



Czech Republic

Assessment: Good

Trend: ⇔

Capital: Prague

Type of Government: Parliamentary Democracy

Head of Government: President Vaclav Havel
(since 2 February 1993)

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Cyril Svoboda

Population: 10,264,212

Human Development Index Ranking 2002: 33

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Czech Republic has a **good** overall record of support for democracy abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has undertaken initiatives to promote democratic development in other European countries, and has exhibited a commitment to cooperate with major international agencies in devising effective ways to allocate aid to emerging democracies.¹ The Czech Republic has participated in election monitoring missions throughout the European and Central Asian post-communist area. It has criticized the manipulation of the electoral process in Belarus and in the former Yugoslavia during the presidency of Slobodan Milosevic. As a member of both the UN and NATO, it has supported actions ranging from imposing sanctions to issuing verbal condemnations intended to isolate and punish dictators and their repressive regimes. Czech soldiers have participated in many NATO operations, including in the Balkans, where the international military presence has sought to bolster the prospects for democratic stability.

Following the Velvet Revolution that swept away the communist regime in 1989, Czechoslovakia formally broke into the two countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. After an initial period of turbulence the Czech Republic has made significant strides toward consolidating democratic rule and has been eager to help extend democratic principles and practices around the world. As a member of NATO and a candidate for European Union (EU) membership, the Czech Republic is integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures and continuing its economic transition while setting a sound example for other “awakening” democracies in the post-communist world and elsewhere.

The Czech Republic’s record in promoting democracy internationally is likely to remain stable or steadily improve, as its own democratic development deepens and its capacity for broader international involvement increases.

FOREIGN RELATIONS BACKGROUND

The top foreign policy priority of the Czech Republic has been the country’s reintegration with the West while building a robust, dynamic economy. It has achieved good results on both fronts. Since 1992, its political institutions have matured rapidly with successive elections meeting international standards. Internationally recognized human rights are guaranteed in the Czech Constitution and observed in practice. President Vaclav Havel, a former political prisoner under the communist regime, is a world-renowned advocate of human rights and social justice. He draws frequently on this moral authority to promote democratic values and practices abroad.

The Czech Republic’s integration into the world economy has moved forward rapidly. The country entered the Organization for European Cooperation and Development (OECD) in December 1995, the first former communist country to do so. It has concluded an association agreement with the EU and is a prime candidate for early accession. The country also is a member of the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.



Since the fall of communism in 1989, the EU has been providing both technical and financial assistance to the Czech Republic.² During the first few years, assistance focused on the transformation of the centrally planned economy to a functioning market system. Funding from the EU and the U.S. also helped the Czech Republic to consolidate its new democratic institutions. More recently, EU aid has been geared to prepare the country for EU accession.

The goal of reintegrating with the West, and promoting democratic development both in the country and abroad, has been largely carried out through the government's effort to join major international organizations. The Czechs were founding members of NATO's Partnership for Peace, and have participated in numerous joint exercises with the U.S. and other allies. Czech soldiers served alongside U.S. soldiers in the Gulf War and in the British-supervised sector in Bosnia. They took active part in Operation Desert Storm and have participated in UN peacekeeping operations in Croatia and Kosovo.

However, residual democracy-related challenges at home, over and above expected resource constraints, are impeding the Czech Republic's ability to take a more active role in promoting democracy abroad. Certainly the basic foundations and institutions of democracy and the rule of law are firmly in place. Yet many observers have criticized the country's political system for being too centralized, retarding the growth of a civil society and limiting the ability of citizens to influence both national and local politics. While numerous civic groups have been established, most have suffered from inadequate resources and poor organizational and planning skills, according to a 1993 analysis by the National Democratic Institute. Also, the NGO sector as a whole has not been held in high regard by the government or by the public-at-large, thereby limiting citizen impact on public policy.³

Another persistent problem revolves around discrimination against the Roma population and other minorities. Even though the Czech government launched a major campaign against racism in the country, the Roma population still does not enjoy in practice the same liberties as other citizens. The hope is that this campaign will raise awareness and improve living conditions for Roma and other minority groups in the Czech Republic.⁴

The transformation of the Czech Republic from a recipient of international assistance, including

in the democracy sphere, to a modest donor is a significant and inspiring turn. The government has used humanitarian and development aid to help alleviate suffering and strengthen nascent democratic institutions in Europe and other regions.

At the same time, the Czech Republic's preoccupation with its ties to the more powerful economies of the EU and NATO member states also has diverted policymakers' attention away from urgent democracy and human rights situations such as East Timor, Tibet, and the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. Government support for international democracy often does not go beyond the boundaries established by the international community's dominant actors and their narrowly drawn economic and political interests. That is to say, the Czech Republic has tended to follow the lead of the large, established democracies such that extensive violations of democracy and human rights norms in many countries very often do not appear on Prague's foreign policy agenda unless the issue first becomes part of the agenda of the Czech Republic's more influential allies.

RESPONSE TO OVERTHROW OF DEMOCRATICALLY-ELECTED GOVERNMENTS

Since Vaclav Havel's Civic Forum movement won national elections in 1990, the Czech Republic has issued strong public statements condemning coups d'etat around the world and has supported UN sanctions against the offending regimes. President Havel declared the 1999 military coup in Pakistan an unconstitutional measure and reiterated the importance of a rapid restoration of democracy. The Foreign Ministry, which closely monitored events as they unfolded, condemned the coup and called on the military leaders to respect democratic principles and parliamentary procedure.⁵ The Czech Republic also has supported EU declarations on threats to democracy, such as that regarding the 1999 military coup in Cote d'Ivoire.⁶

In the European region there have been no instances of coups or major, sudden disruptions in the democratic order, although some leaders have misused democratic processes to subsequently undermine democratic governance. In Yugoslavia and Belarus, the Milosevic and Lukashenko regimes, respectively, came to power through elections but quickly moved to consolidate autocratic power and undermine democratic norms, prompting blunt criticism from President Havel and other Czech government officials. These cases are dealt with in



subsequent sections.

RESPONSE TO MANIPULATION OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

Once the integrity of their own domestic national electoral process was ensured, the Czech Republic became more confident in promoting democratic reform beyond its borders. Eager to share lessons learned from its own experience, the government became an active participant in election monitoring missions throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the new countries of the former Soviet Union. It joined fellow members of the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN in speaking out against electoral malpractice.

The Czech Republic, along with many Western governments, strongly criticized the manipulations of the electoral process by the Lukashenko regime in Belarus during both presidential and parliamentary elections. It has continued to condemn the repressive practices of the Belarus government. In a recent visit to Belarus, Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman refused to meet with President Lukashenko unless dissidents were invited to, and attended, the meeting.⁷

The Czech Republic also worked within the UN framework to condemn electoral malfeasance in the former Yugoslavia during the presidency of Slobodan Milosevic. Later, in concert with other Western governments, the Czech Republic supported the opposition student movement, which finally succeeded in ousting Milosevic. In part because of limited resources and capacity, the Czech Republic has tended to rely more on public criticism than on creating or directly financing actual programs to combat electoral fraud.

In Ukraine, President Kuchma has presided over deteriorating political conditions that have weakened the country's fledgling democratic institutions and processes. The electoral process has suffered, as well as irregularities in both parliamentary and presidential elections have been documented and questions have been raised about the lack of a level playing field. The Czech Republic has expressed its concern over the concentration of political power in the presidency, the erosion of basic rights and electoral shortcomings in Ukraine.

PROMOTION OF INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRACY

The Czech Republic has participated in

many initiatives and actions taken by international organizations in promoting democracy around the world. It has forged particularly close links with Poland, another former communist country that likewise has sought to play a significant role in democracy promotion beyond its borders.

Czech foreign policy emphasizes support for political and economic development, including poverty reduction, access to education and health care, gender equality, and promoting sustainable development.⁸ These are viewed as essential conditions in which democracy can flourish. Its success in integrating into Euro-Atlantic and other international institutional structures has given the Czech Republic mechanisms through which to play a more active role in the diffusion of democratic ideals and practices.

In one notable example, the Czech Republic is a member of the convening group, or steering committee, of the Community of Democracies, the first-ever gathering of the world's democratic governments that met in Warsaw, Poland in June 2000. In that capacity, the Czech Republic helped to organize the Warsaw gathering and is involved in planning the next ministerial meeting to be held in Seoul, Korea in November 2002. A major goal of the Community of Democracies is to increase inter-governmental cooperation to strengthen democratic institutions and practices where they have already begun to take hold.

The Czech government also provides modest funding to, and works cooperatively with, some indigenous NGOs that are engaged in humanitarian and democracy building efforts internationally. For example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior have supported various projects and activities of the People in Need Foundation, a Czech nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that promotes democracy and provides humanitarian assistance in twenty-five countries throughout the world.⁹

POLICY TOWARDS ENTRENCHED DICTATORSHIPS

Primarily through its membership in international organizations, the Czech Republic has supported policies and resolutions, including the imposition of sanctions, in order to isolate authoritarian regimes and/or attempt to leverage political change.

In the case of Belarus, President Lukashenko has steadily enhanced his personal power while violating human rights and limiting



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civil and political rights such as freedom of assembly and freedom of speech.¹⁰ President Havel has, on numerous occasions, expressed concern about the concentration of authoritarian power in Belarus, criticizing Lukashenko by name, and expressing solidarity with the opposition democratic forces by issuing public statements of support. Some Czech NGOs have worked with their counterparts in Belarus to strengthen civil society and grassroots democracy efforts.

Outside of the European region, the Czech Republic has forcefully condemned the repressive Cuban Government for violating basic human rights

and played a prominent role at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in calling attention to the denial of human rights in Cuba and spearheading, along with Poland, resolutions criticizing the Castro regime.¹¹

In 1999, as a brand new member of NATO, the Czech Republic participated in the military operation against the Milosevic regime and had previously been a staunch backer of UN sanctions. The Czech government later became a very supportive voice on behalf of the Kostunica government and reconstruction efforts in Serbia.

¹ One example of Czech activity within this area is a MFA-sponsored conference held in September 2002 to launch a broad discussion on foreign development assistance in the Czech Republic and other EU accession countries. Official Government web site for the Czech Republic Accessed June 1, 2002

² Official European Web Site <<http://europa.eu.int>> 24 June 2002

³ National Democratic Institute for International Affairs Online <www.ndi.org> 14 June 2002.

⁴ Information obtained at the Embassy of the Czech Republic, Washington, DC, 10 July 2002.

⁵ "President Havel is disturbed by the situation in Pakistan." Czech News Agency 13 Oct. 1999.

⁶ Declaration of the Presidency on behalf of the European Union on the military coup in Ivory Coast. Brussels 7 Jan. 2000. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/news/01_00/pesc_99_129.htm>

⁷ Interview with Press Secretary at the Embassy of the Czech Republic, 25 June 2002 Washington, D.C.

⁸ Official web cite of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic < <http://www.mzv.cz>> 5 June 2002.

⁹ People in Need Foundation. Annual Report 2000.

¹⁰ Available at <www.belcentrum.org>

¹¹ Information obtained from the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Washington D.C., Press Office, 10 June 2002.