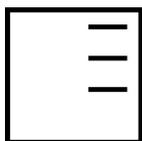


EU Monitor

Conference on the Future of Europe: Czech Perspective

Vít Havelka



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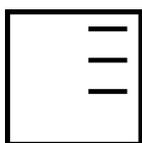
Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe was launched on the 9th of May 2021. If everything goes according to plan, the Conference will be concluded in Spring 2022, during the French presidential campaign. As the Czechs will assume the presidency to the EU Council from July 2022, they will have to start implementing the result of the Conference. In this respect, the Czech Republic will be more in a forefront of the Conference than any other Member State.

One would therefore assume that the Conference attracts a lot of media coverage and political attention in the Czech Republic; however, the exact opposite is the case. Indeed, Czech politicians have barely mentioned the Conference, and the media landscape is dominated by news on the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the upcoming general elections. Although it is natural that the Czech public discourse concentrates on contemporary issues, the absence of the Conference is surprising. It is especially striking when knowing that the Czechs will be in charge of the first implementation steps.

Furthermore, Czech attitudes towards the Conference have not been elaborated on the expert level either. The following paper therefore tries to fill this research gap and clarify how Czechs perceive the Conference on the Future of Europe and what influence it might potentially have on the Czech perception of the EU. Finally, the article will address both the political and societal level of the question, thus drawing a wider perspective of what other Member States might expect from the Czech Republic.

This paper is structured into three sections. The first tackles the Czech EU policy of the incumbent Babiš cabinet. The second part is devoted to the expectations of the citizens, about what the EU should do and whether the Conference on the Future of Europe is a good tool how to approach the Czech society so that it increases its trust towards the EU and its institutions. Finally, this paper will analyze the expected impact of the Conference in the Czech Republic.



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Babiš Cabinet and the EU Policy

The Czech government's EU policy can be summarized in the following six words – do less things and better together. The incumbent Czech government does not affiliate to any euro-enthusiasts supporting a deeper European integration. On the contrary, its own policy statement speaks about a more intergovernmental Europe, and in a general discussion, it positions itself as the defender of Czech interests in the EU.

Furthermore, the cabinet significantly focused its policy statement¹ on the securitization of the migration crisis. The chapter devoted to European policy consists almost exclusively of an explanation on what the government wants to achieve in talks about amendments to the European asylum system. In fact, there is very little to analyze about any other policy areas, apart from the fact that the cabinet wants to play an “active part” in the EU decision making and that the Union should build resilience from “outer threats”.

Looking at the actual steps the Czech government has taken in the last three years, one may assert that it did try to take an assertive posture on the European stage, at least considering its rhetoric. Andrej Babiš likes to position himself as the “protector of the Czech interests” and tends to fiercely present his existing as well as imagined successes. Not that any other politician would be different; however, Babiš absolutely mastered the game.

In some cases, this nationalistic rhetoric translates into concrete political actions. During the discussions about the post-COVID recovery fund, the Czech government strongly argued for a redesign of the allocations criteria, thinking they might increase the Czech national envelope.² The same also applies to a joint European pledge to finance

COVID-vaccine development. The Czech Republic also did not contribute a single euro, but the country still largely benefits from the joint EU procurement of vaccines.³

Bearing this strategy in mind, one must ask to what extent the new Conference on the Future of Europe is in line with the current government's approach to the presentation of EU politics. There is a clear communication line where the cabinet strives to create a more intergovernmental EU and pose itself as a link between the EU and Czech citizens. In this sense, the cabinet perceives itself as the agent bringing the EU to “senses”. The population as such is not envisioned to directly have more say in European politics – only provide permissive consent. This naturally results in an ambiguous ownership of the Conference by the incumbent Czech government. On one hand, the cabinet is obliged to play along the EU and other Member State. Nevertheless, it simultaneously perceives the Conference as a waste of energy and resources that is contradictory to its political goals.

Finally, the Czech public administration does not invest political capital in the Conference. It sticks to the bare minimum, outsourcing organization of debates to the Czech public and non-governmental organizations. There are no grand public debates planned, and even the social media account of the Office of the Government keeps silent.

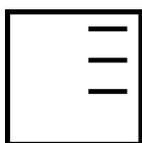
Several factors may explain this lack of mobilization from the Czech authorities. Firstly, the Czech public administration is overwhelmed with the preparations of the Czech presidency to the EU Council in 2022. Therefore, there are simply no resources left to be invested in the Conference propagation and organization. A year ago, the government allocated an absolute minimum to the presidency, which created a significant shortage of manpower in the Czech public administration⁴. Communication

¹ See: <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/jednani-vlady/programove-prohlaseni/programove-prohlaseni-vlady-165960/>

² <https://euractiv.cz/section/cr-v-evropske-unii/news/babis-penize-ze-zachranneho-programu-eu-by-mely-jit-na-dotace/>

³ <https://euractiv.cz/section/politika/news/sliby-chyby-cesko-melo-prispet-750-tisic-eur-na-vyvoj-vakciny-zustalo-ale-pouze-u-slibu/>

⁴ In Autumn 2019, the Czech government decided to allocate 1,24 billion CZK to the Czech presidency, which is around 2/3s of what countries of similar size spend on their presidency. This means that the public administration must have limited personal resources devoted to the Czech presidency and there is a growing fear that the Czech state won't be able to fulfill its duties. Some



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departments had to leave aside their usual tasks – which would be e.g., propagation of the Conference – and focus solely on the presidency. Secondly, every public administration follows her or his political leadership which currently shows next to no ownership. Even if public servants intended to invest more energy in the Conference, they would contradict their political assignments.

Czech Citizens' attitudes

The still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic hit the Czech Republic hard. The country is the second worst impacted State in relation deaths/capita in the EU, and its economy significantly suffered from more than half-a-year long lockdown. The absolute mismanagement of the pandemic left many Czechs in dismay, which also manifests in public opinion polls analyzing trust in institutions. The trust in the EU currently oscillates around 50 % - a decrease by 5 p.p. since Autumn last year. Even greater slump of 10 p.p. suffered the satisfaction with the EU membership⁵. As of March 2020, only 47 % of Czechs were satisfied with the EU. On the other hand, it must be asserted that the current support to and trust in the EU have not reached historical minimums witnessed during the migration crisis in 2015/16 and it is still well above the trust in Czech institutions.

The EU is notoriously perceived as an institution distant from the Czech citizens and focusing on small and “unimportant” issue. If anything, many Czechs associate the EU with slightly patronizing policies that are somehow in opposition to the Czech interests.

Czechs also doubt that their country is able to pursue its interests on the European level, which is attributed to the structure of the EU's political

system and the population size of the Czech Republic rather than to Czech political leaders.

However, the good news is that, based on our previous sociological studies, it is known that Czech citizens are no hardline proponents of EU exit in the sense that they would leave the EU immediately. If asked about what should happen with the EU, majority of Czechs acknowledge that it is worth waiting and striving for a “reform”. Only a small part – around 22 % of citizens – would leave the EU immediately⁶. The preferred structure of reforms should focus on making the EU more intergovernmental and focused only on policies that strictly respect the principle of subsidiarity. These can be internal market policies, protection against globalized world, and peaceful cooperation of European nations, but definitely not migration, culture and defense. In this respect, the current incumbent government well reflects the opinions of the Czech society.

With regard to the Conference itself, around 59 % of Czechs declared, they would be interested in taking part to it – which is a slightly higher number than the EU average. Yet, the Czechs are more skeptical than other European citizens that the Conference could have any significant impact on the EU (48% says it will not have any impact). Simultaneously, Czechs are less interested in physical discussion forums, and more attentive to sociological questioning than the rest of the EU⁷.

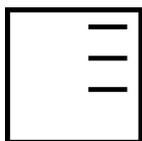
Overall, it is hard to take these numbers seriously and say that 60 % of Czechs will take part in the Conference. Firstly, Czechs generally overestimate their actual turnout during the elections. Secondly, the questions were asked after explaining what the Conference on the Future of Europe is which erased the biggest obstacle – knowledge of its existence. Although there is no data available, one may presume that up to 10% of the Czech society has a very shallow idea that the EU is organizing the

public servants already admit that they will not be able to create a new Czech initiative during the presidency and will have to resort to processing the ongoing legislative procedures. See: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ceske-predsednictvi-evropska-unie-rozpocet-vlada-andrej-babis-cssd_1910141701_dok

⁵ Source: STEM Research Institute, data from April 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_1025



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Conference. Only around 2-3% actively seek more information.⁸

Conference can be only perceived as a good example of a failed effort. If similar events are to succeed in the future, they have to convince citizens it is worth taking part in, and the Czech political elite must show a resolute ownership of the process.

Impact of the Conference in the Czech Republic

The goal of the Conference on the Future of Europe is to bring the European Union closer to its citizens and discuss with them the content of its current as well as future policies. It is however a big question whether this ambition will be fulfilled – in the Czech Republic the Conference seems to be heading towards an absolute insignificance.

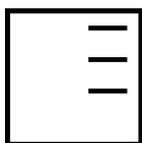
The Conference organization in the Czech Republic lacks a sufficient political leadership and active participation of the Czech state, which significantly hampers the chance that the knowledge of the Conference's existence will reach broader public. Therefore, there is a risk that the participation would be limited to Czech citizens already closely following European politics.

How likely is it that one may witness a more favorable development? In two words - pretty low. The current Czech political elite is not interested in EU engaging citizens and would rather focus on their public picture as the only proponents of Czech interests in the EU. Simultaneously, it is unlikely that the Czech media will suddenly discover passion for the Conference and thus will spread the knowledge of the Conference's existence.

This being said, the Conference is expected to have next to no influence on the Czech perception of the European Union as well as it will not “bring the Union” closer to the Czech citizens. The upcoming Czech Presidency to the Council of the EU will be a much better opportunity for EU membership promotion. Historic data showed that the last Czech Presidency in 2009 had a profound impact on the satisfaction with the EU membership and a similar effect could be witnessed in 2022⁹. The ongoing

⁸ This is an estimate based on previous finding with regard to other EU issues such as EU budget, Green Deal and Defense Pillar of the EU.

⁹ See: <https://www.stem.cz/tag/evropska-unie/>



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