



REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 6
THE CZECH EU ACCESSION REFERENDUM
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Key points:

- The Czech referendum on EU accession was the seventh of nine held in candidate states due to join the EU on 1 May 2004.
- The pro-accession camp scored a convincing victory, with 77.33% of those voting backing EU membership and 22.67% voting against.
- At 55%, turnout was comparable with that in last year's general election.
- The official 'Yes' campaign dwarfed the principal 'No' campaign, run by small far-right groups, in terms of both resources and effectiveness.
- The only significant anti-accession party, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, was deeply divided and ambivalent over the issue.
- The mainstream opposition centre-right, Civic Democrats, endorsed accession, but did not actively campaign for a 'Yes' vote.
- The surprise election of former Civic Democrat leader and noted right-wing Eurosceptic, Václav Klaus as President by the Czech Parliament in February was a complicating factor.

Political Background

Membership of the European Union, has been a key priority for all mainstream Czech parties and governments in Czechoslovakia and, latterly, the Czech Republic since 1989. However, issues of European integration and EU accession in the Czech Republic have been significantly politicized since at least the mid-1990s. Moreover, although surveys of Czech public opinion consistently recorded clear majorities in favour of entry to the EU, levels of support for accession were lower than for many other CEE accession states. This was arguably related to the 'Thatcherite' Eurosceptic positions taken by the main Czech centre-

¹ I would like to thank Mrs Eva Knotková for her help obtaining some of the materials on which this paper is based.

right party, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) of former Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus, which was the dominant partner in the 1992-7 centre-right coalition government. A secondary factor was the presence in the Czech party system of two sizeable radical minority parties hostile to the EU: the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) and far-right the Republicans (SPR-RSC).² The political consensus around EU accession in the Czech Republic can therefore be characterized as broad, but shallow.

From the mid-1990s, the ODS began to decline as a political force, as its record of reform and policies on Europe were challenged by both the centre-left opposition and its own liberal and Christian Democratic coalition partners. Klaus's party finally lost office in 1997 when a major party financing scandal prompted its partners to abandon it. The Czech Republic's accession negotiations were therefore largely conducted by a minority Social Democratic government, formed after early elections in 1998. However, domestic debate on Europe was still driven by the growing Euroscepticism of the Civic Democrats, who, in opposition, moved from a critique of the EU as stifling free markets towards one emphasizing the defence of Czech national interests against German-inspired eurofederalism.³

The June 2002 elections were won by the Social Democrats under a new leader, Vladimír Špidla, the current Prime Minister, who formed a coalition government with the liberal Freedom Union and the Christian Democrats with a parliamentary majority of two. A common commitment to rapid Czech accession to the EU was a key unifying factor for parties otherwise divided over fiscal and social policy. The 2003 elections also saw the Communists make significant gains, increasing their vote to 18.5%, benefitting from the disillusionment of some Social Democrat voters with their party's performance in office. The Civic Democratic Party's poor showing in the election also prompted Václav Klaus to announce that he would not stand for re-election as chairman of his party in order to campaign for the Czech presidency due to be vacated Václav Havel in January 2003.⁴

The Špidla government has made it a key priority reduce the ballooning Czech state budget deficit, currently standing at 6% of GDP. Its goal is to bring the deficit down to less than 4% by 2006. It, therefore, proposes to make up 280 billion crowns of the deficit through a combination of tax increases and cuts in public spending, including spending on welfare benefits. This has led to strained relations with the trade unions, and threats of strike action by public sector. The proposed reforms have aggravated tensions between Špidla and the more statist wing of his own party. He also faces opposition from both the Communists, who hope to destabilise both the current coalition and his leadership of CSSD, and the Civic Democrats, who see the reforms as insufficiently radical. Significantly, aspects of the proposed reforms can be linked to EU accession. Efforts to reduce the budget deficit are partly driven by a desire to meet the criteria for eurozone membership, which the Czech Republic hopes to join some time after 2007. VAT rises are related to the requirement that EU member states have a unified national rates of VAT.

The unexpected election of Václav Klaus as President by the Czech Parliament in February 2003 was a complicating factor for the referendum campaign. Intriguingly, Klaus owed his

² The Republicans were represented in the Czech parliament between 1992 and 1998, but have since disintegrated.

³ See S Hanley *The Political Context of European Integration in the Czech Republic*, Royal Institute of International Affairs Briefing Paper, October 2002, <http://www.riia.org/index.php?id=103>

⁴ See S Hanley, 'Europe and the Czech Parliamentary Elections of June 2002', *Opposing Europe Research Network/RIIA Election Briefing no. 5*, <http://www.riia.org/index.php?id=39>

narrow victory to support from Communist deputies and dissident Social Democrats, attracted by his defence of the legality of the post-war Beneš Decrees removing Czechoslovakia's 2.5 million strong ethnic German population and a shared dislike of the political course of Prime Minister Špidla. Klaus's election was a severe blow to the centre-left government, whose inability to unite behind a single presidential candidate highlighted both its own fragility and the deep internal divisions within the Social Democratic Party, prompting Prime Minister Špidla (successfully) to seek a new vote of confidence in parliament. However, at the start of 2003 the popularity of the coalition parties fell dramatically in opinion polls, with the Social Democrats dropping back to the same level of supports as the Communists and support for ODS surging. The government's evident disarray thus raised the political stakes of the referendum campaign, as possible recriminations over low turnout or lower than expected 'Yes' vote could have fatally undermined it.

Although initially overshadowed by the election of a new President and the war in Iraq, by mid-February the accession referendum was becoming a dominant theme. Although, it was initially expected that the referendum would take place on 15-16 June, President Klaus eventually fixed polling for 13-14 June. This reflected both the Czech tradition of holding national elections over a Friday and Saturday and concern on the part of politicians that polling over a Sunday and Monday would depress turnout.

Constitutional and legal framework

Both historically and in the post-communist period Czech political elites have been deeply resistant to referendums and other forms of direct democracy. In post-communist Czechoslovakia legislation provided for referendums in only two restricted contexts: 1) local referendums on altering the boundaries of communes and other local matters and 2) a 1991 Constitutional Law allowing referendums on the principles of any new Czech-Slovak constitutional settlement. However, when in mid-1992 Czech and Slovak elites decided to divide Czechoslovakia, they passed new legislation, avoiding the holding of a referendum. The 1992 Czech Constitution, hastily adopted during the months preceding the break-up of Czechoslovakia, made a limited, theoretical provision for referendums (and other forms of direct democracy) subject to the passing of a constitutional law (requiring a qualified majority). In the mid-1990s, therefore, Czech law contained no provision of any kind for national referendums.

For much of the 1990s, debates over referendums in the Czech Republic were embroiled in a broader dispute over the role civil society should play in democratic politics. While President Havel, the Social Democrats (CSSD) and small centre-right parties such as the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and elements of the Freedom Union (US) saw referendums as a legitimate and desirable means to promote citizen participation, the right-wing Civic Democratic Party of then Prime Minister Václav Klaus opposed them as undermining 'standard' West European style parliamentary democracy. The hardline Czech Communists (KSCM) favoured referendums on principle as a supplementary democratic mechanism appropriate to 'self-governing socialism'.

In the course of the 1990s, there were more than a dozen unsuccessful attempts in the Czech parliament to legislate for referendums, some trying to introduce the referendum as a general institution, others to legislate only for a referendum on EU accession. The resultant political deadlock appeared to threaten the prospect of any referendum on accession taking place. However, a constitutional act providing for a referendum on EU accession), but not on any

other issue, was finally passed in October 2002 with near unanimity using accelerated procedures. The act stated that parliament's normal powers of decision and treaty ratification on accession were to be replaced by a referendum. Accession would be approved by a simple majority of all those voting. Despite the efforts of ODS legislators to insert one, unlike in neighbouring Poland and Slovakia, there was no minimum turnout requirement.

As in Czech parliamentary elections, voting was to take place over two days with the President determining the exact dates of polling. Any person entitled to vote was entitled submit legal objections to the validity of the referendum to the Czech Constitutional Court within 10 days of the end of polling. If EU membership was rejected, the Law allowed for further accession referendums to be held. However, no referendum on EU accession on the same conditions as those rejected could be held for two years – in practice, this suggested that minor modifications to the terms of accession would make an earlier repeat referendum possible.

The referendum campaign(s)

The 'Yes' campaign

The official 'Yes' campaign was run by the Communication Strategy Section (OKS) of the Czech Foreign Ministry, which had been responsible for accession negotiations and pre-accession preparations. The OKS was founded in 2000. However, its budget and activities were restricted until mid-2002, when the Foreign Ministry passed from the control of the Social Democrats to that of the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL). Both the overall campaign strategy and individual aspects of the campaign were then put out to tender to private firms. The winning campaign strategy was devised by a non-profit organisation named 'European Integration', founded especially to bid for the campaign by a number of advertising professionals.

The campaign, which began in mid-February after being formally approved by the cabinet, was largely based around conventional advertising. 40-45% of its 200 million crown budget was set aside for TV, press and billboard advertising and the production of leaflets and other publicity materials – the campaign sought to ensure that a leaflet explaining accession was delivered to every Czech household. Publicity materials were also distributed through libraries and branches of the main Czech banks and insurance companies. The campaign also set up a telephone information line, reported to have answered several hundred thousand enquiries, and an internet site – www.euroskop.cz. A further 40-45% of the budget was allocated to support smaller projects in the regions and projects by NGOs. This included 20 million crowns for the functioning of seventeen Regional European Information Centres, which were to liaise and coordinate activities with regional authorities and NGOs. The remaining 10-20% of the budget was to be used to promote the accession of the Czech Republic in the existing 15 member states.

The campaign was officially titled an 'Information Campaign'. It would, Communication Strategy officials insisted, provide a balanced picture of the advantages and disadvantages of accession. In practice, as government politicians conceded –and as was readily apparent from campaign materials and the campaign logo, the word 'ano' ('Yes') with the final letter taking the form of the EU symbol – its goal was to deliver a vote for accession. The campaign was timetabled into three phases: 1) a first phase concentrating on providing information concerning accession that citizens lacked; 2) a second phase (beginning in early May)

stressing the benefits of EU membership; and 3) and a final two week long media-led drive to maximise turnout at the referendum itself. Campaigning in the national media centred around typical individual citizens from small-medium European states, which had joined the EU in previous enlargement waves. The campaign slogan was ‘Welcome to the Community’.

However, the core of the campaign, particularly its printed materials and the regional and NGO projects and events, was to address the Czech public’s concerns about the impact of accession on everyday life and stress the benefits it would bring ordinary people. Leaflets stressed the economic benefits EU membership would bring the Czech Republic, such as lower unemployment, lower prices and better quality products, the new rights Czechs would acquire to travel, work, study and do business throughout the EU, the benefits of the Euro for both Czech businesses and individuals, the financial support already provided to the Czech Republic by the EU, and the minimal impact that EU regulations would have on traditional Czech food products and delicacies. A particular concern was to reach difficult-to-access-groups where concern over the impact of accession was highest and support for EU membership and likely referendum participation lowest. Such groups included the elderly, rural residents employed in agriculture, housewives, disabled people, and Roma. Many regional events also appear to have targeted students and young people and local business elites.

Smaller, separate ‘Yes’ campaigns were launched by a number of civil society organisations and political parties. The Catholic Church formally endorsed accession at the start of the campaign and called on Catholics and other voters to support it. Major Christian denominations also facilitated the distribution of a 200,000 copies of a special booklet, issued by the official information campaign, which stressed that the EU had a spiritual and moral dimension – an acknowledgement that some Christians had concerns that accession would promote moral permissiveness. Despite its growing opposition to the governing coalition’s austerity plans, in April the principal trade union federation (CMKOS) launched its own pro-EU campaign, calling a series of regional meetings and distributing an *Employees’ Guide to the EU* to members. The Unions stressed that accession would lead to a growth in wages, purchasing power and productivity and ensure high standards of labour protection.

Most pro-EU NGOs functioned purely at local or regional level. However, the ‘Yes for Europe’ campaign (www.anoproevropu.cz), a group supported by leading figures from the Czech intelligentsia and cultural elite, including former President Václav Havel, gained some degree of national prominence, organising, amongst other events, a pro EU concert in Prague’s Wenceslas Square on the eve of polling. Of the three political parties in the governing coalition, only two, the Christian Democrats and the Freedom Union (US) organised separate party campaigns. The dominant coalition partner, the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD), considered a separate campaign unnecessary, although it did use its traditional May Day gatherings to support accession. Given its limited resources and organisation, perhaps unsurprisingly the Freedom Union’s campaign consisted largely of a single national launch event. However, the Christian Democrats invested significant resources into a party campaign, producing a range of pro-EU materials for their own supporters, which adapted official campaign materials to address economic concerns more directly. The party’s national and regional headquarters were reported to be hives of activity during the weeks leading up to the referendum.

Public relations professionals praised the campaign’s organisation, targeting and timetabling, but were critical of its lack of substantive information, limited visibility, excessively positive

image of the EU and its unusual decision to centre its message around the experience of foreigners. The campaign slogan, 'Welcome to the Community' was also criticised for implying that accession was a *fait accompli*. Some also argued that the absence of any effective 'No' voices, paradoxically, undermined the effectiveness of the 'Yes' campaign. Moreover, analysis of polling data suggested that, despite superior planning, organisation and resources, the 'Yes' campaign was having relatively little impact on voters beyond creating an awareness that 'something was going on'. Polling data also suggested that, despite the message of the 'Yes' campaign, large numbers of Czech voters believed that accession would have a significant negative, short-term, economic impact on their lives.⁵ Many, however, believed that they would be able to adjust to these changes and were therefore inclined to vote 'Yes' or not strongly inclined to vote 'No'. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that groups such as pensioners discounted its immediate economic impact in favour of the longer-term benefits it might bring future generations.

The Civic Democrats: 'Yes, but...'

The 2003 accession referendum campaign saw ODS more divided and ambivalent than ever over EU membership. In December 2002 party's congress unexpectedly, elected Miroslav Topolánek, a pragmatic politician with a strong regional power base, as Václav Klaus's successor. However, Jan Zahradil, the principal architect of its 'Eurorealist' thinking on European integration, was elected to the influential new position of ODS First Deputy Chairman and continued as its principal foreign affairs spokesman. The ODS referendum 'campaign' was officially launched by Miroslav Topolánek in a keynote speech in mid-February and concluded with the party's annual ideological conference in May, which was entirely devoted to the EU. Topolánek suggested that the arguments in favour of accession only narrowly outweighed those against and that, although he expected ODS supporters to vote 'Yes', accession could not be regarded as an issue above party politics, because ODS endorsed EU membership for reasons other than those of the Social Democrats.

As the above suggests, the ODS accession 'campaign' was largely confined to internal party discussion and criticism of political opponents. It undertook virtually no organised national or regional campaigning directed at voters in connection with the referendum.⁶ Most strikingly, ODS failed to make any formal appeal to party supporters to vote 'Yes' until two hours before polling was due to begin on 13 June, when Jan Zahradil issued a press release urging them to do so on the grounds that the Czech Republic would be better able to defend its national interests from within the Union.

ODS argued that it was unnecessary for the party to pro-accession campaign, given that the overwhelming majority of its supporters were known to favour EU membership. Moreover, it claimed, the pro-accession campaigners were missing the point that the *form* of the EU mattered far more than mere accession to it. The bombastic official 'Yes' campaign, it claimed, was wilfully obscuring both the costs and benefits of accession and the future of the Union. However, the growing trend towards the EU becoming 'a centralised European superstate' dominated by larger nations urgently required the formulation of a 'Czech policy' to assert and defend national interests. The party, therefore, demanded that a second referendum should be held in 2004 over any proposed EU Constitution. If such new

⁵ See S Blechová, 'Největší obava Čechu z EU? Rust cen', *Lidové noviny*, 24 May 2003.

⁶ K Šafářiková and L Doležalová, 'Příští stanice Evropa', *Respekt*, 12-18 May 2003, no. 20, p. 4.

arrangements were too federalist, Jan Zahradil suggested, ODS would not recommend its supporters to ratify them.

A number of ODS figures, including its Interior and Trade spokespersons Ivan Langer and Martin Ríman one of the authors of its keynote 2001 *Manifesto of Czech Eurorealism*, Milošlav Bednár publicly opposed accession, a divergence from party policy that its leader seemed to accept with equanimity.

President Klaus: 'No comment'

In his first weeks as President Klaus sent mixed signals regarding the EU. In early April on a visit to Poland, Klaus emphasised that he saw 'no alternative' path for the Czech Republic other than membership of the EU, given the country's geographical position. He also insisted on his right as head of state to be one of the three Czech co-signatories of the Athens Treaty of Accession later the same month. However, other interventions by the new President were more controversial.

Klaus continued to air his well-established 'Eurorealist' stance on European integration. Klaus thus told *Die Zeit*, during an official visit to Germany, that Czech EU membership was 'a marriage of convenience, not a love match', also expressing scepticism about the feasibility of a European foreign policy. In an eve-of poll newspaper interview, he also repeated his doubts over the viability of both democracy above the level of the nation-state and the eurozone, criticised Czech intellectuals who, he claimed, saw EU membership as a panacea for all social and political ills and expressed regret that Czechs had not had longer to enjoy the national independence regained in 1989. Klaus also re-engaged with the Beneš Decrees issue, conceding that they 'unacceptable from today's point of view', but refusing to contemplate compensation for or negotiations with Sudeten German groups. He did not, however, link the issue to EU accession as he had done in the 2002 election campaign.

The President also repeatedly and publicly clashed with government politicians over European integration. His remarks to journalists after the Athens Treaty signing, that joining the EU involved a calculation of costs and benefits, one of the costs being loss of national sovereignty, provoked Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda to retort, if given by a law student in an exam, the President's views would be failed. Similarly rancorous exchanges were reported at the meeting of Czech party leaders called by Klaus to discuss accession in May. He also publicly criticised the 'Yes' campaign for trivialising accession, failing to spur any serious debate and wasting public money. Most significant, perhaps, was his failure to publicly advocate a 'Yes' vote - a singular exception among accession countries' heads of state - or to say how he would be voting in the referendum. The President justified this stance as necessary to underline the political neutrality of his office, confining himself simply to an appeal to citizens to vote in the referendum.

The Communists: 'No, but ...'

Although bitterly opposed to Czech membership of NATO, the Communists were divided and ambivalent towards the EU. While some in the party saw the EU simply as a vehicle for German-dominated big business, others felt that its social and regulatory policies and emerging democratic institutions, made membership preferable to likely domination by US interests and transnational capital outside the Union. Communist differences over EU

membership quickly become aligned with deeper divisions over party strategy and have provoked rare public arguments between Communist leaders.

The KSCM, therefore, deliberately postponed adopting an explicit stance on accession until March 2003. On 8 March the majority of the KSCM executive opted for a 'moderate No' position of 'not recommending' EU membership, a decision confirmed two weeks later by its Central Committee. The KSCM justified its qualified rejection of EU membership on the grounds that the terms of entry – and in particular the balance of agricultural subsidies and regional aid and power of the EU bureaucracy – were unacceptable, that the Czech Republic was unprepared for the rigours of the Single Market and that the future shape of the Union was still uncertain, but did not rule membership 'in a longer term perspective'.

Communist campaigning against EU membership was incorporated into the party's extensive programme of May Day activities. As with its election campaigning, its anti-accession activities were based upon grassroots activists, who distributed some 360, 000 leaflets. In June the party also announced that it would mobilise members in every polling district in the country to election monitors to prevent 'manipulation' of the result. However, the party did not seek to develop a broader campaign or use other media. Given that its events mainly attracted its own members and sympathisers, it seems unlikely that KSCM's belated campaigning on EU accession reached beyond its own limited, core electorate. Its campaign also appears to have been weakened by a lack of strong central co-ordination, allowing local organisations, in some cases, to articulate a more radical and nationalistic message than that of the party's national leadership. Despite its considerable resources and capacity for strategic planning, KSCM thus appears to have mounted only a belated token campaign against accession, which was to prove ineffective even in winning over some of its own supporters.

The 'No' campaign: Enter the far right

The most visible, active 'No' campaign ('No to the EU') was a loose alliance of small, previously obscure right-wing groupings and activists. Its main components were: Citizens Against the EU, an organization formed by several small groups with an overt neo-fascist orientation;⁷ the National Party (NS), a small, newly formed far-right party seeking to use the referendum campaign as a platform for its own launch; the Eurosceptic Alternative (EAS), a Brno-based group with an anti-communist, neo-conservative outlook (www.euroskeptik.cz); the Faithful We Remain (*Verní zůstaneme*) committee of Dalibor Plichta, which took a traditional, anti-German, Czech nationalist position; and the Euro-Objective (*Euroobjektiv*) group, about which little information is available.

The 'No' campaign had limited resources – its most active component, the Eurosceptic Alternative grouping, for example, was reported to have only approximately 150 active supporters. One of its most insistent demands was, therefore, that it be allocated state funding to put the anti-accession case, the sum requested being variously reported as 5, 25 or 100 million crowns. In early 2003 members of the 'No' campaign appear also applied for a grant from the official information campaign's funding for civil society groups. However, this application was turned down, ostensibly because it was drawn up in an unprofessional manner.

⁷ The groups in question were Action for National Renewal (ANO), the Patriotic Front (VF), the Lime Cross (LK), National Idea (NM) and National Unity (NS). Of these only National Unity was registered as a political party.

The 'No' campaign strategy, therefore, appears to have been to develop and co-ordinate a network of local grassroots campaigns and that, where possible, anti-EU campaigners gain access to discussion events organised by the pro-EU official information campaign. Throughout the referendum campaign, the websites of the Eurosceptic Alternative and the National Party provided full and up-to-date coverage of anti-EU events and initiatives. The National Party also made extensive use of e-mail to contact presumed sympathisers both in the Czech Republic and abroad. 'No' campaigners also attempted to organise a number of high-profile national events. In February 2003 it organised an International Eurocritical Congress in Prague, billed as an international symposium of activists and intellectuals opposed to the EU. It also organised a demonstration in Prague on 15 March 2003, a date chosen for its symbolism as the anniversary of the annexation of the Czech Lands by Nazi Germany in 1939. The 'No' campaign also attracted some interest from both print and broadcast media, which offered a limited platform for anti-EU viewpoints.

However, the campaign drew little support and was on the whole highly ineffective. The Eurocritical Congress attracted only 100 delegates, only one of whom came from abroad (a member of the No to the European Union movement of Lithuania) and the 15 March demonstration was attended by only 50 people. The campaign leaders' claim that they had distributed 20,000 leaflets in Prague, a city with a population of some one million, also indicates the limits of the campaign. Reports of other anti-EU events elsewhere in the Czech Republic in both mainstream media and on Czech anti-EU websites suggest that these were similarly scattered, small scale and few in number.

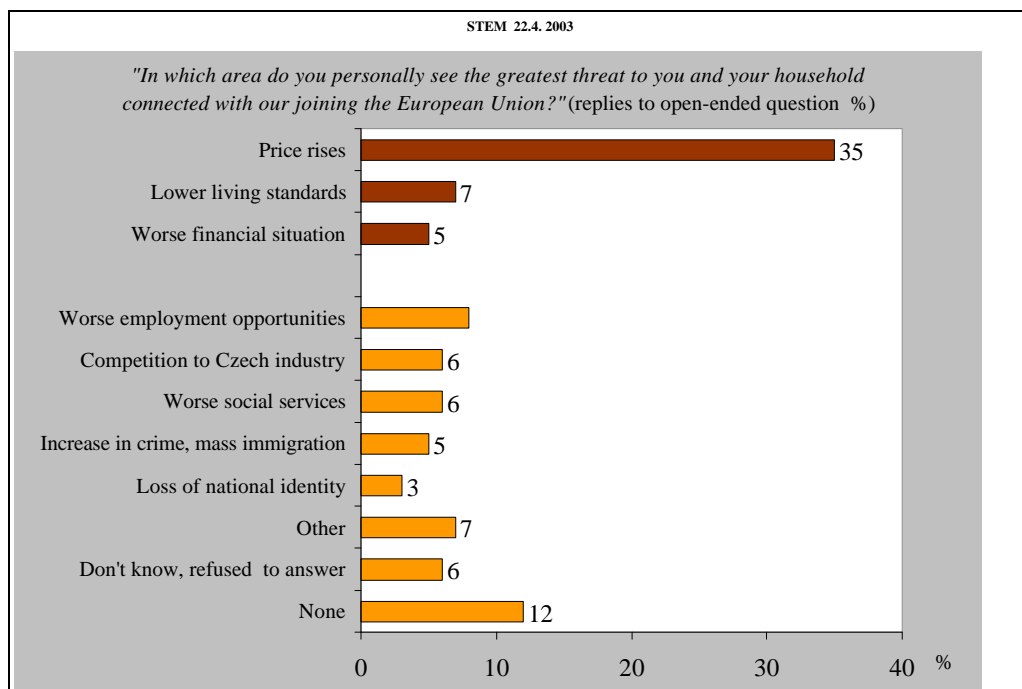
Despite differences of emphasis, reflecting the different ideological strands within the campaign, its arguments against accession centred on three key points:

- 1) that the EU was a 'bureaucratic colossus', which would suffocate the Czech Republic with 'socialist' bureaucratic regulation – a point emphasised by the campaign logo, a hammer and sickle intertwined with the EU symbol;
- 2) that EU accession would mark an unacceptable loss of Czech national sovereignty, comparable to previous periods of external domination by Austria, Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union; and
- 3) that the Czech economy was strong enough to withstand international competition outside the Union and could, if necessary, negotiate bilateral trade arrangements with it on the Norwegian or Swiss model.

Notwithstanding its lack of resources and the fractiousness of the fringe groups within it, the 'No' campaign's strategy appeared misconceived in a number of ways. Firstly, as polls repeatedly showed, voters inclined to vote against accession were most concerned about the immediate negative economic impact of EU membership on prices and employment, than abstract concepts such as sovereignty or identity, which were at best a secondary concern (see figure 1). The use of anti-communism to frame the issue of accession was also arguably a strategic error, as many (potential) 'No' voters and activists were politically on the left, many being Communist supporters. Secondly, the 'No' campaign rapidly became side-tracked, expending considerable energy criticising the alleged unfairness of the official information campaign's refusal to fund 'No' campaigners. Finally, the 'No' campaign was also arguably discredited by the obvious extremism of some of its leading members.⁸

⁸ See, reports of speeches to the Eurocritical Congress, ⁸ H Capová, 'Nový žalár národu', *Respekt*, no. 7, 10 – 16 February 2003, p. 4

Figure 1: Czech concerns related to EU accession



Source: STEM poll, 22 April 2003, www.euroskop.cz

The results

As Table 1 shows, 77.33% of those voting supported accession, 22.67% voted against. Those voting in favour represented 41.73% of the total electorate. At 55.21% the turnout was comparable with that in last year's general election (58%). The results were broadly in line with pre-referendum polling, although as in other CEE accession states' turnout was lower and the majority in favour of accession higher than forecast. This seems to confirm pollsters' forecasts that many of those inclined, but not committed, to vote 'Yes' would give priority to other activities on polling days and that many opponents of accession would abstain.

Table 1: Results of the 2003 EU accession referendum in the Czech Republic

	Total	% of Registered Voters	% of Valid Votes
Registered voters	8 259 525	100.00	
Ballot papers issued	4 560 399	55.21	
Votes cast	4 557 960	55.18	
Valid votes	4 457 206	53.95	
Yes	3 446 758	41.73	77.33
No	1 010 448	12.23	22.67

Source: Central Election Commission, www.volby.cz

As predicted by polls, support for accession was highest in Prague (80.47%) and in the Zlín region (80.61%).⁹ Support for accession was lowest in the Liberec region in Northern Bohemia, where 73.82% voted ‘Yes’ and 26.18% voted ‘No’, a region with multiple social and economic problems, where parties of the radical left and far right have had strong electoral support. However, compared with variations in voting patterns in national elections, the accession vote was surprisingly geographically uniform.

Table 2: Exit poll findings on voting patterns in the June 2003 Czech EU accession referendum

	Yes %	No %
Voting by gender		
Men	77	23
Women	78	22
Voting by age		
18-29	78	22
30-44	75	25
45-59	77	23
60+	79	21
Voting by place of residence		
Urban	78	28
Rural	75	25
Voting by education		
Primary	73	27
Vocational	73	27
High School Diploma (<i>maturita</i>)	79	21
Higher	82	18
Voting by occupational group		
Employees	77	23
Businesspeople	79	21
Students	84	16
Pensioners	78	22
Housewives/husbands	75	25
Unemployed	65	35
Voting by party		
Freedom Union (US-DEU)	92	8
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	86	14
Christian Democratic Union (KDU-CSL)	84	16
Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD)	82	18
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM)	37	63
Other	71	29

Source: SC&C for Czech Television as reported in *Lidové noviny* (online edition), 14 June 2003.

⁹ The city has a strong tradition of pro-reform voting, probably related to its origins as the company town of Bat’a, the ‘Shoe King’, whose unusual brand of enterprise culture and paternalism dominated the locality in interwar Czechoslovakia.

As Table 2 shows, exit polling based on responses from 12,500 voters,¹⁰ suggested relatively little variation in terms of social and demographic characteristics. There was little difference in support for accession among men (77%) and women (78%) and almost no difference between those living in urban areas (78%) and those living in the countryside (75%), reflecting the absence of a strong urban-rural cleavage in the Czech Republic. There was also little variation by age group, with support lowest among those aged 30 – 44 (75%) and highest amongst 18-29 year olds (78%) and, surprisingly, the over 60s (79%). Although support for accession was correlated with rising educational levels, here too differences were not large: while 73% of those with only primary or vocational education supported accession, the figure for those with a high school diploma was 78% and for those with higher education 82%. The only significant variation by occupational group was the relatively low (65%) support for accession among the unemployed. The only clear determinant of support for or opposition to accession appears to have been voters' party alignment. While voters for both ODS and the parties of the governing coalition overwhelmingly supported accession, a large majority (63%) of Communist voters polled voted 'No'.

The Czech Constitutional Court received 28 objections to the validity of the referendum, some submitted by private citizens, some by leaders of the Eurosceptic Initiative and Citizens Against the EU. Most individuals' complaints concerned alleged technical irregularities, such as the size of the official stamp on ballot papers or the provision of pencils, not pens at some polling stations. The anti-EU activists, by contrast, claimed that the government's use of taxes paid by both supporters and opponents of accession to fund the pro-accession campaign violated the constitutional principles that power stemmed from the whole people and that minorities' rights should be protected. However, the Court rejected all the objections as either legally invalid or as mere polemic.

Conclusions

Despite the lack of a turnout requirement, turnout in the Czech accession referenda was comparable with that in neighbouring CEE states, which did have such a hurdle. Most Czech commentators and politicians have thus accepted the view that turnout was respectable. The result represents a much needed political success for the embattled centre-left administration. However, the fact that the 'Yes' vote represented only 41.73% of the total electorate – a percentage lower than in any accession referendum so far with the exception of that Hungary – has been negatively commented on and may provide future ammunition for Eurosceptics.

Political debate about European integration at elite level now seems set to shift to the Czech Republic's role and interests within an enlarged EU. However, the central issue in Czech politics in the coming months seems likely to be the reform of public finances and the government's proposed austerity measures. Shortly after the referendum, Prime Minister Špidla indicated that he was prepared to stake both his own political future and that of his government on their successful implementation. However, he will face growing industrial and social protest and testing political battles both in parliament and within his own party over the issue. However, despite the role of accession in shaping some of these policies, few political actors have strong incentives to link them with the EU. For Špidla and the trade unions, such linkage would undo much of the logic of their pro-accession campaigns. For the Communists and dissident Social Democrats, it would highlight divisions in a possible future

¹⁰ One third of the 19,000 voters approached refused to answer questions.

coalition of the left. Issues of European integration, therefore, seem likely to remain the property of the centre-right Civic Democrats, whose attention is already focused on the prospective European Constitution.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute OERN was established in June 2000 as an international network of scholars studying party politics. The original focus was to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems but the Network has widened its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/index.html>