicator of stability of international political embedding of each state. Regional cooperation is therefore logically alpha and omega of the international politics of the Czech Republic. One of the priority objectives of the country is to extend and strengthen central European cooperation with other countries of the so-called Visegrad Four as well as with the two neighbouring EU countries, that is, with Germany and Austria. After all, relations with geographically, culturally and historically nearby states, to which we are also closely linked in economic terms, are no less important for current integrative efforts.

However, there exists a revival of certain historical sentiments between the Czech Republic and some Central European countries that have not been completely overcome and that sometimes develop into political disputes, burdening mutual relations not only on the state, institutional level, but also on the “civil” level. Nobody can argue that mutual relations between the Czech Republic and other countries of the region are – at least in their basic and officially declared intentions – free of serious conflicts. Nevertheless, the object of this paper is the already mentioned civil dimension, that is, existing attitudes of the Czech public to relations between the Czech Republic and other countries.<sup>1</sup>

### I. Current evaluation of relations with neighbouring countries

Diagram 1 and Table 1 represent the point of view of the public opinion on the current relations between the Czech Republic and the neighbouring countries 1.

**Diagram 1. Relations with neighbouring countries – January 2003 (in %)**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society (Our Society) 2003 survey.

Relations among the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia are most frequently – and let us stress that with a high rate of consensus – regarded as positive. 90% of the questioned find them good. Number of positive opinions is also very high in case of Hungary (82%) and Germany (79%). Relations with Austria are much less frequently considered as positive. In this case, practically ideal dichotomy has appeared in the Czech public, when 48 % of the questioned regarded relations with their southern neighbour as good and on the contrary 49 % considered them as bad.

From the perspective of basic socio-demographic characteristics it can be established, with a certain measure of generalization, that number of the questioned who regards relations with all neighbouring countries as good increases with higher education (the group of university educated people obviously regards them most positively). Higher number of positive

evaluation is apparent among Prague citizens, businessmen and ODS sympathizers. On the contrary, it is not without interest that KSCM sympathizers evaluate relations with Germany and Austria less favourably when compared with the average. It probably results from the fact, that relations to both states are burdened in the long term by the problem of Sudeten Germans, and KSCM electorate has always had a very pronounced attitude towards this issue.

**Table 1. Relations with neighbouring countries – January 2003 (in %)**

	Very good	Rather good	Rather bad	Very bad	Doesn't know	Total
<b>Poland</b>	24	65	6	0	5	100
<b>Slovakia</b>	34	55	8	0	3	100
<b>Hungary</b>	16	66	6	0	12	100
<b>Germany</b>	16	63	16	1	4	100
<b>Austria</b>	8	40	41	8	3	100

Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey.

## II. Evaluation of relations with neighbouring countries – comparison

In case of Poland, Hungary and Austria we have can compare current results with figures acquired in surveys from March 2000 and March and October 2002 (see Table 2). As regard relations of the Czech Republic with Slovakia and Germany, data for long-term comparisons are available (see Diagrams 2 and 3).

**Table 2. Evaluation of relations with neighbouring countries – comparison for a period from 2000 to 2003 (v %)**

	03/00 +/-	03/02 +/-	10/02 +/-	01/03 +/-
<b>Poland</b>	86/3	87/5	90/3	89/6
<b>Slovakia</b>	75/17	87/7	87/9	89/8
<b>Hungary</b>	73/4	62/23	80/7	82/6
<b>Germany</b>	77/14	56/38	74/21	79/17
<b>Austria</b>	59/27	24/71	38/56	48/49

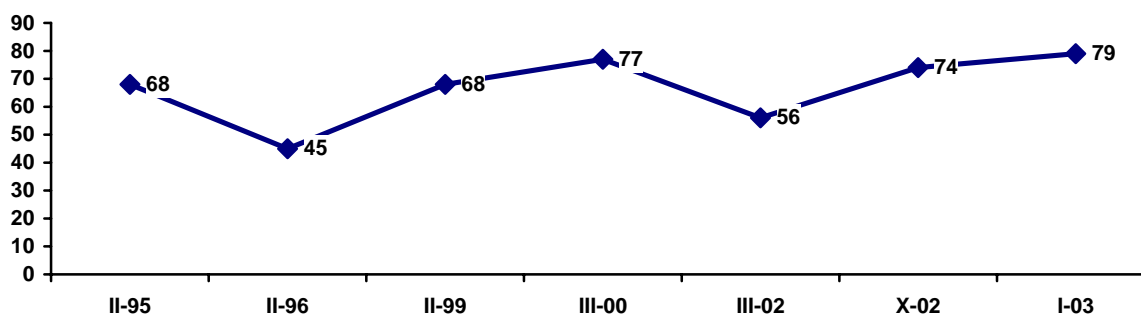
Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey.

The results of the surveys reflect rather accurately the current state of mutual relations on the “high” political level. Relations with Poland and Slovakia are – at least in the perspective of the last few years – stably trouble-free, in fact even closely cooperative, which is reflected also in the respondent’s attitudes. At present, the Czech public highly appraises also relations with Hungary and Germany. Four fifths of respondents consider them to be good. Temporary decrease in positive evaluation of relations with the mentioned countries, indicated last spring, was most probably connected with at that time critical discussions concerning the so-called presidential decrees of president Beneš.

Assessment of relations between the Czech Republic and Austria is noticeably different. In spite of visible improvement in comparison to the scrutiny from 2002, it continues to be very ambivalent and positively the worst among the scrutinized states. The Czech-Austrian relations were especially at the beginning of last year (besides in the tumult of election campaign) saturated by the debate concerning presidential decrees of president Beneš. In this very period characterised by certain political tension between Prague and Vienna (in March 2002), mutual relations were found exceptionally unfavourable (only a quarter of the respondents considered them to be good). We should note that the past relations were repeatedly disrupted, with different intensity, by plentifully promoted political evergreens: besides the issue of Sudeten Germans it also concerned the controversy regarding constructing completion of Temelín nuclear power station.

It is evident that the evaluation of relations with Germany is primarily influenced by a certain historical burden. If there are, from the public's point of view, any significant (and therefore reflected) points of tension in the Czech and German relations, it seems to be namely their rather different legal and political interpretation of the progress and outcomes of the Second World War. The evaluation of bilateral relations since 1995 therefore appears to be considerably fluctuating, clearly depending on the current state of dialogue about the open questions of the past (positive evaluation - minimum 45 %, maximum 79 %). In a given context it is not surprising that at the beginning of 1996, that is, at the time of restless atmosphere in which the Czech-German declaration was being drafted, the favourable evaluation of mutual relations in general decreased significantly. In 1999, however, the number of positive voices reached the level of the first finding and in 2000 an even more favourable view was indicated. Last year in spring the positive evaluation significantly decreased again, but current figures returned again to a relatively high level from 2000. The public opinion clearly responded to the turbulences in Czech-German relations of that time the same as in the case of Austria.

**Diagram 2. Development of positive evaluation of relations between the Czech Republic and Germany (data in %)**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey.

The above data indicate that the already mentioned revival of the past sentiments, which has repeatedly aggravated also current bilateral relations, has positively an important influence on the appraisal of general state of relations between the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany (even though in this case less than in the past years). A survey from March 2002 mapping the opinions about the mutual relations with regard to the discussions concerning the presidential decrees of president Beneš, supported the fact that different emphasis or even incompatible interpretation of certain historical issues significantly influence relations between the Czech Republic on one side and Germany and Austria on the other side. (see Table 3).

**Table 3. In what way do the so-called presidential decrees of president Beneš influence relations with neighbouring countries – March 2002 (in %)**

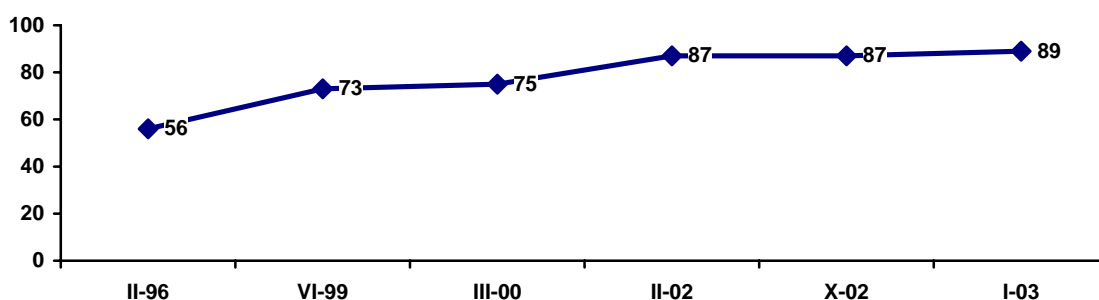
	Positively	No influence	Negatively	Doesn't know	Total
<b>Slovakia</b>	14	64	3	19	100
<b>Poland</b>	10	66	3	21	100
<b>Hungary</b>	2	40	33	25	100
<b>Germany</b>	2	21	61	16	100
<b>Austria</b>	1	22	58	19	100

Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2002 survey.

As the table indicates, roughly three thirds of the questioned believed in the given time that presidential decrees of president Beneš have a negative affect on relations with Germany (61 %) and Austria (58 %). A third of the questioned maintained a similar position concerning relations with Hungary. In connection with indicated statements we want to specify that not only the official German and Austrian authorities but also representatives of Hungarian government lead at that time by Prime Minister Orbán intervened in the nearly historical polemics launched by ex Prime Minister Zeman in the Austrian press at the beginning of 2002.

Relations with Slovakia represent for many good reasons an independent chapter. They qualitatively exceed, to a considerable extent, the framework of other surveyed countries by their historical specific character.

**Diagram 3. Development of favourable evaluation of relation between Czech Republic and Slovakia (in %)**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey.

Diagram 3 indicates well that Czecho-Slovak relations were not always valued as favourably as they are today, or to be more exact, in the last two years. As it is well known, the relations between both successional states of the former federation have in the past gone through certain problems. Especially at the time of Vladimír Mečiar's government they were far below the quality and depth of present formal as well as informal bonds. A fairly significant change happened only after the succession of the wide democratic coalition lead by Mikuláš Dzurinda in 1998. The bilateral relations reached a new quality level; the close political cooperation in the field of external relations and in security and economic fields did not remain unreflected in the Czech public opinion. During last seven years the positive evaluation of relations between Czech Republic and Slovakia increased by more than 30 percentage points. After a more significant change for the better indicated in 1999, another rapid increase of favourable opinions occurred last year.

If we have said that relations with Slovakia have an exceptional position in comparison with other countries, it would be appropriate to indicate the present attitudes of Czech citizens to the division of the Czechoslovak Federation into the Czech and the Slovak Republic. Tables 4 and 5 indicate the manner in which people according to their present knowledge evaluated the division of the federation ten years ago, that is, just at the time of the actual disjunction, and how they regard the break-up of Czechoslovakia nowadays.

**Table 4. How did people regard the division of Czechoslovakia ten years ago? (in %)**

Certainly for	Rather for	Rather against	Certainly against	Doesn't know	For/against
8	18	33	26	15	26/59

Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey, January 2003.

**Table 5. How do people evaluate division of Czechoslovakia today? As a decision... (in %)**

<b>Certainly right</b>	<b>Rather right</b>	<b>Rather bad</b>	<b>Certainly bad</b>	<b>Doesn't know</b>	<b>Right/bad</b>
18	37	25	11	9	<b>55/36</b>

Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey, January 2003.

According to present statements, only a quarter of the Czechs agreed with the division of Czechoslovakia ten years ago. On the contrary, at a given time, there were twice as many opponents of the division (Table 4). However, more than a half of respondents regard the division of a common state of Czechs and Slovaks as a right decision today. On the contrary, “only” a third of the questioned regards it as a mistake (Table 5).

In this context, there is a rather significant discrepancy between the number of those, who according to their own words agreed with the division ten years ago, and the number of respondents who presently regard the division as a right decision (55 %).<sup>2</sup>

Evaluation of present relations between the Czechs and the Slovaks in comparison with the period preceding the division has also brought interesting findings. From Table 6 it is evident that nearly half of the questioned (44 %) consider quality of present relations between the Czechs and the Slovaks to be the same in comparison with the period preceding the state's division. Roughly a third of the questioned even finds them better and only 17 % as worse.

**Table 6. What are the relations between the Czechs and the Slovaks like in comparison with the period preceding the division? (in %)**

<b>Certainly better</b>	<b>Rather better</b>	<b>The same</b>	<b>Rather worse</b>	<b>Certainly worse</b>	<b>Doesn't know</b>
<b>7</b>	25	44	15	2	7

Note: CVVM source, Our Society 2003 survey, January 2003.

### **III. Interest in political events in neighbouring countries**

The attention paid to principal political events is undoubtedly an indicator of general interest in the events of the neighbouring countries. After the autumn parliamentary elections in Slovakia, Germany and Austria it was therefore scrutinized whether and to what extent the Czech public was interested in these events. (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Interest in elections in Slovakia, Germany and Austria (in %)**

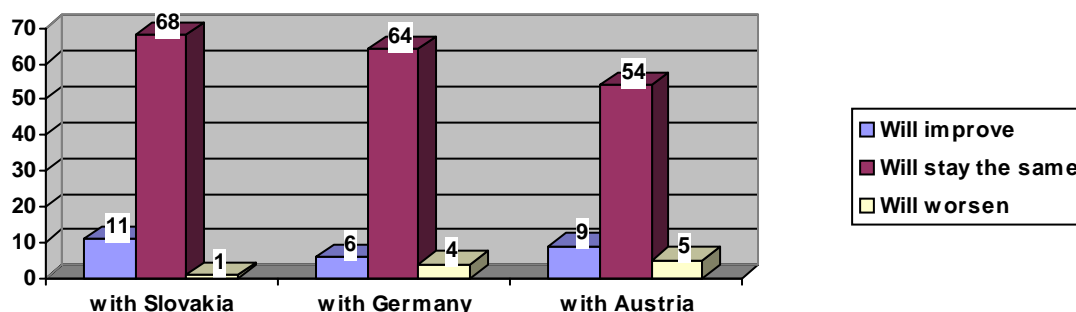
<b>Interest in elections:</b>	<b>In Slovakia</b>	<b>In Germany</b>	<b>In Austria</b>
<b>Large</b>	10	6	3
<b>Partial</b>	31	23	14
<b>Little</b>	27	28	30
<b>No</b>	32	43	53
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey. In January 2003, respondents were asked to express their opinion about the Austrian elections from November 2002, and they were asked about the Slovak and German elections from September 2002 in a survey from November of the same year.

From the results of the survey it is evident that respondents were most interested in the Slovak elections, which is not surprising. 41 % of respondents were at least partly interested, 59 % were not much interested or not at all interested. Elections in Germany have elicited less interest – 29 % respondents stated at least partial interest, 71 % small or no interest. Only 17 % of respondents were at least partly interested in Austrian elections, 83 % were not much or not at all interested.

Diagram 4 illustrates the expectations of the Czech public as regards the development of bilateral relations following the elections in the countries mentioned above.

**Diagram 4. Expectations in mutual relations following elections in Slovakia, Austria and Germany (in %)**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey. In January 2003, respondents were asked to express their opinion about the elections held in Austria in November 2002 and they were asked about the Slovak and German elections from September 2002, in a survey from November of the same year.

In all cases people most frequently believed that relations with Slovakia were not going to change after the elections (with Slovakia 68 %, with Germany 64 %, with Austria 54 %). More than a tenth of the citizens expected improvement and only 1 % deterioration, 6 % predicted improvement of relations in case of Germany and 4 % deterioration, after the Austrian elections almost tenth of citizens expected improvement and only 5 % deterioration. With respect to relatively small general interest in elections it is rather understandable that relatively large part of the respondents (fifth to fourth) was not able to express their opinion.

<sup>1</sup> The basis of this paper primarily consists (if not stated otherwise) of data obtained in a regular CVVM survey in January 2003 (6 – 13/1) within the survey Our Society 2003.

<sup>2</sup> For illustration, let us mention that according to the results of IVVM survey from February 1993, 40 % of the questioned have considered the dissolution of the Federation as necessary, whereas 51 % of respondents did not find the dissolution necessary.

Sudeten Germans, presidential decrees of president B., Viszegrad Four