

Update

Czech Perception of the EU Climate Policy

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Summary

This article develops on the last year's issue which tackled Czech attitudes towards climate change and whether the European Green Deal might be accepted by the Czech population as a solution to decarbonization and sustainability of European economy¹. Since then, STEM Research Institute in cooperation with EUROPEUM conducted another round of questioning where we examined more thoroughly the Czech perception of green policies and the road towards decarbonization and sustainability.

The goal of this paper is to familiarize the reader with our newest findings as well as elaborate on what problems might occur in the future. The European Green Deal and the accompanying EU policies still have potential to create rifts within the EU's political cohesion. Even with our contribution, the topic must be further studied, and policy makers must be aware that a wrong presentation of even the best policies might cause a serious backlash in the current political climate, and threaten the European political system as such.

¹ See: <https://europeum.org/data/articles/green-deal-public-opinion-2020.pdf>



Context of the data pool

The article is based on data gathered in April 2021. Since then, two important events happened. Firstly, the Czech Republic has undergone an intensive election campaign, which also featured the European Green Deal as one of the most prominent topics. The discussion was, however, shallow and focused mainly on the adoption of electric vehicles and renewables. The outgoing Prime Minister Andrej Babiš based his campaign on picturing the Green Deal as “madness” destroying Czech economy from which he would protect the Czech Republic. Other parties, such as Pirates & Mayors, did not vocally counter this interpretation and resorted only to vaguely referring to the European Green Deal as “an opportunity”.

Secondly, a large energy supplier, Bohemia Energy, declared bankruptcy shortly after the election, which forced around 900.000 individual customers to buy energy through other companies for prices on the spot market. It was not rare for Czechs to pay monthly more for energy than they earned per month. Although the problem was obviously in a weak regulatory environment, newspapers started reporting on how the European efforts towards decarbonization contributed to the high prices, and that energy will become expensive for everyone even after the current surge is over.

Most importantly however, the situation with the Bohemia Energy customers has not been resolved. The Czech government only decided to lift VAT on energy, and lower monthly energy deposits that everyone must pay. This situation can be described as a remarkable state failure – by loopholes in regulatory environment, the state allowed companies to run a risky business and it simultaneously failed in aiding its citizens in the resulting problems by said state failure.

All these events mean that decarbonization, the European Green Deal and energy prices became significantly more prominent in the public discourse than in the time of data gathering. Our data for example showed that the European Green Deal was not known in the Czech Republic, or whether decarbonization will impact household expenses or

not. This all might have changed because of the rapidly increasing energy prices. It is, however, too early to say as public opinion tends to slowly change over time, and we will know more during our next round of questioning in spring 2022.

Climate change as a threat

Since last year, the public opinion has not significantly changed with regard to whether climate change is a serious problem, nor whether it is caused by human activity despite the overwhelming scientific consensus. Only a small fraction of the Czech society does not consider global warming a fact. While asking when the climate change should be addressed, a 56% majority prefers the present time. Only 9% of Czechs would leave global warming unmitigated.

We can therefore assert that Czech population further remains aware of the climate change, and that a majority would prefer to start addressing it now or in a very near future. On the other hand, we still must stress that local manifestation of changing climate is yet to be acknowledged in the Czech Republic. Environmental issues are still perceived in the realm of mitigating local problems rather than a global fight against greenhouse gas emissions requiring everyone’s participation.

Is Climate Change caused by human activity? **When should we counter it?**

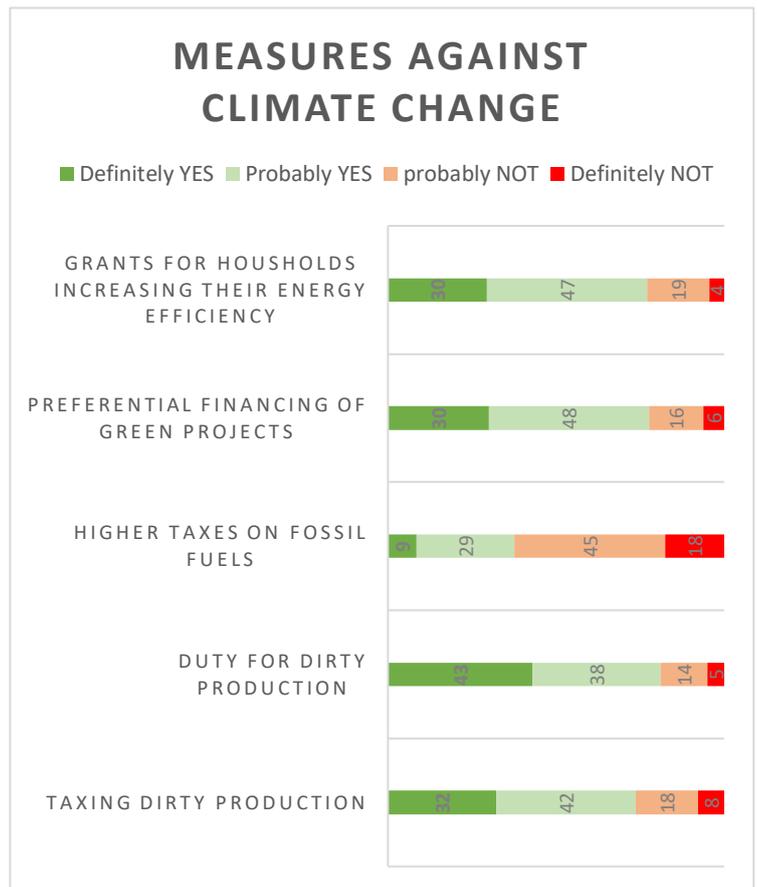
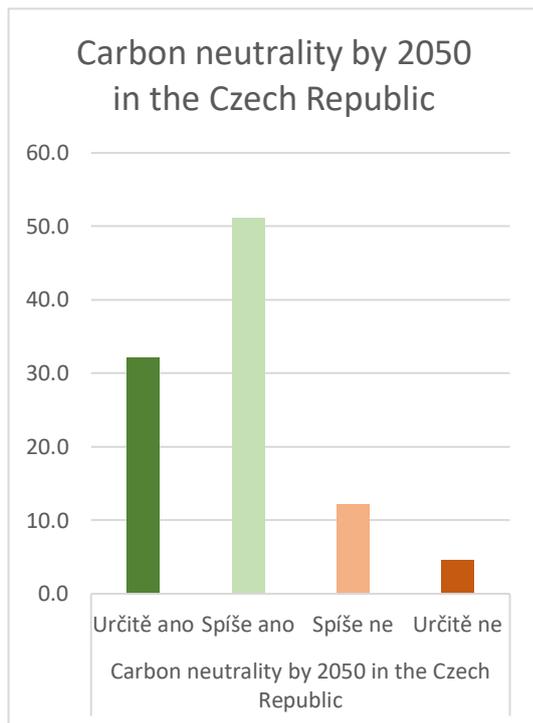
Definitely YES	NOW	34 %
Probably YES	NOW	22 %
Probably YES	In the FUTURE	19 %
Probably NOT	In the FUTURE	16 %
Probably NOT	NEVER	9 %



It is also remarkable that similar numbers to the existence of climate change also apply to the general idea of the Czech Republic being climate neutral economy by 2050. Only a small fraction of the Czech society does not think that the country should pursue this goal. One must stress, however that wanting to mitigate climate change now and doing something concrete that might impact everyday life are two different categories. As outlined in the last year's issue, Czechs do acknowledge the existence of climate change, but they are skeptical of whether the society can do anything about it. In this sense, the 2050 target seems to be well in the future and the majority does not realize what implications the necessary societal transformation is going to have on their life.

Acceptance of concrete measures

This year, we also focused on the question of which selected environmental policies enjoy the support of the population. In general, the more concrete and tangible a policy is on a personal budget, the lesser support such a measure enjoys. For example, Czechs predominantly support tools such as the carbon border adjustment mechanism, taxation of environmentally unfriendly production, or the financial sector supporting green investment. On the other hand, they are reserved to higher taxes on fossil fuels (see chart below).





This is in line with findings from other European states, such as Norway². The more one thinks that a particular measure will influence her or his life, the higher the resistance there tends to be. The chance further increases in instances where a change in lifestyle or culture is required (e.g., reducing meat consumption).

It is also important to note that the above listed measures probably enjoy a higher level of acceptance since the tools have not been thoroughly discussed and the impact of the policies are thus not yet concretized and internalized amongst the wider public. It is reasonable to think that once a political debate starts revolving around the actual impacts on personal wallets and life, the resistance will increase.

Perceived impact of decarbonization

The question of whether decarbonization will influence the Czech Economy and household budgets is another good example of how the debate in the Czech Republic has been shallow and the citizens have not yet made up their mind – or even had the opportunity to make up their mind. As of April 2021, only 30% of Czechs believed that decarbonization might harm their budget, and around 50% thought the Czech economy might suffer from the energy transition (see chart below).

One might say that the numbers are quite positive and give a chance to implement decarbonization in Czechia. This, however, would arguably be a significant misinterpretation. The numbers are rather a sign that the society has not fully grasped the profound changes that the decarbonization will bring.

To what extent decarbonisation will impact:

Definitely YES Probably YES Definitely NO Probably NO



Furthermore, it remains to be seen what impact the rising energy prices will have on the population. Almost a million individual customers cannot be neglected, especially in time when media and politicians tried to blame the European Green Deal and decarbonization effort as such.

Conclusions

This year's issue concentrated on what decarbonization measures might be accepted by the Czech population, and whether it feels threatened by the process. Our findings show several distinct results. Firstly, it was confirmed that the more tangible a measure is on personal life or wealth, the more the population tends to resist. The key to a successful decarbonization will therefore be in mitigating the impact on personal finances, especially in low-income households.

² See: <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/4571/policy-paper-zelena-transformace-prenastaveni-spotreby-v-norsku-a-ceske-republice-udrzitelnejsim-smerem>



Secondly, it is also better to incentivize producers to change their processes so that they are more environmentally friendly rather than convincing the population to change their habits. Some tools, such as taxing environmentally unfriendly production, will probably lead to more expensive goods; however, such an effect will probably be concealed in inflation and technology advancement. Even so, the acceptance will depend on the potential politicization of the topic. Higher inflation can become a serious social problem if it persists for a longer time and is accompanied by stagnating wages.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the principal support to decarbonization and mitigation of the climate change remain high in the Czech Republic. There is therefore a good basis for new policies that will incentivize a low-carbon economy. The overall goal for the policy makers remains to propose policies that will be balanced and will mitigate disproportional impact on low-income households.



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