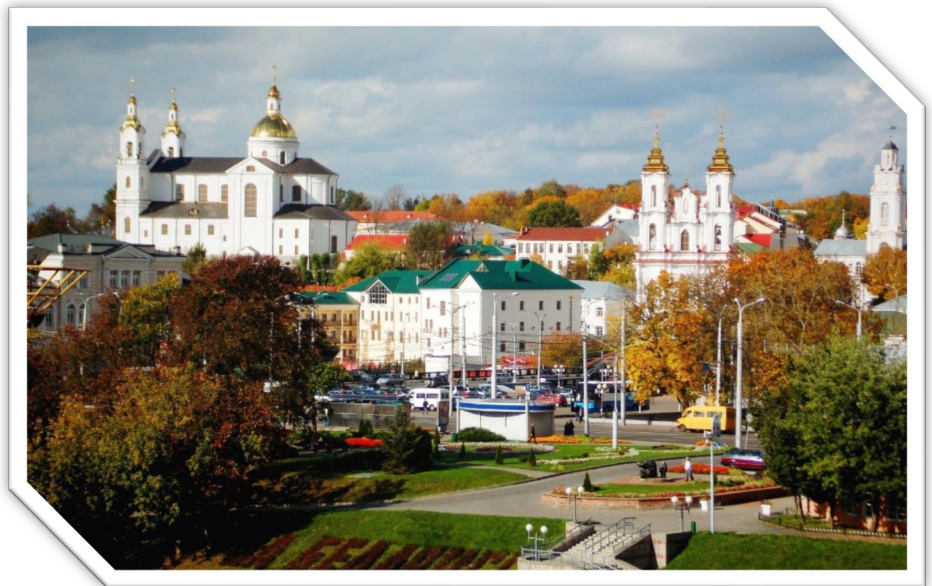


# NCSEJ Country Report



## The Czech Republic (Czechia)



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## Executive Summary:

The landlocked Czech Republic is located in Central Europe and borders Austria, Germany, Poland, and Slovakia. It is one of the country's key foreign policy priorities to keep strong and peaceful neighborly relations.

Since 1989, Czechoslovakia (and later the Czech Republic) has been one of the United States' strongest partners in Central Europe. The U.S. and the Czech Republic have collaborated on strengthening security, promoting economic development, and spreading democratic values in the region.

Since the end of the Communist era and peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992-1993, the Czech Republic has made considerable economic and political progress.

The country joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004.

Today, the Czech Republic enjoys one of the closest relations with Israel among the post-Soviet countries and the EU member states. The two countries cooperate in the areas of economy and trade, education, culture, and science and research. Both nations are members of the Union for the Mediterranean.

The Czech Jewish community is estimated at around 4,000 people and is mostly centered in Prague. A thriving revival of Jewish character in Prague attracts many foreign visitors every year to its Jewish quarter, which includes the oldest synagogue in central Europe.

There is no state discrimination against the Jewish community, though anti-Semitic incidents such as vandalism and desecrations of Jewish sites continue to occur. In 2014 Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek, stated that the Czech Republic had one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in Europe; however, since then he has expressed worry about rising anti-Semitism across Europe, including his country.

### Statistics:

**Population:** 10,700,000 (May 20120 est.)

**Size:** 78,867 sq. km.

**Capital:** Prague

**Major cities:** Brno, Ostrava, Olomouc, Plzen

**Jewish population:** 4,000

**Head of State:** President Peter Pavel

**Prime Minister:** Petr Fiala

**Foreign Minister:** Jan Lipavsky

**Ambassador to United States:** Miloslav Stasek

**U.S. Ambassador to the Czech Republic:** Bijan Sabet

**Freedom House Rating:** Free

# History

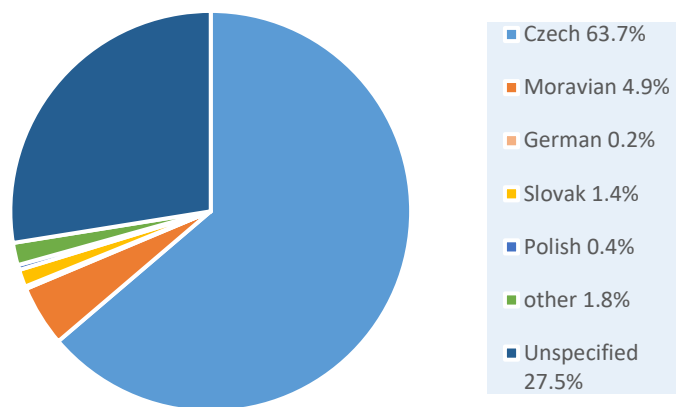
Before Slavs settled in the area of modern-day Czechia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the territory had been inhabited by Celtic and Germanic tribes. After their arrival, the Slavs (Czechs) established the Kingdom of Bohemia, encompassing Bohemia and Moravia, and ruled the area through the newly founded Přemyslid dynasty from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Ferdinand I from the Habsburg dynasty ascended to the throne in 1526. The region remained under Austrian Habsburg authority until the end of World War I, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated.

Czechoslovakia was officially created in 1918 in Prague by merging the Czech lands and Slovakia.

During Czechoslovakian independence, Jews contributed greatly to the development of the country's economy. A Jewish National Council united the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia and advocated for civic and legal rights for Czech Jewry.

**Ethnic composition**

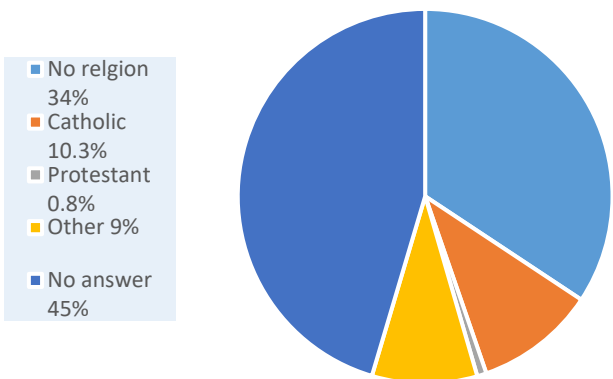


After the occupation of the Sudetenland, Bohemia, and Moravia by Hitler and Slovakia's proclamation of itself as a Nazi client state in 1939, the flourishing of the Czechoslovakian Jewish community came to an end. During the Second World War, tens of thousands of Bohemian and Moravian Jews were deported to a camp-ghetto at Theresienstadt from which the majority were taken to killing sites in the Baltic States, camp ghettos in Poland, and the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland. Overall, 263,000 Jews on Czechoslovakian territory were murdered during the Holocaust.

Czechoslovakia's pre-war boundaries were reinstated after 1945, and elections in 1946 brought the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to power.

In the 1960s, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Alexander Dubček, attempted to liberalize the communist regime in the country; however, his attempts, known as the "Prague Spring," were violently suppressed by the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1968.

## Religion



In November of 1989, peaceful demonstrations known as the Velvet Revolution brought about a peaceful power transition from the Communist Party to a democratically elected new government. The Velvet Revolution also led to the Velvet Divorce during which Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic (Bohemia and Moravia) and the Slovak Republic (Slovakia).

The Czech Republic experienced a smooth and successful transition from communism

to democracy and a free market economy after 1989. The country joined NATO in March 1999 and the European Union in May 2014.

## Political Situation

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy with legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. The Prime Minister is the head of the government and holds substantial powers. The President is the head of state and military commander-in-chief.

The President of the country is elected by the people for a term of five years and can be reelected once. Peter Pavel has been the President of the Czech Republic since March 2023.

According to Czech law, the President appoints the Prime Minister. The new Prime Minister then appoints the other members of the government, which is subject to approval by the Chamber of Deputies. Both the Prime Minister and the government are accountable to the Chamber. Current Prime Minister Petr Fiala was appointed in November 2021.

The Parliament consists of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The Chamber of Deputies has 200 seats, and the Senate has 81 seats.

The most recent parliamentary election was in 2021 when opposition parties Together and Pirates/Mayor won a combined 108 of the 200 seats, Former Prime Minister Andrej Babis' ANO party won 72 seats, and Freedom and Direct Democracy won 20 seats.

Former Prime Minister next launched his campaign for president, running on a populist message and fears about war with Russia. His opponent was former NATO Military Committee Chairman Petr Pavel, who is pro-West and pro-Ukraine. In the end, Pavel was victorious, winning 58% of the vote.

## Civil Rights and Liberties

The Czech Constitution guarantees many civil liberties and rights, include freedom of speech and freedom of expression, banning hate based on “race, religion, class, nationality, or other groups of people.” These protections have helped enforce punishments for Holocaust denial, sentencing those convicted for up to 3 years. The press in Czechia remains independent and contains a wide area of different beliefs. However, in recent years, there have been attempts by The Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, the Communist Party, and ANO to appoint politically biased members to public media supervisory boards.

The judiciary is mostly independent, but there have been recent concerns with Justice Minister Marie Benesova’s direction of the court, who has been public support of Babis might have influenced her judicial discretion. Elections are fair in the Czech Republic and power is not solely held by one political party.

The one of the biggest concerns in Czech politics is the amount of corruption that takes places, including that of Former Prime Minister Andrej Babis. However, various bodies of government to act once the scandals are brought to light.

Overall, Freedom House gives the Czech Republic a 91/100 score: 36/40 for political rights and 55/60 for civil liberties.

## Economic Situation

The Czech Republic is the world’s fifty-first-largest market economy, and one of the strongest, most stable economies among the post-Communist states. Since liberalizing its markets in the 1990s, the Czech Republic has joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The country has also had major economic setbacks. In 1997, the Czech Republic suffered a currency crisis and delays in enterprise restructuring. Its government cut spending and growth dropped significantly.

In May 2004, the Czech Republic became a member of the European Union. After its accession, the country fostered fiscal policies to align its macroeconomic conditions with other EU countries. Increased investment and exports to the EU slowly began to stabilize the country’s economy.

From 2009-2013 the Czech Republic experienced the highest fiscal deficits in its history and a record-long recession. Its economy started recovering in 2014 and in 2015 became the fastest growing economy in the European Union with a 4.2% growth rate.

Today, the Czech Republic’s service sector generates the largest part of its GDP, taking up nearly 61% of its GDP. Following services, industry takes 40% and agriculture only takes up around 2%.

As of 2021, The Czech Republic's most important trade partners are Germany, Slovakia, Poland, France, Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands.

The Czech government first stated its intention to join the Eurozone in 2006. As of now, the country is not ready to adopt the euro; the Czech Republic meets only five of seven Maastricht criteria.

Currency: \$1= 21.68 CZK (2023)  
GDP: \$281.78 billion (2021)  
GDP per capita: \$26,821.2 (2021)  
GDP Growth: 3.5% (2021)

Foreign and domestic businesses have spoken out about corruption in the country. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer surveys, the Czech public is concerned not only by business corruption, but also corruption within political parties. Areas for improvement in the Czech economy include reinvigorating domestic drivers of growth, developing a friendlier regulatory

environment, and increasing spending on labor market policies.

## Foreign Policy

The Czech Republic has warm relations with its neighbors. The country has especially strong ties with Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, as a member of the Visegrad Four regional cooperation group.

Since the Velvet Revolution, Czechs have prioritized integration with Western institutions as their country's primary foreign policy goal. The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004 and held the EU Presidency during the first half of 2009. As a member of NATO and the United Nations, the Czech military has been involved in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan (ISAF), Kosovo (KFOR), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Czech-Russian relations have suffered in recent years. In 2014, the Czech government took an ambiguous stance on Russian aggression in Crimea by labeling it as "annexation," but opposing the EU's economic sanctions on Russia. Also in 2014, the Czech Republic, along with Slovakia, opposed establishing new NATO bases on NATO's eastern flank.

In 2021, the Czech Republic dismissed 18 Russian diplomats who were suspected spies after Czech intelligence agencies found Russian involvement in a Czech military explosion back in 2014. Russia then expelled 20 Czech diplomats. Consequently, the Czech Republic ordered Russia to allow their diplomats back into the Moscow Embassy. When Russia did not obey, the Czech Republic as well as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania expelled Russian diplomats.

In May 2023, the Czech Republic also recanted a Soviet-era law that permitted Russia to have free use of land for their embassy in Prague.

Due to China's aggression over the 2019 Huawei case and threats over a potential Taiwan-Czech visit in 2020, the Czech Republic is working to deepen its relations with Taiwan. The Czech Speaker of the Lower House visited Taiwan in March 2023 with a 150-member delegation. This was the Czech Republic's first visit since China sanctioned Lithuania for their new "Taiwanese Representative Office" in Vilnius. Once there, the officials signed 11 Memoranda of Understanding to further economic, political, and cultural relations between the two countries.

### **Relations with the United States:**

The Czech Republic established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1993, following the split of Czechoslovakia into two independent republics. Since the Czech Republic gained independence from the Soviet regime, the two countries have deepened diplomatic relations and increased cooperation on strengthening security, promoting democratic values, and developing bilateral economic relations.

As a part of bilateral cooperation with the U.S., the Czech Republic has contributed soldiers to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) and Kosovo Force (KFOR). The U.S. considers the Czech Republic a partner on Syrian issues as well.

Towards the end of the Bush administration in the 2000s, the U.S. started formal negotiations with Czech Republic on establishing a missile defense shield in the country. Public opinion, heavily influenced by Russia, turned against the proposition, and in 2009 a newly elected President Obama scrapped the plan to put U.S. radar in the Czech Republic. In 2011, Czech defense minister Alexander Vondra officially announced that the Czech Republic was withdrawing from the European defense system but stated that the country would continue cooperation with the NATO Alliance on other issues in the future.

The Czech Republic is one of 38 countries eligible for the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), meaning Czech citizens are eligible for a visa-free entry into the United States as tourists.

The U.S. and Czech Republic have a bilateral investment treaty. Most U.S. investments are directed towards automotive parts and equipment, energy, education, information technology, agriculture, and medical equipment. The Czech Republic also strongly supports the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

The U.S. and the Czech Republic cooperate on cultural issues as well. The U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad has been active in addressing issues of restoration and preservation of sites of shared religious and cultural heritage. In conjunction with the Commission, the U.S. and Czech governments signed an agreement to protect and preserve cultural heritage sites in 1992.



President Obama has visited Prague twice. He took part in an informal EU-U.S. summit in April 2009, and in April 2010, he signed the New START treaty with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. President Obama met with the highest representatives of the Czech Republic during both of his visits.

During his October 2011 official visit to Washington, D.C., Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas met with President Obama in the White House, where they discussed defense cooperation, civil nuclear research, and support for human rights.

In March 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called Czech Prime Minister Adrej Babis to display the United States' continued commitment to the Transatlantic Alliance and US - EU partnership. Blinken noted the importance of building infrastructure in Czechia such as nuclear energy and 5G networks.

In April 2022, Secretary Blinken hosted Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky in Washington, D.C. Secretary Blinken highlighted the Czech Republic's support for Ukraine. They also discussed their shared goals in defense, energy security, and human rights.

In May 2023, Secretary Blinken met with Foreign Minister Lipavsky again for the US - Czech Republic Strategic Dialogue. They discussed their common commitment to Ukraine, concerns about China, and efforts for peace in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Relations with Israel:**

In 1947, Czechoslovakia, along with 33 other countries, voted in favor of the United Nations partition to create a Jewish state, and was one of the first countries to recognize the State of Israel. Czechoslovakia supported the newly established State of Israel with weapons and military aircraft; however, the Soviet government soon halted this support and terminated diplomatic relations between the two countries.

After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic established diplomatic relations with Israel independently from Slovakia. Czech President Václav Havel became the first leader from a post-Soviet Eastern European country to visit Israel. The Czech Republic has an embassy in Tel Aviv and three honorary consulates in the country. Israel has an embassy in Prague.

Today, among the post-Soviet countries, the Czech Republic is considered one of Israel's closest partners. During the Gaza flotilla raid in 2010, the Czech Republic supported Israel's contention that the Turkish flotilla was a planned provocation. The Czech Republic was the sole European country that, in support of Israel, voted against changing Palestinian status to "non-member observer state" at the 2012 UN General Assembly. The country also rejected a controversial EU bill on labelling products from Israeli settlements.

During his official visit to Prague in 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated, “Israel has no better friend in Europe than the Czech Republic.”

In October 2013, Czech President Zeman visited Israel and met with President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Netanyahu.

During his visit to Israel in 2014, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek stated, “the image of Israel in Czech media and society is one of a trusted friend, a vibrant democracy, and an economic and technological powerhouse. The Czech Republic continues to enjoy one of the lowest levels of anti-Semitism in Europe.”

In October 2015, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin met with Czech President Zeman in Prague and discussed economic cooperation, investment opportunities, and tourism.

In April 2016, Czech Foreign Minister Zaorálek visited Israel and met with President Rivlin and Prime Minister Netanyahu, and discussed joining Israeli projects in energy, infrastructure, and construction of railways.



*Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš cut the ribbon for the Czech embassy in Israel.*

In April 2018, the Czech Republic appointed Dan Propper as the first honorary consul in Jerusalem.

In March 2021, the Czech Republic opened an embassy in Jerusalem. The Czech Prime Minister attended the ribbon cutting ceremony.

In July 2022, Israeli President Herzog visited the Czech Republic to meet with Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, President Milos Zeman, President of the Czech Senate Milos

Vystrcil, and the president of the Czech Chamber of Deputies, Marketa Pekarova. Herzog will also meet with members of the Czech Jewish community.

## **Jewish Community**

Jewish presence in what would later become the Czech territory (Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia) was first recorded in the year 995 C.E., when Jews were given permission to settle there by the Byzantine Empire. However, during the Crusades, anti-Semitic sentiments grew in the region; Jews were persecuted, forcefully baptized, and forbidden to own land and practice many professions.

Conditions for Jews slightly improved in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but anti-Semitism continued until the liberalization of the Habsburg dynasty in late 16<sup>th</sup> century. With the ascendance of King Rudolf II to the throne, the “Golden Age” of the Habsburgs began. This directly impacted Jewish life in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia; under King Rudolf II, Jews were no longer forced to live in ghettos and wear distinctive clothing. Jews could practice different trades, travel freely, and enjoyed civil rights. Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the Maharal), one of the era’s leading Jewish scholars (and reputed creator of the mythic *golem*), served as a rabbi in Prague along with other important Jewish personalities such as Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller and David Gan.

Mass persecutions and expulsions of Jews from neighboring countries in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century led to an increase in the Jewish population of Prague. By 1708, one-quarter of Prague’s population was composed of Jews.

The competition between German and Czech nationalists and the famous Hilsner Affair (a blood libel trial) in the 1890’s led to renewed anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews in Czech lands.

The political status of Jews in the newly established Czechoslovakia was very favorable. Jews played a prominent role in the development of economy, arts, sciences, commerce, and industry. Jews also established a Jewish National Council that united the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia and advocated for civic and legal rights for Czech Jewry. According to the 1930 Czechoslovakian census, the Jewish population amounted to 350,000 people.

Czech elites were considered less anti-Semitic than many other Eastern European leaders. Zionist ideals spread during until the mid-1930s, and Jews were allowed to build schools and synagogues.

Soon after Hitler’s coming to power in 1933, Jews from neighboring countries fled to Czechoslovakia. During the Second World War, tens of thousands of Bohemian and Moravian Jews were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, from which the majority were taken to killing sites in neighboring countries, including the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

While approximately 26,000 Jews were able to emigrate before 1941, overall, 85% of the pre-war Jewish population were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Many of the survivors tried to rebuild Jewish life, but Communist rule made this impossible to achieve.

At the beginning of Communist rule, many Jews fled to Israel. Those that stayed in Czechoslovakia were persecuted and discriminated against. Under Soviet-controlled leadership, diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel grew cold and were completely terminated after the 1967 Six Day War.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, democracy was restored, and Jewish consciousness slowly started to reawaken. The democratic Czech government restituted many of the Jewish properties owned before 1938.

Today, the Jewish community in the Czech Republic ranges from 3,000 to 5,000 people, 1,600 of whom live in Prague.

The Federation of the Jewish Communities is an umbrella group that represents Czech Jewry. It organizes a variety of social welfare programs, including compensation given to the Holocaust survivors living in the Czech Republic. The Federation also works with the government to restitute pre-WWII Jewish-owned property. Importantly, the Federation of the Jewish Communities established the Jewish Museum in Prague and regained the ownership of the majority of Judaic collections from the Museum. The Federation also greatly contributed to the establishment of the Sefer Publishing House. Other active Jewish organizations in the Czech Republic include the Czech Israeli Chamber of Commerce, the Franz Kafka Society, and the Foundation for Holocaust Victims.

There are seven functioning synagogues in Prague, five of which are found in the remains of the ghetto. The city is rich in Jewish historical sites such as the Old Jewish Cemetery, the tombstone of Rabbi Loew, Hebrew and Roman faced clocks, and the Jerusalem Synagogue. The Jewish Museum has one of the world's largest collections of Judaic art, which includes books and archival material from across Central Europe, and Prague's Jewish character and history attracts many foreign visitors to the city's Jewish quarter.

The Czech Republic became a fully-fledged International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) member country in 2001 and assumed chairmanship of the organization in 2007.

Currently, two kosher restaurants operate in Prague, and some other restaurants offer kosher-style options. The *Rosh Chodesh* Jewish newspaper is printed monthly, and the Jewish community broadcasts a radio program called *Shalom Aleichem*. The Jewish Town Hall, the leading communal organization, hosts Jewish social, religious, and cultural events.

The country has no dedicated Jewish universities, though several universities offer Jewish education courses such as Charles University, Palacky University, and New York University. The Terezin Memorial and the Jewish Museum in Prague offer a variety of educational programs to visitors, teachers, and scholars. Prague also has a Jewish school district, sponsored by the Ronald Lauder Foundation. This school system runs a kindergarten, an elementary school, and a high school. An online school was added in 2013.

The Prague Jewish Community also provides social services for the elderly. In 2008, it launched the Hagibor Social Care Facility to provide housing, nursing and social care, meals, and therapeutic programs to Prague's Jewish elderly.

Prague synagogues offer at least three options for Shabbat services and have daily services in the morning and the afternoon. The Chief Rabbinate of Prague supervises the religious services in the Czech Republic. Rabbi David Peter was elected to be Chief Rabbi of Prague in 2014.

The Federation of Jewish Communities helps run the Maccabi World Union Chapter in Prague that offers Jewish programming to youth.

While standards for Jewish life in the Czech Republic are improving, the Jewish population is declining because of a low birth rate, emigration, and assimilation.

## **Anti-Semitism**

There is no official state discrimination against the Jewish community in the Czech Republic. Czech law criminalizes Holocaust denial and restricts hate speech against race, gender, and religion.

Despite this, anti-Semitic incidents in the Czech Republic are still prevalent. These incidents often include Holocaust denial, Nazi propaganda, and anti-Semitic vandalism. In 2014, groups such as the National Resistance and the Autonomous Nationalists held assemblies and published blogs that contain anti-Semitic statements, neo-Nazi propaganda, and Holocaust denial. In 2015, the Ministry of Interior identified anti-Semitic rhetoric from political parties such as National Democracy Party, National Revival Party, and the Workers' Party of Social Justice. There were also over twenty "white power" concerts held in the country, where anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi views were expressed.

In December 2015, Adam Bartos, Chairman of the far-right Czech National Democracy Party, and Ladislav Zemanet, a party official, were accused of incitement to hatred for a note they wrote supporting a 19<sup>th</sup> century blood libel trial. Throughout the year, Bartos wrote anti-Semitic blogs including statements that the Holocaust was a conspiracy and called for the European Jewish Congress to apologize for the "injustices" Jews have caused to the Czech Republic. However, many perpetrators of anti-Semitism online are found to be unaffiliated with any extremist groups, suggesting that suggests that anti-Semitic sentiment is taking root in society.

The Czech government is actively involved in helping to prevent the spread of anti-Semitic sentiment by monitoring anti-Semitic incidents and rhetoric and by organizing public events (e.g., concerts, rallies, etc.) against anti-Semitism.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic released their 2021 report on the manifestations of anti-Semitism in the Czech Republic, finding 1,128 anti-Semitic incidents in that year. They recorded 254 more incidents than 2020, showing a consistent rise in anti-Semitism.