

## Public opinion and unemployment in the Czech Republic

Jan Červenka

Unemployment undoubtedly belongs among the most significant phenomena as well as the problems of the modern world. First of all, it has a number of negative socio-economic consequences, both for directly affected individuals, their families, households, and their environment, which is affected, among others, by reduced purchasing power of the unemployed, and for the whole society, which has to bear both the direct and the indirect costs connected with unemployment and with the struggle to overcome it. Unemployment has a significant effect on politics and political decision-making processes both on the part of civil society and political elites as well as on people's minds and on the solidarity of the society. Long-term unemployment in particular belongs among the factors that contribute significantly to the origin and spread of a number of pathological phenomena including alcoholism, drug addiction, criminality, vandalism, suicides, apathy, but also racism and different forms of militant political radicalism. In the following text we will concentrate on the way in which unemployment is reflected in the public opinion in the Czech Republic.

As to unemployment itself, the Czech Republic is a very specific case in many ways. During a large part of the 1990's the Czech Republic ranked among countries with unexceptionally low rate of unemployment, not only among the European post-communist states, but also within the whole European continent as well as in comparison with non-European OECD members. Before 1990, involuntary unemployment had not even existed as a socio-economic phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The state in then still Czechoslovak centrally planned economy provided full employment to whole population in economically active age without regard to the effectiveness of such an approach. It was supposed to fulfil the "right to work" declared by law, which was not only a political proclamation, but at the same time created one of the basic features of the state's social politics. Voluntary unemployment was not tolerated by the state authorities and it was treated as a criminal offence of parasitism. Thus the Czech society, with the exception of the oldest generation, which had directly experienced the era of pre-war Czechoslovakia and especially the period of great economic depression of the 30's, didn't have any personal experience with unemployment and the unemployed in the beginning of transformation.

**Table 1. Rate of unemployment in the Czech Republic (in %)**

1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
0,0	0,7	4,1	2,6	3,5	3,2	2,9	3,5	5,2	7,5	9,4	8,8	8,9	9,8

Note.: The data of CSÚ, data by 31.12. of the relevant year.

Even though economic analyses estimated existence of almost 20% of artificial "over-employment" and thus predicted fast and steep growth of unemployment following the application of economic reform strategy and even though economic performance decreased unexpectedly, affecting industry, building industry, agriculture, transport and a large part of the services sector, the rate of unemployment in the Czech Republic, after reaching the not too dramatic rate of 4,1% (approximately 222 000 non-placed job candidates), subsequently fell to 2,6% (approximately 135 000 non-placed job candidates) by December 1992 and fluctuated

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<sup>1</sup> We put aside politically motivated work restrictions and dismissals that were a common part of bullying exercised by the pre-November regime towards active or potential opponents, possibly against the so-called class enemies, because this practice did not lead to the emergence of actual unemployment, but to forced changes of profession and to job descend.

under the rate of 4 % in the following years up to the year 1997 (see Table 1). During the Czechoslovak federation low unemployment rate in the Czech Republic was emphasized by a significantly higher unemployment rate in Slovakia, where already in the end of 1991 there were about 302 000 unemployed, that is, 11,8% of Slovak population in economically active age.

There exist two completely different interpretations of unemployment rate in the Czech Republic in the period up to 1997. According to the first one, low unemployment rate at that time was a result of high absorbing ability of the new or previously underestimated economic areas, especially the sector of services, where the newly established businesses expanded rapidly and substantially. On the other hand, the alternative hypothesis regarded the low rate of unemployment as a result of continuous postponing of the necessary economic restructuring, which had only accumulated existing problems and increased future financial and social costs of their solution. But whatever was the decisive cause of the low unemployment lasting until 1997, the very fact that the unemployment rate was practically insignificant in the long term had alone a significant impact on the attitudes of public opinion. Furthermore, we also have to take into consideration the influence of certain stereotypes of thought concerning unemployment and the unemployed. They were rooted in the pre-revolution experience, according to which those who didn't work were simply parasites, as well as in the after-revolution right wing rhetoric based on the neo-liberalist economic doctrine, which on the theoretical level practically denied the possibility of involuntary unemployment. As a result of the effect of the previously mentioned, most of the Czech citizens still believed in the beginning of 1997 that the existing unemployment was caused mainly by the fact that the unemployed did not want to work (see Table 2).

**Table 2. The predominant cause of unemployment (in %)<sup>2</sup>**

	III/199	III/200	III/200	XI/200
	7	0	1	2
Cannot find a suitable job	36	49	53	49
Cannot find any job	6	31	16	18
Not interested in working	45	14	24	27
DOESN'T KNOW, OTHER	13	6	7	6
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: CVVM source, Our Society (Naše společnost) survey.

Following development brought about a radical change. Long ignored problems of external macroeconomic instability, as well as the unfortunate state of the financial sector and the absence of restructuring of non-competitive enterprises or economic sectors have resulted in economic recession that lasted from 1997 to 1999. Among others, it has brought about a perceptible global increase of unemployment, reaching 9,4 % (488 000 non-placed job candidates) in the end of 1999. In spite of a number of expectations, rate of unemployment did not break the psychological barrier of 10 % at that time, and even though its relatively steep rise from the years 1997 to 1999 stopped thanks to economic recovery, while unemployment in the years 2000 and 2001 even slightly decreased, this relatively dramatic experience has evidently lead a large part of the population to reassess their previous attitudes to unemployment.

<sup>2</sup> Question: "Do you think that majority of unemployed in our country... (further see Table 2)?"

<sup>3</sup> Question: "According to you, is it easy or difficult to find a) any job in the region, where you live, b) a job in your profession anywhere in the Czech Republic c) a job in your profession in the region, where you live?"

If at the beginning of 1997 about 45 % respondents thought that majority of the unemployed were not interested in working, in 2000 it was only 14 %. Only the numbers of those, who thought that majority of the unemployed consisted of people unable to find suitable job and those, who answered that most of the unemployed were people unable to find any job, have not increased so conspicuously. The results of a subsequent scrutiny from 2001 and 2002, indicated in Table 2, pointed at the decreasing representation of the least mentioned opinion and on the contrary at the rise of the number of citizens, who believed that the unemployed consisted primarily of people with no interest in work. This may be related to the fact that after the tense period lasting from 1997 to 1999 with its negative development trend, the situation at the labour market calmed down a little, as well as to the fact that people became used to higher rate of unemployment. In spite of the shift from 2001 and 2002, public opinion mood remained completely different from that, which had existed here before the direct experience with relatively higher or fast growing unemployment rate of global character.

In this respect, socio-demographic differences are interesting as well. They confirm unambiguously the link between the direct experience with unemployment and the attitude to unemployment and the unemployed. Besides businessmen, people, who had never been employed or have been employed only for a short time not exceeding three months, more frequently mentioned the lack of interest in work as a prevailing reason for unemployment. In addition to the employees with higher qualification or people from towns with population over 100 000, people who had been unemployed between four to six months more frequently mentioned the inability to find a suitable job. The presently unemployed and the people, who had been unemployed for more than half a year answered more frequently that they were not able to find a suitable job. Besides that, the survey noted relatively higher occurrence of similar statements also among respondents with basic education, who according to the statistics become unemployed far most frequently and find it very difficult to find a suitable job, and among the inhabitants of north Moravia, the most affected region of the Czech republic with regard to the unemployment rate and occurrence of long-term unemployment.

Apart from the direct experience with unemployment, opinions on the current situation at the job market are also closely connected to the opinion on the prevailing cause of unemployment. A survey of the CVVM has dealt with this problem, scrutinizing respondents' opinions on the difficulty of the prospective finding of a suitable job with regard to their profession and the region where they live. (see Table 3)<sup>3</sup>.

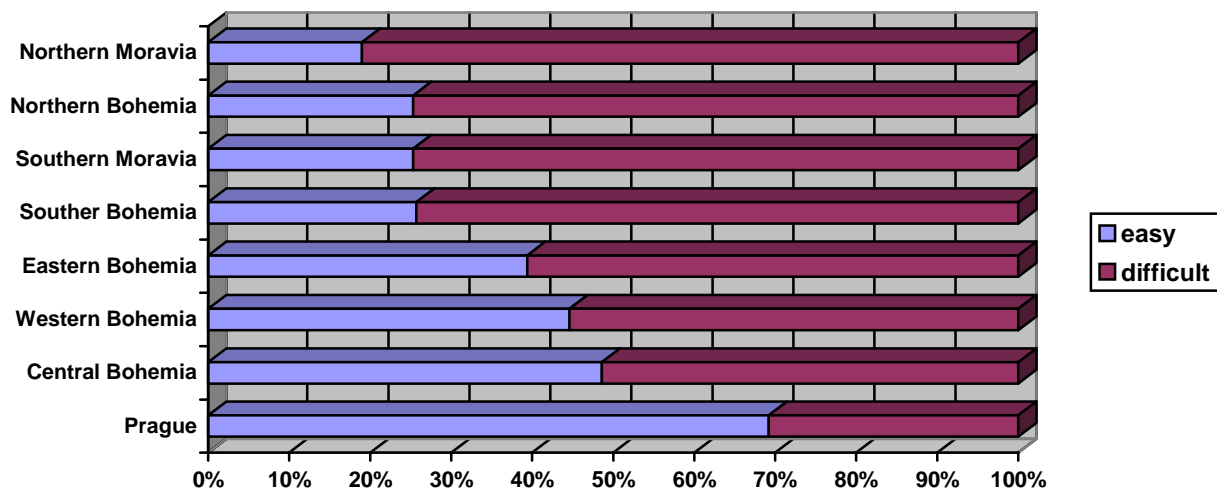
**Table 3. Finding work – November 2002 (in %)**

	In region	In profession	In profession and in region
Very easy	4	2	1
Rather easy	28	24	16
Rather difficult	43	36	42
Very difficult	17	13	25
Doesn't know, not concerned	8	25	16
Total	100	100	100
<i>Easy/difficult</i>	<i>32/60</i>	<i>26/49</i>	<i>17/67</i>
<i>Difference</i>	<i>-28</i>	<i>-23</i>	<i>-50</i>
<i>Proportion</i>	<i>0,533</i>	<i>0,531</i>	<i>0,254</i>

Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey.

From the survey's results it is obvious that finding work is regarded as difficult in all scrutinized cases. From the point of mutual relation between "easy" and "difficult" proportions, the evaluation of the possibility to find any job in region does not differ significantly from the possibility to find a job in one's profession anywhere in the Czech Republic. In the evaluation of the possibility to find a job in one's profession and region, a synergic effect of both limiting conditions appears quite clearly. As a result, the proportion between "easy" and "difficult" search for a job was much worse in this case than with both conditions applied individually.

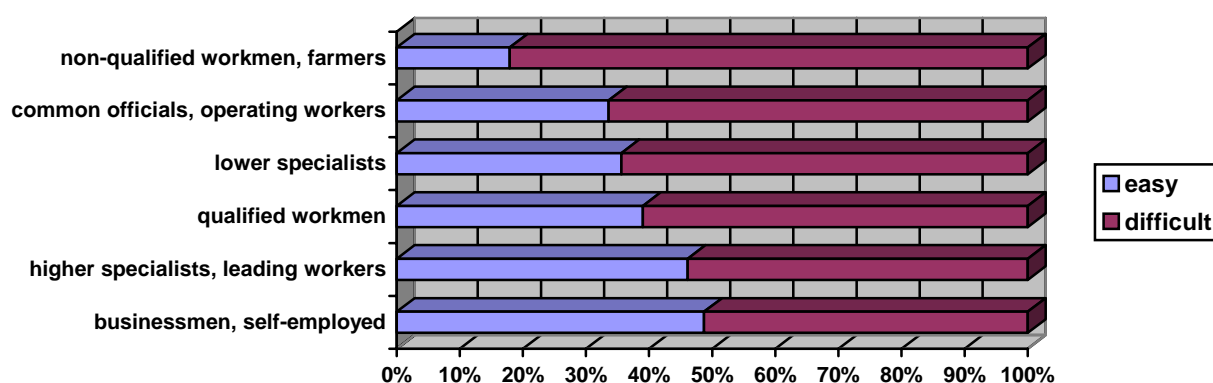
**Graph 1. Finding work in region according to regional division**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey.

As it was expected from the actual situation as regards numbers of non-placed job candidates in individual regions, evaluation of the possibility to find any job in region differs significantly according to geographical division. As it is evident from Graph 1, inhabitants of Prague most frequently believe that it is easy to find some job and this opinion actually prevails among them. The public opinion in central and western Bohemia concerning the situation is also relatively better. On the contrary, respondents from southern and northern Bohemia and from the whole of Moravia tend to think much more frequently that it is difficult to find any job in their region.

**Graph 2. Finding job in one's profession according to occupation**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey.

As regards the possibilities of a prospective search for job within the whole of Czech Republic, businessmen and self-employed view the situation most favourably from the point of view of profession (see Graph 2). Among employees, only qualified specialists draw close to them. On the contrary, the worst evaluation of possibilities to find a job in their profession was among non-qualified workers and physically working farmers, as it was expected.

Detailed result analysis based on different socio-demographic and other classifying criteria has indicated that finding an adequate job in their qualification and in region, where they live, is more often regarded as relatively easy by university graduates, businessmen and tradesmen, residents of Prague and respondents from cities with population over 100 000 in general. On the contrary, besides the presently unemployed and those, who were unemployed for more than three months, non-qualified workmen, inhabitants of Moravia and respondents from communities with 500 to 2000 inhabitants also regard it as very difficult.

Prevailing scepticism of the public opinion is typical not only for evaluation of the current prospects at the job market, but also for expectations of the future development of unemployment,<sup>4</sup> as it follows from the survey results of CVVM indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Expected development of unemployment in the next two years (v %)**

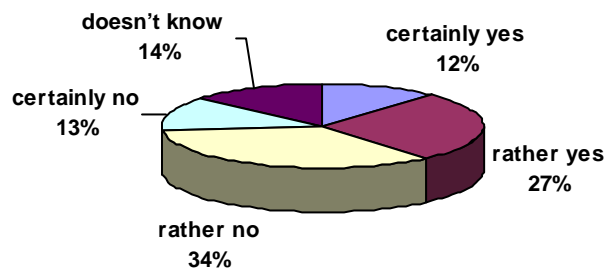
	III/2000	III/2001	XI/2002
Will increase significantly	33	11	15
Will increase partially	40	30	41
Will stay approximately on the same level	15	37	29
Will fall partially	3	9	2
Will fall substantially	1	0	0
Doesn't know	8	13	13
Total	100	100	100

Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey.

<sup>4</sup> Question: "According to you, how is the unemployment in the Czech Republic going to develop in the next two years? It will increase significantly, will increase partially, will stay approximately on the same level, will decrease partially or will decrease significantly"

More than half (56 %) of the population of the Czech Republic believed in the end of 2002 that in the next two years unemployment would at least partially increase. 29 % respondents believed that the rate of unemployment would not change significantly and only 2 % expected some decrease. In comparison with March 2001, this result represents an obvious shift of expectations for the worse, even though people generally continue to regard the prospects much more favourably than in spring 2000, when 73% of respondents expected increase and 33% significant increase of unemployment in the following two years.

**Graph 3. Concerns about own unemployment in the next two years**



Note: CVVM source, Our Society survey.

In spite of these strongly pessimistic expectations and predominantly critical evaluation of the situation with regard to the possibilities of finding a new job nowadays, recent surveys show that citizens of the Czech Republic are not worried about their own unemployment (see Graph 3). At the end of November and beginning of December 2002 only 39 % of respondents of the CVVM survey, according to whom this possibility could apply,<sup>5</sup> expressed concerns about losing their job in the following two years. Only 12 % were “certainly” worried. On the contrary, 47 % of the questioned were not worried about unemployment (13 % “certainly”), the remaining 14 % answered that they didn’t know. People with basic education, lower incomes, non-qualified workmen, the presently unemployed, people who have had their own experience with unemployment and those who find it difficult to find a job in their profession and region have more concerns about unemployment. On the other hand, businessmen, university graduates, highly qualified specialists or managers and inhabitants of Prague have shown less concerns, which more or less correspond with the present situation of unemployment and possibilities of finding a job.

## Conclusion

In the period after 1997, which brought about a significant increase of unemployment in the Czech Republic, opinions of the public on this phenomenon have shifted significantly. Whereas in the past unemployment was much more frequently regarded as an expression of some people’s unwillingness to work, the development from the years 1997 to 1999 has

<sup>5</sup> All respondents answered the question: “Are you worried about becoming unemployed in the next two years? Certainly yes, rather yes, rather no or certainly no?” The indicated results do not include answers of the respondents, who mentioned spontaneously that the possibility of losing job in the next two years did not worry them.

evidently made majority of population admit to the existence of involuntary unemployment. Increase of unemployment has also brought about obviously prevailing scepticism concerning future development. Majority of people believe it would be difficult to find a new job in case they lost the old one. However, there are substantial regional differences and also differences with regard to qualification, which reflects with the actual situation on the job market.