

PRESS RELEASE

A Czech perspective for the future of the EU

Thursday 1st of June 2017, 18:00 – 21:00
Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU

- **The Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy hosted a conference titled "A Czech perspective for the future of the EU" on 1 June 2017. The event, organized in cooperation with the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU, aimed to contribute to the current debate about the further direction for the European integration project from the Czech perspective and bring the Prague debates closer to Brussels.**

The event was opened by a keynote speech by **Ms Věra Jourová**, Commissioner for justice, consumers and gender equality. She started by stating that "**the Czechs have to decide whether they want to be the most western country of the east, or the most eastern country of the west.**" Commissioner Jourová then urged Czech politicians to be at the forefront of the discussion on multi-speed Europe, and to be as pro-active as possible in trying to keep up the speed, in order to achieve the best possible common future. She warned against the 'let's wait and see' attitude in Czech society and politics. Instead, the Czech Republic should be among those taking the decisions, to join the core of countries

at the head of the process of integration. Jourová would like to see the Czech future as close to the European Union as possible, and play a confident, active, dynamic and positive part.

Following the opening address, the discussion continued among four distinguished guests: **Mr Pavel Svoboda**, Member of the European Parliament (EPP), **Mr Jakub Dürr**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, **Mr Steven Blockmans**, Head of EU Foreign Policy at CEPS and EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy's Deputy Director, **Mr Martin Michelot**. The event was moderated by **Mr Filip Nerad**, Permanent correspondent of the Czech radio in Brussels.



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Pavel Svoboda stated that while the discussion on the future of Europe encompasses a diverse range of topics, a pragmatic view from the Czech Republic with its significant reliance on trade will serve best the country's economic interests, noting that "*(economically) we are not far from being a 17th Bundesland.*" He agreed with the Commissioner that the wait-and-see approach is not the right way to go and the Czechs should be in the first speed, leading the discussions on the future. Svoboda urged the Czechs to make full use of the options that EU membership offers, and reminded that **the Czechs throughout the institutions should cooperate and synergize, to influence legislation at a much earlier stage.** Czechs politicians should fully stand behind any change in policy in the EU, or any change will be totally useless, according to Svoboda.

Jakub Dürr alluded to the fact that for the first time in the history of European integration, the two main driving processes, the deepening and widening, are both paralyzed. The process of deepening has halted due to Brexit and a general questioning by citizens of how far the EU should go – therefore instead of multi-speed Europe, the discussion should really be more about multi-depth Europe, Dürr observed. "**This discussion the future of Europe is not a new phenomenon, but now with Brexit there is a genuine need to get it right and to involve all citizens in the process.**" He mentioned economic and social convergence, as well as the unity of the remaining 27 member states as the two main mantras coming from Prague, adding the security and defense cooperation among the main priorities for the Czech

Republic, and an area where it is already at the forefront.

Steven Blockmans expressed his concern over the convergence of a nativist narrative in the current political struggle between the coalition partners in the Czech government. Even the usually pro-European Social Democrats have been externalizing the EU rather than taking ownership of decisions made in the Council. While he understands that this is induced by a popular sentiment stemming from fears of migration and terrorism, it is misplaced and out of touch with reality. Blockmans adds that this approach is also out of sync with the recent victory of Emmanuel Macron, as a centrist candidate with a pro-European agenda, which is absent in Czech politics. According to Blockmans, **lack of pro-European forces could shape the V4 into an obstructive force in Council decision making.** He then addressed the topic of the upcoming elections, stating that Mr Babis is a businessman, fundamentally driven by monopolistic thinking. As cases of President Trump and PM Orbán show, this monopolistic thinking results in the breaking down of the rule of law and democratic principles – and **while Mr Babis might not want or be able to go as far as that, his transactional thinking will likely take precedence over his liberal and democratic values.**

Martin Michelot mentioned that the Czech Republic is at crossroads after the French election result and Czech policy makers have to make choices about multi-speed Europe. In the framework of enhanced cooperation, the Czech Republic could very well play a positive role, according to Michelot,



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and be a policy maker, rather than a policy taker or even blocker. He then turned to the effect of the French presidential elections. While in Czech media, the Franco-German axis is often portrayed as the downfall of Central and Eastern Europe, Mr Michelot stated that the relationship is premised first and foremost on Emmanuel Macron's promise to reform France, which will be the only way to put the country on a path of competitiveness that will enable the sharing of monetary, social and economic risks between Paris and Berlin. This will take probably around 3 years, and **the multi-speed Europe idea will thus be not a threat to the Czech Republic meanwhile.** He picked security and defense, justice and home affairs, the digital agenda and energy policy as topics for the enhanced cooperation and expressed hope that the Czech Republic will have a full role to play in these areas. **"The Czech Republic will also remain to play a bridging role between the V4 and the rest of the EU."**

His Excellency ambassador **Martin Povejšil**, host of the evening, offered the closing remarks. He started by stating that the Czech integration into the EU and NATO is an existential issue, widely shared among Czech representatives. He noted that **there**

is a deficit in politics in both Prague and Brussels to communicate this existential importance to the citizens, expressing fear that the upcoming election will not dramatically change this for the better. The chain of crises surrounding the EU significantly accelerated the discussion on the future of the EU, which has been here for decades – however with Brexit, this discussion is now more acute and urgent, and consequently the answers will be delivered in a more urgent manner. **Some of the questions at the basis of this discussion have been here for a long time, but so far, the politicians have not been able to address the questions like joining the Eurozone in public, formulate answers, get feedback and informed opinions on the matter. "The wait-and-see mentality has quite often been disguised as the need for strategic patience."** This inability to answer the questions will result in other forces providing the answers, but we will not necessarily have the feeling of sharing them. He concluded that **"We (the Czechs) have no better strategic option than being part of this process and project".**

The event was followed by a glass of wine and small reception.

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