

Trust in the EU in times of crisis:

Public perceptions in the Czech Republic in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic

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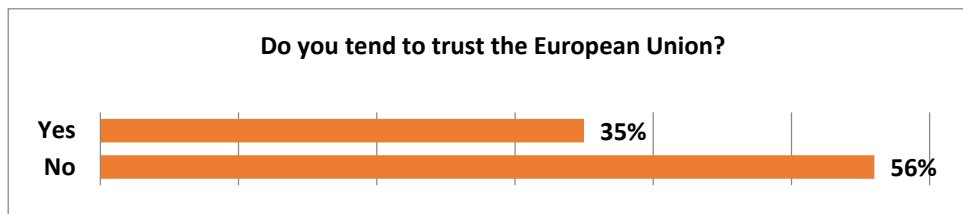
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Czechs' complicated relationship with the EU

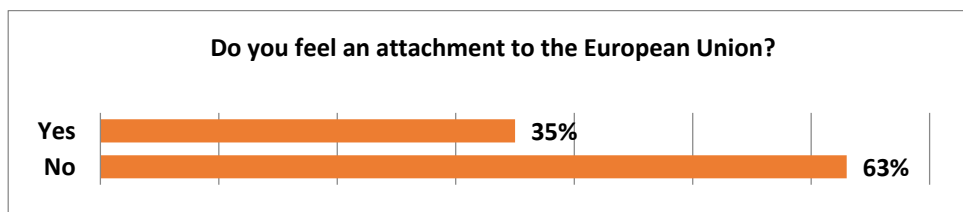
Czech attitudes towards the European Union are an interesting phenomenon. Standard Eurobarometer surveys across the years have shown that this country is consistently among the most Eurosceptic member-states. Back in 2020, a total of 63 percent of Czechs did not feel any attachment to the European Union and only 35% have expressed trust in the EU (Eurobarometer 93, 2020). Czech people's views of the EU are surprisingly skeptical even when compared to the other Visegrad Group countries.

	Visegrad Group			
	Czechia	Slovakia	Hungary	Poland
Feel attachment to the EU (%)	35	59	70	73
Do not feel attachment to the EU (%)	63	40	28	25
Have trust in the EU (%)	35	45	53	56
Do not have trust in the EU (%)	56	46	40	32

Source: Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020



Source: Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020



Source: Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020

Yet there is no mainstream movement for leaving the EU within the Czech political sphere, nor is there any appetite for it among the general population. A noticeable trend is that Czech support for the EU drops during periods of crises in EU. The European Union has faced a series of crises over the past decade, which have impacted citizens' trust in the EU and have increased Euroscepticism in many

member states, but this trend is particularly evident in the Czech Republic. The research at the core of this paper analyses perceptions of the EU in the Czech Republic following the Covid-19 pandemic and how trust in the EU has been affected by the European Union's management of the pandemic. This paper looks at different indicators, such as satisfaction with the EU's response to solving the pandemic, satisfaction with EU's vaccine procurement, satisfaction with solidarity by member states during the pandemic, and satisfaction with Czech membership to the EU.

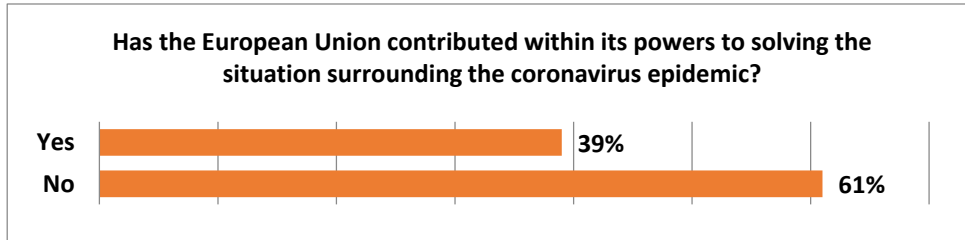
Just like the financial and migration crises, the Covid-19 crisis was a result of pressures emerging from exogenous shocks. The health crisis (and subsequent economic crisis) represented a novel challenge to the socio-political context of the EU and has put to the test EU's crisis management skills, EU solidarity, responsiveness, and coordination. In the early phases of the pandemic, the EU had faced criticism for its slow reaction. Since then, the European Union has succeeded in jointly procuring and distributing medical equipment, allocating funds for supporting jobs and businesses, purchasing and distributing vaccines across member-states in a coordinated manner, and introducing a unified vaccination certificate to facilitate the return of cross-border movement.

However, the Czech audience's reactions to the various EU efforts in tackling the pandemic have been mixed and, often, genuine understanding of what the EU was doing to help national governments in times of crisis was lacking. For example, despite the EU being among the first regions in the world to be able to vaccinate their population in mass, due to procedural limitations of inter-EU negotiations, member-states could not roll-out their vaccination programmes as swiftly as post-Brexit United Kingdom, or the USA could. Such circumstances have led to some loss of trust in the bloc's aptness to respond to the challenge.

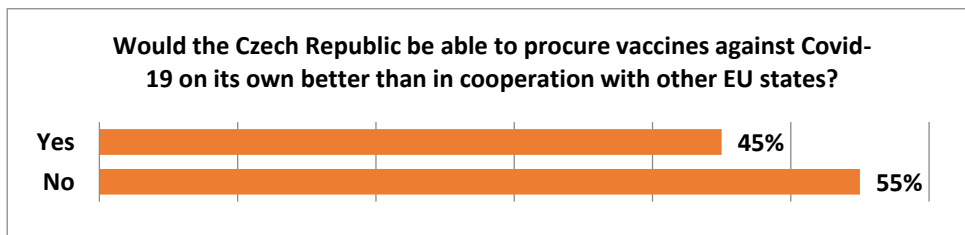
This research examines the impact the coronavirus pandemic had on public perceptions in the Czech Republic of the European Union. Did the crisis have the side-effect of eroding public trust in EU governance? Have attitudes towards the EU changed? If so, how? The research is based on a representative public opinion survey conducted in October 2022 by the research institute STEM in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute of European Policy, as well as a public opinion survey conducted in April 2021 by the same institutes. Data from Eurobarometer during the pandemic has been used for reference as well.

(Dis)Satisfaction with pandemic response

Asked in April 2021, still in the period of an active pandemic, whether the EU has contributed within its powers to solving the situation surrounding the coronavirus epidemic, more than 61% of Czechs said that it has not, indicating a high level of dissatisfaction with the EU's help in the management of the crisis. However, asked if they believed that Czechia would be able to do a better job on its own to procure vaccines against Covid, 55% said no.



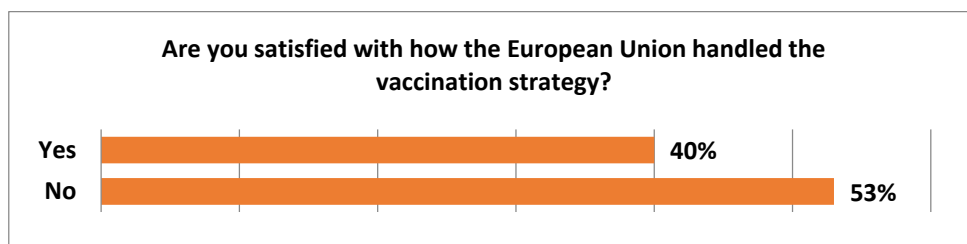
Source: STEM, April 2021



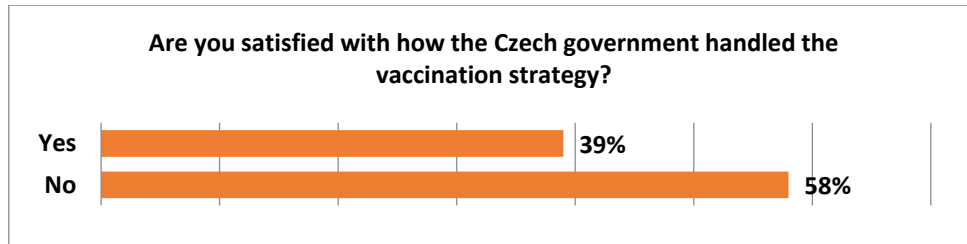
Source: STEM, April 2021

These responses may seem counterintuitive, but they are an example of the broader lack of trust Czechs have in institutions, both national and supranational, to address their needs. This is also shown in the responses they gave for the Flash Eurobarometer 494 of June 2021.

A majority of 53% of Czech respondents said they were not satisfied with how the European Union has handled the vaccination strategy, while only 40% expressed satisfaction with the EU's actions. These responses were worse than the average across EU member states, where a majority of respondents said they were satisfied with the EU's management of the vaccination programme. However, responses showed that Czechs were equally, if not more, dissatisfied with their own government's handling of the vaccination strategy. Only 38% of respondents were content with how the Czech government handled the vaccination process, while a whopping 58% expressed a negative view. Such results indicate a general sense of disappointment among the Czech population of both the EU's and their national government's crisis management capabilities.

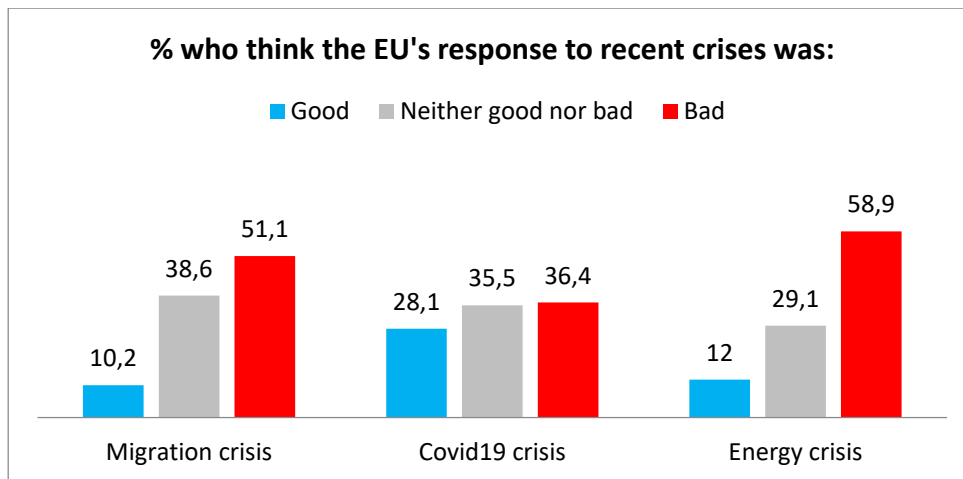


Source: Flash Eurobarometer 494, June 2021



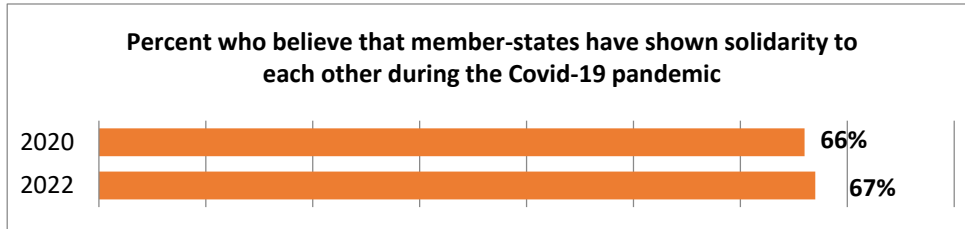
Source: Flash Eurobarometer 494, June 2021

However, as time has passed, and concerns over the pandemic have been substituted with other political and economic problems, Czechs evaluate EU’s pandemic response less harshly from today’s perspective. While most are still dissatisfied with how the EU managed that crisis, it is roughly a third who have a negative view, while a same portion think it was neither good nor bad, and almost a third feel it was a good response. Comparatively, nearly 60% of people feel the EU’s management of the current energy crisis is bad. Some of the negative feelings surrounding the EU’s management of the Covid-19 crisis have mellowed or been forgotten in the year that has passed. However, we cannot say that time erases all dissatisfaction with the EU, because even today, a majority of Czechs still believe that the EU’s response to the migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016 was bad. This tells us that the Covid-19 crisis has not had the same detrimental effect to the EU’s image in the Czech Republic that the migrant crisis did.



Source: STEM, October 2022

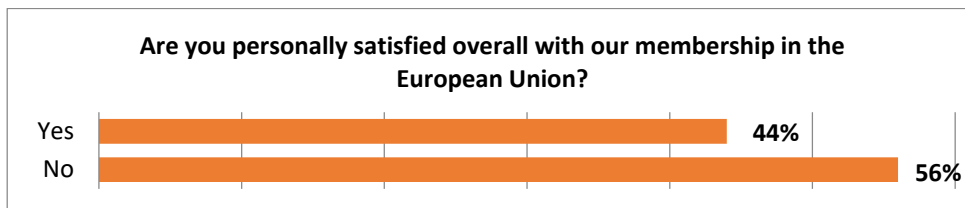
In addition, a vast majority, about 67% of respondents, believe that member states showed solidarity to each other during the pandemic (STEM, 2022), a percentage that has remained consistent since 2020, when 66% of respondents believed at least some EU member-states have shown solidarity to one another during the Coronavirus outbreak (Eurobarometer 93, 2020).



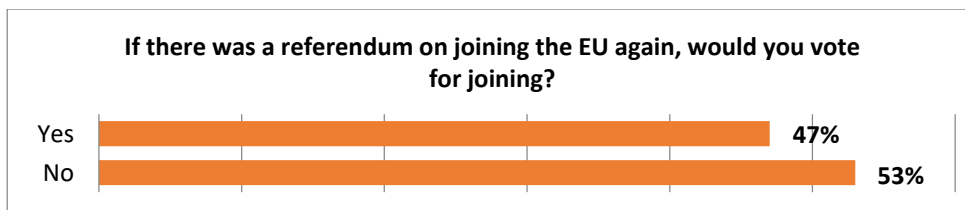
Source: STEM, October 2022 and Eurobarometer 93, Summer 2020.

What does this say about Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic today?

Consistent with expressed attitudes in previous years, a majority of 56% of Czechs responded that they are unhappy with the country’s EU membership, while only 44% said they were satisfied. Consequently, asked whether they would vote to join the EU if there were a referendum on the issue again, 53% of respondents have stated they would vote against EU membership for the Czech Republic.



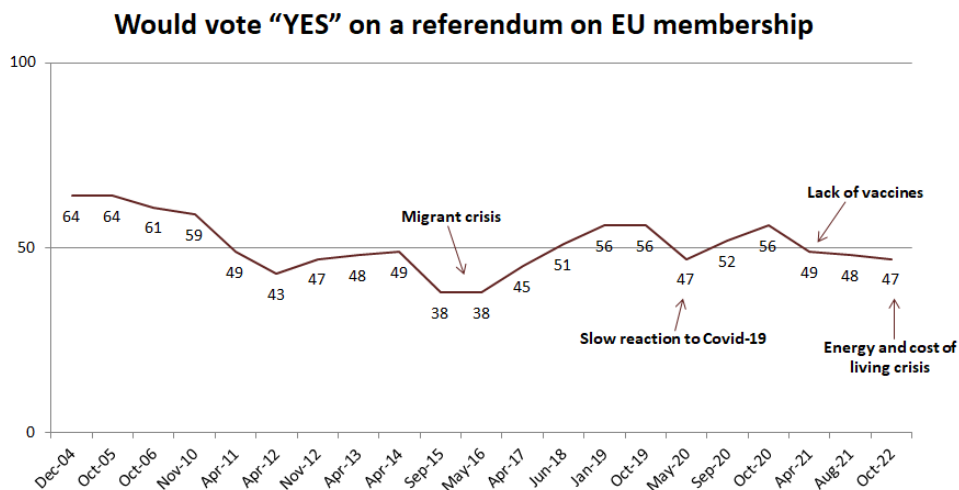
Source: STEM, October 2022



Source: STEM, October 2022

It is concerning when such numbers are coming from an EU member state, but what is important to see is how this public sentiment correlates to Czech attitudes toward the EU in previous years. The graph below shows how each major crisis facing the EU in the past decade and a half has resulted in a loss of the level of confidence in the EU among the Czech population. Since the early highs in the years just after the Czech Republic’s accession to the EU, where support for EU membership stood at about 64%, the EU-enthusiasm in the Czech Republic has been in constant decline, with the European debt crisis marking the first major downturn in public opinion.

In the first half of 2020, in the initial stages of the pandemic, there was a noticeable slump of support for the EU among the Czech population, with only 47% in favour of EU membership. This was due to the EU’s early inability to curtail the spread of the virus and coordinate the reaction between member states. Yet, this dissatisfaction was short lived and, as the worst of the first two waves had passed and hope in the form of vaccines was on the horizon, support for the EU rose back to 56%. When those vaccines did not arrive at the speed or quantity desired in early 2021, public mood shifted against the EU again. However, the negative impact the Covid-19 crisis had on Czech attitudes toward the EU was not nearly as dramatic as the negative impact of the 2015-2016 migrant crisis. Not only had support for EU membership at that time dropped to mere 38%, but it also took a considerably longer period of time for public opinion on the EU to rebound.



Source: STEM, October 2022

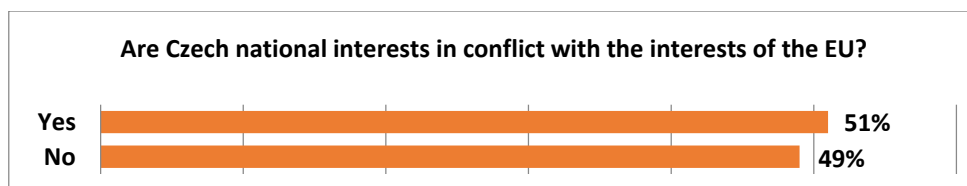
Unlike during the migrant crisis, there was a desire for more EU-level decision-making during the pandemic. However, this time around, the EU had fewer competences in the area affected by the crisis – health sector. So there was a disappointment in the EU’s effectiveness in crisis-management, which has led to a drop in support for the EU. However, Czechs were equally critical of their government’s response to the pandemic. The longitudinal data shows that while Euroscepticism persists in Czech society, it has not increased significantly as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. This crisis has not been as damaging to the EU’s reputation as has the migrant crisis. And while there were the expected downturns in support for the EU during the peak of the pandemic, the effect wasn’t a lasting

one. The graph shows that Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic is reactive to periods of perceived worsened living conditions, and the current low levels of support for the EU are a result of the on-going energy and cost of living crisis.

Previous research has shown that Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic is partially due to the limited understanding among the general population about what the EU actually does,¹ its policy competences and programmes. For example, that public health is a policy area within the domain of member states, not the EU. But more than anything, the economy is the most important factor and predictor of Czech attitudes towards the EU. In general, a downward trajectory of the Czech economy has engendered lower levels of trust in the EU and European institutions, whereas periods of positive economic conditions lead to an increase in overall satisfaction with EU membership and politics. At the moment, roughly 85% of the Czech population would describe the current economic situation in the Czech Republic as either rather bad or very bad (STEM, 2022). This explains the return to low levels of support for the EU at the present time.

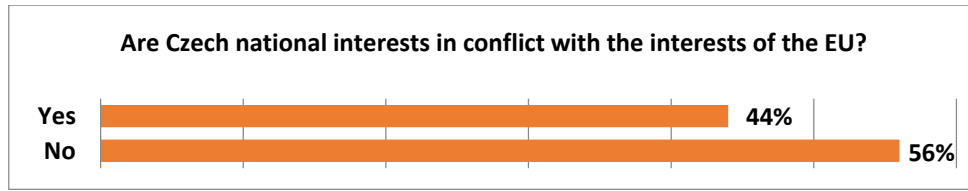
However, Czechs prefer to address many policy issues on an EU level, jointly with other member states. Such examples are solving the problem of migration, border protection, protection from Russia, moving to a more sustainable economy, buying gas, training the armies of European countries (STEM, 2022).

So when it comes to how they feel about the EU, Czechs may appear confused, because on one hand they want great joint action in several policy areas, but on another hand they are often dissatisfied with the EU’s work and results. A good example is how they responded to the question of whether or not Czech national interests are in conflict with EU interests. A slight majority of 51% in 2021 answered that they thought Czech national interests indeed do collide with those of the EU. However, a year later a majority of 56% believed the opposite to be true, and that Czech and EU interests are not in conflict.



Source: STEM, April 2021

¹ Vit Havelka, “Czech perception of the EU’s COVID-19 response”, *Europeum*, December 2021.



Source: STEM, October 2022

National interests are most often viewed through the lens of economic prosperity and EU approval ratings in the Czech Republic are habitually driven by the state of the Czech economy. Czechs are aware, however, that their national economy has been strengthened by EU membership and, with the Czech Republic being a net beneficiary of the EU budget, their interests are best served by remaining in the EU. While the Czechs might sometimes distrust the EU’s ability to improve their livelihoods, they are equally sceptical of their national government’s capacity to do any better on their own, or their economy doing better outside the EU.

Policy recommendation

Accepting that there is a general lack of comprehension among citizens about the precise projects and activities that the EU undertakes, both in times of crisis management and otherwise, the EU needs to make improvements to its approach and scope of information distribution.

While it would be easy to dismiss Czechs’ Euroscepticism as a result of ignorance of the EU’s contributions, simply discounting citizens’ concerns about the EU as uninformed has proven completely ineffective in reducing the populations’ mistrust in the EU over the years. It should not be expected for the average citizen to be up-to-date on the work of European institutions or on-going EU initiatives set to mitigate crises. This is a communications issue, with the onus on the European Union.

The good news is that the EU already has experience with some of the necessary marketing tools when it comes to relating its activities to the public. In the case of EU-funded projects in both member—states and candidate states, the EU very clearly delineates its contribution through visual media. Construction, restoration, or infrastructure projects are always accompanied by a plaque announcing they are financed by the EU. In candidate states the media presence goes even further: TV programmes created with the support of the EU display the EU logo in their credits and EU delegations do not shy away from self-promotion. Thus, the European Union should consider employing

domestically the intensity in publicizing its own projects to audiences abroad. For example, the Next Generation EU, and in particular the Recovery and Resilience Facility, would remain vague phrases to the general public without palpable benefits that people could associate them with. While the employment programmes, farming subsidies, or green energy infrastructure projects that will benefit from EU investments are to be implemented by national governments, the EU's role and funding for each ought to be advertised. The difference in approach, however, would be that, unlike in candidate-states, the EU would have to challenge the misconceptions in some member-states, such as the Czech Republic, that the member-state is a net contributor to the EU, therefore any EU-funded project is actually just a roundabout-way of member-states funding their own projects. Figures showing that the Czech Republic is a net beneficiary of the EU are available on official sites, however this is a passive form of communication that will not reach anyone outside of those in the policy-making or research circles who are actively seeking out that information. The EU needs to communicate these figures directly and frequently to the wider population.

Likewise, the EU should consider introducing occasional commercials on national broadcasters of EU member states that would showcase the EU's latest or most notable contributions to the development and recovery in individual member-states. This strategy would go some way to show people what the EU does in real terms, but also to address the criticism that the EU lacks transparency and accountability. There is nothing gauche with this approach, as within the realm of international relations it would be considered good "public diplomacy". Similar public diplomacy has been employed effectively by China in European countries on multiple occasions during the pandemic, when their deliveries of medical aid did not go by without televised pomp, which has helped with shifting public narratives about China's role in the pandemic: from an irresponsible instigator of a global health crisis to an international benefactor. The EU should take notes.

About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.



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