

Public opinion on economic situation and living conditions in the context of Central Europe

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For the last few years, comparable public polls dealing with different topics have been carried out in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland within the international cooperation based on CEORG¹. These countries were occasionally joined by other states from Central, Eastern or South Eastern Europe. These more or less regularly repeated polls include questions asking about the country's economic situation and household living conditions. The last research dealing with this issue was performed in summer 2004 and the traditional participants were joined by Slovakia.²

At the beginning, respondents were asked to evaluate current economic situation of their country.³ In this respect, critical opinions generally highly prevail above favourable opinions – see Table 1a to 1d. The lowest contentment was registered in Hungary (40 % "bad" economic situation, but only 4 % "good") and the highest in Slovakia (70 % "bad", 2 % "good"). Polish and Czech public opinion was somewhere in between and was quite similar to each other. According to the most recent results, 9 % of Czech citizens find the current economic situation in the Czech Republic good, 53 % bad and 37 % define it as "neither bad, nor good". In Poland, 7 % of people regard the situation as good, 56 % as bad and 31 % find it neutral.

Evaluation in the Czech Republic hasn't changed much since January 2004, even though it is slightly better from a statistical point of view. However, in comparison with the period from 2001 to 2002, it appears to be much worse. In the past two years, significant downgrade in the evaluation of economic situation was registered also in Hungary, despite the fact that in the last poll, the Hungarians regarded the situation slightly less critically than at the end of 2003. The Poles, on the contrary, regard the state of their economy substantially more positively than two years ago. Another positive shift was registered since January 2004. In case of Slovakia, the only data available from the past are those from January 2002. In comparison with these results the overall opinion hasn't changed.

Table 1a: Current economic situation in the Czech Republic (in %)⁴

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	9/04
Good	5	4	4	6	7	12	14	7	6	9
Neither good nor bad	29	22	30	37	41	46	47	43	35	37
Bad	65	72	63	55	49	40	37	49	57	53
Doesn't know	1	2	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	1
Difference +/-	-60	-68	-59	-49	-42	-28	-23	-42	-51	-44

Source: CVVM (IVVM), Our society (Naše společnost) survey

¹ CEORG [The Central European Opinion Research Group] includes three institutions that deal with public opinion research in the Czech Republic [CVVM SOÚ AV ČR – Centre for public opinion research of the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic], in Hungary [TÁRKI - Társadalomkutatási Intézet és Társadalomkutatási Informatikai Egyesülés] and in Poland [CBOS - Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej].

² In Hungary the data was collected from June 22nd until July 1st 2004 among a representative group of 1021 respondents over 18 years of age. In Poland the survey was carried out between July 9 and 12 2004 on the representative group of 920 respondents from the age of 18 and in Slovakia the research was carried out by FOCUS agency between June 15 and June 22 2004. Slovak population was represented by 1063 respondents over 18 years of age. Due to capacity reasons, the survey in the Czech Republic was carried out only in September. It took place from the 13th to the 20th September 2004. 1053 respondents from the age of 15 participated in the survey. The data presented is collected from respondents over 18 years of age.

³ Question: "How would you assess current economic situation in our country? According to you is it very good, good, neither good nor bad or, bad or very bad?"

⁴ Data for respondents over 18 years of age.

Table 1b: Current economic situation in Hungary (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	12/03	6/04
Good	7	3	6	8	9	8	12	8	4	4
Neither good nor bad	50	44	46	48	52	53	56	56	48	51
Bad	39	49	44	41	34	35	28	31	45	40
Doesn't know	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	5
Difference +/-	-32	-46	-38	-33	-25	-27	-16	-23	-41	-36

Source: TÁRKI, Hungary

Table 1c: Current economic situation in Poland (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	7/04
Good	13	10	12	7	9	5	3	4	6	7
Neither good nor bad	33	30	33	31	29	21	18	27	27	31
Bad	49	53	50	59	58	71	75	64	62	56
Doesn't know	5	7	5	3	4	3	4	5	5	6
Difference +/-	-36	-43	-38	-52	-49	-66	-72	-60	-56	-49

Source: CBOS, Poland

Table 1d: Current economic situation in Slovakia (in %)

	1/02	6/04
Good	2	2
Neither good nor bad	25	27
Bad	72	70
Doesn't know	1	1
Difference +/-	-70	-68

Source: FOCUS, Slovakia

Note: "Good" stands for the sum of answers "very good" and "good", "bad" is the sum of results "bad" and "very bad".

The Czechs and the Slovaks appear to be much more pessimistic in their expectations of the economic development⁵ than the Poles or the Hungarians. In both countries, roughly two fifths of respondents expect worsening of economic situation, whereas almost one fifth expects improvement. In case of the Czech Republic, however, it means a significant improvement as compared to the beginning of this year, when one half of respondents anticipated worsening of economic situation and only slightly over one tenth of the questioned expected positive development. In spite of this, however, the expectations remain much more pessimistic than in the period from 2000 to 2002. In Slovakia, the expectations are slightly less negative than in 2002. In case of Hungary and Poland, opinions on further development of economic situation are very similar. Optimistic voices slightly prevail over the pessimistic ones and one half of the questioned doesn't expect any changes in either way. In the context of the previously mentioned critical evaluation, this is not an overly joyful finding. In any way, the Polish expectations are the most positive ones in the history of the collective researches. The Hungarians, on the contrary, are markedly more sceptical than they were at the beginning of 2002 (See Tables 2a to 2d).

⁵ Question: "Do you think that economic situation in the Czech Republic in the next year will be much better, slightly better, will not change, will be worse, or will be much worse?"

Table 2a: Expected development of economic situation in The Czech Republic in the next year (in %)⁶

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	9/04
Will be better	10	11	17	16	16	22	23	14	13	19
Will not change	40	42	46	53	46	54	43	42	31	35
Will be worse	43	39	25	21	26	16	24	38	50	39
Doesn't know	7	8	12	10	12	8	10	6	6	7
Difference +/-	-33	-28	-8	-5	-10	+6	-1	-24	-37	-20

Source: CVVM (IVVM), Our society (Naše společnost) survey

Table 2b: Expected development of economic situation in Hungary in the next year (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	12/03	6/04
Will be better	31	19	21	22	27	28	31	29	19	22
Will not change	39	39	43	44	46	47	47	40	39	50
Will be worse	21	33	27	26	19	17	9	20	33	18
Doesn't know	9	9	9	8	8	8	13	11	9	10
Difference +/-	+10	-14	-6	-4	+8	+11	+22	+9	-14	+4

Source: TÁRKI, Hungary

Table 2c: Expected development of economic situation in Poland in the next year (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	7/04
Will be better	21	15	16	13	15	14	14	18	17	23
Will not change	41	44	52	47	50	52	50	50	44	50
Will be worse	27	29	22	29	26	24	28	22	27	16
Doesn't know	11	12	10	11	9	10	8	10	12	11
Difference +/-	-6	-14	-6	-16	-11	-10	-14	-4	-10	+7

Source: CBOS, Poland

Table 2d: Expected development of economic situation in Slovakia in the next year (in %)

	1/02	7/04
Will be better	8	16
Will not change	42	36
Will be worse	40	38
Doesn't know	10	10
Difference +/-	-32	-22

Source: FOCUS, Slovakia

Note: "Will be better" stands for the sum answers "will be much better" and "will be slightly better", "will be worse" is the sum of answers "will be slightly worse" and "will be much worse".

Citizens of the Czech Republic regard their household living conditions⁷ (see Tables 3a to 3d) rather favourably. In the last survey, 27 % of Czechs described their household living conditions as good, 48 % as "neither good, nor bad" and the remaining 24 % as bad. In comparison with the survey, which was carried out in January, the number of answers "good" decreased in favour of

⁶ Data for respondents over 18 years of age.

⁷ Question: "How would you describe your current household living conditions? Would you describe them as very good, rather good, neither good, nor bad, rather bad or very bad?"

“bad”. From the long-term point of view, however, the current results are the same as in surveys carried out from 2000 to 2003. The result of the survey carried out in January 2004 presents only a random divergence.⁸ Our respondents regard their household living conditions significantly more favourably than the Hungarians and the Slovaks. This corresponds with the objective standard of living, which is on average higher in the Czech Republic than in the other countries. In the last research, the Poles evaluated their household living conditions in a similar way as the Czech respondents. Gradual improvement, which is perceptible in Poland since 2003, corresponds with the previously mentioned shift in evaluation of economic situation. Hungarians, on the contrary, evaluate their current household living conditions significantly more negatively than last year. The results of this year’s survey in Slovakia are the same as in the research carried out in the beginning of 2002.

Table 3a: Evaluation of current household living conditions in the Czech Republic (in %)⁹

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	9/04
Good	24	24	27	23	29	31	27	25	34	27
Neither bad, nor good	50	48	50	52	44	47	48	50	42	48
Bad	26	27	23	25	27	22	25	24	24	24
Doesn't know	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Difference +/-	-2	-3	+4	-2	+2	+9	+2	+1	+10	+3

Source: CVVM (IVVM), Our Society (Naše společnost) survey

Table 3b: Evaluation of current household living conditions in Hungary (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	12/03	6/04
Good	9	9	8	9	8	7	10	12	17	10
Neither bad, nor good	60	54	56	53	58	59	56	63	56	60
Bad	31	37	36	38	34	34	33	25	27	30
Doesn't know	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Difference +/-	-22	-28	-28	-29	-26	-27	-23	-13	-10	-20

Source: TÁRKI, Hungary

Table 3c: Evaluation of current household living conditions in Poland (in %)

	2/99	7/99	1/00	7/00	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	7/04
Good	21	19	22	19	21	21	23	24	24	26
Neither bad, nor good	45	47	46	48	46	45	43	45	45	45
Bad	34	34	32	33	33	34	34	31	31	29
Doesn't know	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Difference +/-	-13	-15	-10	-14	-12	-13	-11	-7	-7	-3

Source: CBOS, Poland

⁸ Comparison of the results of a similar question dealing with respondents’ household living conditions, which was asked simultaneously with the evaluation of household living conditions, doesn’t show any shift between January and September 2004. This supports our hypothesis of a random divergence in case of answers “good” and “neither good, nor bad” in the January survey.

⁹ Data for respondents over 18 years of age.

Table 3d: Evaluation of current household living conditions in Slovakia (in %)

	1/02	7/04
Good	16	16
Neither bad, nor good	47	49
Bad	37	35
Doesn't know	0	0
Difference +/-	-21	-19

Source: FOCUS, Slovakia

Note: "Good" means the sum of answers "very good" and "rather good", "bad" is the sum of answers "rather bad" and "very bad".

As follows from the data in Tables 4a to 4d, our citizens are more pessimistic in their expectations of the development of household living conditions in next year¹⁰ than the Hungarians, the Poles and also than the Slovaks, even though in their case the recorded difference is minimal (in respect to the given size of the groups of respondents it is basically on the verge of a statistical error). In September 2004, 30 % of Czech citizens expected worsening of their household living conditions during the course of one year. 15 %, on the contrary, expected a certain improvement and 45 % believed in maintaining their present situation. This result presents a certain improvement as compared with January 2004, but in comparison with the first half of 2001 or the beginning of 2002, the most recent expectations are markedly worse. Following the previous downfall, the expectations concerning living conditions improved in Hungary as well, even though they still remain below the level reached in 2002 and 2003. Polish expectations basically haven't changed in the last two years. In comparison with 2001 and 2002 the Poles are slightly more optimistic. This is due to a more optimistic view on their current living conditions, which was mentioned in the previous text. In Slovakia, the number of people expecting improvement of their household living conditions has slightly increased since 2002.

Table 4a: Expected development of the respondent's household living conditions in the Czech Republic in next year (in %)¹¹

	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	9/04
Will improve	14	28	22	11	12	15
Will not improve	49	41	50	54	46	45
Will worsen	27	21	20	29	36	30
Doesn't know	10	10	8	6	6	10
Difference +/-	-13	+7	+2	-18	-24	-15

Source: CVVM (IVVM), Our Society (Naše společnost) survey

Table 4b: Expected development of the respondent's household living conditions in the Czech Republic in next year (in %)

	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	12/03	6/04
Will improve	21	23	27	25	16	18
Will not improve	46	47	51	50	52	56
Will worsen	28	24	14	17	27	20
Doesn't know	5	6	8	8	5	6
Difference +/-	-7	-1	+13	+8	-11	-2

Source: TÁRKI, Hungary

¹⁰ Question: "Do you expect that living conditions of your household in the next will be improve a lot, will slightly improve, will not change, will slightly worsen, will be much worse?"

¹¹ Data for respondents of 18 years of age.

Table 4c: Expected development of the respondent's household living conditions in the Czech Republic in next year (in %)

	1/01	7/01	1/02	1/03	1/04	7/04
Will improve	16	11	14	13	16	15
Will not improve	56	57	57	67	60	63
Will worsen	27	21	29	19	22	20
Doesn't know	1	11	0	1	2	2
Difference +/-	-11	-10	-15	-6	-6	-5

Source: CBOS, Poland

Table 4d: Expected development of the respondent's household living conditions in the Czech Republic in next year (in %)

	1/02	6/04
Will improve	12	17
Will not improve	46	46
Will worsen	27	27
Doesn't know	15	10
Difference +/-	-15	-10

Source: FOCUS, Slovakia

Note: "Will improve" stands for the sum of proportional amount of "Will highly improve" and "Will slightly improve", "Will worsen" is the sum of proportional amount of answers "will slightly worsen" and "will very much worsen".

A more detailed analysis has shown that young people between the ages of 15 and 19, as well as students, respondents with a high standard of living, and voters of ODS and ČSSD, regard their economic situation and living conditions more favourably. Supporters of KSČM and retired people are more critical in both respects. University graduates, businessmen, highly qualified workers or managers more frequently regard their living conditions as good. On the contrary, unemployed people and workers with no qualification regard them more frequently as bad. Optimistic expectations for the future are almost always connected with positive evaluation of present situation. It means that among those, who expect an improvement of economic situation or household living conditions are people who are satisfied with their present situation. On the contrary, people who criticize their present situation are most likely to expect its further worsening.