

REPORT

Brand EU: What do Czechs think of the EU and how it differs from other V4 countries

Thursday 10th of October 2019
Hotel Leopold

- The working breakfast “Brand EU: What do Czechs think of the EU and how it differs from other V4 countries” was organised by the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and took place on 10th October 2019 in Hotel Leopold in Brussels. The discussion was led by Nikola Hořejš (Analyst, STEM) together with Martin Buchtík (Director, STEM) and Vít Havelka (Researcher, EUROPEUM). The event attracted 11 actively discussing participants from various backgrounds.
- During the working breakfast, the results of an extensive research bearing the same title as the event were presented. The research was conducted by Behavio Labs and STEM in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. As the title suggests, the research was focused on the segmentation of the Czech society according to its relationship with the EU and which aspects of European integration they see as the most problematic. The conducted research unravelled a deeper understanding of the Czech population in relation to the EU as it focused on the first subconscious reaction, which is independent from rational reasoning.

The presenter, Mr Vít Havelka, opened the working breakfast by introducing the researchers and institutions involved in the study and then he followed by introducing a general data from Eurobarometer. As the data shows, the V4 countries are less enthusiastic about the EU membership than the EU average. Nevertheless, Czechs are the nation who supports the EU least, which results also in a bigger proportion of people, who would vote for leaving the EU, from all Member states. One of the reasons that contributed to this outcome is that Czechs do not think their voice is heard in the EU. In the Eurobarometer survey only 22% of

Czech respondents thought their voice counts. For comparison, in the other V4 countries the percentage is higher, thus in Hungary 46%, Slovakia 51% and Poland 57%. The presentation followed with introducing the results of the study, which defines six different **segments** of the society that are defined by their attitude towards the EU and by their satisfaction with Post-1989 development (Supporters 15%, Lukewarm Supporters 30%, Critics 17%, Distrustful 15%, Opponents 21% and Active Opponents 2%). The majority of the groups are either dissatisfied with the Post-1989 development and are opponents of the EU

(Opponents and Distrustful) or are positive and are supporting or somewhat supporting the EU (Supporters, Lukewarm Supporters). Whereas a distinguish part of the Czech population is actually satisfied with Post-1989 development but have a critical stance towards the EU (Critics). The last group of Active Opponents is represented by 2% of the population and are very critical towards the EU and are very actively involved.

When the researchers were asking respondents about the Czech **geopolitical position** and what are their associations towards other regions of Europe, from all European regions, Central Europe received the most positive emotion, which is followed by Southern Europe and Scandinavia. The least favourite emotion belonged to Eastern Europe. Despite the fact that Western Europe scored in overall relatively low, among the pro-European segments of society is more attractive. Whereas Eastern Europe has not been found even popular among the critical segment of the society.

The **general perception** and share of votes supporting the EU membership has been changing over the course of last two decades. The support was highest before the Financial crisis of 2008 hit. In the aftermath the support gradually decreased to the lowest point of the years 2015 and 2016, when the refugee/migration crisis took place. After that and after the British referendum about exiting the EU, the general support has been slowly increasing up till now. According to the researchers from STEM, the increase has been more caused by the positive economic development of recent years rather than external factors such as Brexit.

In comparison to other countries or international organisations, the **"EU as a brand"** is not high on the list for Czech population. It scores somewhere between the USA and Russia. On top of the list of positive brands, Czechs placed their own country with overall perception counting roughly 70%, followed by Visegrád 50% and NATO 39%. Only Russia 22% and China 17% scored lower than the EU. One of the most interesting results of the study is that Czech population love Europe per se. Even the opponents of the

EU like Europe. In overall, 71% of the respondents are proud to be European and 72% thinks that to live in Europe is an advantage. Why do Czechs like Europe but do not like the EU? According to the study, Czechs do not know the basics about the EU. A vast majority (60%) do not know that Czechs are represented by ministers or the Prime Minister in the Council. Czechs also do not know the differences between the European Council, the Commission and the Council of the European Union as well as Brussels and the EU fall generally into one same category. The positive associations with the EU are lacking whereas worsen emotions are widely spread. A large number of respondents answered that the EU "tackles trivial issues", "complicates" or is "difficult to understand".

What do we want from the EU? In a more detailed questionnaire about leaving the EU, it results show that the situation is more complex. Only around 11% of respondents demands immediate departure, whereas 54% respondents think that changes are needed but the Czech Republic should definitely stay in the EU. Only 7% of Czech population think that the EU works and there is no need to reform. The researchers have also asked what are the categories that Czechs want from the EU. Among those answered were mostly security and defence and secondly, defending quality of life - like high quality food, clean air, healthy water and high quality of medicine.

At the end of the presentation were given **recommendations** on communication surrounding the EU. This included focusing on big issues and leaving out small advantages like studying abroad - overall it is not for everyone. The researches also recommended to use and develop right labelling - according to study most people do not want to exit the EU immediately, but they want to reform it. Perhaps, such a group should be called in the public sphere as reformers. For the EU supporters have been recommended not to act superior towards the opponents and any other. Lastly, grand plans and vision for the future should be present while talking about the EU.

The presentation was followed by a **discussion**, where participants asked the researchers followed-up question. In the plenum a question of the age factor has been raised but also commented that what plays actually more role in the attitude towards the EU is social background than simply age. Followed by questions on key media outlets and key politicians as well as participants were trying to dig deeper in the fact why is the Czech population the most sceptical, what is the real cause. One of the many possible reasons was a fact that historically, Czechs, tend to define themselves negatively towards something else, as it was towards Austrian-Hungarian Empire or Germans. Perhaps, under this scenario the EU is the possible “other”.

To sum up, despite the fact that the Czechs are the most sceptical population towards the EU in absolute numbers, the results of the deeper study found out that this is commonly misinterpreted. Because Czech population supports the membership in the EU in case of a reform. Only 11% demands the immediate exit. Generally, the support of the EU changes according to crisis outbreaks when it decreases or economic upswing when it increases. What Czechs want mostly from the EU is to create a defence and security, followed by defending the quality of life.