



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

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

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

A continental climate prevails, though with increasingly wider swings of temperature and weather conditions. Summers start out moderate but can become quite hot in July and August, especially in the cities. Winters always bring cold and snow in the mountains; in the cities, freezing rain and ice are common, and the occasional snowfall tends to melt quickly.

### History

In the fifth century, Slavic tribes began settling the area, and by the middle of the ninth century, they lived in a loose confederation known as the Great Moravian Empire. Its brief

history ended in 907 with the invasion of the nomadic Magyars (ancestors of today's Hungarians). The Slovak region became subject to Hungarian rule, while Czechs developed the Bohemian Empire, centered in Prague. In the 14th century, under the leadership of King Charles IV, Prague became a cultural and political capital that rivaled Paris. In the 15th century, Bohemia was a center of the Protestant Reformation led by Jan Hus, who became a martyr and national hero when he was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1415. Civil war in Bohemia and events elsewhere in Europe led the Czechs (as well as people in Hungary and Slovakia) to become part of the Hapsburg (Austro-Hungarian) Empire in 1526.

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

Liberated in 1945 by Allied forces, Czechoslovakia held elections in 1946 under Soviet guidance. Left-wing parties performed well, and by 1948 the Communists had seized control of the government. The Soviet-style state promoted rapid industrialization in the 1950s. Social and economic policies began to be liberalized in the 1960s. This change led

to discussions about easing political restrictions. In 1968, reform-minded Alexander Dubček, a Slovak, assumed leadership and put into motion a series of reforms known as “socialism with a human face.” The brief period that followed, dubbed Prague Spring, was crushed when Warsaw Pact tanks rolled into Prague in August 1968. The Communist Party was subsequently purged of liberals.

In the 1970s, many dissident groups organized against the government. Members of these groups joined with workers, university students, and others in peaceful demonstrations in 1989 in what was called the Velvet Revolution. A crackdown on a student protest in November 1989 prompted a general strike that led General Secretary Miloš Jakeš to resign. Dubček returned to prominence and was elected leader of Parliament. In 1990, Václav Havel, dissident playwright and leader of the Civic Forum party, became president.

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

Political infighting and economic stagnation increased following the 1996 elections. A financial scandal forced Klaus to resign in November 1997; however, he was elected president in 2003 and reelected in 2008. The Czech Republic became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in March 1999 and joined the European Union (EU) in 2004. The Czech government's 2008 decision to allow the United States to build part of a missile defense shield southwest of Prague was unpopular with most Czech citizens. In September 2009, the Obama administration scrapped that plan, but the Czech Republic is expected to be part of a reformulated missile defense system within the framework of NATO.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

The Czech Republic's population of 10.2 million is decreasing slightly. About 90 percent of the population is Bohemian, 4 percent is Moravian, and 2 percent is ethnic Slovak. Other groups include Poles, Silesians, Germans, Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Russians, and Greeks. The Roma ethnic group (Gypsies) is difficult to count because its members often claim other ethnicities to avoid discrimination. Official statistics list the group's population at well under 1 percent of all Czechs, but there may actually be many more Roma. The Roma are often treated poorly throughout Europe and have not integrated into mainstream society. The EU has criticized the country for its policies toward the Roma. About 73 percent of the Czech population lives in urban areas, and more than one million people live in Prague, the capital city.

### Language

Czech is a Slavic language; it is similar to Slovak but also

related to Polish, Croatian, and Russian. Latin was the language of literature until the 14th century, when Czech began to gain popularity as a written language. Czech uses a Latin alphabet with several distinct accent marks and letters. The marks ˇ, ´, and ° appear over consonants or vowels to soften, lengthen or sometimes completely change the sound. Minority groups speak their own languages. Czechs also often speak German, Russian, or English as second languages, depending on their generation.

### Religion

Only one-third of all Czechs consider themselves Christians. Many were influenced by four decades of official (communist) atheism. Therefore, their adherence to religion sometimes is a result of heritage rather than belief. In addition, Czechs tend to think of worship as a private matter. While they believe in a Supreme Being, they are not necessarily affiliated with a particular religion. Nearly 27 percent of Czechs belong to the Catholic Church, and just over 2 percent are Protestant. Many Czechs belong to the Czech Brethren (a Lutheran/Calvinist group). Roughly 60 percent of Czechs claim no religious affiliation.

### General Attitudes

Czechs value education, cleverness, modesty, and humor. Czech humor tends to be dry and iconic rather than slapstick, and sharp-edged jokes are commonly used in conversation. Moravians and Slovaks tend to be friendlier and more lighthearted than the Bohemian Czechs. Irony also colors Czech realism, making it seem more like pessimism. Czechs tend to move at their own pace and can be stubborn, especially when dealing with foreigners. Rules are paramount in Czech society, which emphasizes conformity. Young people tend to be very involved at school, especially with extracurriculars like sports and music, but many prefer to spend their time on computers and mobile phones. Generally, the most-admired people in the country are sports stars and longtime culture heroes like singer Karel Gott.

### Personal Appearance

European fashions are widespread in the Czech Republic, and young people wear the latest styles. Jeans and T-shirts are popular, and shorts are common. Most attire is more casual than in some western European nations (e.g., men wear sport jackets instead of suits to work). Czechs like to dress up to attend events; not being properly dressed is frowned upon. Women wear fancy evening gowns and men dress up in tuxes for formal events; younger people wear expensive European fashions to go to clubs. Traditional national costumes are generally reserved for festivals or special historical days.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

When strangers meet or when a young person greets an older person, they shake hands firmly and say their last names, followed by a verbal greeting, such as *Těší mne* (Pleased to meet you) or *Dobry den* (Good day). A man usually waits for

a woman to extend her hand before shaking it, but a boss always offers his or her hand first. To show respect, one addresses both men and women by their professional titles (engineer, doctor, professor) and last names. It is common to preface the title with *Pán* (Sir) or *Paní* (Madam) when greeting the person: *Dobry den, paní Doktorká Čekanová*. One also uses *Pán* and *Paní* for people without professional titles. People do not use first names until they are well acquainted, but relatives generally hug upon meeting and address each other by first names, as do young people of the same age.

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

### Gestures

Maintaining eye contact while conversing is important to Czechs. They often look or even stare at other people in public, though usually with no ill intentions. They beckon and point with their index finger. When one counts on the fingers, the thumb (rather than the index finger) is number one. Speaking loudly on public transportation or in quiet places is impolite; however, it is commonplace in places like pubs.

### Visiting

Czechs consider the home to be private. However, close family members and friends will visit one another unannounced. Guests who are invited to dinner may be taken to a restaurant; it is an honor to be invited to a home for a meal. However, a major part of the Czech lifestyle includes socializing with friends at pubs, cafes and wine bars. Czechs remove their shoes when entering a home and leave them in the entryway. Visiting etiquette is fairly formal, but the atmosphere is friendly. Guests are offered something to drink or, prior to a meal, hors d’oeuvres. Women guests may offer to help prepare the meal in the kitchen or to clear dishes, but the offer will be politely declined. Invited guests usually bring an odd number of flowers to the hostess. Any type of flower is acceptable except chrysanthemums, which are reserved for funeral arrangements. Small gifts (usually candy) for the children are appreciated. Guests might also bring wine or chocolates for the hosts.

### Eating

Czechs eat three meals a day with frequent snacks, typically ice cream or fast food bought at street stands. The main meal is lunch, while dinner and breakfast are light. During the week, children eat at school and adults usually eat at work. Women generally prepare the meals; men might help with cleanup. Few Czech men cook. Plates usually are prepared in the kitchen and carried to the table. The head of the household is served first, unless guests are present. People eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right. They keep their hands, but not elbows, above the table. The hostess generally offers seconds to guests, but it is not impolite to decline them after commenting on how good the food is.

Most Czechs do not dine out often. In restaurants, mineral water and bread and butter can be ordered, but they do not

come with the meal. In pubs and restaurants, there are usually multiple servers that take your order, and bring the drinks and food. Still, service can be slow, and it is not considered impolite to wave down one of the servers. The head server adds up the bill at the table. Drinking and toasting are common for formal and informal events. An empty glass is always refilled. When drinking socially, people do not pour for themselves.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Czech families traditionally are close and tight-knit. Urban families are usually small, rarely with more than two children. Rural families tend to be larger. Both parents generally work outside the home, but women are also responsible for the household and children.

Mothers and fathers may receive several months of paid leave when a child is born, in addition to a subsidy for each birth and child-care services when they return to work. Grandparents often help with child care, especially when a young couple is just starting out. Parents feel responsible for their children until they are financially independent, and it is not uncommon for children to continue to live with their parents as adults, even when married. Later on in life, adult children usually take care of aging parents. Parents and children tend to share more expensive things such as cars or *chaty* (cottages) for many years. Pets, especially dogs, are cherished members of many families.

### Housing

Much housing in the Czech Republic recalls the communist era. In the cities, many people live in old prefabricated apartment blocks, known as *panelák*, which were constructed in communist times. After the fall of communism, many of these buildings were transferred from state to private ownership. Part of the housing market continues to be regulated, which allows people to rent flats at reasonable prices. Most young people cannot afford to buy homes, though young couples will buy flats if both of them have jobs. Otherwise, many young people struggle to afford renting or buying a flat and will live with their parents after marriage. However, they strive to become independent as soon as possible. Some people live in tenement houses or in the new Western-style apartment blocks. The typical rural dwelling is a brick house with gardens at the front and back. Today, people generally take better care of their houses than they did under communism.

### Dating and Marriage

Young people tend to socialize in groups; they enjoy going to movies or the theater, hiking or camping, attending music festivals, or dancing at discos. Most men are married by the age of 30; women marry a few years earlier. Most urban weddings take place at city hall, with only the immediate family and closest friends present. A family luncheon or dinner is offered afterward. Suit jackets and short dresses have been the standard wedding attire, but more formal

gowns and tuxedos are being worn today. Church weddings are now legally binding and are becoming increasingly common. Honeymoons are also gaining popularity. Rural weddings tend to incorporate more people; attendees often include village members. Traditional costumes may be worn, and celebrations can last all day.

### Life Cycle

Parents pick names for their children before birth. When a baby is born, the mother and child receive flowers and presents, while the father often goes out to drink with his friends. Fifteen and eighteen are significant birthdays for Czech teenagers: both come with new rights and responsibilities. Important to teens is acquiring a motorcycle license (at 15) and a license to drive a car (at 18). After 18, people often have big celebrations when they reach 20, 30, 40, and so on. The 50th birthday is one of the most important, as 50 is considered the peak of adulthood. Marriage anniversaries are also celebrated, particularly the 25th (the “silver marriage”) and the 50th (the “golden marriage”). Funerals take place a few days after death. After friends and family members gather to bury or cremate the deceased, they typically eat and drink at a big feast.

### Diet

Traditional Czech food is heavy and arduous to prepare. Among older people and in Czech pubs and restaurants, various kinds of goulash and schnitzels, along with the ubiquitous dumplings, are still dietary mainstays. However, among younger people and in newer restaurants, there is a growing trend toward lighter fare that is easier to prepare and includes fresh vegetables and other produce. Foreign cuisine—Asian, Mediterranean, American—has also established a foothold. For most Czechs, the main meal of the day is lunch, which usually begins with a hearty soup, followed by a main dish of meat and potatoes or bread dumplings. A common dish is *knedlo, vepřo, zelo* (sauerkraut, pork roast, and dumplings). Sausages and pizza are popular snack foods that can be purchased from sidewalk vendors and storefront counters in the city centers.

A wide variety of breads and bakery items are available. Breakfast usually consists of rolls or bread with butter and jam or ham and cheese. Coffee is most common in the morning, though the recent proliferation of coffee shops (led by Starbucks) has made meeting for coffee a popular activity any time of day. Beer, soda, and juice are popular throughout the day. Many desserts are made from fruit.

### Recreation

Czechs are known for their love of nature. The country's forests, fields, mountains, and lakes are regularly filled with people (especially urban residents) on weekends. Almost every family owns a country cottage, where they spend as much time as possible, especially during the summer. Czechs are constantly reconstructing or improving their cottages, so many look like construction zones. The other main activity at the cottage is tending the gardens and fruit trees. Camping, hiking, swimming in lakes, gathering mushrooms and berries, and snow skiing are all favorite outdoor activities. Popular

sports include soccer, tennis, and ice hockey. The Czech Republic's national hockey team has been successful in international competition, winning several world titles.

Leisure activities include watching television, going to movies or concerts, dancing, taking walks, and getting together with friends. Gardening and home-improvement projects are also widely enjoyed. In the evening, men often gather in pubs to drink beer and talk, while women visit close friends at home. In smaller towns, people socialize while doing errands.

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

### The Arts

Czechs pride themselves on their support of the arts. Theater performances, concerts, and exhibits are offered throughout the year. In the summer, many towns sponsor free outdoor concerts. Some hold festivals organized around music, film, historic events, food, wine, or some combination thereof. The Prague Spring Festival is an important classical musical event that showcases the best Czech ensembles and brings in star performers from all over the world. The Czech Philharmonic, established in the late 19th century, is internationally renowned. World-famous nationalist composers such as Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana took much of their inspiration from folk music. Polkas and waltzes are popular folk dances.

Czech artists have also attracted attention in visual arts such as painting, photography, and film. The world's most popular and influential art nouveau painter, Alfons Mucha, was Czech. Czech folk arts include making puppets, ceramics, toys, and glass. Bohemian crystal is especially renowned. The Czech Republic is also known for its baroque, art nouveau, and cubist architecture.

### Holidays

Public holidays include New Year's Day, Easter Monday, Labor Day or Workers' Day (1 May), End of World War II (8 May), Cyril and Methodius's Day (5 July), Jan Hus Day (6 July), Founding of the First Republic in 1918 (28 Oct.), Velvet Revolution Day or Fight for Freedom and Democracy Day (17 Nov.), and Christmas (24–26 Dec.). Cyril and Methodius are honored for introducing Christianity and creating the Cyrillic alphabet (used before the current Latin alphabet). Christmas Eve is the most important part of Christmas, and people eat carp for dinner in honor of their Catholic heritage. They also eat *vánočka*, a fruit bread, in the days leading to Christmas and during Lent. Small marzipan candies or paper cards in the shape of pigs are given in the New Year for good luck.

All Saints' Day (1 Nov.) and St. Nicholas Day (6 Dec.) are celebrated but are not days off from work. The week before Lent begins, known as Masopust, has also become an increasingly popular time of celebration. Some villages and towns also celebrate a day for their patron saint with fairs, dancing, feasting, and Mass. Name days are personal holidays commemorating the saint after whom a person is named. On

this day, a person receives gifts, greetings, and toasts from friends and family.

## **SOCIETY**

### **Government**

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

### **Economy**

The Czech Republic enjoyed marked success in its initial years of transition from a planned to a free-market economy. Rapid reforms encouraged privatization in many sectors, and private enterprises absorbed many who were laid off by sagging industries. Although economic progress has slowed in recent years, low labor costs, the export of manufactured goods, and strong fiscal policies led to balanced budgets ahead of joining the EU. The Czech Republic suffered budget shortfalls in the wake of the 2009 worldwide financial crisis and, like almost every other country in Europe, has been struggling to make up for large budget deficits.

Although only 5 percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture, it is important to the domestic economy. Crops include wheat, hops, sugar beets, potatoes, barley, rye, onions, and fruit. Major industries include metallurgy, machinery and equipment, motor vehicles, glass, and armaments. Tourism is increasingly important. The Czech labor force is cohesive and well educated. The country's privatization program, which has sold stock to Czechs rather than outside interests or large firms, has attempted to give Czechs a stake in economic performance. The Czech National Bank, a self-governing group whose leaders are appointed by the president, regulates the currency—the Czech *koruna* (CZK).

### **Transportation and Communications**

Public transportation is extensive and reliable in most urban areas and between towns and cities. However, the fleet of trams, buses, and trains is aging, and the industry is being encouraged to privatize and modernize. This development will likely increase prices but decrease service along unprofitable routes. More people are buying cars.

Daily newspapers are widely read, as is an abundance of other printed media. Many homes have cable television and access to international programming in addition to local broadcasts. While businesses and many homes have regular phone service, overwhelmingly, Czechs use mobile phones to communicate with one another. Post offices provide a full array of domestic and international delivery services; postal service is for the most part efficient.

### **Education**

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

### **Health**

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

## **AT A GLANCE**

### **Contact Information**

Embassy of the Czech Republic, 3900 Spring of Freedom Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 274-9100; web site [www.mzv.cz/washington](http://www.mzv.cz/washington). Czech Center, 321 East 73rd Street, New York, NY 10021; phone (646) 422-3399; web site [www.czechcenter.com](http://www.czechcenter.com).

### **POPULATION & AREA**

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Population    | 10,201,707 (rank=81) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 30,450 (rank=115)    |
| Area, sq. km. | 78,866               |

### **DEVELOPMENT DATA**

|                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 28 of 182 countries      |
| Gender inequality rank | 27 of 155 countries      |
| Real GDP per capita    | \$24,800                 |
| Adult literacy rate    | 99% (male); 99% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate  | 4 per 1,000 births       |
| Life expectancy        | 73 (male); 81 (female)   |

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).