



▶ EUROPE

*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Covering 30,450 square miles (78,866 square kilometers), the Czech Republic is just smaller than South Carolina. It includes three principal geographic regions: Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Bohemia comprises roughly the western two-thirds of the country. Moravia occupies nearly one-third of the eastern portion. Silesia is a relatively small area in the northeast near the Polish border. It is dominated by coal fields and steel mills centered around the city of Ostrava.

Mountain ranges nearly surround the country, forming natural boundaries with several countries. The interior of Bohemia is relatively flat, while Moravia has gently rolling hills. Bohemia's rivers flow north to the Labe (Elbe) River, and Moravia's rivers flow south to the Danube. Bohemia is dominated by industry, particularly in the northern and western regions. Moravia is largely agricultural.

A continental climate prevails. Summers are moderate. High temperatures are rare but may occur in July. Winters often are cold with snow, particularly in the mountains; temperatures are usually below freezing.

**History.** In the fifth century, Slavic tribes began settling the area, and by the middle of the ninth century they lived in a loose confederation known as the Great Moravian Empire. Its brief history ended in 907 with the invasion of the nomadic Magyars (ancestors of today's Hungarians). The Slovak region became subject to Hungarian rule, while Czechs developed the Bohemian Empire, centered in Prague. In the 14th century, under the leadership of King Charles IV, Prague became a cultural and political capital that rivaled Paris. In the 15th century, Bohemia was a center of the Protestant Reformation led by Jan Hus, who became a martyr and national hero when he was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1415. Civil war in Bohemia

and events elsewhere in Europe led the Czechs (as well as people in Hungary and Slovakia) to become part of the Hapsburg (Austro-Hungarian) Empire in 1526.

When the Hapsburg Empire dissolved at the end of World War I (1918), Czech and Slovak lands were united to form a new Czecho-Slovak state (the hyphen was dropped in 1920). Tomas Masaryk became the first president. Democracy flourished for a time, but the country was not able to withstand German aggression. In 1938 Hitler annexed the Sudetenland, a region in the northwest where many German-speaking people lived. By 1939, all Czech lands had fallen into German possession. The Czechoslovak people then suffered through World War II, in which more than 350,000 citizens (250,000 Jews) lost their lives. After the war, three million Germans were forced out of the country.

Liberated in 1945 by Allied forces, Czechoslovakia held elections in 1946 under Soviet guidance. Left-wing parties performed well, and by 1948 the Communists had seized control of the government. The Soviet-style state promoted rapid industrialization in the 1950s. Social and economic policies began to be liberalized in the 1960s. This change led to discussions about easing political restrictions. In 1968, reform-minded Alexander Dubček, a Slovak, assumed leadership and put into motion a series of reforms known as "socialism with a human face." But a Soviet-led army crushed the movement. The Communist Party was purged of liberals, and reforms were abolished.

In the 1970s, many dissident groups organized against the government. Members of these groups joined with workers, university students, and others in peaceful demonstrations in 1989 in what was called the Velvet Revolution. A crackdown

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on a student protest in November 1989 prompted a general strike that led General Secretary Miloš Jakeš to resign. Dubček returned to prominence and was elected leader of Parliament. In 1990, Václav Havel, dissident playwright and leader of the Civic Forum party, became president.

Full multiparty elections under a new constitution were held in 1992. Differences between Slovak and Czech leaders on such issues as resource distribution, infrastructure investment, and the course of economic reform led the two governments to peacefully split into two sovereign states on 1 January 1993. Havel was reelected president of the Czech Republic; Václav Klaus continued as prime minister. With widespread support, Klaus launched an impressive program of economic reform.

Political infighting and economic stagnation increased following the 1996 elections. A financial scandal forced Klaus to resign in November 1997. Josef Tošovský (not affiliated with any party) served as caretaker of the government until elections in June 1998. The Czech Republic became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in March 1999 and joined the European Union (EU) in 2004.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** The Czech Republic's population of 10.25 million is decreasing slightly. About 90 percent is Bohemian and 4 percent is Moravian. Ethnic Slovaks (3 percent) also live in the Republic. The rest of the population is comprised of several groups: Poles, Silesians, Germans, Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Russians, and Greeks. The Roma ethnic group (Gypsies) is difficult to count because they often claim other nationalities to avoid discrimination. Officially the group's population has decreased to just 0.1 percent of the population, even though the number of Roma may have increased. The Roma are often treated poorly throughout Europe and have not integrated into mainstream society. The EU has criticized the country over its policies toward the Roma. Around 75 percent of the Czech population lives in urban areas, and more than 1 million people live in Prague, the capital city.

**Language.** Czech is a Slavic language; it is similar to Slovak but also related to Polish, Croatian, and Russian. Latin was the language of literature until the 14th century, when Czech began to gain popularity as a written language. Czech uses a Latin alphabet with several distinct accent marks and letters. The marks ˇ, ˘, and ˚ appear over consonants or vowels to soften or lengthen the sound. Minority groups speak their own languages. Czechs also often speak German, Russian, or English as second languages, depending on their generation.

**Religion.** Although 60 percent of Czechs consider themselves Christians, many were influenced by 40 years of official (Communist) atheism. Therefore, their adherence to religion sometimes is a result of heritage rather than belief. In addition, Czechs tend to think of worship as a private matter. While they believe in a Supreme Being, they may not necessarily be devoted to a religious institution. Still, around 39 percent belong to the Catholic Church, and many are Protestant. The Czech Brethren (a Lutheran/Calvinist group) claims 2 percent of the population as members. Around 40 percent of Czechs consider themselves atheists. However, many younger people are joining churches, some of which have been imported or established since 1990.

**General Attitudes.** Czechs value education, cleverness, social standing, modesty, and humor. Czech humor is dry and ironic rather than slapstick, and jokes and parables are commonly used in conversation. Moravians and Slovaks are thought to be

more lighthearted and jovial than other Czechs. Irony also colors Czech realism, making it seem more like pessimism. While Czechs are individualistic to the degree that they may be stubborn in stating opinions or wishes, society's emphasis is on conformity and cooperation. For instance, community leaders (those who organize others) are held in high esteem. Young people are encouraged to belong to organizations such as the Boy Scouts or sports teams, but many prefer to stay home and watch television or play video games. Anyone who performs a job well is admired, whether the person is a professional (doctors, engineers, etc.) or a skilled manual laborer.

**Personal Appearance.** European fashions are common, and the youth wear the latest styles. Jeans and T-shirts are popular. Work attire for men generally is more casual than in some western European nations (e.g., sport jackets instead of suits, or blue overalls or jogging suits instead of shirts and ties). Older women generally wear skirts and hats. Adults wear shorts for recreation or when they go to the park, but shorts are not worn on city streets. Czechs dress up to attend cultural events; not being properly dressed is frowned upon. Some Moravians still wear traditional national costumes on festival days or for weddings and other special events.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** When strangers meet or when a young person greets an older person, they shake hands firmly and say their last names, followed by a verbal greeting, such as *Těší mne* (Pleased to meet you) or *Dobry den* (Good day). A man usually waits for a woman to extend her hand before shaking it, but a boss always offers his or her hand first. To show respect, one addresses both men and women by their professional titles (engineer, doctor, professor) and last names. It is common to preface the title with *Pán* (Sir) or *Paní* (Madam) when greeting the person: *Dobry den, paní Doktorká Čekanová*. One also uses *Pán* and *Paní* for people without professional titles. People do not use first names until they are well acquainted, but relatives generally hug upon meeting and address each other by first names, as do young people of the same age.

To say good-bye, one uses the formal *Na schledanou* or the informal *Čau* (Ciao). *Ahoj* is an informal "Hi" and "Bye." One responds to *Děkuji* (Thank you) with *Prosim* (Please), meaning "You're welcome."

**Gestures.** Eye contact while conversing is important to Czechs. They may also look at or even stare at other people in public, but usually with no ill intentions. People often gesture with their hands to emphasize their meaning in conversation. They beckon and point with their index finger. When one counts on the fingers, the thumb (not index finger) is number one. Speaking loudly on public transportation or in quiet places is impolite; however, it is commonplace in places like pubs.

**Visiting.** Czechs consider the home to be private. They do not often visit one another unannounced; even spontaneous visitors (only relatives and very close friends) call ahead when possible. Others are not invited to a Czech's home for more than a drink or coffee. Guests who are invited to dinner may be taken to a restaurant; it is an honor to be invited to a home for a meal. Friends often socialize in pubs, coffeehouses, and wine bars.

Czechs remove their shoes when entering a home and leave them in the entryway. Visiting etiquette is fairly formal, but the atmosphere is friendly. Guests are offered something to drink, or prior to a meal, hors d'oeuvres. Women guests may offer to

help prepare the meal in the kitchen or to clear dishes, but the offer will be politely declined. Invited guests usually bring an odd number of flowers to the hostess. Any type of flower is acceptable, except chrysanthemums, which are reserved for funeral arrangements. Small gifts (usually candy) for the children are appreciated. Guests might also bring wine or chocolates for the hosts.

**Eating.** Czechs eat three meals a day and often a midmorning snack. On weekends lunch is the main meal while dinner and breakfast are light. However, during the week, children eat at school and adults usually eat at work. Women generally prepare the meals; men might help with cleanup. Few Czech men cook. Plates usually are prepared in the kitchen and carried to the table. The head of the household is served first, unless guests are present. People eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. Hands, but not elbows, are kept above the table. Depending on the family, there is little dinner conversation unless the head of the household speaks first or special guests are present. The hostess generally offers seconds to guests, but it is not impolite to decline them after commenting on how good the food is.

Most Czechs do not dine out often. In restaurants, mineral water and bread and butter can be ordered, but they do not come with the meal. In pubs, there may be two servers, one for the drinks and the other for the food. The head server adds up the bill at the table. Drinking and toasting are common for formal and informal events. An empty glass is always refilled. When drinking socially, people do not pour for themselves.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** Czech families traditionally are close and tight-knit. Urban families usually are small, rarely with more than two children. Rural families tend to be larger. Urban housing is in short supply, so many families live in large apartment complexes on the outskirts of the city. Both parents generally work outside the home, but women are also generally responsible for the household and children. Mothers or fathers may receive several months of paid maternity leave, a subsidy for each birth, and child-care services when they return to work. Grandparents often help with child care, especially when a young couple is just starting out. Parents feel responsible for their adult children until they are financially independent. At the same time, adult children expect to take care of aging parents. Parents and children tend to share more expensive things such as cars or *chaty* (cottages) for many years. Pets, especially dogs, are cherished members of many families.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people tend to date in groups; they enjoy going to movies or the theater, hiking or camping, attending music festivals, or dancing at discos. Most men are married by the age of 30; women marry a few years earlier. Because of a shortage of affordable housing, young couples tend to live with their parents after marriage. However, they strive to become independent as soon as possible. Most urban weddings take place at city hall, with only the immediate family and closest friends present. A family luncheon or dinner is offered afterward. Suit jackets and short dresses have been the standard wedding attire, but more formal gowns and tuxedos are being worn today. Church weddings, now legally binding, are becoming increasingly common. Honeymoons are also gaining popularity. Rural weddings tend to incorporate more people, such as village members. Traditional costumes might be worn, and celebrations can last all day.

**Diet.** Traditional Czech food is heavy and arduous to prepare.

In the last decade, a healthier diet (fewer heavy sauces, leaner meat, and more vegetables) that is easier to prepare has become more popular. Lunch usually begins with a hearty soup, followed by a main dish of meat and potatoes or bread dumplings. A common dish is *knedlo, vepřo, zelo* (sauerkraut, pork roast, and dumplings). Hotdogs and pizza are popular snack foods that can be purchased from sidewalk vendors.

A wide variety of breads and bakery items are available. Breakfast usually consists of rolls or bread with butter and jam or ham and cheese. Coffee is most common in the morning. Beer, soda, and juice are popular throughout the day. Many desserts are made from fruit.

**Recreation.** Czechs are known for their love of nature; forests, fields, mountains, and lakes often are filled with people (especially urban residents) on weekends. A surprising number of families own cottages. Urban families often tend garden plots of flowers, fruit trees, and vegetables that are either near their cottage or in communal garden areas on city outskirts. Camping, hiking, swimming in lakes, gathering mushrooms and berries, and snow skiing are all favorite outdoor activities.

Popular sports include soccer, tennis, and ice hockey. The Czech Republic's national hockey has been successful in international competition, winning several world titles. Leisure activities include watching television, going to movies or concerts, dancing, taking walks, and getting together with friends. Gardening and home-improvement projects are also widely enjoyed. In the evening, men often gather in pubs to drink beer and talk, while women visit close friends at home. In smaller towns, people socialize while doing errands.

Czechs enjoy touring by car or bus. Forty years of travel restrictions under Soviet rule led to a pent-up desire to go abroad. Czechs usually vacation for one to three weeks. The Mediterranean is a popular destination.

**The Arts.** Czechs pride themselves on their support of the arts. Theater performances, concerts, and exhibits are offered throughout the year. In the summer, towns often sponsor informal outdoor theaters, and music or film festivals. The Prague Spring Festival is an important musical event. It emphasizes the people's rich musical history. The Czech Philharmonic, established in the late 19th century, is internationally renowned. World-famous nationalist composers such as Dvořák and Smetana took much of their inspiration from folk music. Polkas and waltzes are popular folk dances.

Czech artists have also attracted attention in visual arts such as painting, lithography, and film. Czech painting influenced the art nouveau movement. Folk art includes puppet making, costume making, ceramics, toys, and glass. Bohemian crystal is especially renowned. The Czech Republic is also known for its baroque, art nouveau, and cubist architecture.

**Holidays.** Public holidays include New Year's Day, Easter Monday, End of World War II (8 May), Cyril and Methodius's Day (5 July), Jan Hus Day (6 July), Founding of the First Republic in 1918 (28 Oct.), Velvet Revolution Day or Fight for Freedom and Democracy Day (17 Nov.), and Christmas (24–26 Dec.). Cyril and Methodius are honored for introducing Christianity and creating the Cyrillic alphabet (used before the current Latin alphabet). Christmas Eve is the most important part of Christmas, and people eat carp for dinner in honor of their Catholic heritage. They also eat *vánočka*, a fruit bread, in the days leading to Christmas and during Lent. Small marzipan candies or paper cards in the shape of pigs are given in the New Year for good luck.

All Saints' Day (1 Nov.) and St. Nicholas Day (6 Dec.) are

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celebrated but are not days off from work. Each village or town also celebrates a day for its patron saint with fairs, dancing, feasting, and Mass. Name days are personal holidays commemorating the saint after whom a person is named. On this day, a person receives gifts, greetings, and toasts from friends and family.

**Commerce.** The workday usually begins between 7 and 8 a.m. and ends between 3 and 4 p.m. Factory workers may begin and end their workdays an hour or two earlier. Government offices usually are open until 6 p.m. Since 1989, more stores in town centers stay open later in the evening. Czechs shop weekly for groceries and other items at large chain stores, but may rely on small shops and market stands for daily purchases of bread, fruit, and vegetables.

### SOCIETY

**Government.** The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy divided into 14 regions. The president (currently Václav Klaus), who is elected by Parliament to a five-year term, is head of state. The prime minister (currently Vladimír Špidla) is head of government and leads Parliament's majority party or coalition. Parliament (or National Council) is composed of a Senate (81 seats) and a Chamber of Deputies (200 seats). The voting age is 18.

**Economy.** The Czech Republic enjoyed marked success in its initial years of transition from a planned to a free-market economy. Rapid reforms encouraged privatization in many sectors, and private enterprises absorbed many who were laid off by sagging industries. Although economic progress has slowed in recent years, low labor costs, the export of manufactured goods, and strong fiscal policies led to balanced budgets ahead of joining the EU.

Although only 5 percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture, it is important to the domestic economy, and the country is nearly self-sufficient in food. Crops include wheat, hops, sugar beets, potatoes, barley, rye, onions, and fruit. Major industries include metallurgy, machinery and equipment, motor vehicles, glass, and armaments. Tourism is increasingly important.

The Czech labor force is cohesive and well educated. The country's privatization program, which has sold stock to Czechs rather than outside interests or large firms, has attempted to give Czechs a stake in economic performance. The Czech National Bank, a self-governing group whose leaders are appointed by the president, regulates the currency—the Czech *koruna* (CZK).

**Transportation and Communications.** Public transportation is extensive and reliable in most urban areas and between towns and cities. The fleet of trams, buses, and trains is aging, and the industry is being pressed to privatize and modernize. This development will increase prices and decrease service along unprofitable routes. More people are buying cars. NATO plans on improving the condition of the Republic's airfields.

Daily newspapers are widely read, as is an abundance of other printed media. Many homes have cable television and access to international programming in addition to local broadcasts. People without phones in the home have access to public phones. A growing number of people are using mobile phones

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	32 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	32 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$14,720
Adult literacy rate	99 percent (male); 99 (female)
Infant mortality rate	5 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	72 (male); 78 (female)

in addition to or instead of regular phone lines. Post offices sell transit tickets, accept utility payments, and provide many other services; postal delivery is efficient.

**Education.** Young children go to nursery school or kindergarten, but compulsory education begins at age six. Public education is free. After eight years of grade school, children begin four years of secondary school in one of several tracks: academic (a preparation for university studies), technical, art, or teaching. Two-year, postsecondary job training programs are increasingly popular. There are several institutions of higher learning, the oldest of which is Charles University, founded in 1348. Students at public universities pay a small amount for tuition.

**Health.** Health care is universal, and the government covers most costs. People pay a minimal premium for insurance that covers all but a few prescriptions. Employers assist in covering these costs. Industrial pollution is a significant problem in some areas of the Czech Republic and represents a serious threat to public health. The pollution levels are linked to higher rates of cancer, respiratory disease, and birth defects.

### AT A GLANCE

#### Events and Trends.

- In 2002 parliamentary elections, the Social Democratic Party won a small majority and formed a coalition with the Christian Democrat and Freedom Union Parties. Major political events in 2003 included the approval of EU membership by 77 percent of Czech voters and the retirement of Václav Havel from the presidency after 13 years in power, followed by the election of Václav Klaus, the former prime minister.
- In 2003, the Czech government began a program aimed at attracting highly skilled workers to the country by allowing qualified immigrants to gain residency more quickly. However, much of the population voiced opposition to the presence of foreigners, saying that the country should focus on lowering the unemployment rate among current citizens.

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