



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic social briefing:
Czech Society and Religiosity
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Czech Society and Religiosity

Summary

The 2021 state census confirmed the long-term declining religiosity of the Czech society accompanied by a high degree of mistrust towards churches as an institutionalised form of religion. The leading role continues to be played by the Roman Catholic Church, however, the number of its members plummeted. The other churches that were traditionally the largest ones aside from the Roman Catholics – the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren and Czechoslovak Hussite Church – have been replaced by the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia. The latter is being both marginalised and exposed to attacks because of the alleged connections with Russia. This sphere of social life is thus affected by (geo)political and ideological struggles as well.

Introduction

Since the beginning of this year, the Czech Statistical Office has gradually presented the data obtained within the state census which was held in 2021 after ten years. In the March social briefing did I inquire into the statistics regarding nationality and ethnicity, chosen aspects of the demographic development (ageing and overall population balance) or sex.¹ The present analysis is, in turn, concerned with the area of confession and religion, which has several specific features in the context of the Czech society. Nevertheless, the validity of the data is somewhat undermined by the fact that the questions focused on religion were facultative.

General and regional perspectives

The official statistics reveal the descending tendency as far as the number of believers is concerned. In the first census held after the fall of the communist regime in 1991, the total figure amounted to 4,523,734 people (43.9 per cent). Ten year later it decreased to 3,288,088 people (32.1 per cent) and dropped to 2,168,952 (20.8 per cent) in 2011. The recent data show that the number of believers slightly increased to 2,334,486 (22.2 per cent). At the same time,

¹ Zemánek, L. (2022, March 07). *The 2021 Census: Basic Features in The Social Context*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2022/03/07/czech-republic-social-briefing-the-2021-census-basic-features-in-the-social-context/>.

the number of believers claiming allegiance to no church or denomination rose from 705,368 to 960,201 persons. It confirms the strong sense of mistrust towards institutionalised forms of religion. This observation is strengthened by a sharp increase in the number of non-believers compared to 2011 – it went up from 3,604,095 (34.5 per cent) to 5,027,141 (47.8 per cent).

The situation is different in regional terms. Traditionally, Moravia has been more religious than Bohemia. Not by coincidence, the highest share of believers (54.6 per cent) can be observed at the Zlín Region in the Eastern tip of the country. It is the only region where the number of believers is higher than that of non-believers. For a long time, Ústí nad Labem Region, Liberec Region and Karlovy Vary Region show the lowest percentage of believers (15.8, 19.4, and 20.6 per cent respectively by 2021). Nevertheless, the data regarding believers claiming allegiance to concrete churches and denominations are much lower. It equals 38.6 per cent in the Zlín Region whereas only 7.2, 9.5 and 10.0 per cent in Ústí nad Labem Region, Liberec Region and Karlovy Vary Region respectively.

This phenomenon has its historical reasons. These border regions form a substantial part of the former Sudetenland where the German population predominated for centuries. However, the Sudeten Germans, who started to settle Bohemian lands in the 12th century and numbered more than 3 million people (thus accounting for around 23 per cent of the population), were expelled after the Second World War, initially spontaneously, later based on the decision taken at the Potsdam Conference. The desolate borderlands were subsequently massively industrialised and populated during the communist rule, which influenced significantly the social and cultural (religious) character of the local inhabitants.

Declining Roman Catholicism

Interesting tendencies can be observed in the case of individual churches and denominations. In the Czech Republic, the number of such legal subjects amounted to 42 by 2019. The strongest role is traditionally played by the Roman Catholic Church. However, it has suffered from an outflow of its members which is connected to multiple causes. Let's mention at least the most important ones. First, the Roman Catholic Church is internally split, being affected by what is usually called „cultural wars“. While the liberal wing has endeavoured to make substantial reforms, „open up“ the church, adapt to conditions of the present post-industrial society, conservatives have opposed excessive transformations which are rightly perceived as unacceptable concessions to the liberal democratic systems and their ideology, endangering traditions and peculiarity of the Roman Catholic Church. The internal struggle is

weakening the role of the church in society. Second, it is especially the image of the Roman Catholics that has been damaged by the so-called church restitutions. It was a matter of public debate since the 1990s but the law was passed no earlier than 2012. It was to solve the problem of compensation for the nationalisation of the church properties between 1948 and 1989 but also that of separation of churches from the state since the churches were financed from the state budget as a result of their subordination to and control by the state authorities in the socialist period. However, the massive property transfers and financial compensations in favour of churches have been considered controversial by many.²

Criticism aimed against the Roman Catholic Church should be, however, supplemented with the fact that within the deal with the state the Roman Catholics gave up a part of claims in favour of other churches and denominations in order to reach a compromise acceptable to all sides involved. As a result, paradoxically, compensations have been paid off even to those subjects that were established after 1989. This concession, nevertheless, did not mitigate people's negative attitudes towards the final deal. Third, the reputation of the Roman Catholic Church has been seriously damaged by the disclosure of a wide array of cases of child sexual abuse, even though their number is probably lower compared to other countries. And again, this problem, which has been accentuated by the Roman Bishop Francis, divides the church community internally. Last but not least, the problematical attitude of the Czechs towards the Roman Catholic Church is interconnected with a negative attitude towards different kinds of institutions, towards institutional, organised, collective forms of social life, and a related sense of mistrust towards them.

Historical explanation

It might be explained by the long-term alienation and gap between a large part of society and official institutions which were frequently perceived as instruments of oppression or foreign domination. Sociological surveys conducted over the last years confirm that the level of trust towards churches is the lowest in comparison with other institutions including the security forces, courts, banks, media, political parties or non-profit organisations. For a long period, the figure oscillates around 25 per cent.³ The Czech Republic and Estonia are, therefore,

² Zemánek, L. (2019, December 09). *Drawing the Story of Church Restitutions to an End: The Constitutional Court in Action Again*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2019/12/09/czech-republic-political-briefing-drawing-the-story-of-church-restitutions-to-an-end-the-constitutional-court-in-action-again/>.

³ CVVM: Z veřejných institucí věří nejméně lidí církvím. Policie dopadla nejlépe od roku 1994 (2018, December 13). IROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/cvvm-pruzkum-vyzkum-duvera-verejne-institute-armada-policie_1812132037_lac. *Lidé mají nejmenší důvěru v politické strany a církve, věří naopak armádě a*

called the most irreligious countries in Europe. In general, the reasons can be sought in the intricate historical development of the Czech Lands. Whereas the Great Moravia as the first relevant statehood in the region as well as the first historically documented Duke of Bohemia Bořivoj was baptised by Constantinople with its Byzantine Rite and traditions, the emerging Bohemian state soon fell to the Catholic sphere of influence. In the 15th century, the Czech Lands gave birth to one of the first reformation, proto-protestant movements in Europe – the Hussite one, resulting in religious wars and subsequent conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. The religious rivalry together with secular interests escalated to the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), one of the most destructive wars in European history. The results of the war brought about forced recatholisation of the Czech populace accompanied by expulsion of non-Catholics. Yet, the Czech National Revival, the modern nation-building process of the 18th and 19th centuries, was predominantly based on anti-Catholic narratives, constructing the Hussite and Protestant tradition as genuinely national phenomena, unlike the allegedly alien Roman Catholicism which was imposed upon the Czech nation by the German House of Habsburg.

This simplistic, one-sided narrative became the official paradigm of the Czechoslovakia and was later reinterpreted by the communist authors within the Marxist framework. The first Czechoslovak President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk initiated the establishment of the „national church“ in opposition to the Roman Catholic one, deepening the internal split in the Czech society. Unlike Poland, the fall of the communist system did not lead to a substantial revival of religiosity. Such a complicated development full of conflicts, enmity and violence could not but strengthen mistrust towards churches and Christianity as such. The recent statistics are telling in this regard as demonstrated by the following table:

	Roman Catholic Church	Eastern Orthodoxy	Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren	Czechoslovak Hussite Church
1991	4,021,385	19,354	203,996	178,036
2001	2,740,780	22,968	117,212	99,103
2011	1,082,463	26,350	51,858	39,229
2021	741,019	41,178	32,577	23,610

Source: Czech Statistical Office⁴

policii (2019, October 08). Aktuálně.cz. <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/nejmensi-duveru-maji-u-lidi-politicke-strany-a-cirkve-veri-n/r~daa07416e9bb11e9ac60ac1f6b220ee8/>.

⁴ *Religious belief* (2022, March 31). Census 2021. <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/religious-beliefs>.

Conclusion

Even though the data obtained within the 2021 census show the gradual rise of the Eastern Orthodoxy in the country, the fact that the Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia has become the second-largest church is usually overlooked. It is beyond any doubt that it relates to the present (geo)political and ideological struggles since the Orthodox Church is falsely labelled as an instrument of Russian influence. The Orthodox Church has been exposed to media manipulations and attacks in connection with the alleged property machinations in conjunction with Russian „oligarchs“, alleged support for Russia’s foreign policy, or serving the Kremlin’s interests in the Czech Republic.⁵ Despite the incessant campaign, the Orthodox Church is the only traditional Christian church on the rise.

⁵ See Břešťan, R. (2022, February 15). *Pravoslavná církev jako měkká síla Kremlu. Využívá ji ve své propagandě*. HlídacíPes.org. <https://hlidacipes.org/pravoslavna-cirkev-jako-mekka-sila-kremlu-vyuziva-ji-ve-sve-propagande/>. *Anonymní vlastníci i provoz pod hlavičkou církve. Pátrání po majetku Rusů spojených s Putinem není snadné* (2022, March 17). Česká televize. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3456012-anonymni-vlastnici-i-provoz-pod-hlavickou-cirkve-patrani-po-majetku-rusu-spojnych-s>.