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Czech Republic: Sending mixed signals

The Czech Republic has benefited from European Union membership both economically and politically. On the tenth anniversary of the country's EU accession, the Czech government commissioned a study – “Economic Evaluation of the Czech Republic's Membership in the EU after Ten Years” –, which estimated that economic benefits from the first ten years of Czech EU membership equate to around €115 billion and that EU membership helped the Czech economy to grow by an extra 1.1 percent annually.¹ Moreover, the country's net budgetary position during this period has reached more than €12 billion. Politically, thanks to EU-driven reforms, the country has significantly raised its standards of human rights protection and strengthened the rule of law (adopting anti-discriminatory legislation, consumer protection legislation, judiciary reform, and so on). The Czech Republic has also quickly become capable of using the EU to promote its foreign policy priorities. Still, the country is perceived as being among those that are lukewarm towards European integration, and whose political cohesion with the rest of the EU is low.

In the Czech Republic, as elsewhere, the question of cohesion is often limited to funding from the EU budget for infrastructural and “soft” projects or to economic convergence with the rest of the Union. This limited understanding of cohesion is shared by the political elite as well as citizens. The broader meanings of cohesion suggested by the EU Cohesion Monitor – the willingness to cooperate and to act collectively towards a common purpose – are underrepresented in the public debate. Therefore, Czech citizens are not fully aware of what the European integration project entails.

When the Czech Republic entered the EU in 2004, its main strategic goal was to become a full-fledged member of the Union. This meant to accede as quickly as possible to the Schengen area and the eurozone, and to get rid of limitations

¹ “Ekonomické vyhodnocení členství České republiky v EU po deseti letech”, Government of the Czech Republic, May 2014, available at http://www.vlada.cz/assets/evropske-zalezitosti/analyzy-EU/SEZUV-2014-1-Ekonomicke_vyhodnoceni_clenstvi_Ceske_republiky_v_EU_po_deseti_let.pdf.

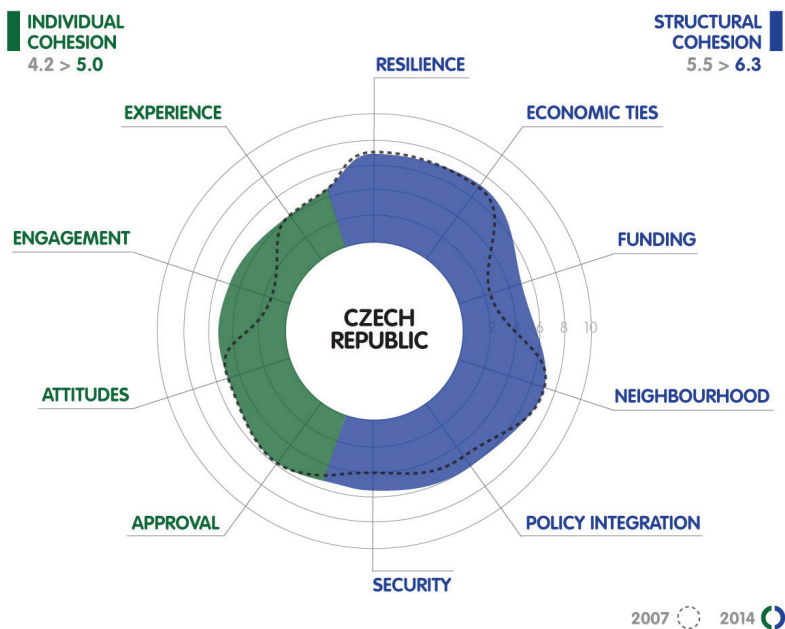
on the free movement of workers. It achieved its aims on the Schengen area and free movement of workers, but accession to the eurozone was halted, mainly because of the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in 2009. This year was important from other points of view as well: in 2009, the Czech Republic held the Presidency of the Council of the EU and Czech satisfaction with membership in the Union peaked at 69 percent. Since then, the population has become more negative towards membership. The last similar survey from September 2015 showed that only 39 percent of Czechs are satisfied with Czech membership in the EU.

A reality check

The Monitor presents a mainly accurate version of the reality as well as the image of the country. Both individual and structural cohesion increased between 2007 and 2014. However, the overall level of cohesion is important too: the Czech Republic is among the EU countries that have reached a relatively high level of structural cohesion (seventh place in the EU), but on individual cohesion, the country is among the three worst EU member states (only Greece and Hungary rank lower).

On structural cohesion indicators, the only indicator on which the Czech score fell was Resilience. As in other countries, this was mainly because of the growing debt-to-GDP ratio. On Economic Ties, the Czech Republic ranks together with Slovakia at fourth place in the EU. This is natural, given the overwhelming orientation of the Czech exports towards EU countries as well as the high level of foreign direct investment, mainly from other EU countries. The Czech Republic, together with other states that entered the EU in 2004, increased its level of cohesion in Funding (the amount of funding from investment and structural funds increased dramatically after 2007) and Policy Integration (thanks to entry to the Schengen area).

On individual cohesion indicators, the situation remained more or less the same in Experience, Attitudes, and Approval, but increased dramatically on Engagement. However, the overall level of individual cohesion is still among the lowest in the EU, and the increase on Engagement does not fully reflect the reality. For example, voter turnout in the last European Parliament elections in 2014 was the second lowest in the EU, and there has been no significant decrease of the share of the anti-EU/populist parties in national or European Parliament elections since 2007.



Between cooperation and obstruction

The Czech Republic's willingness to cooperate and act collectively in the EU depends, to a large extent, on the composition of its political representation. During the first five years of its EU membership, as it attempted to become a full-fledged member of the Union, the country demonstrated strong willingness to cooperate. But the next five years showed the completely opposite. President Václav Klaus caused delays in the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and took every opportunity to criticise the EU. The government refused to join the Euro Plus Pact or the Fiscal Compact and halted Czech preparations for the introduction of the euro. The country obtained a negative image as being a troublemaker and a policy killer. The current Socialist-led government appointed in 2014 decided to reverse this negative trend and image; it declared that the strategic interest of the Czech Republic lies in the gravity centre of European integration and restated the long-term commitment of the Czech Republic to introduce the euro. But this positive trend was disrupted by the migration crisis, on which the country has adopted a very negative position, especially towards relocation mechanisms. The Czech Republic was in a difficult position: it had to balance its obligation to defend the interests of the Visegrad group (of which it held the presidency) and its desire to preserve top-level relations with the "old" member states, especially Germany.

Most Czech political leaders acknowledge that there is no alternative for the Czech Republic to EU membership, and that in the long term, the EU and the Czech Republic can prosper only if cohesion among EU member states is strengthened. However, they are incapable of and sometimes also reluctant about explaining this to citizens. According to surveys, Czech citizens have some of the most negative opinions in the whole Union on the EU and their country's membership in it. But this Euroscepticism is fortunately not deeply rooted, and derives mainly from the fact that they either do not have enough information on the EU or the information they have is inaccurate. As a result, European integration is not a clear project for Czechs, and thus the public expresses confused signals on the EU. For example, according to the last Eurobarometer, 48 percent of Czechs do not want more decisions to be taken at the EU level (with 44 percent in favour). But when asked about individual policies, on all of them with the exception of the Economic and Monetary Union, the majority of Czechs support more decision making at the EU level.