

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

## Czech Republic



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Eastern Europe.



Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Czech society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil) or visit the AFCLC website at

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.



We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a

society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

## Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to



support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

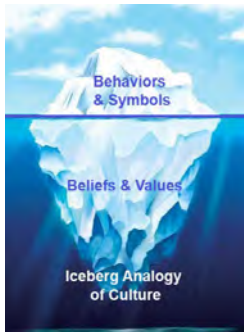
While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and



shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model



for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The

ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective

when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through Eastern Europe, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.



# CULTURAL DOMAINS

## 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

Eastern Europe comprises 10 countries on the eastern side of the European continent: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Archaeological finds suggest people inhabited the region as early as 40,000 BC. From approximately 10,000-3,000 BC, hunter-gatherers formed semi-permanent settlements, sustained by agriculture and cattle herding. Slavic tribes settled in the plains of present-day Ukraine as early as 2000 BC, eventually moving west and south along the fertile basin of the Danube River. Notably, although short-lived, the Roman Empire's incorporation of much of the region's South in the early centuries AD significantly influenced culture in present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia.

Over the following centuries, various migratory peoples from elsewhere in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia continued to settle in the region, expelling, conquering, or mixing with the Slavs and other inhabitants. By the 10th century, loosely aligned settlements coalesced into large, powerful kingdoms, including the Bohemian Empire centered in present-day Czech Republic and the Kingdoms of Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. In the 14th century, much of the region fell to the Ottoman Empire, based in present-day Turkey, with many of the region's residents experiencing several centuries of Turkish raids.





While present-day Bulgaria and Romania remained under Ottoman rule for over 500 years, in the 16th century, many regions became subject to the rule of the Austrian House of Habsburg – one of Europe’s most influential royal dynasties that later joined Hungary to form the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile, Poland formed an independent state, eventually uniting with neighboring Lithuania to control large parts of the region, including Ukraine and Belarus.

Unable to repel persistent attacks from neighbors, the Polish-Lithuanian Empire disintegrated in the late 18th century, with Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus falling under Russian control for the next nearly 120 years. During this time, Russia violently quelled nationalist movements, suppressed regional languages,

and deported thousands of native inhabitants while encouraging Russian immigration into the region.



All 10 Eastern European states experienced substantial conflict during World

War I (WWI). Immediately following the war, most states enjoyed brief periods of independence. By contrast, the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) absorbed Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, all of which suffered severely under communist repression. Notably, after its defeat in WWI, the Austro-Hungarian Empire splintered. Hungary consequently lost nearly 2/3 of its territory and 3/5 of its people to neighboring nations.

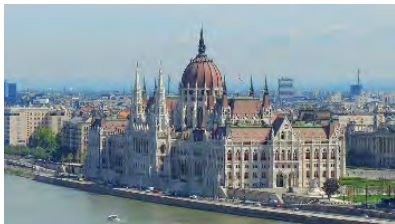
With the onset of World War II (WWII), all 10 states again became battlegrounds. While some immediately sided with the Axis powers, others were unable to withstand German aggression. All 10 states suffered heavy casualties throughout the war. During its occupation of the region, Nazi Germany murdered, deported, or confined most of the region’s sizeable Jewish population and other “undesirables.”

At war's end, the USSR either absorbed or heavily influenced the political, social, and economic systems of each Eastern European state. Adopting communist tenets, each state nationalized private companies, appropriated private property, and rapidly expanded industrial development. Communist leaders also encouraged Russification in the region, violently repressing national languages, religions, and cultures.

In the late 1980s, democratic movements swept across the Soviet bloc, and within a few years, all 10 states had declared independence from the USSR. Further, they removed communist leaders, transformed their governments, and adopted market capitalism. Since then, all states but Belarus largely pivoted away from Russian influence to pursue political, military, and economic integration with the West.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All 10 Eastern European states are parliamentary republics led by an elected Prime



Minister, President, and legislature. In most states, Presidential powers are largely ceremonial with executive power vested in the Prime Minister, who leads the government together with the support of a Cabinet of Ministers. In most states, political parties typically form coalitions in order to attain and maintain power.

With most having suffered crippling dictatorial rule for much of the late 20th century, each Eastern European state emerged in the 1990s with new political, social, and economic structures. While some states have since created relatively stable, well-run democracies, others face challenges to the democratic process. Corruption is a prevalent problem in the region. In some cases, governments' inability to adequately curb widespread corruption

results in frequent public protests, causes distrust of public officials, and creates an overall skepticism of the democratic process. Moreover, weakened by overly broad and at times differing ideological profiles, ruling political coalitions and parties tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in a political landscape marked by infighting and successive changes of government.

Most states are members of strong regional alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and NATO. Although somewhat fraught with political instability, most states remain committed to improving democratic processes, serving as advocates of a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the region. By contrast, Belarus is politically aligned with Russia, while Ukraine and Bulgaria have historically attempted to balance relations between the West and Russia, at times resulting in internal tension between ideologically opposing political groups.

With the exception of Belarus, the states rely on NATO, the EU, the US, and other international support to defend against



external, state-level threats. Russia's recent aggression in the region, notably its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has significantly heightened regional tensions and consequently dominates the states' security environment.

The region exhibits differing levels of ethnic diversity. Poland, for example, is largely homogenous, with ethnic Poles comprising 99% of the population. By contrast, the native populations of Ukraine and Czech Republic are significantly lower, 78% and 57%, respectively. Notably, the Roma and other ethnic minorities suffer significant social division, discrimination, and stigmatization across Eastern Europe.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Early residents of Eastern Europe practiced a variety of indigenous religions, venerating multiple deities and spirits who inhabited the natural world. Romans introduced Christianity as early as the 1st century. By the 10th century, many Eastern European kingdoms had adopted Christianity as a state religion. In the early 11th century, theological differences between western and eastern branches of the Christian movement forced a permanent divide between the Roman Catholic Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine Empire. Over subsequent centuries, both branches of Christianity flourished in the region. Later, as the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, some states saw the Catholic

Church reorganize under Lutheran authority. Across the region, Christianity became closely linked to national identity.

In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church became entrenched in daily life, influencing

education, social services, and remaining politically influential even today. Throughout the centuries, Judaism also enjoyed growth in the region, with among others, Polish and Czech Jewish communities growing significantly until their annihilation during WWII.

During their years of occupation and influence, the Soviets suppressed all religious institutions and activities in the states, while simultaneously cultivating atheism and encouraging the devout to abandon long-held religious beliefs. To do so, the states' communist governments carefully regulated religious affairs and deported clergy, while destroying or converting most churches and synagogues for other uses. Consequently, membership in religious organizations decreased significantly over the years. Nevertheless, most states saw a resurgence in



religiosity once religious freedom was restored following the fall of communism.

Today, some of the region's inhabitants are Orthodox Christian, while others – including the majority of Poles (85%), Slovaks (56%), Slovenes (74%), and Hungarians (28%) – are Roman Catholic. Notably, while most Eastern Europeans retain deep religious convictions, others remain religiously unaffiliated. For example, only about 78% of Belarusians claim a religious affiliation – the lowest rate in the region -- while large numbers of Slovenes, Slovaks, and Czechs are atheist. In parts of the region, small Jewish and Muslim communities are experiencing some growth. One notable exception is Bulgaria, where a relatively large Muslim community (11% of the population) traces back to the early 14th century.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are highly valued within Eastern European societies. Residents maintain strong connections with both immediate and



extended family members, supporting them emotionally and financially and providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Most households comprise 2 parents and their children (nuclear family), with many families choosing to have just 1 or 2 children. Nevertheless, extended kin on both sides of the family often live nearby and are significantly influential in family matters.

Rapid urbanization has changed family life in recent years, as urban inhabitants marry later or cohabit (live in long-term, unmarried partnership) and have fewer children. Consequently,

while the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, it is more diverse in urban centers.

While historically marriage was an arranged union, today Eastern Europeans typically choose their own partners. Couples may spend several years dating, live together, and have children before choosing to marry. In some states, divorce is increasingly prevalent among younger generations, with rates comparable to the US. Still in others, the practice is relatively uncommon and carries social stigma.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Eastern European states' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. While some of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – gender roles and responsibilities began to transform during the Soviet era and continue to change today, particularly among younger generations.



Although women hold equal rights under the law, political, social, and economic inequalities between the genders remain. For example, women often face discrimination in the hiring and promotion process, routinely receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Despite these barriers, the number of women serving in the political sector across the region has increased over the past few decades. Eastern European women hold a significant proportion of national and sub-national government positions, with most states maintaining similar or higher female participation rates in their national legislatures as the US.

Notably, the region's women suffer high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic abuse and rape. Often considered private matters, many incidences of GBV go unreported. If cases are reported, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Although homosexuality is legal throughout the region, same-sex marriage is not legal in most countries in Eastern Europe, except in Slovenia.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. Most of the region's languages derive from the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, while Moldovan and Romanian belong to the same family's Eastern Romance branch. A member of the Uralic family, Hungarian is the region's only language not part of the Indo-European family. Notably, the Bulgarian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. By contrast, all other state languages employ the Latin script.



Some states managed to largely avoid harsh Russification policies during the Soviet era. Others suffered years of linguistic repression when Russian became the predominant language in education, the media, and government proceedings. Today, with the exception of Belarus, Russian is no longer the region's main language. Instead, native languages have largely supplanted Russian, though some residents continue to use Russian in business and everyday life. The states are also home to native speakers of other languages, notably Romani (the language of the Roma), Turkish, German, and other regional languages. English has become increasingly popular over the last several decades and is spoken widely in business and by young, urban residents.



Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. In some states, communications reflect notable emotion and engagement. By contrast, others typically refrain from displaying strong emotions in public, feel comfortable in silence, and prefer quiet speech. Across the region, residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and are reserved when interacting with strangers.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized

systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 14th century, most formal education in the region occurred in religious institutions where clergymen

taught religion and basic literacy. Notably, while Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic had established universities as early as the 14th century, secular centers of higher academic learning were slow to develop elsewhere in the region. Nevertheless, by the late 1800s, extensive public school networks administered both religious and secular curricula to millions of students across the region.

Most Eastern European governments established free and compulsory public education systems in the early 20th century. The subsequent Soviet occupation and influence brought significant changes to schools and curricula. During that period, the education system promoted Soviet ideology and communist tenets and emphasized Russian culture and language. It also



prioritized vocational instruction, while simultaneously suppressing Eastern European languages and culture.

Today, most Eastern European students receive free and compulsory schooling at the primary and secondary levels. School enrollment rates are high, and nearly 100% of Eastern European residents are literate. Challenges to the education systems include low teacher salaries, rural school closures, and disparities in educational attainment between majority groups and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. As in most Western cultures, Eastern Europeans tend to be preoccupied more with time management than relationship-building. They too value punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and candid professional interactions. Within their personal lives, however, most Eastern Europeans invest significant time into establishing and maintaining relationships.

They also like to build relations before conducting business, which tends to move more slowly in Eastern Europe than in the US. Throughout the region, residents usually begin discussions with light



conversation. Most communication is explicit and direct, with frequent eye contact. Eastern Europeans generally require less personal space when conversing than is common in the US. One exception is in Slovenia, where residents maintain about the same personal distance as in the US.

Eastern European states observe a number of public holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and their respective independence day. Further, all Eastern European states commemorate both the end of World War II and the Soviet era, as well as unique seasonal or harvest holidays.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most Eastern European forms of artistic expression – including art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect the region's rural peasant past, history of foreign presence, and modern global trends.

Traditional music and dance in Eastern Europe typically promote themes such as nature, the seasons, rural life, and love. Folk songs, festivals, and dance are particularly popular in rural areas, often utilizing traditional instruments. Most common dances are performed in pairs, circles, or lines. Under Russian and Soviet influence, classical ballet became a common form of dance across the region. Classical music and opera remain popular, as well as rock, jazz, and international pop music. Government financing for the arts largely declined after the

Soviet era, yet artistic freedom has increased significantly.



Rural landscapes and geometric designs are common themes in visual arts. Eastern Europeans also practice various traditional handicrafts

and folk art that reflect the region's rich peasant history, along with Christian or ancient pagan motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, and baskets. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region, followed by basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics. During the winter, residents also enjoy ice hockey, skiing, and ice skating.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Eastern European dishes tend to be simple, hearty, and mildly seasoned. Most meals consist of a staple, such as potatoes, oats, or barley served with a meat, fresh salad, and various breads. While beer is the most popular alcoholic beverage, some residents enjoy unique herbal liquors or vodka. Notably, the region also has a rich history of wine production, dating back to the 1st century BC.



Health in Eastern Europe has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents have access to free, state-funded healthcare in modern facilities.

Nevertheless, the region's healthcare systems face several challenges. The quality of care varies significantly between private/public and urban/rural facilities. Generally, public facilities concentrate in cities and are ill-equipped, overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued by corruption. Meanwhile, private facilities offer first-rate care mostly to the wealthy. Finally, a shrinking yet aging population threatens to burden already overloaded national healthcare services in many states.

Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as cardiovascular, cancer, respiratory, liver and diabetes account for the majority of deaths across Eastern Europe. In addition, the region's residents suffer from high rates of suicide and alcohol poisoning. Mostly a result of Soviet-era industrial policies, pollution is a widespread hazard throughout Eastern Europe, causing further health-related issues.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the 19th century, the Eastern European states

maintained largely agrarian economies, with residents engaging in subsistence agriculture or laboring as serfs on large elite landholdings.

During the 1800s, several states began to industrialize, while Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia remained primarily agrarian. Industrialization intensified throughout the region in the Soviet era, when all states followed a centrally-controlled and planned economic system, establishing large collective farms



and developing various heavy industries.

Following the end of communism, the states immediately sought to decentralize their economies and adopt liberal, free

market systems. While the transition initially caused their economies to contract, by the early 2000s, all 10 nations experienced growth. For most states, accession into the EU further spurred economic expansion. In 2008, the global financial crisis slowed investment in the region, reducing demand for exports and causing severe economic contractions in every state except Poland and Belarus.

Some of the states reacted quickly to the crisis with strict internal reforms which allowed their economies to rebound within a few years. Others were slow to respond and suffered a protracted recession. Notably, the crisis in Ukraine has hurt that country's recent economic growth, while Belarus continues to experience economic stagnation.

The economic outlook in the region is varied. Some states such as Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovenia appear poised to maintain stable growth rates. The non-EU member states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are impacted the most by geopolitical events in Russia. All 10 states are vulnerable to economic fluctuations due to their export-oriented economies. Some common economic challenges include persistent corruption, aging populations, and emigration of skilled workers.

The EU is by far the region's largest trading partner, except for Belarus, which heavily relies on trade with Russia. As EU members, most Eastern European states benefit from a secure business environment and free movement of goods and services.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. All 10 Eastern European states have invested in extensive road networks and efficient public transportation systems, particularly in urban areas. While Slovenia maintains the region's best roads, Ukraine and Romania have some of the world's worst. Rural infrastructure is typically less developed, and corruption often impedes progress on road and rail projects.

Generally in better condition than roads, railways connect major cities throughout the



region, though some services are slow and inefficient. The Black Sea and major rivers, notably the Danube, host important ports. Although modern information technology is available in all states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania have some of Europe's least developed networks. Internet use also varies widely, with 92% of Belarussians using the Internet at home compared to approximately 64% of Moldovans.

While Poland relies on fossil fuels for 73% of its electricity production, nuclear fuels account for 44% of Hungary's electricity generation. Most Eastern European states depend on imported natural gas and oil from Russia and the Middle East. Governments throughout the region have announced their intention to increase the use of renewable resources such as hydroelectric plants, wind, and other renewables.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Eastern European society at large, we will focus on specific features of Czech society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Located in the heart of Central Europe, the Czech Republic (also known as Czechia) comprises the historical regions of Bohemia and Moravia along with a part of Silesia. Together, these “Czech Lands” experienced population shifts and religious upheavals over centuries of self-rule and foreign domination. World War I ended almost 400 years of Austrian control and brought Czechs and Slovaks together in the independent Czechoslovakia. The rise of Nazi Germany brought the state’s dissolution and Czechia’s occupation during World War II. Reconstituted as Czechoslovakia, the country experienced 40 years of communism. Independent since 1993, Czechia is now a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

### Early History

Evidence of early human activity includes fossil remains, tools, weapons, and engraved mammoth ivory dating to 28,000-50,000 years ago. Around 4,000 BC, semi-permanent farming communities formed. Around 500 BC, Celtic tribes arrived in the region, notably also the Boii, who gave Bohemia its name. Eventually, Germanic tribes expelled the Celts.



### Arrival of the Slavs

Meanwhile, Slavic tribes were leaving their homeland in Central Asia to settle north of the Black Sea around the turn of the millennium. In the 5th century AD, Germanic tribes moving south to invade the Roman Empire disrupted the Slavs’ Black Sea settlements, prompting many to migrate again. While other Slavic groups moved northeast and south, the ancestors of the



Czechs, known as the West Slavs, spread through Central Europe, settling the Czech Lands between the 5th-8th centuries.

### Great Moravian Empire

The Slavs of Moravia united in the early 9th century to form the region's first Slavic state, expanding over the next several decades to include Bohemia and parts of present-day Poland and Hungary. In 863, Moravian King Rostislav invited missionaries from the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire to introduce Christianity to the region (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Following repeated incursions from German and Magyar (Hungarian) rivals, the Empire fell in 906.

### The Přemysl Dynasty of Bohemia

Meanwhile, Prince Bořivoj consolidated power in Bohemia, choosing the present-day capital of Prague as the seat of his Přemysl Dynasty (see "Myth" below) around 885. The dynasty's most famous member was Duke Wenceslas I (Václav I in Czech), a fervent supporter of Christianity, who made it the state religion. Following his politically-motivated murder around 935,

Wenceslas I became Bohemia's patron saint and continues to be a beloved figure today.



Over the next 4 centuries, the Přemysl Dynasty ruled Bohemia, which intermittently lost and gained territories. In the late 10th century, Bohemia became an independent domain within the Holy Roman Empire, an alliance of primarily German-speaking kingdoms and dukedoms across Central and Western Europe. Bohemia gradually enhanced its standing in the Empire,

achieving the status of kingdom in 1085. The Bohemian king gained the right to participate as an elector in choosing the Holy Roman Emperor in 1114.

In the 13th century, economic prosperity attracted migrants from overpopulated regions of Germany. Meanwhile, the kingdom expanded to include parts of present-day Germany, Austria, and Italy, even reaching the Mediterranean. These efforts aroused

opposition, and Přemysl King Otakar II's 1278 defeat by a combined Army of Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians signaled the decline of Přemysl power. In 1306, the last Přemysl king was murdered, marking the end of the dynasty.

### The Luxembourg Dynasty and Prague's Golden Age

Through marriage, John of Luxembourg assumed the Bohemian throne in 1310 and was succeeded by his son, Charles IV (Karel IV in Czech) in 1346. Through skillful diplomacy, Charles IV acquired additional territories and consolidated control. In 1355, the pope (head of the Roman Catholic Church) crowned Charles IV the Holy Roman Emperor, ushering in a Golden Age when Charles IV chose Prague as the Empire's capital. Considered the "Father of the Homeland" today, Charles IV invited scholars, architects, sculptors, and painters from across the Empire to transform Prague into a leading cultural and commercial center. Notable achievements include Prague's Charles Bridge, Karlštejn Castle, and Charles University (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

### Jan Hus and the Hussite Wars

After Charles IV's 1378 death, conflict flared among his heirs, the Bohemian nobility, and the Catholic Church. Further, a religious reform movement inspired by Jan Hus, a priest and professor at Charles University, also contributed to tensions. Infuriated by corruption in the Catholic Church, Hus advocated



significant changes in Church policies and practices, notably also preaching in Czech instead of Latin. When the Church burned Hus at the stake in 1415, his outraged followers began calling themselves "Hussites." They attacked Church loyalists, expelled Catholic clergy, and seized Church lands. As the primarily Czech movement split into moderate and radical factions, most Germans remained faithful to the Catholic Church, accentuating ethnic resentments in the kingdom.

In 1419, a group of Hussites raided Prague's New Town Hall and tossed several town officials out a window. Known as the "First

Defenestration of Prague” this act marked the beginning of some 15 years of conflict. To punish the rebels, authorities banned Hussites from trade, stalling the economy and causing widespread starvation. While the Holy Roman Emperor launched some 5 crusades against the Hussites, the rebels managed to repel them each time with the help of leaders like military strategist Jan Žižka. As the conflict dragged on, some moderate Hussites seeking peace eventually joined forces with Catholics in 1434 to defeat the radical Hussites. While the subsequent Compact of Basel granted the Hussites some measure of religious freedom, the Catholic clergy largely refused to accept it, and tensions remained high.



### **The Hussite King**

In 1457, discord among the Czech nobility brought the teenaged German Catholic Ladislaus to the Bohemian throne with Czech Hussite George of Poděbrady as his advisor. When Ladislaus

suddenly died, the Czech nobility selected George to ascend the throne. George would prove to be the last Czech King of Bohemia. Over his 13-year rule, George endeavored to unite his subjects, who were divided by religion (Hussites and Catholics) and ethnicity/language (Czech and German).

### **The Jagiellonian Kings**

Upon George's 1471 death, the Czech nobility chose a member of the Polish Jagiellonian Dynasty to become King, thus making Bohemia a part of the Polish-Lithuanian union, a multi-ethnic state that was Europe's largest at the time. Although the Jagiellonian kings were Catholic, they were relatively tolerant of the Hussite population. Yet many peasants saw their plight worsen when new laws allowed landowners to tie them to the land as serfs. The last Jagiellonian King of Bohemia died in a 1526 battle against the Ottoman Turks in Hungary.

### **The Habsburgs Take Control**

Meanwhile, the House of Habsburg (1 of Central Europe's most influential royal dynasties based in Vienna, Austria) was rapidly

expanding its empire. Taking advantage of Bohemia's weakness, Ferdinand I of Habsburg claimed the vacant throne and, after garnering support from the Czech nobility, was elected King of Bohemia. His 1527 coronation inaugurated almost 400 years of Habsburg control of the Czech Lands.

Meanwhile, a new anti-Catholic movement had emerged. In 1517, Martin Luther announced his criticisms of the Catholic Church in Germany, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Within Bohemia and Moravia, Lutheranism gained supporters among Czechs and Germans. The Habsburgs were initially tolerant, and the region experienced its second Golden Age in the late 16th century. The Habsburg King of Bohemia, Rudolf II, also became the Holy Roman Emperor and moved the imperial court from Vienna to Prague. For 3 decades, Prague was Central Europe's center of culture, art, and science. Rudolf II retained the support of the Czech nobility until he issued a decree against the Hussites in 1602. With rebellion threatening, Rudolf conceded in 1609, granting religious freedom.

**The Thirty Years' War:** Yet, tensions between the Czech nobility and their Habsburg rulers continued to increase, especially after Emperor Ferdinand II violated the religious



freedom granted by his predecessor. In 1618, the "Second Defenestration of Prague" occurred when a Protestant mob stormed Prague Castle and threw 2 Catholic Habsburg administrators out a window. This event sparked a series of conflicts, known as the Thirty

Years' War, spurred by religious disputes but also dynastic, territorial, and commercial rivalries among dozens of territories, with battles occurring throughout Europe.

**Protestant Rebellion and Defeat:** Besides sparking a continent-wide war, the 1618 defenestration also spurred a rebellion against the Habsburgs in the Czech Lands. The Protestant Czech nobility mobilized troops, and in 1619, rejected the Habsburg candidate for the Bohemian throne and crowned

their own Protestant King. However, the Protestant rebels were unable to rally support, and in the 1620 Battle of White Mountain near Prague, lost to a combined Army of the Habsburgs and the Catholic League, a military alliance of regional Catholic powers.

### Re-Catholicization and Absolute Habsburg Rule

In retribution, the Habsburgs executed rebel leaders and confiscated Czech nobles' property. The Habsburgs also made the Bohemian throne their hereditary property, while rescinding religious freedom and imposing Roman Catholicism by force (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Faced with economic ruin and the requirement to convert to Catholicism, many Czechs fled. Within a few years, the population of Bohemia and Moravia reduced by half, while Prague's dropped from 60,000 to 25,000.

The Habsburg administration also made German the region's official language, reducing Czech to a purely oral language. Further, it granted confiscated land to German-speaking newcomers, heightening ethnic and linguistic divisions. Over the next century, the Habsburgs heavily taxed Bohemia to finance costly wars, further impoverishing the region.



Following her 1740 accession to the Austrian and Bohemian thrones, Empress Maria

Theresa launched reforms, notably improved education (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and fairer taxes, which her son and successor, Joseph II, extended. Inspired by European Enlightenment philosophy that emphasized the dignity of the individual, Joseph II also abolished serfdom and granted limited religious tolerance in 1781. In 1805, Austria and Russia lost a decisive battle to French Emperor Napoleon at the Battle of Austerlitz, near the Moravian city of Slavkov u Brna, leading the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire.

### National Awakening

With the end of serfdom plus improved education, many Czechs migrated to urban areas to work in newly-opened factories. Over the course of the 19th century, Prague changed from being

primarily German to Czech. Reacting to centuries of Austrian oppression and inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, Czech academics and artists created institutions and organizations to foster Czech culture, while historians and linguists promoted a revival of the Czech language (see *Language and Communication*).



Internationally renowned musicians and composers also looked to the Czech experience for inspiration (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

In 1866, Austria lost the Austro-Prussian War at the Battle of Königgrätz near the Bohemian city of

Hradec Králové. Meanwhile, Hungarian separatists within the Empire sought independence. In response, the Habsburgs re-established the Kingdom of Hungary's sovereignty within a dual Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. Inspired by the Hungarians' success, new Czech political parties sought similar privileges. This growth of Czech nationalism and political activity created some tensions between Czech and German residents.

### **World War I (WWI)**

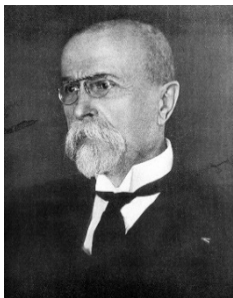
In 1914, WWI broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (Britain, France, Russia and by war's end the US, among others). While the region's German residents largely gave their support to the Central Powers, the war was unpopular among Czechs, since a Central Powers victory would likely end their dreams of autonomy. Nevertheless, many Czechs were conscripted to fight alongside Austrians and Germans. Some Czech soldiers sent to fight Russia objected to battling their fellow Slavs and defected.

Meanwhile, Czech leaders Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš sought exile in Western Europe, where they established networks with Czechs living abroad. Both men were strong supporters of the union of the Czech Lands with neighboring Slovakia, especially given their cultural and linguistic similarities (see *Language and Communication*). In

1917, Masaryk traveled to Russia to form a Czechoslovak brigade that subsequently fought for the Allies, garnering significant positive publicity for the Czechoslovak cause. In October 1918, the 2 leaders issued a declaration of independence that was quickly recognized by the Allied powers. With the Austrian Empire's collapse and the German Army's surrender in November 1918, WWI ended.

### **The First Czechoslovak Republic**

Masaryk became the new republic's first President. Czechs (Bohemians and Moravians) and Slovaks comprised some 2/3 of the population. Other residents – primarily Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians, and Poles – received special protections to preserve their cultures and languages. The new republic faced several challenges. Besides boundary disputes with Poland and Hungary, German-speakers in the border area known as the Sudetenland advocated the region's transfer to Germany or Austria.



Further, relations between the Czechs and Slovaks were not always smooth. While the Czechs comprised some 50% of the population, Slovaks made up just 15%. Although they spoke similar languages, they had very different histories, and the Czechs were considerably more educated, urbanized, industrialized, and secularized than the Slovaks. Nevertheless, and despite serious disagreements among Czech, Slovak, German, and communist political parties, Masaryk created a stable government. Czechoslovakia experienced significant economic progress through the 1920s, becoming the region's most industrially advanced country.

**Rising German Nationalism:** Yet many German residents were resentful. A land reform program mandating the confiscation and redistribution of property targeted Germans disproportionately, since they made up the majority of the upper classes. Beginning in 1929, the Great Depression hit Germans hard, since they occupied the country's most industrialized regions. In 1930,



Czechoslovakia was home to 3.2 million Germans, compared to 3.5 million Slovaks and 5.5 million Czechs. Inspired at least partly by the rise of the Nazi party in neighboring Germany, some Czechoslovak Germans began to advocate secession. The movement gained additional momentum when Nazi party head Adolf Hitler became Germany's leader in 1933. In the 1935 Czechoslovakian parliamentary elections, the Sudeten German Party (SdP) received almost two-thirds of the German vote. As the new President, Edvard Beneš began fortifying the border with Germany.

### **The Munich Agreement and the Dissolution of the Republic**

Germany's annexation of Austria in spring 1938 spurred a nationalist fervor among the Sudetenland Germans. Soon, Hitler announced his support for self-determination in the Sudetenland, raising fears of imminent war. Anxious to avoid conflict, Britain and France unsuccessfully tried to negotiate between Czechoslovakia and Germany.

As Czechoslovakia mobilized for war, Hitler met with the leaders of Italy, Britain, and France, and notably without President Beneš, on September 29, 1938 and signed the Munich Agreement. In it, Czechoslovakia was forced to transfer to Germany all border districts in which Germans comprised at least 50% of the population. In response, Beneš resigned and went into exile. Sensing Czechoslovakia's weakness, Poland and Hungary immediately occupied other Czechoslovakian territories. Altogether, these losses cost Czechoslovakia a third of its population and most of its industry and defenses. Meanwhile, Slovak leaders began advocating for Slovakia's autonomy. After receiving Hitler's support, the Slovakian parliament declared independence in mid-March 1939. The next day, the German Army marched into Prague. While Slovakia would remain nominally independent through World War II (WWII), the Czech Lands were incorporated into the Nazi Third Reich as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.



## The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

President Beneš and other Czech leaders immediately formed a Czechoslovakian government-in-exile in London. While the Czech Lands experienced little military action during WWII, the Nazi occupation was devastating. A Nazi reign of terror began in 1941, when Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the secret police, assumed leadership of the Protectorate. Under Heydrich, the Nazi regime opened the Terezín concentration camp some 40 mi north of Prague.

Terezín primarily functioned as a holding camp for Jews, Roma, and other “undesirables” destined for death and slave labor camps elsewhere (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Some 34,000 prisoners died during the war, mostly due to hunger, disease, and mistreatment. In 1942, Czech commandoes trained in Britain parachuted into the territory and assassinated Heydrich,



provoking ruthless reprisals by the Nazis, who completely destroyed the village of Lidice and murdered most of its inhabitants.

In London, the Czech government-in-exile was planning for Germany's

eventual defeat. In 1943, Beneš signed a treaty of alliance with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) that recognized Czechoslovakia's pre-WWII borders. In early 1945, Beneš and Soviet premier Joseph Stalin agreed to a program of postwar reconstruction. They also formed a new provisional government, which claimed jurisdiction when the Soviets advanced into eastern Czechoslovakia in April. Meanwhile, US troops advanced from the west as far as the city of Plzeň. Sensing liberation, Prague's residents rose in revolt against the Germans on May 5. Instead of advancing on Prague, US troops honored an agreement with the USSR allowing it to liberate the city.

## Post-war Czechoslovakia

As WWII ended, President Beneš returned to Czechoslovakia to oversee its reconstitution with its prewar borders, notably including the Sudetenland. Within months, the government

announced that German inhabitants would be expelled. By 1947, some 2.5 million Germans had left Czechoslovakia.

**The Communists Take Control:** Disappointed with their treatment by the Allies before the war, many Czechs looked to the communist USSR as a model for reconstruction. In the 1946 parliamentary elections, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) won almost 39% of the vote, making KSČ leader Klement Gottwald Prime Minister (PM) and allowing other communists to take control of key ministries. In 1948, several non-communist ministers resigned to protest certain communist actions. Immediately, the communists seized all ministries, forcing President Beneš to accept the formation of a new communist government. With the takeover complete, many non-communists fled the country, and Beneš resigned. Within a few weeks, Gottwald assumed the Presidency. Czechoslovakia would remain a communist satellite of the USSR known as the



Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR) until 1989.

Following the USSR's Stalinist model, the ČSSR nationalized all commercial enterprises, pursued agricultural collectivization, and promoted heavy industry. Further, the military expelled all officers

suspected of pro-Western sentiments, while the government worked to undermine the Catholic Church (see p. 5-6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Beginning in the 1950s, the government conducted a series of purges, falsely accusing some politicians of conspiracy and non-communist sympathies, sentencing some to death and imprisoning others.

### **Attempts at Reform**

By the 1960s, the ČSSR's economy was stagnating, with agricultural output below pre-WWII levels. In 1964, the government implemented limited economic reforms with little effect. Unsatisfied and seeking real change, some KSČ reformers began conspiring against President and KSČ Secretary Antonín Novotný. Meanwhile, unrest spread as writers

and artists questioned the officially-sanctioned style of Socialist Realism (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). The police responded brutally to student protests in 1967, which only strengthened opposition to the KSČ hardliners.

**The Prague Spring:** Unable to ignore the calls for change from within the KSČ, Novotný resigned in early 1968 and was replaced by Slovak KSČ leader Alexander Dubček. In April, the KSČ adopted a reform program encompassing both economic changes and constitutional revisions guaranteeing civil rights. As censorship lifted, the international community welcomed this “Prague Spring” and the reforms that promoted “socialism with a human face.”



In July, the USSR warned Dubček that it disapproved of the proposed reforms. Even though Dubček and other leaders confirmed their loyalty to the USSR, some 200,000 Soviet-led forces invaded on August 20. The population responded with small-scale resistance and sabotage, with some 58 killed. By late August, Dubček and other leaders had yielded to the Soviets' demands, including the repeal of all reforms.

### Normalization and Political Dissidence

Within a year, KSČ hardliners re-occupied all government posts. To appease the Slovaks, Czechoslovakia became a federal republic with 2 autonomous territories, the Czech Lands and Slovakia. KSČ leader and President Gustav Husák repudiated the Prague Spring reform plans and implemented a policy of “normalization,” returning the economy's focus to central planning and increasing ties to the USSR. Strict censorship stifled cultural and intellectual life, though underground dissidents communicated through *samizdat*, self-published protest letters and essays (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Gradually, a few small dissident groups re-emerged, most notably Charter 77, a group committed to human rights. In early 1977, the publication of its manifesto resulted in the arrest, loss

of employment, or persecution of many signers, notably a prominent playwright and future President Václav Havel.

In 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms that would eventually result in the dissolution of the USSR. Although the attempted reforms were largely unsuccessful, they signaled that the era of Soviet intervention in its satellite countries was over, sparking democratic movements across Eastern Europe.

### **The Velvet Revolution**

By late 1989, communist governments across the region were crumbling. Inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall in early November, protesters gathered in Bratislava and Prague for several days of demonstrations. The police response was brutal, spurring additional protests across the country and culminating in a march of some 750,000 in Prague.



Leading dissidents and opposition figures addressed the crowd, demanding that the KSČ step down and release all political prisoners. In mid-month, several dissident groups unified as the Civic Forum, with Charter 77 co-founder Václav Havel as its head. As pro-democracy protests continued, former President Dubček returned to lend his support, and a strike brought life in Prague to a standstill. Capitulating to the demands, President Husák resigned on December 10. A few weeks later, a provisional government chose Havel as Czechoslovakia's first non-communist President in over 40 years. In mid-1990, the Civic Forum prevailed in the country's first free elections since 1946, confirming Havel's Presidency. This Velvet Revolution marked the end of Czechoslovakia's communist era.

### **The Velvet Divorce**

The new government moved quickly to transition from communism, privatizing business and shifting foreign policy. Yet, disagreements between the 2 halves of the country soon

surfaced, with less-industrialized Slovakia preferring a slower transition pace. There was little public support for separation, yet neither Czech nor Slovak political leaders advocated a referendum to decide the matter. Instead, they simply announced that the Parliament had dissolved Czechoslovakia, a process formalized on December 31, 1992 and nicknamed the Velvet Divorce.

### Contemporary Czech Republic

In January 1993, the Parliament elected Havel President then re-elected him in 1998. Under Havel, Czechia pursued political, economic, and social reform with the goal of rapid accession to the European Union (EU – see *Political and Social Relations*). In 1997, Germany and Czechia signed a document of reconciliation, and in 1999, Czechia joined NATO.

Former PM Václav Klaus assumed the Presidency in 2003 and was re-elected by the Parliament in 2008. Despite his noted “Euroscpticism” (criticism of and opposition to certain EU institutions and policies), Klaus’ tenure saw Czechia’s accession



to the EU in 2004 but also significant political infighting and instability due to Klaus’ controversial opinions and actions, leading to a charge of treason against him.

Czechia’s first direct presidential election in 2013 attracted 9

candidates, with former PM Miloš Zeman of the Citizens’ Rights Party emerging victorious. A mid-2013 corruption scandal caused Zeman to schedule early parliamentary elections in late 2013. The elections included a new protest party, the Action for Alienated Citizens (ANO) led by billionaire Andrej Babiš. Despite charges of tax evasion against Babiš, ANO prevailed in the 2017 parliamentary elections, leading to Babiš’ appointment as PM. In 2018, President Zeman won a second term. Since then, Zeman and Babiš have attracted significant opposition and controversy (see *Political and Social Relations*). In 2023, Petr Pavel became President.

## Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

### Princess Libuše: Mother of the Czech Nation

The myth of Princess Libuše traces to 19th century Czech writer Alois Jirásek. Like other scholars during the National Awakening, Jirásek explored Czech history and myth in order to promote Czech culture, nationalism, and patriotism.

Wise and beautiful, Princess Libuše had the gift of prophecy. Upon her father's death, Libuše assumed his place as ruler. However, some of her subjects objected to female leadership and demanded a male replacement. After warning that a male would likely revoke the freedoms she had provided, Libuše accepted their demands, agreeing to marry the new ruler if they followed her advice regarding a suitable candidate.



The people approved, and Libuše entered a trance. In her dream-like state, Libuše told her followers how to find their new ruler, first by following her white horse beyond the hills to a village called Stadice. Some 120 paces beyond the village, they would encounter a field in a narrow valley. There, a simple plowman named Přemysl would be working with 2 oxen. Libuše said the people would know they had found the correct plowman if he was eating at an iron table when they arrived and if the horse stopped next to him and neighed.

Indeed, they found him and brought him back to Libuše, who immediately married him, thus founding the famous Přemysl Dynasty. A beloved and well-known figure, Libuše also famously predicted the future glory of Prague and has been the subject of numerous literary and musical compositions, such as Bedřich Smetana's opera *Libuše* (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).



## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

The Czech Republic/  
Czechia

**Česká Republika/Česko**

### Political Borders

Poland: 495 mi

Slovakia: 150 mi

Austria: 250 mi

Germany: 437 mi

### Capital

Prague

### Demographics

As of 2024, Czechia's population of about 10.8 million has a current growth rate of 0.04% (see "Ethnic Groups" below). Generally, the population is expected to shrink in the coming decades, primarily due to low birth rates (see *Sex and Gender*) and notable emigration stemming from Czechs' search for employment and education opportunities abroad. The lack of population growth, coupled with Czechia's high life expectancy (see *Sustenance and Health*), also results in a rapidly aging population. The population distributes relatively evenly across Czechia, with about 75% of residents living in urban areas. About 12% of the population lives in or around the capital of Prague.



### Flag

Czechia's flag consists of 2 equal horizontal white and red bands, with a blue isosceles triangle situated on the flag's hoist side. White and red represent Bohemia, while the blue



derives from Moravia's coat of arms. Czechia's flag is identical to that of the former Czechoslovakia (see *History and Myth*).

## Geography

A landlocked nation located in Central Europe, Czechia shares a border with Poland to the northeast, Slovakia to the southeast, Austria to the south, and Germany to the west. Czechia's total land area is about 29,800 sq mi, making it slightly smaller than South Carolina.

Czechia divides into 2 main geographic regions, with Bohemia comprising about two-thirds of the country in the West and Moravia encompassing about a third in Czechia's East. Encircled by low mountains along the German and Polish borders, Bohemia's interior is characterized by gently rolling hills, undulating plains, and high plateaus. Located in the Krkonoše Mountains, the nation's highest peak, Sněžka, rises to 5,256 ft along the Polish border. In contrast to Bohemia's relatively flat interior, much of Moravia is characterized by towering, rugged mountains. The historical and highly industrialized region of Silesia occupies a sliver of land along Moravia's northeastern border with Poland.

Czechia's numerous forested mountain ranges cover about 35% of Czech territory. Meanwhile, many



lowland areas have been converted for agricultural use, with rich, fertile land and pastures making up over half of the country. Important rivers include the Morava, Oder, Labe, and Vltava, which runs through Prague and is Czechia's longest river.

## Climate

Czechia experiences a temperate continental climate with 4 distinct seasons. Extending June-August, summers are short, hot, and characterized by sporadic but heavy rain showers and thunderstorms. Summer temperatures generally average 75°F and may reach 90°F in July. By contrast, winters are long, cold, and cloudy. December, January, and February are the coldest months, with temperatures averaging around 30°F in Prague. Generally, temperatures tend to vary with elevation, while

upland and mountainous areas frequently experience freezing conditions. Snowfall typically occurs November-April and is heaviest at higher elevations.



### Natural Hazards

Czechia is vulnerable to few natural hazards, although flooding is the most significant and in part intensified by the

gradual decrease in wooded areas from deforestation. Czechia's most damaging flood occurred in 1997, when the Oder River swelled to cover nearly a third of the country. As a result, some 40 people were killed, some 10,000 displaced, and infrastructure and agricultural land were severely damaged. Other destructive floods occurred in 2002 and 2013, killing dozens, crippling infrastructure, and causing \$millions in damages. Heavy snowfall and cold temperatures also cause hardships in some areas, while landslides are a threat in mountainous regions.

### Environmental Issues

Rapid industrialization during the communist era (see of *History and Myth*) resulted in widespread environmental degradation throughout the second half of the 20th century. For example, the clearing of land for industrial development, improper disposal of agricultural and industrial waste, and dumping of untreated sewage into groundwater reservoirs caused extensive water, soil, and air pollution. In some areas, unsafe levels of toxic contamination forced evacuations of industrial sites and small towns through the 1980s.

Despite recent efforts to counteract environmental degradation, many sites remain among the world's most polluted, with residents still suffering adverse health effects (see *Sustenance and Health*). The burning of low-grade brown coal continues to create air pollution and results in acid rain that contaminates waterways, poisons wildlife, and scars forests. Today, some 56% of Czechia's forests exhibit such damage. Moreover,

harmful agricultural byproducts continue to pollute water sources and soil across the country. Automobile emissions contribute to air pollution in most major cities.

## Government

Czechia is a constitutional republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 13 regions (**kraje**) and the capital city district of Prague, each administered by governors and elected local councils. Adopted in 1993, Czechia's Constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining the fundamental rights and freedoms of Czech citizens.

## Executive Branch

The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Czechia's Armed Forces, is elected by popular vote and may serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms. Although his powers are largely ceremonial, the President exercises several functions, notably making appointments in government and representing Czechia abroad. The current President, Petr Pavel, he took office in 2023.

Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of a Cabinet of Ministers, the PM oversees the country's day-to-day affairs. Nominated by the President and

approved by Parliament to serve a single 4-year term, the PM is traditionally a member of the political party that holds the most seats in the Parliament. Czechia's current PM, Petr Fiala, took office in late 2021.

## Legislative Branch

Czechia's legislature is a 2-chamber Parliament composed of an 81-seat Senate and 200-seat Chamber of Deputies (CoD or **Poslanecka Snemovna**). Senate members are elected directly in single seat constituencies by a nationwide majority vote to



serve 6-year terms, with 1/3 of the membership renewed every 2 years. Meanwhile, CoD members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies by a proportional representation vote to serve 4-year terms. The Parliament controls all federal legislative powers. Further, the Parliament amends the Constitution, appoints positions in government, approves declarations of war, and passes the national budget.

### Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, Supreme Administrative Court, and a system of lower regional and district courts. As the highest court, the Supreme Court divides into civil, criminal, and commercial chambers and is the final court of appeal for civil, criminal, and military cases. The CoD nominates, and the President, approves the Supreme Court justices who typically serve for life. Meanwhile, the President appoints, and the Senate confirms, Constitutional Court justices to serve 10-year, renewable terms. Finally, the Supreme Administrative Court's President selects its justices to

serve unlimited terms.

### Political Climate

Czechia's political landscape consists of a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Generally, those



parties and coalitions which hold the majority of seats in the Parliament also hold the bulk of government leadership positions. Notably, ruling coalitions tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in infighting and sudden changes in government leadership. Moreover, disputes among political factions in the Parliament often disrupt legislative activity and occasionally lead to political gridlock.

In recent years, Czechia's government has been controlled by the conservative, center-right, and populist Action for Alienated Citizens (ANO), founded and led by Czechia's second most

wealthy man, media mogul Andrej Babiš. Formed in 2011 as a protest against the established political parties, ANO first rose to prominence in the 2013 parliamentary elections (see *History and Myth*) amid growing public dissatisfaction with Czechia's political process and ongoing high-level corruption. ANO prevailed again in the 2017 elections, bringing Babiš to power as PM despite a scandal-ridden past that includes charges of financial misconduct and cooperation with communist-era secret police. Since then, Babiš has continued to be a controversial figure, facing accusations of corruption and questions regarding his fitness for office.

Together, Babiš and Zeman, who was an experienced and influential political figure with populist and far-right views, reflected the region-wide growth in social conservatism and nationalist movements in recent years. For example, Zeman had promoted an increasingly isolationist political agenda, questioning Czechia's role and involvement in the EU, while expressing interest in forging closer political and economic ties with Russia and China (see "Foreign Relations" below). Moreover, amid Europe's recent refugee crisis (see "Security Issues" below), both Zeman and Babiš had supported staunch anti-immigrant positions and made derogatory and inflammatory comments about refugees, migrants, and certain ethnic/religious groups in numerous public forums. Although popular among Czech conservatives, Zeman and Babiš sparked heated opposition from moderate political and civil society groups and polarizing debate in Czech society.

The recent anti-immigrant rhetoric of Zeman and Babiš had been especially controversial and divisive. Investigations by EU and Czech authorities into Babiš' potentially fraudulent business activities and misuse of EU funds triggered mass protests and calls for Babiš' resignation. As a result, Babiš lost the 2021 election to Petr Fiala.



## Defense

The Czech Armed Forces (CAF) are a unified military force consisting of ground and air branches, with a joint strength of



26,600 active-duty troops charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats, performing humanitarian assistance operations, and protecting critical infrastructure. The CAF's small size compels Czechia to rely heavily on

its allies to respond to larger, state-level threats. The CAF receives most of its support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO – a political and military alliance among 32 nations, including the US) that promotes its members' security through collective defense.

**Army:** A well-trained force of 14,700 active-duty troops consisting of 4 maneuver regiments, brigades, and battalions (including reconnaissance, armored, and mechanized), 3 combat support regiments, and a combat service support regiment.



**Air Force:** Consists of 5,850 active-duty personnel with 2 fighter/ground attack squadrons, 2 transport squadrons, a training squadron, an attack helicopter squadron, 2 transport helicopter squadrons, and an air defense regiment. The Air Force is equipped with 38 combat capable aircraft and 44 helicopters.

**Other Forces:** Czechia's remaining 6,050 active-duty troops divide into 1 Special Forces group, 2 maneuver brigades and battalions (including presidential and honor guard), and 6 combat support groups and commands.

# Czech Republic Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Senior  
Lieutenant



First  
Lieutenant



Chief  
Master  
Sergeant



Senior  
Master  
Sergeant



Master  
Sergeant



Staff  
Sergeant



Senior  
Warrant  
Officer



Senior  
Airman



Airman  
First  
Class



Sergeant



Airman  
Basic



Airman  
Basic



## Foreign Relations

Since 1990, Czechia has pursued political, economic, and military integration with its Western European neighbors, joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. However, the emergence of political leaders who promoted nationalistic and isolationist political ideologies has distanced Czechia from its Western European allies and caused some regional tensions. President Petr Pavel, who took office in 2023, has started to once again make Czechia a reliable international partner.



**Relations with the EU:** The EU is a political and economic partnership among 27 nations located in Europe. Czechia has established lucrative trade ties with the EU and relies on the partnership as a political and military buffer against external security threats. In 2009, Czechia held the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU – an institution that determines and steers the EU's general political direction and priorities.

Czechia's reluctance to accept refugees amid a migrant crisis in Europe (see "Security Issues" below) caused a diplomatic rift with the EU. Specifically, the government had previously refused to participate in the mandatory EU refugee relocation plan, accepting only 12 asylum-seekers out of some 2,700 assigned to Czechia by the EU under the relocation scheme since 2015. EU leaders had publicly reproached Czechia, and threatened economic sanctions, fines, and other penalties, considerably heightening tensions. However, Czechia now harbors over 381,000 non-EU citizens who fled the war against Ukraine.

**NATO Involvement:** As a member, Czechia regularly participates in NATO training exercises to improve interoperability and effectiveness in large-scale NATO operations. Czechia also engages in various NATO-led international military and peacekeeping operations in the Middle

East and North Africa, where CAF forces have promoted rule of law, helped reform state agencies, and provided humanitarian aid, among other stabilizing activities.

**International Cooperation:** In 1991, Czechia joined with Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland to form the Visegrad Group, a political and cultural alliance intended to advance military, economic, social, and energy cooperation among its four members. Under its 2009 EU Presidency, Czechia launched the Eastern Partnership, an initiative to promote trade, cultural exchanges, and strategic relations among EU members and the following 6 Eastern European partners: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Czechia is also a member of the United Nations, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization.

**Relations with the US:** Although relations were strained during Czechia's four decades of communist rule, the two nations built



strong political, economic, and social relations following Czechia's peaceful transition to democracy in 1990. Since then, Czechia has emerged as an important regional ally for the US, which has

supported Czech efforts to build a free market economy, strengthen democratic institutions, and promote civil society. The US notably advocated for Czechia's entry into NATO and its bid to join the EU.

Czechia and the US also share close military ties and cooperate on security issues such as nonproliferation, energy security, missile defense, and counter-terrorism. For example, Czechia participated in US and NATO-led operations in Afghanistan, Libya, Egypt, and Syria and has supported US operations to

counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, ISIL, and IS) – a notoriously brutal militant Islamist group attempting to control territory in Iraq and Syria. Today, the US contributes substantial defense assistance to Czechia, providing military training and equipment to bolster the CAF's capacity to more effectively engage domestic threats and increase CAF interoperability with US and NATO forces. Besides sharing close trade ties with the



US as a member of the EU, Czechia's bilateral investment agreement with the US has eased restrictions between the two nations and allows some goods, services, and capital to move more freely.

### Security Issues

Czechia's security environment has been dominated by a migrant crisis and Russian assertiveness in the region in recent years. Czechia notably relies heavily on military and economic support from NATO, the US, the EU, and other allies to help insulate it from large, external threats.

**Migrant Crisis:** Political unrest in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as the war in Ukraine, have forced thousands of refugees and migrants to flee to Europe. Seeking to alleviate pressure on Greece and Italy, two nations disproportionately affected by the migrant crisis, the EU adopted a mandatory relocation plan in 2015 requiring EU member states to absorb a portion of the asylum-seekers. The Czech government overwhelmingly rejected the quota, citing security concerns. Czechia's ongoing refusal to accept migrants has heightened intra-EU tensions with some Western European nations accusing Czechia of failing to share the economic and social burden of the ongoing crisis.

**Relations with Russia:** Since the 1968 Prague Spring (see *History and Myth*), relations with Russia have been tense, with

most Czech leaders historically tending to view Russian intentions in the region with suspicion and caution. Bilateral friction escalated considerably in 2014 following Russia's occupation of Crimea and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most Czech leaders immediately condemned Russia's aggression and vocally called for harsh EU sanctions against Russia and a reduction in staff at Russia's embassy in Prague. Czechia was the first country to provide Ukraine with Soviet era tanks.

Czechia collaborates closely with Western allies to fortify itself against potential threats from Russia, such as relying on NATO to help strengthen its cyber-attack countermeasures. This support includes the 2017 formation of a cyber defense and



information security agency following reports that Russia is engaging in information warfare in Czechia by carrying out cyber-attacks and spreading misleading information through news outlets.

Czechia's foreign policy changed substantially in 2022. The Czech diplomacy resorted to a hardline policy towards Russia, suspending relations, immediately following Moscow's military operation in Ukraine.

## Ethnic Groups

As late as World War II (WWII), the region was relatively diverse, with Germans comprising about 30% of the population (see *History and Myth*) plus Hungarians, Poles, and Ruthenians in addition to Czechs and Slovaks. The Nazi genocide combined with population expulsions after the war severely reduced Czechia's diversity (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*).

Today, Czechia is ethnically homogenous, with some 61% of the population identifying as Czech or Moravian in the 2021 census. However, another 32% of census respondents declined to

specify an ethnic identity, leading some observers to conclude that the Czech proportion of the population is actually quite higher, perhaps even 92%.

Under a 2001 law, Czechia recognizes 14 ethnic minorities: Belarusians, Bulgarians, Croats, Germans, Greeks, Hungarians, Poles, Roma ("Gypsies"), Russians, Ruthenians, Serbs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Vietnamese. This official designation grants certain language rights (see *Language and Communication*) and support for cultural preservation. According to the 2021 census, Slovaks form the largest minority group (1%), followed by Ukrainians (0.7%), Poles (0.3%), and Germans (0.08%).

Other groups include Silesians (a loosely-defined group with Polish and German characteristics that populates a region now divided among Poland, Germany, and Czechia) and Ruthenians. Czechia is also home to around 31,469 Vietnamese, who arrived in the 1970s. While the 2021 census reported just 4,458 Roma, observers believe that the actual number is between 200,000-300,000.



The number of foreigners living in Czechia has increased significantly from around 80,000 in 1993 to 659,000 in 2021. Most of these foreign residents come from Central and Eastern Europe, though Czechia also attracts Western Europeans, Americans, and Canadians in large numbers. As of January 2024, Czechia is home to over 381,000 Ukrainian refugees making Czechia the country with the most Ukrainian refugees per capita in the EU.

## Social Relations

After a decade of economic growth, Czechia has some of the EU's lowest poverty and income inequality levels (see *Economics and Resources*). Nevertheless, prosperity is not equally distributed across the country, with some parts of

northern and western Bohemia as well as northern Moravia lagging due to the negative effects of de-industrialization. Other societal divisions occur along rural-urban, male-female, and generational lines. Generally, urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy have greater access to educational and economic



opportunities and hold the most social prestige.

While most other minorities are well-integrated and largely accepted in Czech society, anti-Roma prejudices are widespread, with some 66% of respondents in a

2019 survey reporting “unfavorable” opinions of Roma. This hostility in turn supports systemic harassment and discrimination that affects the Roma’s access to education, housing, healthcare (see *Sustenance and Health*), and employment opportunities.

In 2023, about only 43% of Roma were employed compared to the average Czech employment rate of 75% and the EU average of 70%. That same year, 28% of Roma reported experiencing discrimination when seeking employment, housing, healthcare, or education. Although Roma children attend early grades at similar rates to non-Roma children, they often experience harassment or bullying and typically receive a substandard education (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Many Roma live in communities segregated from mainstream Czech society. Roma tend to lack political representation, since they rarely vote, and political parties seldom support their causes due to the perceived stigma of association with the community. Under EU pressure, the Czech government has set goals to improve Roma health and welfare and promote Roma language and culture. Nonetheless, uneven implementation means that poverty and unemployment remain serious problems.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

In the 2021 Czech census, just 70% of respondents answered questions on religion. Some 48% reported they held no religious beliefs and 9% claimed no specific religious affiliation. The faith with the largest following was Roman Catholicism, claimed by 7% of religious question respondents. Meanwhile, some 6% identified with a variety of other Christian traditions, such as the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Czechoslovak



Hussite Church, and other Protestant churches, or were Jews, Muslims, or Buddhists.

Other studies report slightly different results, yet they all agree that nonbelievers and

agnostics comprise the overwhelming majority of the population, making Czechia one of the world's least religious countries. By some estimates, only North Korea's society counts as less religious.

Czechia's Constitution protects the freedom of religion and recognizes no state religion. While Czechia has a mostly tolerant society free of religious violence, the popularity of conservative, nationalist political leaders (see *Political and Social Relations*) who embrace and promote racially and religiously discriminatory views has caused societal tensions.

#### The Early Spiritual Landscape of the Czech Lands

Many of the Czech Lands' early inhabitants practiced a variety of indigenous religions that worshiped multiple deities and objects such as the sun, moon, and mountains. Other groups practiced animism, the belief that the spirit of life or consciousness resides in all natural animate and inanimate objects such as trees, rocks, hills, fields, and animals.

## The Arrival and Spread of Christianity

In 863, King Rostislav of the Great Moravian Empire invited 2 missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, from the Byzantine Empire (based in modern-day Istanbul) to introduce Christianity to the region (see *History and Myth*). Instead of the traditional Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, Cyril and Methodius preached in the Slavic language, developed what would become the Cyrillic alphabet, and translated the Bible to create the first written work in a Slavic language.

Czechs today commemorate these achievements with a holiday (see *Time and Space*).

In the early 10th century, Christianity spread rapidly through the support of Duke Wenceslas I (see *History and Myth*), who made it the state religion of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Wenceslas I is well-known in the English-speaking Christian world as the “Good King Wenceslas” of the famous Christmas carol. The region’s subsequent incorporation into the Holy Roman Empire (see *History and Myth*) ensured further spread of the faith and cemented the Rome-based Catholic Church’s influence in all aspects of life.



## Jan Hus and the Hussite Wars

Religious conflict inspired by reformer priest Jan Hus flared in the early 15th century. When the Church burned Hus at the stake, his supporters organized as “Hussites” and rebelled (see *History and Myth*). Many Czechs, especially the nobility, left the Catholic Church to join this new movement. While conflicts occasionally surfaced, Hussites and Catholics co-existed over the next century, with a Hussite King even ruling Bohemia for some 13 years in the mid-15th century. Gradually, Catholics became a minority in the region.

## Protestant Rebellion

Religious tensions sparked again in the early 16th century, when Martin Luther began what would become the Protestant



Reformation in Germany (see *History and Myth*). As Lutheranism gained supporters, the region's Catholic Habsburg rulers tried to slow its spread. For example, they introduced the newly-founded and militant Society of Jesus (Jesuits) into Bohemia in 1556, which targeted Hussites and Lutherans for conversion. Nevertheless, the Protestant groups remained relatively influential, with the Hussites producing a new Czech translation of the Bible in 1579.



Tensions between the Protestant Czech nobility and Catholic Habsburg rulers increased over the next several decades. The Habsburgs outlawed the Hussites in 1602, then rescinded the decree in

1609, when the Hussites threatened to rebel. In 1618, open conflict erupted when a Protestant mob tossed 2 Catholic administrators from a window in Prague Castle (see *History and Myth*). Over the next 2 years, Protestant rebels engaged the Habsburgs but lost a decisive battle to the Catholics in 1620 (see *History and Myth*).

### **Re-Catholicization under the Habsburgs**

The Czechs faced harsh retribution from their Habsburg rulers, including the confiscation of property from the Protestant Czech nobility, withdrawal of religious freedom, and forceful re-Catholicization of the population. Besides Judaism (see "Jewish Life in the Czech Lands" text box), Roman Catholicism became the only permitted religion. Faced with forced conversion, many Czechs fled, severely depopulating the region (see *History and Myth*). The Jesuits led these re-Catholicization efforts, becoming highly influential in society and controlling higher education (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Inspired by European Enlightenment philosophy, the Habsburg rulers introduced a series of reforms in the mid-18th century, most notably an Edict of Toleration in 1781 that legalized 2 Protestant denominations (Lutheran and Reformed), though it

made no mention of any Hussite denominations. Over the course of the 19th-early 20th centuries, the power and influence of the Catholic Church decreased though Catholics continued to comprise the majority of the population.

### **Jewish Life in the Czech Lands**

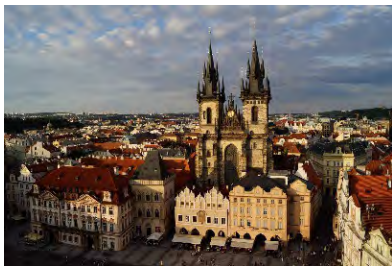
First arriving in the region in the late 10th century, Jews were barred from owning land and practicing most professions. The late 14th-15th centuries saw a period of fierce anti-Semitism, notably a pogrom (attack) during Easter in 1389 in which some 900 Jews were massacred. When the Habsburgs gained control of Bohemia in the early 16th century, they first expelled the Jews. They later allowed the Jews to return under the requirement that they live within the confines of ghettos and wear distinctive clothing.

By the early 17th century, the Habsburgs had lifted these requirements, while permitting the Jews to travel freely, own land, and practice certain occupations. Consequently, many Jews rose to prominence as doctors, bankers, traders, and farmers. This period also saw the rise of Rabbi Judah Loew, also known as the Maharal of Prague, a philosopher and expert on Jewish mysticism who is considered 1 of the most important scholars in Jewish history.

Under subsequent Habsburg rulers, anti-Semitism continued. For example, a 1726 law allowed only 1 son per Jewish family to marry. Other laws taxed the Jews at rates 10 times higher than non-Jews. However, by the end of the 18th century, most such discriminatory policies were lifted, and many Jews began to assimilate into mainstream society. By the 1890s, the Czech Lands were home to some 140,000 Jews.

## Religion during the 20th Century

In 1921, Catholics made up 78% of the population of the Czech Lands. The next largest group, comprising some 8% of the population, were members of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, a denomination that broke from the Catholic Church in 1920 and claims a connection to the 15th-century Hussite movement. Meanwhile, some 3% belonged to the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, a Protestant denomination. About 125,000 Jews resided in the Czech Lands at that time, comprising some 1.2% of the population.



## Religion during World War II:

By the time Nazi Germany invaded and incorporated the Czech Lands into its empire in 1939 (see *History and Myth*), some Jewish residents had immigrated, reducing the population to around 118,000. Over the course of their 6-year occupation, the Nazis confined Jews to ghettos, murdered them outright, or shipped them to labor or extermination camps located elsewhere.

The Czech Lands were home to a notorious transit camp, Theresienstadt (Terezín in Czech – see *History and Myth*), where some 34,000 prisoners died. By the war's end in 1945, just 14,000 Jews remained alive in the Czech Lands. Jews made up some 50% of the Czech resistance forces led by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile during the war (see *History and Myth*).

**Religion during the Communist Period:** Shortly after the conclusion of WWII, Czechoslovakia came under the control of a Soviet-backed communist government (see *History and Myth*). The communists' atheistic worldview, or the disbelief in deities and the rejection of religion, brought significant changes to the region's religious landscape.

For example, the communist government sought to dismantle the Catholic Church and other religious institutions by drastically restricting their activities. The state nationalized all Catholic Church property and converted many churches for alternative uses. Moreover, the state dissolved seminaries, monasteries, and convents, banned religious literature, excluded religion from educational policy and curriculum, and controlled the activities of clergy, who were forced to carry out many religious rituals in private. Finally, many Jews fled the country, further reducing their population.

### Religion Today

Over the decades of communist control, many Czechs lost their connection to their religious faith. A visit by Pope John Paul II in early 1990 following the end of communism somewhat spurred a Catholic resurgence. Nevertheless, most Czechs today remain religiously unaffiliated, and of those who claim a Christian identity, few regularly attend church services. Moreover, religion



has little influence on Czechia's politics, business, education, or intellectual life. Some Czechs equate religion with their nation's long history of oppression and foreign domination and strongly oppose any religious influence in the political sphere. Despite their lack of commitment to organized religion, many Czechs consider themselves moral and spiritual but tend to see these matters as deeply personal and rarely discuss them in public.

**Judaism:** By the mid-1960s, about 20,000 Jews remained in the Czech Lands. Yet, decades of hostility from the communist government caused many Czechs to neglect their Jewish identity, and by 1990, just one rabbi (Jewish religious leader) and 6,000 mostly elderly Jews remained. However, with the return of religious freedom, many Czech Jews have re-engaged with their Jewish identity, resulting in the founding of new synagogues, schools, and nursing homes.

Today, some 10,000-20,000 Jews live in Czechia, mostly in Prague, though the community faces a dwindling population due to low birth and high emigration rates.



The recent emergence of right-wing hate groups and politicians who espouse anti-Semitic sentiments has caused concern within Czechia's Jewish community.

In 2021, the Czech government reported over 37 acts of anti-Semitic violence and harassment, notably the vandalizing of Jewish cemeteries and other religious sites. Moreover, some media outlets openly promote hateful and offensive anti-Semitic rhetoric and print/broadcast discriminatory content.

**Islam:** Czechia is home to some 10,000 Muslims, most immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. Czechia has experienced a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment in recent years. Both

former President Zeman and former PM Babiš made derogatory anti-Muslim comments, fueling tensions with Muslim residents and inflaming debate amid Europe's migrant crisis (see *Political and Social Relations*). Some political groups, such



as the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, successfully campaigned on anti-Muslim platforms in the 2017 parliamentary elections. Further, groups in several cities, notably Prague, have organized anti-immigrant rallies in which some participants chanted anti-Muslim hate speech and displayed racist, inflammatory banners.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Czechs typically have a notable appreciation of family and community. Even families living apart are often close-knit, and relatives typically strive to maintain close bonds.

### Residence

During the communist era (see *History and Myth*), the government assigned housing, mostly in state-owned, collectively maintained properties. While the government prioritized housing construction, it did not keep pace with demand, and by the 1980s, the country was experiencing a severe housing shortage. Today, about half of existing housing dates from the period since 1950, much of it prefabricated, high-rise apartment buildings. In recent years, high prices have prevented many young people from purchasing property. Nevertheless, roughly 76% of Czechs

own their own home today, higher than the EU average (69%) and in Germany (48%) and but lower than in Poland (87%). Some 75% of Czechs live in urban areas.

**Urban:** Prague was 1 of the few European cities

spared heavy bombing during World War II (see *History and Myth*). Consequently, it has many historical buildings exhibiting a wide range of artistic styles such as Gothic, Renaissance, Romanesque, and Baroque. Many cities and towns also feature large, red-roofed, single- or multi-family homes. Nevertheless, Soviet-style concrete apartment blocks continue to dominate urban outskirts, with about a third of Czechs living in these



**paneláky** (“prefabs” – referring to the prefabricated panes used to construct the buildings). These quarters are often small, with 1-2 bedrooms and a living room that also may be used for sleeping. Affordable housing remains a problem in many urban areas.

**Rural:** Due to its early industrialization (see *Economics and Resources*), Czechia developed numerous small cities and towns. Nevertheless, some Czechs still live in scattered rural villages, especially in eastern Moravia (see *Political and Social Relations*). Rural homes tend to be free-standing, single-family dwellings of brick, cinderblock, or wood, often in a traditional farmhouse style. The countryside also features **chaty** (country homes) typically owned by urban residents and used as vacation retreats for rest and relaxation. Some *chaty* have elaborate grounds and gardens.



### Family Structure

Even if both parents work outside the home (see *Sex and Gender*), the father is traditionally the head of the household and primary breadwinner, while the mother holds responsibility for most household chores and childcare. Czech families tend to be tight-knit, with family members living close to each other and children living at home until they have finished their education.

While extended relatives often gather for special occasions and holiday celebrations, most Czechs live as nuclear families (2 parents and their children). Nevertheless, **babičky** (grandmothers) remain important figures within the family and often help care for grandchildren, especially if the mother works outside the home. In recent decades, this traditional family structure has changed, with an increasing number of Czechs foregoing marriage for cohabitation with or without children.

### Children

While rural families were traditionally larger, with several offspring, most Czech families today have just 1-2 children.

Parents endeavor to instill obedience, politeness, and a practical, strong work ethic in their children. While children typically perform some household chores, parents generally prioritize their children's academics and extracurricular activities but also give them significant autonomy and independence to play and engage with their peers.

**Birth:** Pregnant women are encouraged to rest the 6 weeks prior to their due date. After a birth, friends and family typically visit,



bearing gifts such as flowers or sweets, while the new father traditionally gathers with friends at a local pub to toast the child. Some Czechs baptize their babies within a few months of the birth.

**Names:** Parents often choose their baby's name before the birth, traditionally relying on the Czech calendar, which lists boy and girl names for each day

of the year. Czechs often celebrate their **svátek** or "name day" in addition to their birthday.

### Dating and Marriage

Boys and girls typically interact from a young age, socializing at school and community events before beginning to date in their teens. Popular activities include watching movies, going for city strolls, shopping, hiking or visiting parks, and visiting restaurants, bars, or cafes. Czech parents are typically lenient with curfews. With little societal emphasis on marriage, many Czechs live with their parents until moving in with a long-term partner. If they do marry, it is typically later in life, with the average marriage age 30 for women and 33 for men.

**Weddings:** Few couples have a formal engagement, preferring to simply announce their marriage intentions to family and friends via wedding invitations. A popular method is sending "wedding sweets," such as cakes filled with plum or apple jam, that function as edible invitations.



Czechs typically marry in a civil ceremony at a local government registry, town hall, or a scenic location such as a castle or countryside estate. Some couples also hold a religious ceremony in a church following Christian traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). After the ceremony, friends and family gather for a celebration that often lasts into the early morning. During the festivities, groomsmen may pretend to “kidnap” the bride, requiring the groom to pay a ransom such as a drink for her return. Guests typically shower the couple with rice, confetti, nuts, or raisins, symbolizing their hope for abundance in the marriage.



To show their commitment to facing challenges together, the couple typically shatters a ceramic plate then cleans the mess. The bride and groom also traditionally share a spoon to eat from a bowl of soup, signifying their pledge to share all things in life. At midnight, the blindfolded bride is spun around before she places her veil on one of the unmarried female attendees, indicating that she will marry next.

**Divorce:** In 2023, the divorce rate was 1.8 per 1,000 people, higher than rates in Germany (1.7 in 2021) and Poland (1.6) and the EU average (1.6), but lower than the US rate (2.4 in 2022).

## Death

Since few Czechs are religious (see *Religion and Spirituality*), funerals tend to be secular events held at a funeral home. A few days after the death, family and friends gather for a service during which a professional speaker, usually provided by the funeral home, remembers the deceased in a short speech. Some families in rural areas prefer a Catholic church service. Regardless of the type of ceremony, loved ones typically gather afterwards to share a meal and reminisce about the deceased. Families increasingly choose cremation over a casket burial, then bury, scatter, or inter the ashes, often with no formal ceremony.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Czech society is traditionally patriarchal, meaning men hold most power and authority. Although women and men share equal rights before the law, women continue to face obstacles to their full participation in social, economic, and political spheres.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** During the communist era (see *History and Myth*), gender equality was a pillar of state social policies. Many women worked outside the home on equal footing with men but under the expectation that they would also uphold their domestic duties. Today, many Czechs continue to share the expectation that women balance this double duty. In 2022, for example, some 58% of working women with children engaged in cooking and housework daily, compared with 20% of men.

**Labor Force:** As of 2024, about 52% of Czech women worked outside the home, similar to rates in neighboring Poland (52%) but lower than the US rate (57%) and Slovakia (55%). Some gender



segregation in the labor market occurs, with some 27% of women working in jobs traditionally considered “female” such as education, nursing, and social services, compared to 6% of men. Women remain severely underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields and occupy fewer prominent positions in industry, holding just 20% of corporate board seats as of 2024. Czechia has one of the EU’s highest gender wage gaps, with women earning 18% less than men with similar qualifications, compared to the EU average of 12%. Further, Czechia has one of the EU’s lowest rates of available childcare services, forcing many women to take time off from

work for childcare, hindering their career development and slowing their progress toward promotion.

### **Gender and the Law**

The Czech Constitution guarantees equal rights, and various laws criminalize discrimination and sexual harassment. Other laws mandate 28 weeks of paid maternity leave, while guaranteeing a return to the same job, even if the mother takes additional leave. Despite legal equality, some gender disparities and unequal treatment exist. For example, societal pressures and the tedious process of filing criminal complaints discourage many women from reporting discrimination and harassment. Further, legal loopholes allow employers to terminate new mothers upon their return to work.

### **Gender and Politics**

While the former communist government mandated that women hold 30% of parliamentary seats, independent Czechia has implemented no such quota system. Today, rates of female representation in the Parliament remain low. As of April 2025, women occupy 26% of lower house seats, lower than the EU average (33%) and rates in Germany (36%), Poland (31%), and the US (29%). Just 21% of Czech Senators are female, compared to 26% in the US.



Women's participation increases somewhat at the local level, where they hold some 28% of municipal assembly seats. Generally, critics note that women often receive assignments to committees focused on traditionally "female" domains such as education or healthcare, while those covering finance and defense tend to be male dominated. Nevertheless, Czechia has had four female Ministers of Defense since 2007. Some political parties have created their own policies for encouraging women's participation in the political process. For example, the Czech Social Democratic Party stipulates that at least 25% of its candidates must be women.

## Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Some 20% of Czechia women reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence at least once since the age of 15, lower



than the 2024 EU averages of 31%. However, experts estimate that some 17% of female victims fail to report the crimes, higher than the EU average of 13%. They also note that failure to report occurs at higher rates within immigrant communities due to reluctance to interact with authorities.

The Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*) in particular experience higher rates of GBV, notably also forced prostitution.

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal and punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Domestic violence is punishable by up to 4 years in prison. In 2015, the government implemented programs to train law enforcement, provide professional development for caregivers, and offer rehabilitation and counseling for perpetrators to prevent repeat offenses. Organizations providing short-term social, legal, and psychological services to rape victims remain underfunded.

## Sex and Procreation

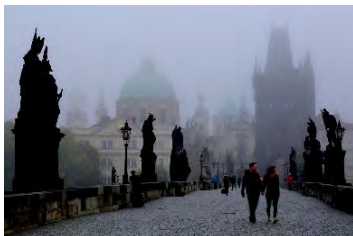
At 1.7 children per woman in 2024, Czechia's birthrate has increased from a 1999 low of 1.13 but remains well below the rate required to maintain the population. Nevertheless, the 2024 rate is higher than both neighboring Germany (1.58) and Poland (1.32). Abortion is legal upon request in the first 12 weeks of a pregnancy, and available thereafter in cases of risk to a mother's life or fetal deformities. Since the 1990s, enhanced access to improved contraception methods has resulted in a sharp reduction in abortion rates.

During the communist era (see *History and Myth*), public displays of affection and sexuality were uncommon. Attitudes have liberalized in recent years, and such displays are

customary. Similarly, Czechs tend to have an openness and tolerance towards sexuality, and abortion and contraceptive use are not controversial issues.

### Homosexuality in Czechia

In 2006, Czechia emerged on the forefront of emerging equal rights in Central and Eastern Europe when it became the first former communist state to legalize same-sex partnerships. Under the law, registered same-sex couples have the same rights as married heterosexual couples in inheritance, hospital visitation, and alimony but not in adoptions, taxation, or property ownership. Meanwhile, both gender identity and sexual orientation are protected categories under anti-discrimination laws. Observers note few reports of discrimination and violence against homosexuals, and Czechs generally express acceptance or at least tolerance of homosexuality.



This openness supports thriving homosexual communities and organizations. As of early 2024, Czechia's government reached a compromise in passing a bill equating same-sex partnerships



to marriage in most aspects except joint adoption. The new law is set to take effect on 1 January 2025. The bill has the support of the government and most political parties but faces opposition from some elements.

Further, President Petr Pavel supports same-sex marriage and other progressive policies (see *Political and Social Relations*). At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Czechia. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Czechia's official language is Czech, spoken by more than 88% of the population. Despite efforts by foreign rulers to suppress Czech during the 17th century (see *History and Myth*), the language survived and today is an important part of Czech national identity. Some 78% of Czechs reported knowledge of at least one other language in a 2022 survey.



### Czech

Along with Polish, Sorbian, and Slovak, Czech is a member of the West Slavic branch of the Slavic family of languages. Historically, the region was home to several Czech dialects with slight differences in accent and vocabulary. A major focus of the 19th-century National Awakening (see *History and Myth*) was the resurrection of Czech as a literary language, with scholars devising a new written standard that differed significantly from spoken versions at the time. Today, standard Czech is used for all written and many formal spoken contexts, such as speeches. In most informal contexts, Czechs speak one of several Bohemian or Moravian dialects or use Common Czech, a variety that emerged from the dialect spoken in 16th-17th century Prague.

Czech utilizes a 42-letter Latin alphabet. Many of the letters feature diacritics, symbols placed above the letter to indicate a pronunciation change. For example, "s" is pronounced like the English "s," but "š" is like the English "sh."

### National Minority Languages

The Czech National Minority Act of 2001 recognizes 14 national minority languages that align with the 14 officially-recognized ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*): Belarusian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, German, Polish, Romani (the

language of the Roma or “Gypsies”), Rusyn, Russian, Greek, Slovak, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese. This recognition grants speakers of these languages certain rights, among them the right to receive some instruction in the language in public schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Further, German, Croatian, Polish, Romani, and Slovak are recognized and protected under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This recognition makes them eligible for financial support from the Council of Europe for bilingual signage and a variety of research and education programs (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Of the minority languages, Slovak and Ukrainian have the most speakers, some 150,738 and 88,873 respectively. They are followed by Russian (59,560), Vietnamese (43,822), Polish (30,183), German (10,151), Hungarian (8,533), and two Romani varieties (4,280). The other official minority languages have fewer than 2,000 speakers each. Some 16,523 residents speak Moravian and Silesian. Romanian and Bavarian (a dialect of German) have about 4,920 and 9,000 speakers each respectively, and around 6,500 speak Mongolian.

### **Czech and Slovak**

The only members of the Czech-Slovak group of the West Slavic language branch, Czech and Slovak are mutually intelligible, though Slovak is closer to standard written Czech than spoken Common Czech. Czech and Slovak differ in spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary, among others. While the early 20th century founders of the First Czechoslovak Republic introduced the concept of the “Czechoslovak language” as a means to unify the 2 peoples, communist Czechoslovakia recognized and supported Czech and Slovak as separate languages. Since the 1993 split of Czechia and Slovakia, lack of exposure means that younger Czechs tend to lack the full understanding of Slovak that previous generations often had.

## English

Since Czechia's post-communism pivot to Western Europe and 2004 accession to the EU (see *History and Myth*), English has become increasingly popular. In general, younger Czechs living in large cities are much more likely to speak English than the older generation and those living in rural areas.

## Communication Overview

Effective communication in Czechia requires not only knowledge of Czech but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Communication patterns reflect the values Czechs place on respect and modesty. Czechs typically communicate in a straightforward manner, and compared to Americans, they may appear guarded or overly formal among acquaintances and business contacts. Comfortable in silence and typically unemotional around strangers, some Czechs, especially rural inhabitants, sometimes appear cool or even unfriendly.



Nevertheless, they are generally warm and outgoing among family and friends.

## Greetings

Greetings vary depending on age, gender, and social status. Adult acquaintances typically

shake hands, while friends and relatives often embrace and exchange 1-2 kisses on the cheek. Common verbal greetings include a simple **ahoj** ("hi" or "bye") and **dobrý den** ("good day" or "hello"), **dobré ráno** ("good morning"), and **dobry večer** ("good evening").



## Names

Czech names comprise a first (given) name and a last (family) name. Female first names commonly end in “a,” while male names end in any letter. Most last names have different forms to indicate gender. For example, many common male last names end in **-ský** and **-ný**, while the female versions end in **-ská** or **-ná**. Other male names are modified by adding the ending **-ová**. For example, the female version of the last name Novák is Nováková. Some family names incorporate the prefix “z” (meaning “of”), as in the name Karel z Zerotina.



Women traditionally take their husbands' last names upon marriage, modifying them to the female version as needed. Today, some women continue this tradition, while others add their husband's last name to their own to make a hyphenated name, or they may simply retain their own family name.

## Forms of Address

Czechs use different forms of address to demonstrate respect and the nature of the relationship. For example, Czechs typically address elders, superiors, colleagues, and acquaintances with



**Pan** (Mr.), **Pani** (Mrs.), and **Slečna** (Miss), followed by the last name. Czechs also frequently use professional titles such as doctor or engineer or titles that indicate academic credentials, often pairing them with

*Pan* and *Pani*. For example, a woman named Mrs. Nováková, who has a Master's degree, might be addressed as *Pani magistra* Nováková or simply *Pani magistra*. By contrast, close friends and family members typically address each other by first name.

Czech has distinct “you” pronouns that reflect different levels of formality and respect. They usually use the formal “you” or **vy** with acquaintances, business associates, elders, and authority figures, while reserving the informal **ty** for friends, relatives, younger people, and close colleagues. Foreign nationals should use formal forms of address unless directed otherwise.

### Conversational Topics

Conversation in business settings and among acquaintances tends to be quite formal, centering on general inquiries about the well-being of a person and his family members. More informal topics of discussion include travel, family, art, and sports, especially soccer and ice hockey. While some Czechs appreciate a dark sense of humor and enjoy making jokes about the country’s history and current challenges, foreign nationals should avoid potentially sensitive or controversial subjects such as the country’s communist period, religion, and current politics (see *Political and Social Relations*).



### Gestures

Czechs sometimes use gestures to emphasize their verbal expressions but typically find frequent gesturing inappropriate or annoying. Czechs consider



pointing with the index finger to be impolite, instead indicating direction with the entire hand.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at <http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/> and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Czech
Hello	Dobrý den
Hi/Bye (informal)	Ahoj
How are you?	Jak se máte?
Fine and you?	Děkuji, dobře. A vy?
Yes	Ano
No	Ne
Please	Prosím
Thank you	Děkuji
You are welcome	Prosím
I'm sorry	Promiňte
What's your name?	Jak se jmenujete?
Where are you from?	Odkud jste?
I'm from...	Jsem z...
My name is...	Jmenuju se...
Goodbye	Nashledanou
What does this mean?	Co to znamená?
Please speak more slowly	Prosím mluvte pomaleji
I understand	Rozumím
I don't understand	Nerozumím
Do you speak English?	Mluvíte anglicky?
How much?	Kolik?
Cheers!	Na zdraví!
Call the police!	Zavolejte policii!
Who?	Kdo?
Where?	Kde?
When?	Kdy?
What?	Co?
Why?	Proč?
How?	Jak?
Where is the train station?	Kde je nádraží?
Today	Dnes
Tomorrow	Zítřka
Help!	Pomoc!
What time is it?	Kolik je hodin ?
I'd like to buy...	Chtěl bych koupit ...

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99%
- Male: 99%
- Female: 99% (2021)

### Early History of Education

Before the arrival of formal education that accompanied the introduction and spread of Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*), regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations. Beginning in the 9th century, Christian missionaries established schools to train clergymen, with most instruction in Latin.

Formal education expanded in the 13th century with the establishment of provincial schools for the children of nobles. In 1348, King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV founded a university in Prague focused on theology, law, medicine, and the liberal arts. Known as Charles University today, the institution was the first university north of the Alps and east of Paris and played an important role in the 15th-century anti-Catholic movement led by priest and professor Jan Hus (see *History and Myth*).

Beginning in the 16th century, the region's Catholic Habsburg rulers (see *History and Myth*) used education to stifle religious change and rebellion prompted by the Protestant Reformation (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, they encouraged the Jesuits (a Catholic religious order – see *Religion and Spirituality*) to establish schools of philosophy and theology in Prague beginning in 1556.



Protestant influence returned to Charles University in the early 17th century, when it became a center of anti-Habsburg opposition. Following the Habsburgs' defeat of the Protestant

rebellion in 1620, the rulers pursued forceful re-Catholicization of the region (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*). In 1654, the Jesuits took control of Charles University, heavily influencing Czech cultural life and education in subsequent decades.

The 18th century saw the first efforts to extend education to the general population, though with German as the primary language of instruction (see *History and Myth*). In 1774, Habsburg Empress Maria Theresa (see *History and Myth*) introduced reforms to standardize education throughout the Empire and make schooling compulsory between ages 6-12. Her son, Joseph II, expanded her reforms, most notably the removal of Catholic Church influence from education.

With the resurrection of Czech as a literary language during the 19th-century National Awakening (see *History and Myth*), interest in Czech scholarship grew. In 1882, Charles University split into separate Czech-language and German-language institutions that attracted respected academics from across

Europe through the early 20th century, notably including physicist Albert Einstein.

### Early 20th Century Education

When the Republic of Czechoslovakia emerged in 1918 (see *History and Myth*), the new government built upon the educational system introduced by the Habsburgs. Curricula in primary and secondary schools included courses in German, Czech or Slovak; a second language of either

Latin, Greek, French, or English; history; geography; mathematics; sciences; philosophy; art, and physical exercise. Other educational opportunities included schools of agriculture for men and home economics for women.



During World War II (see *History and Myth*), Nazi occupying forces took over the educational system, revising school curricula to reflect Nazi ideology. Following student demonstrations in 1939, the Nazis closed all Czech-language institutions of higher learning and persecuted many professors and students.

### Education under Communism

The 1948 establishment of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (see *History and Myth*) transformed the education system. Legislation brought all Czechoslovak schools under state control, and reforms revised educational offerings to serve the needs of the economy as well as emphasize communist ideology and the Russian language in addition to Czech and Slovak. Generally, the goals of the communist education system included preparing workers to labor in industry, developing citizens with the proper communist attitudes, spreading the values of the working class, and instilling respect for work.



The Communist Party often used access to higher education to reward regime supporters or punish dissenters. Nevertheless, policies also opened educational opportunities to some historically marginalized groups. For example, institutions prioritized applicants from farmer and worker families and encouraged women to pursue post-secondary studies, increasing the proportion of female higher education students from 19% in 1945 to 41% by 1975.

### Modern Education

Following the 1989 Velvet Revolution (see *History and Myth*), the new government pursued educational reforms, notably a 1990 law that allowed the creation of private and religious schools funded by the state. Following the Velvet Divorce (see *History and Myth*), 2003 reforms granted students, parents, and

school administrators significant autonomy in instructional content and methods, while granting teachers responsibility for educational quality. Overall educational strategy was set by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports.

The scholastic achievement of Czech students was higher than average on a 2022 assessment of 85 countries. Czechia has 1



of the EU's lowest dropout rates, and citizens average almost 14 years of schooling. As of 2022, 83% of students attend public schools, with the rest in religious or other private schools.

Despite its achievements, there are challenges in Czechia's educational system. Observers criticize Czechia's low educational funding levels, with government spending on education 4.5% of GDP in 2023, slightly lower than the EU average (4.7%). While the law mandates that speakers of recognized national minority languages (see *Language and Communication*) receive some or even all instruction in that language from pre-primary through secondary grades, such instruction is occasionally lacking.

Further, some students from disadvantaged backgrounds, notably the Roma (see *Political and Social Relations*), experience discrimination, segregation, and unequal access to educational opportunities. While 2014 reforms were intended to end this discrimination, many Roma children continue to be denied enrollment at mainstream institutions and instead are sent to "special" schools for children with mental disabilities or restricted to ethnically segregated, Roma-only schools. To address these and other issues, the government has adopted the "Strategy for Education 2030+" with a focus on reducing inequalities, improving support to teachers, and enhancing oversight of the education system.

**Pre-Primary:** Public and private pre-primary schools provide optional and typically tuition-based education for children aged

3-5 years and compulsory and free education for 6-year-olds. As of 2022, some 85% of 3-5 year-olds were enrolled in early education programs, lower than the EU average of 92%. Around 96% of pre-primary students attended public institutions in 2022.

**Primary:** Consisting of 9 grades starting around age 6, primary school is compulsory and free. The curriculum for the lower level (grades 1-5) includes Czech, a foreign language, math, information technology, science, geography, music, art, physical education, and occupational skills. In the upper level (grades 6-9), students also receive lessons in history, citizenship, physics, chemistry, and financial literacy. While most students complete all 9 years of compulsory education in primary schools, they may transfer to a ***gymnázium*** (a secondary school focused on preparing students for university studies) after their 5th or 7th year of primary school. Some 99% of students completed primary school in 2022.



**Secondary:** Secondary education encompasses 2 tracks: general (***gymnázium***) and vocational/technical. While neither is compulsory, more than 87% of children attend free secondary school. As of 2023, 27% of upper secondary students were enrolled in general education and 73% in vocational/technical programs, compared to the EU averages of 49% and 51% respectively.



For students who complete 9 years of primary school, ***gymnázium*** lasts 4 years and allows students to deepen

their knowledge of basic school subjects while preparing them



for post-secondary studies. For students who left primary school early, the *gymnázium* offers 6 and 8-year courses of study. Secondary school graduates must pass an examination, the **maturita**, to advance to post-secondary education. This exam consists of both written and oral sections and is a significant rite of passage for Czech students.

Students pursuing secondary vocational/technical education have the option of choosing between a basic vocational school (3 years) and technical school (4 years). Graduates of technical schools typically attend post-secondary professional schools, while those with vocational certificates tend to enter the labor market directly.



### Post-Secondary Education

Czechia has a long history of higher education. Since its 14th-century founding, Prague's Charles University continues to be one of Central Europe's foremost universities, serving over 52,000 students in 2023. Other prominent public institutions include Czech Technical University in Prague, Masaryk University in Brno, and Palacký University in Olomouc. Universities typically award a bachelor's degree after 3 years of



study and master's and doctoral degrees after additional years. In all, some 68 institutions offered post-secondary programs to 338,556 students in 2023. Public university education is free, though most such programs have stringent admissions requirements

and are taught primarily in Czech. As of 2024, some 34% of Czechs aged 25-34 had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, lower than the EU average of 44%.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Czechs tend to prefer more formal business relations, while reserving physical affection and informality for close friends and family. Nevertheless, personal connections are valued and important to successful business.

### Time and Work

Czechia's work week runs Monday-Friday from 8am-4:30pm, though many people start their workday earlier. While hours vary, many shops and markets are open Monday-Friday from 9am-6pm and Saturday from 9am-1pm. Shopping centers tend to have longer hours and are typically open daily from 10am-8pm. In the summer, some Czechs may stop work early on Fridays to take long weekends in their **chaty** (country homes) (see *Family and Kinship*).



Most banks open Monday-Friday from 9am-4pm and Saturday from 9am-1pm. Post office hours are typically Monday-Friday from 8am-6pm and Saturday from 9am-1pm. Generally, restaurants are open from 11am-11pm daily. Museums are usually closed on Mondays and are open for fewer hours outside of the tourist season.

**Working Environment:** Czechia's legal work week is 40 hours, with up to 8 additional hours of paid overtime. Czechs receive additional pay for work performed on public holidays. In addition to 12 paid holidays, Czech workers receive 4 weeks of paid time off per calendar year.

**Time Zone:** Czechia adheres to Central European Time (CET), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Czechia observes daylight savings time.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Czechia uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar, but unlike in the US, Czechs typically write the day first, followed by the month and year.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day/Restoration of Czech Independence Day
- March/April: Easter
- May 1: May Day/Labor Day
- May 8: Liberation Day
- July 5: St. Cyril and Methodius Day
- July 6: Jan Hus Day
- September 28: St. Wenceslas Day/Day of Czech Statehood
- October 28: Foundation of Czechoslovak State
- November 17: Freedom and Democracy Day
- December 24-26: Christmas holidays

### Time and Business

Czech business interactions tend to be somewhat formal (see *Language and Communication*). Czech business partners typically refrain from using first names, preferring titles and last names. Upon meeting, Czechs firmly shake hands, exchange business cards, and may engage in light conversation (see *Language and Communication*).

Czechs appreciate punctuality and tend to schedule meetings in advance. Business interactions and decision-making are generally hierarchical. Czechs rarely make business decisions during initial meetings, preferring to confer with superiors, who decide how to proceed. Meetings may run overtime due to lengthy formalities and discussions.

### Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Czechia depends on the nature of the relationship. Generally, Czechs tend to maintain

slightly less than an arm's length of distance when interacting with strangers, which is slightly closer than US standards.

**Touch:** Conversational touching depends largely on the level of familiarity. In formal settings, Czechs rarely engage in touch beyond handshakes (see *Language and Communication*). Occasionally, Czechs may engage in limited touching to show assurance or emphasize a point.

**Eye Contact:** Czechs generally consider direct eye contact during greetings and business meetings as an indication of interest, respect, and transparency. Nevertheless, prolonged eye contact or staring may be considered a sign of aggression.

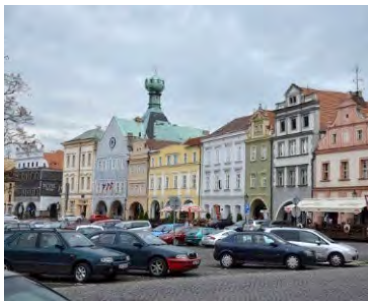
### Photographs

Banks, churches, museums, secured areas, and similar places may prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire a Czech's permission before taking his photo.

### Driving

Road conditions are generally good in Czechia, although drivers may encounter uneven surfaces, narrow roads, irregular markings, cobblestone streets, and a lack of signage in some city neighborhoods and rural areas. Drivers in Czechia generally obey traffic laws, although speeding is common, and enforcement varies.

Czechia has zero tolerance for any detectable blood alcohol level, with violations incurring steep penalties. At 5 per 100,000 people in 2023, Czechia's rate



of traffic-related deaths is lower than neighboring Poland (5) and the US (13), but it is higher than the rate in neighboring Germany (3). Like Americans, Czechs drive on the right side of the road. The law mandates the use of headlights at all times, regardless of time of day or weather conditions.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Czechia's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's rural customs, religious influences, history of communist rule, and modern global traditions.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Traditional costumes (***kroje***) are often featured at festivals, special events, folk celebrations, or religious ceremonies. Styles, colors, and fabrics tend to vary by region, although they do share some common elements. In warmer lowland areas, traditional styles are made from flax, cotton, or hemp, while in colder regions, wool and linen are more common.



Most women's *kroje* feature a white blouse (***halenka***) with puffy sleeves (***rukávce***) worn beneath a vest, often featuring beaded or embroidered floral designs. The outfit also includes an apron and skirt (***fěrtušek***), often with red, black, blue, or yellow as the dominant colors, along with stockings, a bonnet, and lace collar. Unmarried girls traditionally wear a wreath of flowers or ribbon headpiece (***čepení***), while married women typically cover their hair with a headscarf.

Men's *kroje* often feature a similar color and design scheme and include a long-sleeved, embroidered white shirt, vest, and long breeches tucked into tall black boots. In addition, some married men wear a long ribbon (***musla***) on their shoulder to signify their marital status. Men's *kroje* may also feature a hat, scarf, and belt.

**Modern:** For everyday dress, most Czechs wear clothing that reflects the latest European fashion trends. Jeans and T-shirts are popular, although Czechs generally dress up when going out to restaurants or attending formal events. Business attire is

typically modest and formal, consisting of suits for men and dresses or blouses with trousers/skirts for women. Nevertheless, business-casual dress has been gaining popularity among the younger generations.

## Recreation and Leisure

Czechs tend to spend their leisure time with friends and family. Popular activities include camping, walking, cycling, or hiking Czechia's nearly 24,000 mi of trails. During the summer, many urban residents visit their country homes (see *Family and Kinship*). In the summer and fall, collecting berries or mushrooms is a popular outdoor activity. In urban areas, movie theaters and shopping centers are common free time destinations. Other leisure activities include reading, watching television, visiting museums, going to the theater or concerts, and catching up with friends in pubs. Some Czechs travel abroad, particularly to ski or visit beaches.



## Holidays and Festivals:

Most Czechs celebrate holidays and festivals with Christian and pre-Christian roots, even

those who do not claim a religious affiliation (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, they celebrate Easter by decorating and exchanging Easter eggs (**kraslice**), symbolizing the cycle of life and return of spring.

An Easter custom with pre-Christian roots is **pomlázka**, when boys gently swat girls' legs with bundles of braided willow or birch twigs, representing fertility and seasonal rejuvenation. Another celebration with pre-Christian roots is the Burning of Witches (**pálení čarodějnic**), celebrated on April 30. To dispel evil spirits and compel winter to leave, Czechs gather at bonfires to burn witch figures. As the fires die down, young couples often leap over the coals hand-in-hand.

During the Christmas season, many cities and towns decorate with lights and host Christmas markets selling a variety of gifts, foods, and crafts. The Christmas season begins on December 5

when the costumed figure of Saint Nicholas (**Mikuláš**) traditionally gives small presents to children. On Christmas Eve, families traditionally fast during the day then gather for a large evening meal and a gift exchange before a Christmas tree.



Several cities host song, dance, and music festivals. Summer and fall open-air folk festivals are particularly popular.

The largest are the Strážnice and Brno international folk festivals featuring traditional crafts, music, and dance. Other events include the Český Krumlov International Music Festival, which runs for 3 weeks during the summer and showcases musical genres ranging from jazz and rock to classical and opera; the Fringe Theater Festival; the Prague Spring International Music Festival; and the Khamoro World Roma Festival, which showcases Roma musical and cultural traditions (see *Political and Social Relations*).

## Sports and Games

**Sports:** Czechs enjoy a variety of sport, such as swimming, track and field, cycling, skiing, ice skating, and snow biking. In recent decades, Czechia has produced a number of world class tennis players. Soccer is also popular, with several club and professional leagues. Many Czechs consider hockey the national sport. The national men's team historically performs well in both the Olympics and world championship, and Czechs frequently play in the US' National Hockey League. Czechia also offers many opportunities for children's participation in hockey, such as youth leagues, afterschool programs, and lessons during school physical education classes.

**Traditional Games:** Czechs enjoy a variety of traditional games. **Mariáš**, a game similar to spades or hearts, is played with 3 people and a special deck of cards common in Central Europe. Another game, **Taroky**, has similar rules but is played with a deck of tarot cards.

## Music and Dance

**Traditional:** The sounds and melodies of Czech traditional music date to the early 15th century, when religious reformers like Jan Hus composed hymns to accompany their sermons (see *History and Myth*). Following the region's 16th-century incorporation into the Habsburg Empire (see *History and Myth*), the royal court provided significant patronage to musicians. Subsequent centuries saw the influx of musical influences from Germany, Italy, and Austria as well as the arrival of musicians from across Europe. A key Austrian composer was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who performed operas and symphonies in Prague.

During the 19th-century National Awakening (see *History and Myth*), Czech nationalism became a predominant theme in the work of many renowned composers, who often looked to Czech folk music for inspiration. For example, Bedřich Smetana's collection of symphonies, ***Má vlast*** ("My Homeland"), celebrates Czech history and countryside, while his opera ***Libuše*** features a prominent figure in Czech mythology (see *History and Myth*). The first Czech composer to receive worldwide recognition, Antonín Dvořák utilized the rhythms and melodies of traditional Czech folk songs to create new Romantic forms. Today, traditional music often accompanies folk dances and features a variety of instruments, such as a dulcimer (a stringed instrument – ***cimbál***), violins, double basses, drums, clarinets, hurdy-gurdys (a hand cranked, string instrument), and ***bock*** (a type of bagpipe).



Some Czech music and dance traditions are known throughout the world. For example, the ***polka*** is both a lively couples' dance and

style of music that originated in early 19th-century Bohemia and quickly spread globally, while inspiring new styles and variations. By contrast, the ***Slovácko verbunk*** is an improvised dance traditionally performed by boys and men. Reflecting its historical



origins in the recruitment of soldiers for the military during the 18th century, the dance features improvised leaps and arm motions along with group singing.

**Modern:** Contemporary musical genres also thrive in Czechia. Since arriving in the 1930s, jazz has remained popular despite its repression during the communist era. During the 1960s-80s, rock music helped sustain anti-communist sentiments even as musicians faced arrest and oppression. Today, popular performances range from opera and classical to rock, techno, jazz, rap, and punk, among others.



## Theater

During the 19th-century National Awakening (see *History and Myth*), playwrights and puppeteers created new works in Czech to foster Czech nationalism. Meanwhile, the construction of Prague's National Theater provided a permanent home for Czech-language dramatic arts and symbolized the rebirth of Czech national identity. In the early 20th century, Czech



playwrights became more experimental, creating new, modern styles. While cultural life suffered during the World War II Nazi occupation (see *History and Myth*), the prisoners of Terezín concentration camp (see *History and Myth*) housed many artists, actors, and

musicians who produced some 25 plays and operas among other cultural activities.

During the early communist era (see *History and Myth*), the authorities banned certain theatrical styles, while censoring many productions. Yet by the early 1960s, dozens of new

theater companies emerged, and playwrights such as future President Václav Havel (see *History and Myth*) used the stage to explore alternative social models and express their opposition to the communist regime. Following the 1968 Prague Spring (see *History and Myth*), the authorities again closely monitored the theater scene until the 1989 Velvet Revolution (see *History and Myth*). Today, Czech theater features an array of styles and explores a range of subjects.

**Puppetry:** This theatrical form traces to the Middle Ages, when entertainers performed with finger puppets at markets and fairs.

Later, artists developed string puppets (marionettes), and by the 17th century, puppet theaters presented biblical plays, tragedies, and comedies. Puppetry helped keep the Czech language alive during the centuries of Austrian Habsburg rule (see *History and Myth*).



Today, puppetry festivals are held throughout the year, and some 9 professional puppet theaters and hundreds of amateur companies offer regular performances.

## Cinema

Czech cinema also has a rich history. The early 1960s saw the development “Czechoslovak New Wave” cinema, with directors such as Jiří Menzel and Miloš Forman exploring a variety of subjects through humor, irony, and eroticism. After the 1968 Soviet invasion, Forman and many other filmmakers fled abroad. Forman went on to direct Academy Award-winning films in the US, such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Amadeus*. With the loss of state funding since independence, most Czech productions today are independent, small-budget films.

## Literature

For a relatively small country, Czechia has a rich and deep literary tradition that often features an unsentimental, dark yet humorous worldview. Czech literature first blossomed during the

19th-century National Awakening (see *History and Myth*). Poet Karel Hynek Mácha's lyrical epic *Máj* ("May") broke with tradition to explore romantic betrayal using new poetic forms. Still taught in Czech schools today, the work heavily influenced 20th-century poets such as Jaroslav Seifert, who won the 1984 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Czech literature's golden age emerged in the early 1900s. Writer Jaroslav Hašek ridiculed the region's Austrian rulers, religion, patriotism, among other topics. His dark comedy *The Good Soldier Švejk*, depicting a Czech soldier's experiences in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I (see *History and Myth*), was translated into dozens of languages and adapted for theater and film. Around the same time, Franz Kafka produced literature focusing on impotence, alienation, and unresolved guilt, though he wrote in German rather than Czech.

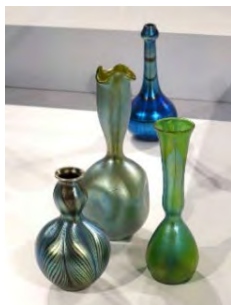
After World War II, Czech authors grappled with communist censorship, while exploring individual freedom and Czechia's place in the modern world. Many authors fled abroad after the 1968 Prague Spring (see *History and Myth*), while others such as noted writer Bohumil Hrabal remained and published **samizdat** (self-published, underground literature) supporting dissident activism. The most well-known Czech author of the

20th century, Milan Kundera, received significant international attention for his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which was set during the 1968 Prague Spring and published from exile in France in 1984.

### Folk Arts and Crafts

Czechia has a rich folk-art tradition of woodworking, weaving, embroidery, lace-making, ceramics, beadwork, and doll making. In addition, Bohemia is known for its colorful, engraved

crystal glassware bowls, vases, and chandeliers often depicting natural scenes or abstract designs. Other arts include a unique block printing technique (**modrotisk**) used to print geometric and floral designs on traditional clothing, tablecloths, and toys.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Czechs enjoy socializing with family and friends over lengthy meals. While friends often gather at bars and restaurants, families typically get together at home, often reserving Sunday afternoons for leisurely lunches. During the warm months, Czechs enjoy picnicking, grilling outdoors, and foraging for mushrooms and berries. Many urban families spend spring and summer weekends at their **chaty** (country homes – see *Family and Kinship*) that often feature small gardens producing a variety of vegetables, fruits, and herbs. Czech dishes tend to be hearty, simply seasoned, and highlight fresh, local ingredients.

### Dining Customs

Most Czechs supplement 3 daily meals with snacks (**svačina**) throughout the day. Although lunch is typically the largest and main meal, dinner may also be substantial. While close friends and family members sometimes drop by unannounced, most visits to a Czech home are arranged in advance. Unarranged visits are usually brief and usually consist of casual afternoon coffee and light snacks. By contrast, formal meals, especially those celebrating special occasions, typically consist of a series of courses served at a slow pace, with guests often lingering into the early morning hours.

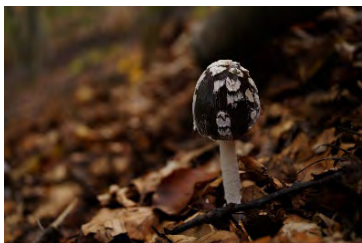
When invited to a formal meal, guests usually arrive on time, bringing small gifts of sweets, alcohol, or flowers. Upon entering a home, guests typically remove their shoes, sometimes replacing them with slippers (**pantofle**) typically provided by the host. It is customary for guests to be served first, and hosts usually offer multiple helpings throughout the meal. Alcoholic beverages feature prominently during most social visits. Diners toast frequently and often dedicate the toast to the host.



## Diet

Potatoes are a main staple and served roasted, boiled, fried, incorporated into salads, or made into soft, doughy dumplings (**knedlíky**). Bread is Czechia's second most common staple and accompanies almost every meal. Some of the most popular breads are **sumava** (traditional dark rye bread, often flavored with caraway seeds) and **rohlik** (crusty white bread rolls).

Meat features prominently in Czech cuisine, with most recipes featuring pork, beef, chicken, goose, duck, pheasant, or wild game as a primary ingredient. Meat is typically grilled or stewed and served with large portions of potato- or bread-based dumplings, potatoes, or rice, all covered in a thick cream or meat sauce and accompanied by seasonal vegetables. Carp and trout are the most prominent fish varieties and served roasted, fried, smoked, salted, or incorporated into soups or salads. Paprika, dill, garlic, onions, caraway, lemon, and vinegar add distinctive flavors to many dishes.



Common vegetables include cabbage, beets, squash, onions, and carrots. Mushrooms are particularly popular and often incorporated into sauces, fillings, and soups. Instead of

serving them raw, Czechs tend to pickle, boil, and sauté vegetables. Moreover, while some salads are lightly dressed in oil and vinegar, other salad varieties feature hearty mixtures of mayonnaise, sour cream, eggs, meat or fish, and potatoes. Locally grown fruits such as apples, cherries, pears, plums, strawberries, apricots, and currants are common in the spring and summer.

## Popular Dishes and Meals

Breakfast is typically a lighter meal often consisting of bread topped with butter and jam, yogurt, cheese, boiled eggs, and cured meats, usually served with coffee or tea. As the day's largest meal, lunch often comprises 3 or more courses. Typical fare includes an array of small appetizers, salad, soup, a larger

meat or fish dish served with dumplings and sauerkraut, boiled cabbage, or seasonal vegetables, and a dessert. Dinner typically consists of several courses or a simple, lighter meal of bread, smoked meats, and cheese or fruit-filled dumplings.

Popular dishes include **svíčková na smetaně** (beef sirloin cooked in a sour cream sauce with carrots, parsley, onion, celery, and various spices, served atop dumplings and garnished with a dollop of whipped cream and tart berries); **zelo** (roasted pork spiced with salt and caraway seeds, served with bread dumplings and sauerkraut); **guláš** (hearty beef and root vegetable stew); **bramboračka** (creamy soup of potatoes, mushrooms, onions, and garlic); and **kyselo** (a sour soup of fermented bread, potatoes, mushrooms, eggs, and caraway seeds).

For dessert, Czechs enjoy an array of pastries, cakes, and other sweets such as dumplings stuffed with dried prunes, blueberries, or apricots; **jablečný závin** (sweet apple pastries); **palačinky** (thin crepes often served with ice cream and/or fresh fruit); and **trdelník** (a rolled pastry dusted with cinnamon, sugar, and crushed walnuts).

## Beverages

Czechs consume coffee and, to a lesser extent, tea throughout the day. Common alcoholic

beverages include cognac, fruit brandies, **Becherovka** (an herb-based liquor), and Moravian wine, which Czechs enjoy hot and mulled (**svažené víno** – sweetened and typically flavored with spice) during the winter. Czechia is home to a rich beer brewing tradition that dates to the

early 11th century. As a result, beer (**pivo**) is particularly popular and available in several local varieties such as the world-famous Budvar and Pilsner Urquell. Notably, Czechs drink some 37 gallons of beer per person each year – the world's highest per capita rate.



## Eating Out

Czechs eat out regularly. Restaurants range from upscale establishments serving regional and international foods to small casual eateries, cafés, and **hospoda** (pubs). Besides serving



full menus, cafés often offer savory snacks such as cured meats; fried or boiled spicy pork or beef sausages (**klobásy**) served with mustard, bread, and other fixings; and **smažený sýr** (breaded, deep-fried pieces of cheese,

usually paired with fries and **tatarka**, tartar sauce) alongside large mugs of *pivo*. Wait staff at restaurants expect a tip of about 10% for good service. By contrast, servers in pubs and casual cafés generally do not expect a large tip, so diners usually simply round up the bill.

## Health Overview

Czechs' overall health has improved significantly in recent decades. Between 1990-2024, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 10 to 2.6 deaths per 1,000 live births, one of the world's lowest rates. Meanwhile, maternal mortality reduced from 14 to 3 deaths per 100,000 live births. Life expectancy at birth also increased from about 71 to 79 years, slightly less than the US and EU averages of 81 years each.

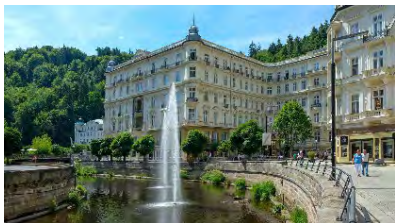
## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Czech medicine uses herbal, mineral, and animal-based remedies rather than surgical methods to identify and treat the basic causes of illness.

Knowledge of natural remedies is widespread. Many Czechs grow or gather their own medicinal herbs and plants or purchase herbal remedies from merchants. Czechs often supplement modern therapies with traditional treatments to address a range

of ailments, from minor issues like skin rashes and sore throats to chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer. Besides herbal treatments, other prominent remedies include acupuncture (the process of inserting long, thin needles into a patient's skin); cupping (the process of applying heated glass cups to the skin to draw out impurities and improve circulation; and homeopathy (a form of alternative medicine developed in 18th-century Germany in which a patient ingests diluted plant, mineral, and animal substances to trigger the body's natural system of healing).

Hydrotherapy (the process of bathing in or drinking mineral-rich water) is a particularly popular treatment in the numerous medicinal "spa towns" of west Bohemia and north Moravia. The famed facilities in the town of Karlovy Vary along the border with Germany feature unique 19th century spa architecture.



### Modern Healthcare System

Czechia's Ministry of Health (MoH) oversees and regulates the national healthcare system, sets industry-wide standards, and develops federal healthcare policy. While the MoH administers some hospitals and research facilities, regional authorities,



private entities, and churches own and operate the bulk of Czechia's healthcare infrastructure.

Several compulsory national health insurance schemes, collectively referred to

as Social Health Insurance (SHI), finance Czechia's healthcare system through diverse combinations of federal, regional, and private contributions. Together, SHI funds free universal healthcare for nearly all Czechs, including vulnerable



populations like the unemployed, retirees, and Czechs on parental leave. The SHI system covers preventive care, long-term care associated with chronic diseases, emergency services, maternal care and compensation, dental care, and costs associated with death, among numerous other benefits.

Under the SHI system, Czechs may freely choose from an extensive network of both public and private primary care physicians, hospitals, clinics, specialized inpatient facilities, and various other health centers. Moreover, low out-of-pocket spending for prescription medication and various medical services not covered by the SHI gives Czechia one of the EU's lowest rates of unmet medical needs due to financial reasons.

**Healthcare System Challenges:** Many of Czechia's finest physicians and nurses choose to practice in large urban areas,



leading to staff shortages in rural areas, where clinics tend to be outdated, small, and under equipped. As a result, high demand forces clinicians to work long hours and creates long waiting periods for patients to receive care. Moreover, some urban facilities, particularly

those providing psychiatric, long-term, and nursing care, are in disrepair and require significant capital investment to modernize the physical infrastructure.

Czechia's aging population is likely to add significant strain to the national healthcare system in the coming decades. The 21% of the population aged 65 or older in 2024 is expected to more than double by 2055 – a trend that will burden Czechia's healthcare system with increasing demand, elevated rates of chronic diseases, and rising costs.

### Health Challenges

As in most countries with aging populations, the rate of chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases now account for approximately 85% of all deaths. In 2023, the top causes of

death were cardiovascular diseases, cancer, neuropsychiatric conditions, diabetes, and digestive diseases. Preventable “external causes” such as car accidents, suicides, drownings, falls, and drug use resulted in about 4% of deaths. Communicable diseases like tuberculosis and hepatitis, infectious and parasitic diseases, and HIV/AIDS, also accounted for about 5% of deaths. Ill-defined diseases accounted for the remaining 3% of deaths.

Smoking, heavy alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, and poor diet result in rising rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes, among other health issues. For example, in 2021, the share of adults with diabetes was on par with the EU average while the fatality rate of liver disease was higher than the EU average. While the government has recently strengthened tobacco control legislation, initiatives to reduce alcohol consumption and obesity rates have seen few positive outcomes.



Significantly, members of the Roma community (see *Political and Social Relations*) disproportionately lack access to modern healthcare, with just 80% of Roma enrolled in medical insurance in 2022. Marginalized Roma communities also experience higher rates of chronic disease and are more likely to contract communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis.

**Pollution:** Unrestrained industrial development during the communist era (see *Economics and Resources*) left many Czech cities heavily polluted, resulting in high rates of respiratory and other pollution-related diseases by the 1990s. While pollution has significantly reduced over the last decade, some northern areas, especially the highly industrialized city of Ostrava, remain affected by toxic industrial discharge. With their air, water, and soil contaminated, residents of those regions experience higher rates of asthma, lung cancer, stunted growth, birth defects, and other medical issues.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, Czechs subsisted as peasants or serfs (see *History and Myth*) in an agrarian-based economy or worked in the region's coal mines. Later, the historical regions of Bohemia and Moravia underwent rapid industrialization, and by the beginning of the 20th century, the Czech Lands were not only the most industrialized region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (see *History and Myth*) but also one of the most economically developed regions in Europe.

Following World War I, the new Czechoslovak Republic united the predominantly agrarian Slovak territory with the industrialized Czech Lands. Because the territory included some 80% of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's industrial assets, Czechoslovakia became one of the world's 10 most industrialized countries. Subsequent industrial expansion in glass, textiles, shoes, and armaments was accompanied by the development of the agriculture and services sectors, so that by 1929, the workforce was relatively evenly divided among the three sectors.



Despite this diversification, the 1930s Great Depression impacted the region significantly, causing industrial production to fall by 40% and putting over 1 million Czechoslovakians out of work. Nevertheless, the economy rebounded with the start of World War II (WWII), when the Nazi German occupying authorities took over the country's industrial plants (see *History and Myth*). By 1945, production from the Bohemian Škoda factory alone represented some 30% of all armament supplies for the German Army.

From 1948-89, communist Czechoslovakia followed economic policies prioritizing heavy industrialization and farm collectivization modeled on the centrally planned Soviet system.

In 1949, Czechoslovakia became a founding member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), an economic cooperative group of Soviet bloc countries, and trade with communist countries increased from 40% of total trade in 1948 to 70% a decade later. Nevertheless, the communist regime's corruption, inefficient policies, and underinvestment resulted in gradual economic decline. By the 1960s, Czechoslovakia had the lowest industrial growth rate in the region, and the agriculture sector produced less than it had prior to WWII.



In response, some members of the communist government sought economic reforms in the 1960s. Soon, this attempted economic liberalization led to broader calls for democratic reform that prompted a Soviet invasion in 1968 (see *History and Myth*).

Subsequently, the communist hardliners re-took control and returned to central planning through a process called “normalization” (see *History and Myth*). By 1980, some 99.8% of the workforce labored in state-owned enterprises.

Following the 1989 Velvet Revolution (see. *History and Myth*), Czechoslovakia's transition from a centrally-planned economy to a free-market system was difficult. However, the country emerged in better condition than many other former communist countries, with little inflation, a low budget deficit, and a highly skilled workforce. To stabilize the economy and create economic competition, the new government privatized land through a voucher system and implemented some wage controls.

Even through the subsequent Velvet Divorce (see *History and Myth*), Czechia maintained its strong economic performance and was considered a model for success in the region despite a 1997 crisis that slowed economic activity. By 2000, the economy began to recover. Czechia's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 brought both significant financial support and further economic integration with Western Europe.

Although the country's GDP declined by 5% during the 2008-09 global financial crisis, it has since rebounded, and Czechia's current economic outlook is largely positive. The economy grew by an average of 3% through 2019, due mostly to domestic demand prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although GDP declined in 2020, it has since rebounded, growing 3.6% in 2021 and 2.5% in 2022 before stagnating in 2023. Czechia has the lowest rate of unemployment recorded in any EU country (2.6% in 2023), and it has one of the lowest levels of income inequality and poverty in the EU. Today, the capital city of Prague plays a substantial role in the country's economy, accounting for 1/4 of GDP.

With record low unemployment, expanding exports, and falling government debt, Czechia is a post-communism economic success story. Nevertheless, challenges remain. Labor shortages are widespread, and the economy remains highly vulnerable to global economic shocks. Other challenges include an aging population (see *Political and Social Relations*) and below-average government investment in education and training (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

### Services

Accounting for about 60% of GDP and 62% of employment, the services sector is the largest and most substantial segment of the Czech economy. Key components include retail, financial services, and tourism.

**Tourism:** In 2023, around 22 million tourists visited Czechia, bringing in \$7.4 billion. Foreign tourists, predominantly Germans, visit a variety of cultural and historical attractions, such as Prague, the historical town of Český Krumlov, and Karlštejn Castle; nature areas such as the Giant Mountains and the Bohemian Forest; and historical sites related to WWII, such as the Terezín concentration camp (see *History and Myth*).



## Industry

Even as industry has declined in importance since the communist era, it remains the second largest economic sector, accounting for about 30% of GDP and employing 36% of the labor force. Manufacturing, construction, and mining are the most significant sub-sectors.

**Manufacturing:** Comprising some 20% of GDP in 2023, Czech's manufacturing industry is the largest among all EU countries. Czechia is a major manufacturer of automobiles and other transport equipment, machinery, iron and steel, chemicals, electronics, glass, and textiles. The automobile sector alone accounts for 20% of all exports, and in 2023, Czechia was the EU's 3rd largest and the world's 14th largest motor vehicle manufacturer, producing 1.4 million passenger cars annually.

**Construction:** Construction has accounted about 6-10% to GDP. Productivity and investment in construction declined significantly between 2009-14 but have recovered since then, notably due to transportation infrastructure development projects (see *Technology and Materials*).

**Mining:** Czechia's mining sub-sector is valued at approximately \$3 billion and employs some 26,000 people. The country has some 3.6 billion metric tons of coal reserves, 70% of which is brown coal, or lignite, mainly produced in northwestern



Bohemia. The remainder is hard coal mined in northern Moravia. As the EU's 4th largest producer of coal, Czechia primarily exports it to Poland, Slovakia, Austria, Germany and Hungary. Czechia

mined uranium until 2017, when the last mine closed.

## Agriculture

Historically the main component of the economy, agriculture today accounts for just 2% of GDP and employs 3% of the labor

force. Some 32% of Czechia's land is arable, and its agricultural sector is characterized by large farms, pasture, gardens and fruit orchards, vineyards, and hop fields. With the world's highest per capita consumption of beer (see *Sustenance and Health*),



Czech breweries produced some 20 million hectoliters of beer in 2023 and exported over 5 million hectoliters. Accordingly, Czechia grows large quantities of grain, malt, and hops (Czechia is the world's third-largest producer of

fine aroma hops). Other important agricultural products include sugar beets, potatoes, and rapeseed. Czechia is also a top producer of poppy seeds.

**Forestry:** With over 34% of its territory covered in woodlands, Czechia has a robust forestry industry. An important timber exporter, Czechia delivered over \$2.52 billion of softwood, wood pellets, and industrial wood products in 2023 primarily within the EU.

### Currency

Czechia's currency is the **koruna** (Kč) or crown, issued in 6 banknote values (100, 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000) and 6 coins (1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50). The *koruna* subdivides into 100 **haler**, though these no longer circulate. In 2024, \$1 was worth approximately 23.22 Kč.



### Foreign Trade

Totaling \$236.7 billion in 2023, Czechia's exports primarily consisted of cars, vehicle parts/accessories, broadcasting equipment, computers, and plastic products to Germany (29%), Slovakia (7%), Poland (6%), and France (5%). In the same year, imports totaled \$219.4 billion and were comprised of broadcasting equipment, vehicle

parts/accessories, cars, plastic products, and computers from Germany (22%), China (17%), Poland (8%), and Slovakia (5%).

## European Union

Membership in the EU (see *Political and Social Relations*) provides a large common market for exports, a more secure business environment, and easier access to investment and development funds. Some 81% of Czech exports were destined for the EU in 2023. A 2020 study showed that 33% of Czechs supported EU membership, while 15% supported leaving the union and 47% declined to say.



This notable level of “Euroscepticism” (see *History and Myth*) contrasts to most neighboring countries such as Slovenia, which demonstrate much higher levels of support, (79%). Current government leadership (see *History and Myth* and *Political and Social Relations*) is often resistant to certain EU directives and policies and is especially reluctant to adopt the Euro, the EU’s currency. Although Czechia is treaty-bound to adopt the Euro, there is no fixed date because the country has not yet met the criteria for price stability and exchange rates.



## Foreign Aid

For the period 2014-20, Czechia is the main beneficiary of some €24 billion (\$27 billion) in financial aid from the EU. Czechia has since become an Official Development

Assistance (ODA) donor. In 2023, Czechia provided some \$810 million (0.24% of its gross national income) in ODA. Czechia has pledged to provide Ukraine with over \$415 million in humanitarian, stabilization, reconstruction, and economic assistance between 2023-2025.



## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Czechia has a well-developed physical infrastructure, though it still lags behind Western Europe's. Czechs enjoy free speech, unrestricted Internet access, and a well-connected telecommunications network.

### Transportation

Besides privately-owned vehicles, Czechs also travel by bus, train, tram, taxi, bicycle, or on foot. Prague has an underground metro, and all of Czechia's major cities have efficient and reliable mass transit systems. The transient infrastructure is less developed beyond urban areas. Trains, buses, and planes also provide service to international destinations. Given the country's strategic location in the middle of Europe, Czechia's railways and roads provide for regional trade and transport. Consequently, they are a target for development by both the EU and the Czech government.

**Roadways:** Czechia has some 81,000 mi of roads, most of which are paved. The EU has invested heavily in improving road quality in Czechia, notably committing \$1 billion between 2014-20 through the Trans-European Transport Network program for the renovation of the D1 motorway connecting Prague and Brno.

**Railways:** With one of the densest railway networks in Europe, Czechia has almost 6,000 mi of railways. Today, **České Dráhy** (Czech Railways) operates most of Czechia's trains, though Regiojet and LEO Express also offer rail services. Long-distance service includes rail from Prague to Brno and Olomouc as well as direct international connections to major European capitals and other cities. In 2017, the government announced plans to build a \$28 billion high-speed railway network connecting



Prague, Brno, and Ostrava to Berlin (Germany) and Munich (Germany), Vienna (Austria), Bratislava (Slovakia), and Katowice (Poland). Construction is scheduled to begin in 2025.

**Ports and Waterways:** Czechia has about 412 mi of navigable waterways. As a landlocked country, Czechia has no maritime ports but makes limited use of its river ports, notably the port of Prague on the Vltava River and the Děčín and Mělník ports on the Elbe River.



**Airways:** Czechia has 128 airports, 41 having paved runways. The largest, Václav Havel Airport (see *History and Myth*) in Prague, formerly Prague-Ruzyně Airport, served some 16.4 million passengers in 2024. The national

carrier, Czech Airlines (CSA), offers flights to Europe, the Middle East, the US, Mexico, and Asia.

## Energy

In 2023, Czechia was the sixth-largest net electricity exporter in the EU, after France, Germany, Sweden, Spain, and the Netherlands. Historically, it has relied on significant reserves of high-quality coal for energy generation (see *Economics and Resources*). Despite diversification efforts, Czechia still generates about 45% of its electricity from fossil fuels. Hydroelectric plants account for around 3% of electricity production, while nuclear energy and other renewable sources account for 40% and 10% respectively.

With two operational nuclear power plants built by the Soviets in the 1980s (see *History and Myth*), the Czech government has prioritized nuclear power, notably setting the goal of generating 50% of its required energy from nuclear sources by 2040. Czechia has already achieved its goal of 13% renewable energy by 2020. Historically, of the country's natural gas imports came from Russia, roughly 87% in 2021. After Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Czech government has attempted to reduce its reliance on Russian fuel imports.

## Media

While Czechia's Constitution protects freedom of speech and press, in practice, the media experience some restrictions, and a few journalists practice self-censorship. By law, hate speech based on race, religion, class, or nationality, and speech that denies communist-era crimes or the Holocaust are punishable with fines or jail time. Czech media is controlled by just a handful of owners, many with political and business interests.

Further, former Prime Minister Babiš' and former President Zeman's relations with the media provoked controversy. Specifically, Babiš controlled the large media group MAFRA until 2017, when conflict of interest laws forced him to place it into a trust. It remains to be seen how new government under newly elected President Pavel will work with Media.

**Print Media:** Czechia's largest dailies include the privately-owned *Lidové Noviny*, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, *Právo*, and *Blesk*.



**TV and Radio:** The public *Česká Televize (ČT)* operates several networks, including a 24-hour news channel CT24, CT Sports, and popular channels CT1 and CT2. The most popular private national TV channels are TV Nova and TV Prima. The state-owned radio, *Český Rozhlas*, operates national and regional stations. Privately-owned radio stations include *Impuls*, owned by MAFRA, and *Frekvence 1*.

## Telecommunications

Czechia has a modern telecommunications network. In 2023, Czechia had about 11 landline and 143 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

**Internet:** Czechia has a relatively modern Internet infrastructure, although its reach is somewhat limited. Around 86% of Czechs regularly use the Internet, while the country had about 38 broadband subscriptions and 102 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 people in 2023. The government does not restrict Internet access nor censor online content.



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