

FROM ENTHUSIASM TO REALISM: CZECH NARRATIVES ON EU ACCESSION

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From enthusiasm to realism: Czech narratives on EU accession

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About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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Introduction

The Czech Republic experienced a period of turbulent societal change following its 1989 shift to democracy and a market economy. Amid these groundbreaking transitions, the geopolitical and ideological affiliation to the West decisively prevailed and the notion of “return to Europe” resonated among politicians and in the society. For Czech citizens and political elites, integration into Euro-Atlantic structures symbolized a break from the communist past and a commitment to democracy, human rights, economic liberalization, and the security goals of the West. Throughout the process of the country’s European integration, all major Czech political parties expressed their support for EU membership.¹

While all mainstream parties publicly supported EU membership, ideological differences influenced their framing of the associated costs and benefits and the preferred nature of future European integration. The centre-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS) adopted a “Euro-realist” stance, focusing on national sovereignty and scepticism about the deepening of EU integration, whereas the centre-left Social Democrats (ČSSD) strongly emphasized the social and economic benefits of membership.

Beyond the political actors, civil society, the media, and public opinion played critical roles in shaping the national discourse on EU accession. Civil society organizations actively engaged in raising awareness about the integration process and addressing public concerns, while the media presented generally a balanced view of the opportunities and challenges of EU membership. Public opinion, initially enthusiastic, became more divided as the complexities of the accession process, such as economic transition costs and questions of sovereignty, came to the forefront.

¹ Pavel Šaradín, ‘Referendum o Přistoupení k EU a Volební Podpora Politických Stran v České Republice’, *MUNI Journals* 5, no. 4 (2003).

This paper focuses on the multifaceted narratives of the Czech Republic's EU accession during the formal accession process, from submitting the application for membership in 1996 to joining the Union in 2004. Through analysis of the official documents and party positions, media articles, public opinion data and interviews with former politicians, diplomats, and civil society representatives,² it shows how the country balanced its hopeful vision of joining Europe with the practical challenges of integration, leading to the historic 2003 referendum that confirmed the Czech Republic's membership in the EU.

National Discourse on EU Accession: Governments, Political Parties, Media and Civil Society

The importance of Euro-Atlantic integration for the Czech Republic is reflected in the strategic documents, regardless of the political orientation of the government that adopted them. Since the early 1990s, integration into the EU and NATO became the country's main objective.³ The 1998 Concept of Foreign Policy stated that the EU was an important platform to promote Czech national identity, the country's participation in shaping the future treaties and development of the EU, support for the monetary and currency union including the euro adoption, support for clear informational campaigns on the EU or support to Slovakia in the EU accession process.⁴ The first Czech security strategy was published in 1999, the year of the Czech accession to NATO, and apart from the focus on the Alliance itself, it also emphasized the security importance of the Czech Republic's involvement in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The strategy also stressed the EU accession of neighbouring countries or police cooperation

² Vladimír Bartovic, 4 November 2024; Petr Mareš, 5 November 2024; Vladimír Špidla, 22 November 2024; Pavel Telička, 19 November 2024.

³ Zdeněk Kříž, Martin Chovančík, and Oldřich Krpec, 'Czech Foreign Policy After the Velvet Revolution', in *Foreign Policy Change in Europe since 1991*, ed. Jeroen K. Joly and Tim Haesebrouck (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 51.

⁴ Vláda České republiky, 'Konceptce zahraniční politiky České republiky', 12 October 1998.

with EUROPOL as security benefits.⁵ In 2001, the updated security strategy mentioned the cooperation with the V4 countries, and specifically Slovakia, as a strategic aim while in the strategic document from 2003, the government expressed its will to strengthen the EU's CFSP.⁶

The 1996-2004 Czech political scene was dominated by two parties, centre-right ODS and centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) that were also the main (or the only) governing parties during the country's EU accession process.

Government terms	Governing parties	Prime Minister	Minister of Foreign Affairs
1992-1996	ODS, KDS, ODA, KDU-ČSL	Václav Klaus I	Josef Zielenec
1996-1998	ODS, ODA, KDU-ČSL	Václav Klaus II	Josef Zielenec, Jaroslav Šedivý
1998	US, ODA, KDU-ČSL, independent	Josef Tošovský	Jaroslav Šedivý
1998-2002	ČSSD	Miloš Zeman	Jan Kavan
2002-2004	ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, US-DEU	Vladimír Špidla	Cyril Svoboda

By analysing programmatic declarations of the consecutive governments, we can identify significant continuity of EU membership among the priorities. The Václav Klaus' ODS-led government, appointed in 1996, clarified in its programmatic declaration that the Czech Republic belonged to Europe historically, politically, culturally, and economically.⁷ Interestingly, the document refers to the importance of "Czech national interests" in the first sentence of the section on foreign policy while the goal to achieve EU membership is only mentioned after, in line with the

⁵ Vláda České republiky, 'Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky', 1999.

⁶ Vláda České republiky, 'Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky', 2001; Vláda České republiky, 'Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky', 2003.

⁷ Vláda České republiky, 'Programové prohlášení vlády Václava Klause', 1996.

emphasis on Czech sovereignty contained in the Eurorealist approach described further.⁸

The programmatic declaration of Miloš Zeman's ČSSD government from 1998 does not mention EU accession as a goal of the government but discusses EU integration in relation to various topics.⁹ This can suggest that the government's position on EU accession was self-evident and the party rather focused on connecting specific policy areas and issues to the overarching goal of EU membership. The successive ČSSD-led government of Vladimír Špidla referred to the EU in its programmatic declaration from 2002 already at the beginning of the document where it mentioned "the European social model:"

„Driven by the desire to realize the principles of the European social model, based on a socially and environmentally oriented market economy, the Government considers its aim to contribute to making our society a society of education, participation and solidarity and, in this sense, to be considered a modern society of the twenty-first century.”¹⁰

This reflected the socio-democratic ideology of the party as well as its pro-European orientation and the targeting of the party's voters that were likely to be receptive to welfare state provisions. In the opening section of the declaration, the government also stressed the importance of presenting EU's benefits to citizens which is in line with the pre-referendum campaign organized later during its term. The document listed EU accession as the government's number one priority and it was then elaborated in a separate chapter of the declaration.¹¹ Overall, it seems that the official documents of the ČSSD(-led) governments stressed EU integration more than the ODS-led governments. However, apart from the generally more

⁸ Vláda České republiky. (1996)

⁹ Vláda České republiky, 'Programové prohlášení vlády Miloše Zemana', 1998.

¹⁰ Vláda České republiky, 'Programové prohlášení vlády Vladimíra Špidly', 2002.

¹¹ Vláda České republiky. (2002)

positive stance on European integration compared to the ODS, it could also be explained by the fact that the EU accession process was already more advanced in the later years and more work had to be done in negotiations with the Union, drawing increased attention to the process.

Attitudes of political parties to EU accession

An analysis of attitudes of political parties in media articles provides a more nuanced insight into the narratives promoted by different Czech political parties. All mainstream parties stressed economic benefits, such as investment, an open economy, export, economic growth and access to EU funds. The argument that “we have no alternative” was also used by several actors.¹² There were, however, also opponents of EU accession in the parliament in the period of the accession talks, such as members of the far-right Rally for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (SPR-RSČ) before 1998. Another Eurosceptic party, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) did not support the EU membership, but this topic did not seem to be of primary importance for them, unlike NATO accession which the party actively opposed. These parties, however, were on the margins of political representation and lacked real political power.

All mainstream parties stressed economic benefits, such as investment, an open economy, export, economic growth and access to EU funds.

Media analysis confirmed the finding from official documents’ analysis that changes between the narratives of different governments were not significant. This could be explained by the fact that the Czech Republic had a negotiating team

with a strong mandate and the governments relied primarily on their capacities

¹² ‘Klaus kvůli referendu schytl spršku kritiky’, *Právo*, 17 June 2003; Jan Kavan, ‘EU, předvolební boj a rány pod pás’, *Právo*, 4 October 2001.

and capabilities while the political ownership over the accession negotiations was rather limited.¹³ The representatives of the Zeman's and particularly Špidla's government were, however, much more visible in relation to EU accession than government representatives of the Klaus' and Tošovský's administration. The media analysis revealed that ČSSD had generally a more pro-European stance than ODS, manifested by their "Eurorealist" approach. At the same time, the ODS representatives' views on EU accession started circulating more in the media during Zeman's and Špidla's term, even if they were not always favourable to the EU. This increase in media coverage of the discussions on the EU can be explained by more advanced stages of the EU accession process, organization of the referendum and increased coverage of the negotiations overall. In the next paragraphs, developments during Zeman's and Špidla's term are analysed in detail.

The ODS members were sceptical regarding the developments of the Union after the Maastricht Treaty, such as the deepening of the integration, the position of the European President, or the European Constitution.

In spring 2001, ODS members published the so-called "Manifest of Czech Eurorealism" (*Manifest českého eurorealismu*). In the document, the ODS expressed its preference to retain the intergovernmental style of decision-making in the EU and promoted the option of not entering the Union if the results of the accession negotiations

would not align with the Czech interests.¹⁴ The risk of sovereignty loss, the notion of the Czech Republic "dissolving" in the EU, represented for the party a serious obstacle to membership.¹⁵ While accepting the relevance of the EU in principle,

¹³ Telička, interview.

¹⁴ 'Nalijme lidem čistého vína o EU', *Lidové noviny*, 23 April 2001.

¹⁵ Petr Pavlík, 'Opravdu chceme do Evropské unie?', *Lidové noviny*, 12 June 1999.

the ODS members were sceptical regarding the developments of the Union after the Maastricht Treaty, such as the deepening of the integration, the position of the European President, or the European Constitution.¹⁶ They favoured economic cooperation but without integration in other areas. Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan of the Zeman's government criticized the Manifest for revising the fundamental principles that Klaus as the Prime Minister signed up to in the EU application in 1996, already after the Maastricht Treaty had been signed. This confirms the ČSSD government's understanding of EU accession as undisputable.

The government of Vladimír Špidla oversaw the peak of the accession talks and many in the government saw the reforms required by the EU for membership as something that needed to be implemented regardless, for the country's own sake.¹⁷ The government stressed the provisions of social-democratic Europe and economic freedoms, targeting its voters with positive affiliation to a strong welfare state rather than to the EU specifically. The government also invested significant funds into the campaign informing citizens about the EU and promoting the benefits of membership, in line with the government's programmatic declaration. The discussion surrounding public campaigns on EU accession was among the topics most extensively covered by all Czech newspapers. The opposition including the ODS declared that opponents should be supported with the same amount of funding as proponents. Špidla's Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda (KDU-ČSL) criticized the ODS for attacking the organization of the EU and relativization of the European integration values.¹⁸ Klaus became the president in 2003 and his Eurorealism was once again demonstrated in his refusal to publicly state how he would vote in the referendum, as the only president among all accession countries

¹⁶ Tomáš Menschik, 'ODS podporuje vstup do EU, proti ale může být až pětina jejích členů', *Lidové noviny*, 3 June 2003.

¹⁷ Mareš, interview.

¹⁸ Cyril Svoboda, 'Proevropská politika zatím není příliš přesvědčivá', *Mladá fronta DNES*, 20 August 2001.

not supporting EU accession publicly. Other ODS representatives, however, eventually encouraged the public to take part in the referendum and vote “yes”.

Reporting on the EU accession in the media

The media played an important role in following the political discussions on EU accession, informing the Czech society, and giving the space to different stakeholders. The mainstream newspapers brought a generally balanced account of proponents and opponents of the EU accession and presented reservations on the side of Eurosceptics. In this regard, only TV Nova stood out among the media with its director openly opposing EU accession.

For the purpose of this publication, the five most-read newspapers published between 1998 and 2004 were analysed – Blesk, Hospodářské noviny, Lidové noviny, Mladá fronta DNES, and Právo. The selection of these media should bring a balanced account of the events due to their varying focus and ideological leaning.¹⁹ Strikingly, Blesk as the most-read newspaper at that time did not cover the researched topics of EU accession at all. The highest number of articles focused on the EU accession process and EU membership were found in Mladá fronta DNES. All newspapers closely followed the results of public opinion polls on EU accession, elaborated in the third chapter. Significant attention was also paid by the media to ODS and their “Eurorealist” position. A significant number of articles covered the EU accession referendum, the campaign preceding it, and the results of the voting. Mladá fronta DNES offered the most space for governing politicians to share their views on EU accession with two op-eds written by Prime Minister Vladimír Špidla and two by Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda. This

¹⁹ Key phrases: výhody členství v EU, nevýhody členství v EU, podpora vstupu do EU, proti vstupu do EU, proti členství v EU, důvody vstupu do EU, bilaterální spory, ztráta národní identity, ztráta české identity

Number of found/relevant articles: Blesk – 2/1, Hospodářské noviny – 68/27, Lidové noviny – 95/54, Mladá fronta DNES – 96/84, Právo – 76/40

was followed by Právo that published two interviews with Vladimír Špidla, and one op-ed written by Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan. The media seldom gave direct space to ODS politicians except for Lidové noviny which made an interview with the Deputy Chair of the Chamber of Deputies Ivan Langer. Lidové noviny also wrote about TV Nova and its director Vladimír Železný who swore to influence the referendum on the EU if it would increase quotas on European broadcasting. Právo and Lidové noviny also extensively covered the bilateral issues that emerged in the Czech Republic's EU accession process. The media gave space to the civil society representatives, religious leaders, union leaders, university representatives, academics, and even readers to express their opinions. Mladá fronta DNES surprisingly paid a lot of attention to the position of KSČM despite it being a party on the fringes of political representation. A clear ideological affiliation of any newspaper on this topic, however, was not found. All newspapers except for Blesk offered rather balanced perspectives and were critical of the government and the opposition, highlighting both the benefits as well as costs of EU accession.

Civil society as an actor in the EU accession process.

Most of the civil society supported the country's EU accession, although some marginal actors opposed it. Among the most visible promoters of EU membership were Monika MacDonagh-Pajerová with the movement "Yes for Europe" (*Ano pro Evropu*) and a new political party "Thank you, we're coming" (*Děkujeme, přicházíme*) established in 2001. The party supported Czech accession to the EU in the referendum by appealing to citizens that had lost faith in the government. Thank you, we're coming also argued against organization of the referendum as the risk of negative result was too high.²⁰ EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy was

²⁰ Josef Kopecký, 'Vzniká strana Děkujeme, přicházíme', *Hospodářské noviny*, 29 October 2001.

founded in 1998 by academic staff and students from the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University and tried to present a balanced account of benefits and potential risks of EU accession to the public. The Institute organized events, published the *Integration* magazine and organized educational programmes in cooperation with high schools. EUROPEUM also focused on practical aspects of EU accession such as the consequences of membership for entrepreneurs. Some environmental organisations also supported the country's EU accession as membership in the Union would lead to higher environmental standards.²¹ While the majority of the civil society and NGOs supported the Czech Republic's EU membership, the prospects of EU accession also brought together different marginal groups in protests against it – for example anarchists, radical antifascists, communists and right-wing extremists, who typically stood at different sides of the barricades.²²

Benefits and costs of EU accession in the Czech discourse

Significant differences can be identified in regard to specific benefits and costs of the Czech EU accession communicated by the main political parties. As outlined in the first chapter, while all major political parties in principle supported joining of the Union, their views varied on questions such as what the country would gain from membership, what extent of integration and future of the EU would be most beneficial, and what were acceptable costs associated with accession.

²¹ Based on interviews

²² Josef Kopecký and Aleš Vojíš, 'Komunisté a radikálové burcovali proti Evropské unii', *Hospodářské noviny*, 2 May 2003.

Benefits of EU accession: between economy, social standards and sovereignty

The ODS traditionally framed integration of the country into the EU as an inevitable process and confirmed its support for EU accession in a pre-referendum booklet “If into the EU, then with the ODS” (*Když do EU tak s ODS*),²³ but at the same time expressed criticism of numerous aspects of this integration. The benefits communicated to the public were predominantly of economic nature – the opportunities for Czech businesses created by joining the EU’s internal market and increased attractiveness for foreign investors.

The position of ODS was shaped also by its traditional preference of the USA and transatlantic alliance as the security provider for Europe in opposition to the Franco-German call for a build-up of European defence capabilities.

However, the ODS was simultaneously very sceptical about “Brussels bureaucracy” and the direction of European integration towards deepening in other areas at the cost of intergovernmentalism, for example in the foreign and security policy. Specifically on further integration in this area, the position of ODS was shaped also by its

traditional preference of the USA and transatlantic alliance as the security provider for Europe in opposition to the Franco-German call for a build-up of European defence capabilities.²⁴ Jan Zahradil, Vice President of the ODS representing the Czech Chamber of Deputies at the Convention on the Future of Europe, even left the meeting in Brussels in June 2003 early in protest against the supranational

²³ ODS, ‘Když do EU tak s ODS’, 2003, https://www.ods.cz/docs/programy/leaflet_EU.pdf.

²⁴ Sylvia-Yvonne Kaufmann, ‘Requirements for the Constitutional Treaty for a European Union Capable of Peace’ (European Convention, 11 April 2003), <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/CV-681-2003-INIT/en/pdf>.

proposals of the Convention.²⁵ Another negative aspect of EU accession emphasized by the ODS was the loss of sovereignty,²⁶ a historically sensitive topic in Czech society. The position of the ODS was thus ambivalent at best – while its members repeatedly emphasized that they supported EU accession and that there was no other alternative for the Czech Republic, they were very critical towards the Union in the public discussions, contributing to the divided public opinion.

ČSSD and other pro-European political parties also emphasized the economic benefits but included a stronger social dimension of EU membership, a positive impact on combating criminality, or improved environmental protection.

Under the governments led by the social democrats later during the accession process, the nature of negotiations as well as the issues under individual chapters were already better understood. The government and the negotiating team were able to communicate more nuanced benefits while more concrete opposing arguments also emerged. The reasoning behind the EU accession from the ČSSD

and other pro-European political parties also emphasized the economic benefits but included a stronger social dimension of EU membership, a positive impact on combating criminality, or improved environmental protection.²⁷ Naturally, the EU funds allocated to the country once it would join the Union was among the most attractive arguments for accession. The importance of the cohesion fund for the development of the poorer regions in the country was specifically underscored.²⁸ Some politicians and experts also advocated for the importance of the rule of law

²⁵ Markéta Kaclová et al., 'Zahradil Předčasně Opouští Jednání Konventu EU', *iRozhlas.Cz*, 12 June 2003, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/zahradil-predcasne-opousti-jednani-konventu-eu_200306121913_mkaclova.

²⁶ Erik Tabery, 'Chvála Negativní Volby', *Respekt*, 11 March 2002, <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2002/11/chvala-negativni-volby?srsId=AfmBOood3U6XY-kPocQixH0UnZyajFAeLu1tQEXoUA7s6ZVMf-PWhGwl>.

²⁷ Kavan, 'EU, předvolební boj a rány pod pás'.

²⁸ Kavan.

reforms and strict conditionality of the EU in this area, arguing that there should be a political consensus on the clear benefits of adopting reforms to curb corruption, assets stripping or strengthen the fight against organized crime.²⁹

Costs of EU accession: Czech pride and transitional periods

The criticism and scepticism towards the EU ranged from concrete and realistic concerns about economic consequences, in particular for Czech farmers and businesses, the abstract fear of loss of sovereignty, to disinformation without any real grounds. The notion of the loss of sovereignty, while frequently used in public discussions, lacked concrete arguments and substance. Some of the arguments along these lines focused on the alleged ban on the Czech “rum”, the tradition of homemade fruit distillates, and some other typically Czech products.³⁰ Certain sensitivity from a part of the political elites was also evident regarding the European Commission’s criticism towards the country during the accession negotiations and the EU requirements were often viewed as patronizing.³¹

On the other hand, the more justified considerations revolved around the expected inflation of prices after accession, the doubts about the ability of Czech enterprises to compete with those of older EU Member States, or the fear regarding increased unemployment rates. In the later stages of negotiations, the transition periods in two areas became the subject of a heated domestic discussion. The first was the transition period restricting the freedom of movement of labour from the Czech Republic to the EU for up to 7 years,³²

²⁹ Karel Vodička, ‘Korupčníci Mají z EU Strach’, *Mladá Fronta DNES*, 1 November 2000, sec. Názory.

³⁰ ‘Podpora vstupu do EU spíše mírně klesá’, *Mladá fronta DNES*, 7 May 2002.

³¹ ‘Češi v EU, Čtenáři MF DNES’, *Mladá Fronta DNES*, 7 May 2001.

³² European Union, ‘Treaty of Accession’ (2003), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2003.236.01.0346.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2003%3A236%3ATOC.

However, three EU countries opted out from this provision and opened their job markets immediately – Ireland, United Kingdom and Sweden.

touching one of the most important benefits of membership in the eyes of the Czech population. The argument of the negotiators that they managed to achieve a transition period for buying land and real estate by foreigners (free movement of capital) in exchange did not calm the public nor the opposition as they argued that the national legislation already allowed the foreigners to do so in other ways. The second sensitive issue was the transition period for gradual access to the Common Agricultural Policy direct payments,³³ disadvantaging the newly acceded countries in the first years of membership and making the domestic agricultural sector potentially vulnerable to import of cheaper products from the EU Member States. The government countered that the Czech agricultural sector would still benefit financially from EU accession, with incomes growing by 60% even without the direct payments.³⁴

Bilateral issues in the Czech EU accession process

Bilateral disputes and dealing with the past also negatively influenced the discussions about EU accession in the public discourse. Two dominant questions were raised in the neighbouring countries – the question of nuclear safety and the Czech nuclear powerplant Temelín specifically, brought up by Austria, and the question of Beneš-Decrees (laws used at the end of World War II as the grounds for expulsion of Germans and Hungarians from postwar Czechoslovakia and confiscation of their property).

While Austria's objections to the Temelín powerplant did not have a significant impact on Czech public opinion and the issue was solved by a compromise between the Czech and Austrian governments in 2000, the question of Beneš-

³³ European Union.

³⁴ Jiří Nádoba and Jan Cizner, 'Zemědělství brzdí vstup do EU', *iDnes.cz*, 27 April 2002, https://www.idnes.cz/ekonomika/domaci/zemedelstvi-brzdi-vstup-do-eu.A020426_221353_ekonomika_was.

Decrees represented a sensitive topic for a part of the Czech population. Despite the reassurance by the German government that the decrees would not be used as an obstacle to the Czech Republic's EU accession, the lobby of the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft (an organization representing Sudeten Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia) in the European Parliament and some Austrian politicians insisted the laws would need to be repealed.³⁵ Eventually, the issue of the decrees was closed in 2002 with a decision of the European Parliament based on a special legal study assessing the complementarity of Czech national legislation with the EU acquis.³⁶

Public opinion and accession referendum: Czechs as the sceptic Europeans

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Czech (and previously Czechoslovak) citizens

As the EU accession negotiations started and it became widely understood that the process would not be easy and the country would need to fulfil a number of difficult conditions, the support gradually declined.

viewed the EU as something abstract but very positive, representing the country as part of the West. The idea of the Union was very vague, associated primarily with opportunities for the young generation, economic prosperity, and freedom to travel and work abroad. In 1993, the support for EU membership was expressed by 85% of respondents.³⁷ As

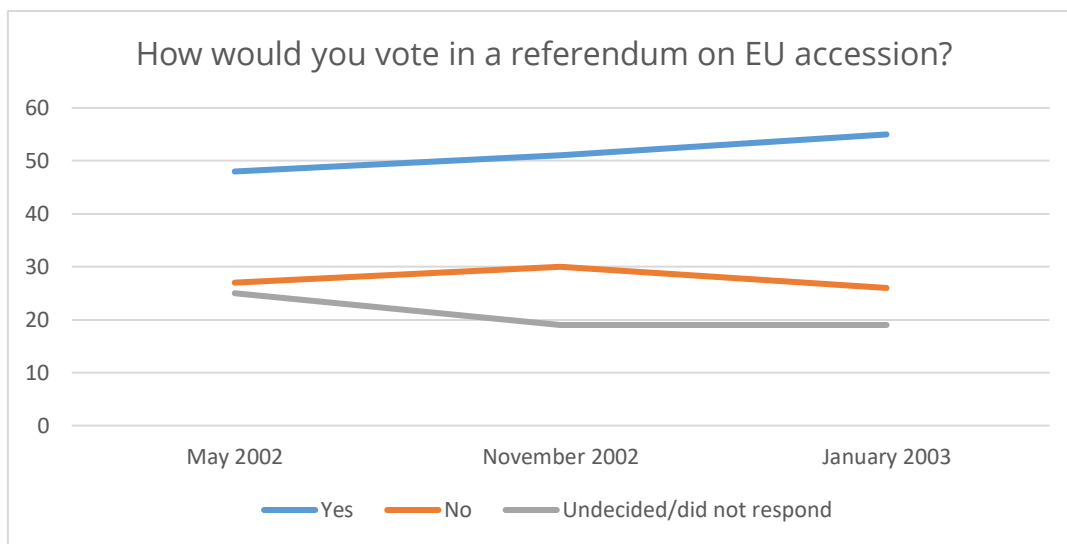
³⁵ Pavel Telička and Karel Barták, *Kterak jsme vstupovali* (Prague: ČTK, Paseka, 2003).

³⁶ Jochen A. Frowein, Ulf Bernitz, and Christopher Prout, 'Legal Opinion on the Beneš-Decrees and the Accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union', Working Paper (Luxembourg: European Parliament, October 2002).

³⁷ '20 Years of Czech EU Membership in the Attitudes of the Czech Public' (Prague: STEM, 1 May 2024), <https://www.stem.cz/en/20-years-of-czech-eu-membership-in-the-attitudes-of-the-czech-public/#:~:text=In%20November%201993%2C%2085%25%20of,to%20join%20the%20European%20Community.>

the EU accession negotiations started and it became widely understood that the process would not be easy and the country would need to fulfil a number of difficult conditions, the support gradually declined. During the accession process, the Czech public was among the more sceptic candidate countries, after the enlargement-cautious Malta, the Baltics and at times Poland.³⁸

How would you vote in a referendum on EU accession?			
	Yes	No	Undecided/did not respond
May 2002	48	27	25
November 2002	51	30	19
January 2003	55	26	19



Data from CVVM research, Miluše Rezková, 'Česká Veřejnost k Evropské Unii', *Naše Společnost* 1, no. 1-2 (2003): 7-13, adapted by the authors.

³⁸ 'Central and Eastern Eurobarometer: Public Opinion and the European Union (20 Countries' Survey)' (European Commission, March 1997); 'Central and Eastern Eurobarometer: Public Opinion and the European Union (10 Countries' Survey)' (European Commission, March 1998); The Gallup Organization Hungary, 'Applicant Countries EUROBAROMETER' (European Commission, April 2000); The Gallup Organization, 'Candidate Countries Eurobarometer: Social Situation in the Countries Applying for European Union Membership' (Budapest: European Commission, October 2002); Magyar Gallup Intézet, 'Eurobarometer: Public Opinion in the Candidate Countries' (European Commission, September 2003). Available at 'Central & Eastern EB Study Profiles', GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, <https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/data-and-documentation/central-eastern-eb/study-profiles> and 'Candidate Countries EB Study Profiles', GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, <https://www.gesis.org/en/eurobarometer-data-service/data-and-documentation/candidate-countries-eb/study-profiles>.

Interestingly, the most supportive of EU accession among the Czech public were the voters of centre-right parties, including the ODS (with 60-70% of voters of centre-right parties supporting EU membership).³⁹ This fact can contribute to the explanation of the ambivalent position of the ODS representatives to the EU – while critical of the Union or even personally against EU membership, the party's representatives had to take into account the preferences of their electorate. On the other hand, the support for EU membership among the voters of the pro-European ČSSD was only over 40%, a similar number to those who were undecided. Unsurprisingly, the group least supportive of EU membership were the voters of KSČM.⁴⁰ According to the polls, the main dividing lines in the population were age and education (with the youngest and more educated citizens expressing more pro-EU views). Pensioners and unemployed citizens were most likely to express fear of EU membership. Women were generally more undecided, expressing both less positive and negative stances than men.⁴¹

Support for EU accession as a reflection of the highs and lows in the negotiations

Compared to other countries of the region, the Czech society typically had higher rates of negative views on EU accession and those who were undecided.⁴² The main reasons for this scepticism were concerns about the lowering of living standards, negative consequences for Czech agriculture and traditional industries, immigration from the East, and loss of national sovereignty. On the other hand, the main benefits of EU membership in the population's view were the freedom to travel and work abroad – both for practical and symbolic reasons (as a manifest

³⁹ 'Jak vidíme vstup naší země do EU?' (Prague: STEM, 19 December 2001), <https://www.stem.cz/jak-vidime-vstup-nasi-zeme-do-eu/>.

⁴⁰ 'Jak vidíme vstup naší země do EU?'

⁴¹ Miluše Rezková, 'Česká Veřejnost k Evropské Unii', *Naše Společnost* 1, no. 1–2 (2003): 7–13.

⁴² Rezková.

of freedom compared to the decades of restrictions under the communist regime) – better quality of education, environmental protection, or more export opportunities.⁴³ However, the transition period imposed by the EU on the free movement of labour from the new member states represented a hard awakening for those who expected to be able to work in Austria or Germany immediately after joining the Union. The deal and the restrictions on access to EU funds in the first years of membership were criticized by the ODS which blamed the government for not being able to negotiate better conditions.⁴⁴ Prior to the referendum, there were even voices claiming that the referendum result should be negative in order to postpone the Czech EU accession for a later time when the country would be better prepared and the EU would also lower its conditions.⁴⁵

The discussions around Beneš-Decrees contributed to the decrease in EU membership support among citizens as they were used as another argument about the threat to Czech national sovereignty.

The public opinion on EU membership was also largely a reflection of domestic issues. From the testimonies prior to the referendum, it is evident that a certain part of the population viewed the referendum as a vote on the government and expected that a negative outcome would force the government to resign. On

the other hand, some hoped that EU accession would be the remedy for the dissatisfying economic and political situation in the country. In autumn 2002, the increase in views opposed to EU membership can be tied also to the campaign prior to the parliamentary elections, with the ODS and anti-EU parties using the topic to mobilize voters against the ČSSD government. The discussions around Beneš-Decrees contributed to the decrease in EU membership support among

⁴³ Rezková.

⁴⁴ Johanna Grohová, 'V unii je hůř, než nám tvrdí vláda', *Mladá fronta DNES*, 19 December 2002.

⁴⁵ Petr Kolář, 'Komunisté vyzvou voliče, aby hlasovali proti vstupu do EU', *Lidové noviny*, 8 March 2003.

citizens as they were used as another argument about the threat to Czech national sovereignty.⁴⁶ Similarly, the drop in public support in the previous year correlated with the start of the negotiations around transition periods including the sensitive issue of freedom of movement of labour.⁴⁷

The historical referendum: Voting for a European future

The referendum on EU accession was held on 13 and 14 June 2003 and has been so far the only referendum in the history of the Czech Republic. In February 2003, the government adopted a communication strategy aimed to increase citizens' awareness of the benefits and costs associated with EU membership. In total, 200 million CZK (around 6,3 mil. EUR) was allocated for the campaign for activities conducted by the government, regional information centres in the regions, special print editions, events, public opinion polls, and for information activities carried out by NGOs.⁴⁸ From this amount, 60 million CZK (approx. 1,9 mil. EUR) was allocated for a media campaign that was limited to six weeks prior to the referendum and had more of a persuasive character.⁴⁹ Although there were accusations that the government distributed the funds only to activities promoting EU membership and not those critical of the accession, the government representatives repeatedly claimed that the funds were not intended to promote only the positives but to objectively inform the citizens.

⁴⁶ 'Kvůli dekretům klesla podpora vstupu do EU', *Právo*, 17 May 2002.

⁴⁷ 'Podpora vstupu do EU dále klesá', *Právo*, 14 August 2001.

⁴⁸ 'Informační Kampaň k Referendu o Vstupu Do EU', *Radiožurnál*, 14 March 2003, <https://radiozurnal.rozhlas.cz/informacni-kampan-k-referendu-o-vstupu-do-eu-6351354>; Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky, 'Financování Kampaně Vstupu ČR Do EU', Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky, 5 March 2020, https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/vyrocní_zpravy_a_dokumenty/poskytnute_informace/financovani_kampane_vstupu_cr_do_eu.html.

⁴⁹ 'Informační kampaň k referendu o vstupu do EU'.

The Czech government decided not to set the 50% turnout as a condition for the referendum's validity, as was the case in Poland and Slovakia. Although the 50% turnout did not represent a requirement for the referendum to be legally binding, the interviews showed that it was strongly associated with the legitimacy of the decision to join the EU and there was a significant concern on the side of the government that the participation would not reach the desired threshold.

The NGOs proved to be a crucial partner in informing the citizens, both during the EU accession process and in the pre-referendum campaign. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the main coordinator of the activities and allocation of funds dedicated for the information campaign viewed NGOs as the actors best capable of organizing activities at the local level, directly reaching the citizens who were not interested in the EU issues.⁵⁰ Apart from the special funding from the government, the NGOs and civil society also received support from abroad through embassies and special grants to inform the Czech citizens about EU membership prior to the referendum. The incentives from the donors were met with high interest and activity from the side of the NGOs with a large number of organizations engaging in the campaign at the national, regional, and local levels.⁵¹

Despite the government representatives' claims that the campaign aimed to inform, not to persuade, in the later stage the campaign focused primarily on selected target groups – women and pensioners. These groups were identified as undecided due to prevailing concerns regarding membership implications but likely to vote yes eventually.⁵² Especially the results among the pensioners indicate that the campaign was successful – while according to the pre-referendum polls, the Czechs above 60 years old had been expected to express the lowest support

⁵⁰ 'Informační kampaň k referendu o vstupu do EU'.

⁵¹ Bartovic, interview.

⁵² Simona Holecová, 'Stát osloví kvůli EU hlavně ženy a důchodce', *Hospodářské noviny*, 1 April 2003, <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-12579040-stat-oslovi-kvuli-eu-hlavne-zeny-a-duchodce>.

for EU accession, in the end, 79% of them voted “yes”, representing a slightly more positive score than the overall result.⁵³

Considering the divided public opinion during the accession process, the results of the referendum can be assessed as positive – 77,3% of voters voted “yes” and 22,7% voted “no” with a turnout of 55,2%.⁵⁴ Although the expressed support among Czech citizens was the lowest among the Visegrad countries, it was still higher than in Malta, Estonia, and Latvia. In terms of turnout, lower participation in the referendum was recorded only in Hungary and Slovakia.⁵⁵

Conclusion

The Czech Republic’s accession to the European Union was a historical milestone that reflected the nation’s determination to confirm its place in Europe and as part of the West. This journey, from the early 1990s to the 2003 referendum, was defined by general political consensus, active civil society engagement, and changing public opinion. The broad support for EU membership among mainstream political parties underscored the strategic importance of European integration but their ideological differences shaped contrasting narratives about its costs and benefits. The ODS’s “Euro-realist” stance, focused on national sovereignty and opposing deeper European integration, contrasted with the ČSSD’s pro-European advocacy. These differences reflected the broader debate in Czech society about balancing national sovereignty and the benefits of integration into the EU.

⁵³ Mikuláš Kroupa, ‘Kdo nejvíce překvapil v referendu o vstupu do EU?’, *Radio Prague International*, 16 June 2003, <https://cesky.radio.cz/kdo-nejvice-prekvapil-v-referendu-o-vstupu-do-eu-8074967>.

⁵⁴ Český statistický úřad, ‘Celostátní Referenda’, Český statistický úřad, 14 June 2003, <https://csu.gov.cz/celostatni-referenda>.

⁵⁵ ‘European Union Candidate Countries: 2003 Referenda Results’ (Congressional Research Service, 26 September 2003), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21624/3>.

Civil society and the media played a key role in the integration process. Civil society and NGOs facilitated grassroots engagement, explaining to the public what joining the EU would involve and addressing the citizens' concerns. Meanwhile, the media kept the public informed and gave space to both supporters and critics of membership. The 2003 referendum served as the culmination of these efforts, with 77.3% of voters endorsing the Czech Republic's EU membership. While this level of support was among the lowest among the countries of the region, the positive result reflected the sense of belonging to the West in the Czech society and the citizens' understanding of the numerous long-term benefits of membership which would outweigh the short-term costs.

As the Czech Republic marks two decades as an EU member state, the lessons of its accession path remain highly relevant today. The tension between the concerns over national sovereignty on the one hand and the desire to be part of the West and to deepen cooperation with European partners on the other seems to still be defining the Czech position in the EU. It also reveals lessons for countries aspiring for EU membership nowadays – the importance of engagement with different domestic stakeholders, proactive and open communication towards the public, and the benefits of close cooperation between the political elites, civil society, and media throughout the challenging process of EU accession.

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