

# **The First Year of Membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union through the Public Eye**

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On 1 May 2004, the Czech Republic became a fully-fledged member of the European Union. At the same time, another 9 states made the same step and the European Union enlarged to the current 25 member states. At present, the European integration process is considered for further continuation – Bulgaria and Romania already signed the accession treaty. Citizens decided in a referendum on the accession of our country. The referendum was held in June 2003 and the population of the Czech Republic expressed their agreement or disagreement with the following question: “Do you agree with the Czech Republic becoming a member state of the European Union pursuant to the treaty on the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union?” An absolute majority of the Czech electorate answered the question in the above referendum (55%) and in their opinions the agreement with the membership prevailed markedly over the disagreement. At that time, 77.33% of the Czech electorate voiced their “Yes” to the European Union.

## **General Attitudes of Czech public to the European Union**

Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění SOÚ AV ČR (Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic) treated issues surrounding the European Union in more detail in its regular investigation implemented in May 2005. The investigation was to answer, among other things, the question whether the Euro-optimistic standpoint that the voters expressed in the referendum still prevails in Czech society; in what way we view the unified Europe project and what changes occurred during the year of our membership.

Let us first examine how the Czechs were and are satisfied with membership in the European Union. We may demonstrate this using data acquired either shortly before incorporation into European structures (in March 2004) and then approximately after one year of membership (in May 2005). The up-to-date results and time comparison are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Satisfaction with Membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union (in %)

	03/04 with “DK”	03/04 without “DK”	05/05 with “DK”	05/05 without “DK”
Definitely satisfied	19	21	18	21
Tends to be satisfied	38	43	46	54
Tends to be dissatisfied	23	25	16	18
Definitely dissatisfied	10	11	6	7
Does not know (DK)	10	0	14	0

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-03; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

As is apparent, the Czechs are a relatively satisfied European nation. If we only include respondents in our analysis that managed to answer the question (i.e. those who leaned towards one or other side), the satisfaction with membership of our country in the European Union is expressed by three quarters of Czech residents above 15 years of age. The fact that the share of satisfied respondents is similar in size to the share of the electorate who voted in favour of the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union in June 2003 is somewhat appealing. The issue therefore suggests itself whether indeed these are the same people who gave a positive answer in the referendum. Let us now compare answers to the question about whether the respondent did or did not participate in the referendum and, as the case may be, how he/she voted in it, and what attitude towards the European Union he/she holds at present. Have voters changed their attitudes or, as the above results suggest, has the division of positive and negative attitudes in Czech society remained more or less preserved?

Respondents who voted in favour of the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union in the referendum are, to a much greater degree, satisfied with our membership in this organisation. Dissatisfaction with the membership was expressed only by 5% of residents who supported the accession into the European Union at that time. To the contrary, voters voting against the accession in the referendum are much more frequently dissatisfied than satisfied. Dissatisfaction with membership in the European Union rules among 84% of those who voted against the accession in the referendum. A noteworthy group are voters who did not participate in the referendum for whatever reason. Even these are satisfied with membership in the European Union for the most part (satisfaction was expressed by almost 60% of them). High degree of satisfaction is also characteristic of respondents who did not have right to vote when the referendum happened. Out of these, 95% currently expresses satisfaction with the membership.

Residents also expressed the general attitude towards the European integration process and our role in it in the answer to the question whether, in their opinion, membership of the

Czech Republic in the European Union is a good or a bad thing. Compared to the question mapping satisfaction with the membership in the European Union, respondents have had the option to select a neutral answer to this question, i.e. that membership was neither a good nor a bad thing. Also, this question offers a valuable possibility of time comparison because the same wording was presented to respondents shortly after the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union, i.e. in June 2004.

Table 2: Is membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union a good or a bad thing?

	June 2004	May 2005
A good thing	35	41
Neither a good nor a bad thing	43	39
Bad thing	14	11
Does not know	8	9

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-06; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

As compared to the last year, the Czechs are yet again a bit more Euro-optimistic. Four out of ten Czechs consider membership of our country in the European Union to be a good thing; approximately the same share of respondents has taken up a neutral standpoint. Only one tenth of the population has a clearly negative attitude towards the question presented.

As the above data demonstrate, a year after the accession into the European Union, significant majority of Czech public perceives our membership in positive terms, is satisfied with it and considers it to be a good thing. After a year when we have tested the project of the united Europe, say, first-hand, there are yet more optimistic and positive moods in Czech society than at the time when the Czech Republic was completely new to the European Union. Therefore, it may be perhaps assumed that certain worries that accompanied the accession into the European Union in Czech environment, did not come true and that the current form of membership of our country in the European Union is acceptable for most Czech residents in most of its aspects.

Let us now examine closer how the “Euro-optimists” and “Euro-pessimists” in Czech society look. In general, satisfaction with our membership in the European Union is distinctly higher among students and young people between 15 and 29 years of age and, furthermore, among respondents with university education, higher income and those who work in managing positions. As far as political orientation is concerned, Social Democratic, Civic Democratic and Christian Democratic voters are more satisfied. On the other hand, elderly

people, mainly people older than 60 years who are in the “non-working pensioner” category are dissatisfied with membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union more frequently. Lower satisfaction also rules among citizens with low income and standard of living and among respondents with secondary education without secondary school-leaving examination (*maturita*) or with vocational-school education. From the point of political orientation, one would find voters of the Communist party and, also, those not leaning towards any political party and not intending to participate in potential elections more frequently among the dissatisfied.

We assess the unified Europe project positively for the most part. CVVM investigated whether the situation is the same in other European new entrants in March 2005. As part of international co-operation roofed by CEORG<sup>1</sup>, the Centre included several questions mapping the attitude of Czech public towards membership in the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in its investigation. The same questions were also presented to respondents in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Residents of all four countries were enquired whether or not they agreed with membership of their country in the European Union. These data helped us compare opinions of Czech population with opinions of residents of certain other countries that accessed the European Union along with our country.

Table 3: Agreement/disagreement with membership of their respective countries in the EU (in %)

	Czech Republic <sup>2</sup>	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Definitely agrees	31	31	43	38
Tends to agree	39	41	36	45
Tends to disagree	17	16	10	11
Definitely disagrees	6	6	4	4
Does not know (DK)	7	6	7	2

Source: Research organised under the auspices of CEORG by CVVM (the Czech Republic), TÁRKI (Hungary), CBOS (Poland) and FOCUS (Slovakia) in March 2005 on a representative sample of population of the given country older than 18 years.

In all the Visegrad Four countries, vast majority of the population agrees with membership of their country in the European Union. The highest rate of approval with membership in the European Union is in Slovakia (83% share of approving) and Poland (79%). The Hungarians and the Czechs expressed approval a bit less frequently but even in

<sup>1</sup> CEORG (Central European Opinion Research Group) associates 3 agencies involved in public opinion research – in the Czech Republic, it is CVVM, in Hungary, an agency called TÁRKI and in Poland, an agency called CBOS. Also, the Slovak agency FOCUS co-operates sometimes with CEORG.

these countries, seven out of ten residents older than 18 years are positive about membership in the European Union.

### **Czechs as European Union citizens**

As already mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Czechs have also been the European Union citizens for over a year. Many citizens of our country feared potential negative phenomena related to the accession. Despite that, voters gave support to the entry into the European Union in the referendum. How do Czech citizens approach the fact now that we are part of unified Europe and the European citizenship? Do they believe that the decisions that the European Union will make will be in the interest of our country and themselves? These are issues that I will try to answer in the following section of the article.

Table 4: Do you feel both a Czech Republic citizen and the European Union citizen?

	June 2004	May 2005
Frequently	6	10
Sometimes	35	39
Never	48	41
Does not know	11	10

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-06; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

Almost a half of citizens of the Czech Republic feels, at least sometimes, to be not only the citizen of the Czech Republic but also as the citizen of the European Union. On the other hand, four out of ten Czech citizens never have such a feeling. As compared to the situation shortly after the accession into the European Union, it is possible to say that the feeling of European solidarity rose among the Czechs. At least sometimes, 8% more of citizens of the Czech Republic feel to be European Union citizens than in June 2004.

A somewhat different view of attitudes of the Czechs to European integration is offered if we analyse the answers to the question whether or not we feel proud of being citizens of the European Union. This question was also presented to respondents in the same form shortly after the accession to the European Union. We are therefore able to compare whether the pride in European citizenship rose or dropped in Czech society.

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<sup>2</sup> Data for the Czech Republic in this table are data for respondents of 18+. Other data contained in the articles characterise the Czech population of 15+.

Table 5: Do you feel proud about being a citizen of the European Union?

	June 2004	May 2005
Very proud	2	4
Quite proud	27	36
Not very proud	27	25
Not proud at all	26	22
Does not know	18	13

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-06; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

In June 2004, more than a half of respondents said that they were not very proud or not proud at all about being citizens in the European Union. Pride in European citizenship was felt only by three out of ten Czechs. After more than a year of membership in the European Union, more Czechs feel proud about being European citizens than at the moment of our entrance into the Union. Four out of ten citizens of the Czech Republic are very or quite proud of being European citizens. But a slightly higher share of respondents said that they were not very proud or not proud at all of being citizens of the European Union. Feelings of pride to be European citizens correspond, very significantly, to the overall satisfaction with our membership in this international organisation. Respondents satisfied with our membership in the European Union also felt pride much more frequently in being the citizens of the European Union.

Misgivings concerning the entrance into the European Union often consisted in worries that following integration into the organisation we will be unable to decide on all our matters entirely independently and that we will also have to take account of the opinions of other member states. In this context, people have frequently expressed their opinion that decisions of the European Union will often not be in the interest of the Czech Republic or that they will not be in the interest of “ordinary people”, i.e. people like themselves. Tables 6 and 7 show the attitude of the Czechs towards the issue above at present.

Table 6: Do you believe that decisions of the European Union will be in the interest of the Czech Republic?

	June 2004	May 2005
Definitely believes	3	5
Quite believes	27	32
Does not believe very much	48	39
Does not believe at all	14	16
Does not know	8	8

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-06; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

Table 7: Do you believe that decisions of the European Union will be in the interest of people like you?

	June 2004	May 2005
Definitely believes	3	5
Quite believes	24	27
Does not believe very much	39	34
Does not believe at all	26	25
Does not know	9	9

Source: CVVM, Naše společnost 2004 (Our Society 2004) research, investigation 04-06; Naše společnost 2005 (Our Society 2005) research, investigation 05-05.

Majority of Czech residents (55%) does not believe that decisions of the European Union will be in the interest of the Czech Republic. To the contrary, four out of ten residents of our country are optimistic in this respect. In evaluating whether or not decisions of the European Union will be in the interest of the Czech Republic, respondents are much more optimistic than they were shortly after the entrance of the Czech Republic into the European Union. Back then only three out of ten respondents believed that decisions of the European Union would be in harmony with the interests of the Czech Republic.

People doubt whether decisions of the European Union will be in the interest of people like them even more frequently than about whether the decisions will be in the interest of the Czech Republic. In this respect, only less than a third of respondents assess the decision-making in the European Union positively. Approximately six out of ten respondents assess it in negative terms. Despite the prevailing scepticism in this respect, the Czechs again are a bit more optimistic than they were in June 2004. Back then, only one fourth of respondents hoped in the harmony of decisions of the European Union with the interests of people like themselves.

### **Advantages and disadvantages of membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union**

Approximately a year after the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union, we presented respondents of the research conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research of the Sociological Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic with the option to think of the chief advantages and disadvantages that membership in such an international organisation brings to our country. First, we presented a question to our respondents as to what, in their opinion, is the biggest contribution of membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union. It was an open question, i.e. without any answers

offered. Respondents were given the option to state spontaneously up to two different answers.

Opening up frontiers, making it possible for Czech citizens to travel to other European Union member states, was the most frequently mentioned contribution of membership in the European Union. This fact was indicated as the largest benefit by 43% of the citizens enquired. Almost a fifth of respondents expressed an opinion in our research that the greatest benefit our country draws from the integration into the European structures is the opening up of new job opportunities in the European Union member states. Respondents also stated that thanks to this the unemployment in the Czech Republic could drop. In this context, about one tenth of the Czechs also mentioned the opening up of the European market making possible free movement of goods. Approximately the same share of respondents appreciated that by accessing the European Union the Czech Republic joined a large entity, the unified Europe. Furthermore, respondents often added that the Czech Republic opens to the world thanks to membership in the European Union and exits certain isolation. In other words that it is part of Europe.

Not all respondents were able and willing to name advantages that the Czech Republic gains from membership in the European Union. Less than one tenth of citizens included in our survey stated that in their opinion the membership had no advantages for our country and that it only brought about troubles.

Money from the European Union budget and funds and contributions for various projects provided by the European Union were a relatively frequently mentioned advantage (less than 9% of respondents stated this answer). Citizens in our survey further appreciated that after the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union, possibilities for study in other Union countries broadened and became simpler for the Czechs. More than 5% of respondents also said that European co-operation had favourable impact on Czech economy. Namely, respondents mentioned growth of foreign investments, growth of gross domestic product of the Czech Republic or overall strengthening of economics and business growth.

But, in the minds of the Czechs, the project of unified Europe is definitely not perceived only positively and the Czechs are also able to name some disadvantages along with advantages brought by membership in the European Union. We have, therefore, also asked all respondents in the May survey what annoys them most about membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union. This was again an open question, i.e. without answers offered.



Approximately one third of the Czechs mind most the feeling of inferiority and dependence. Respondents complained that after the accession to the European Union the Czech Republic cannot decide alone on all matters and that we have had to conform, in numerous matters, to regulations and standards requested of us by the European Union. Moreover, the Czechs frequently perceive such regulations to be completely senseless.

More than one tenth of the population of the Czech Republic has the feeling that the Czech Republic is only in a second-rate position in the European Union and that it is not on completely equal terms with other member states. In this context, then, respondents often added that large states managed to promote their interests in the European Union, notwithstanding the interests of the Czech Republic. A slightly lower number of the Czechs expressed their opinion in our survey that the accession of the Czech Republic into the European Union meant drop in standard of living in our country, price increase and reduction of salaries, pensions, and social support contributions. Approximately one tenth of respondents stated that they minded negative impacts on Czech farmers as far as membership in the European Union was concerned. Less than a tenth of the Czechs think that European integration has negative consequences for Czech economy. Most frequently, respondents mentioned that Czech business, in their opinion, are not able to stand up in international competition and that they go bankrupt and that is why unemployment is growing in the Czech Republic.

A less than one tenth of residents enquired (9%) did not record any disadvantages with our membership in the European Union. The same amount of respondents thinks that the Czech Republic lost its national sovereignty due to joining the European Union and also that Czech national traditions are disappearing because no account is taken of them in the European Union. More than 5% of respondents stated that they minded mainly immigration in the unified Europe, i.e. influx of foreigners into the Czech Republic. Respondents also frequently stated in this context that foreigners take our jobs in their opinion and that Czech residents remain unemployed as a consequence.

## **Conclusion**

As is clear from various angles which we have used in our surveys to map attitudes of Czech residents towards membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union and towards the process of the European integration as a whole, there is certain part of people in the Czech Republic who disapprove of our membership in the European Union and of everything that is connected to the European Union and it is highly likely that almost nothing

would be able to change their opinion. On the other hand, it is also possible to find a certain share of supporters of European integration in Czech population who are very satisfied with membership of our country in the European Union, who feels to be European residents and who are accordingly proud of such fact. Majority of Czech population has not a completely clear-cut attitude towards issues surrounding the European Union and, therefore, even if majority of the Czechs are satisfied with the Czech Republic having become member of the European Union, Czech residents are, in majority cases, also able to perceive negative aspects that membership in the international organisation brings along. On the other hand, the Czech Republic's residents also perceive positive aspects that prevail with a number of people as four out of ten respondents declared our membership in the European Union to be a good thing.