

Czech perception of EU's Reaction to COVID-19

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- **As of 13th August 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has claimed more than 179 000 European lives out of 1,8 million who contracted with the virus¹. Most of the European states issued lockdowns, significantly curtailing economic activity. This resulted in the deepest recorded recession in the EU, reaching negative 11,9% GDP growth in the second quarter of 2020².**
- **As a reaction to the ongoing economic crisis, the European Council decided to create a joint €750 billion recovery fund called Next Generation EU that should be financed by loans and repaid after 2027, a significant step that might mitigate the poor perception of the EU actions during the initial weeks of the health crisis. Significant EU criticism appeared in Italy; leading international outlets started discussing whether Europe had lost Italy.³**

Only the upcoming months and years will show whether the budget deal proves to be enough in combating anti-EU sentiment in the member states. In any case, it is necessary to start discussing what impact the COVID-19 pandemic might have on the perception of the European integration in the future. As a starting

point, the following text offers a first glimpse at what to expect in the Czech Republic.

This paper discusses the past and current development of the pandemic in the Czech Republic as well as a first interpretations of how the Czech attitudes towards the EU might have changed. The article is based on a representative

¹ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea>

² <https://bit.ly/2DQMPj3>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/f21cf708-759e-11ea-ad98-044200cb277f>

See:

public opinion survey conducted by research institute STEM in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute of European Policy at the end of May 2020. For more information regarding the data and methodology, please contact either EUROPEUM or STEM.⁴

COVID-19 in the Czech Republic

The first cases of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic were diagnosed on the 1st March 2020.⁵ Since then, there has been more than 20 000 cases and 401 deaths as of this writing. The health situation improved after the lockdown; however, since July 2020, the cases are again on the rise, which raises fears of an upcoming second wave in autumn.⁶

The beginning of the pandemic was marked by reports from Italy that has already been suffering under the COVID-19. From the beginning of February, the media almost entirely devoted their coverage to spread of the virus as well as contemplations about how to avoid the Italian scenario. Society was mobilized and afraid of what comes once the first cases are diagnosed in the Czech Republic. The very first patients were eventually diagnosed on the March 1, but all the cases had their origin abroad. Five days after the first confirmed community transmission

on the March 15, the government issued a nation-wide lockdown, closed borders for any passengers excluding cross border workers. Czechs were forced to stay at home apart from necessary visits to pharmacy or food stores, something they had not endured before. Reopening followed in several stages from April 20.

In such an atmosphere, the Czech government admitted that the Czech health care system lacks a sufficient testing capacity as well as there were next to no PPE sets in the government emergency stocks. Journalists reported about the struggle to purchase PPE for two weeks until the Ministry of Interior managed to purchase large deliveries from China. The president Miloš Zeman, Jaroslav Tvrdík as well as billionaire Petr Kellner are thought to have played a key role in securing these supplies.

The Chinese supplies were presented as an aid provided by China, although the Czech state paid the entire delivery. The PPE were transported via airplanes, the first Chinese Eastern aircraft was welcomed by the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, Minister of Interior Jan Hamáček, and the Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic.⁷ They were talking about “airlift”

⁴ Vít Havelka: vhavelka@europeum.org, EUROPEUM; Martin Buchčík, martin.buchcik@stem.cz, STEM

⁵ https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/koronavirus-v-cesku-prvni-potvrzeny-pripad-20200226.html

⁶ <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19>

⁷ <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-koronavirus/638163/1-1-milionu-respiratoru-pro-cesky-letadlo-priletelo-z-ciny-babis-dekoval-zemanovi-i-tvrdikovi.html>

referring to the famous Allied effort to supply West Berlin during the Berlin Crisis in 1948/49.

In parallel with the delivery of Chinese supplies, the EU has been criticized for lack of preparedness and inability to contain the spread of the virus. The negative reporting was followed by a more elaborate discussion about the EU powers as well as about reactions of member states to an early warning by the EU agency ECDC on the January 26 that urged the national governments to stockpile medical supplies. Nevertheless, the initial criticism could not be altered and the EU's media coverage was utterly negative.

EU budget discussions

The slump in diagnosed cases at the end of April allowed the Czechs and media to concentrate more on the economic recovery, partly also reporting about the EU budget negotiations. Prime Minister Babiš's position to EC's proposals was initially negative; he criticized mainly the Next Generation EU fund, which he perceived as "irresponsible lending." He also stated that the Czech Republic should not be punished for being successful in fight against the virus, therefore, Czechs should not financially aid Southern Europe. Subsequently, the Prime Minister made a U-turn during the MFF and recovery fund negotiations and presented the results of the European Council meeting as a great success. He highlighted a higher flexibility in allocations between various funds, and an extra present of € 1,5 billion for the Czech Republic in Cohesion Funds.

Overall, it is very difficult to determine the impact of EU budget deal on the public opinion poll in the Czech Republic, as from previous surveys we know that Czechs broadly speaking do not follow European politics and their opinion about the EU is mainly derived from their economic situation as well as satisfaction with Czech politics. Furthermore, the data were gathered before the EU leaders struck the deal, thus, we can only presume the negotiations ramifications.

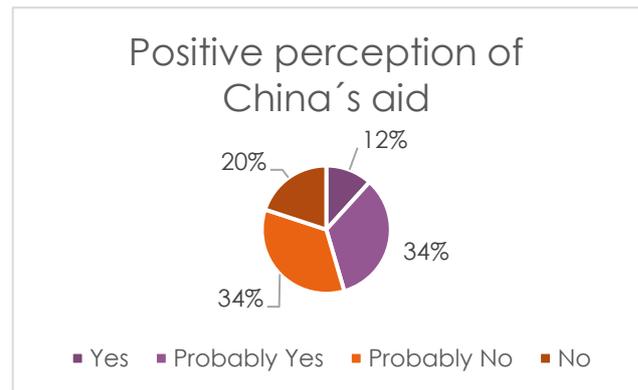
It can be presumed that the budget deal will not have a significant influence on the Czech public opinion about the EU membership. The biggest success is that the budget will not become a contentious issue and will not polarize the Czech public debate. In this sense, the budget deal has become a "yesterday's news" and will not be part of the Czech European debate anymore. This could change in the future, if the Czech Republic becomes a net payer to the EU budget, however, as of now, the EU treasury is only a topic of interest for pundits, and specialized journalists.

China vs EU

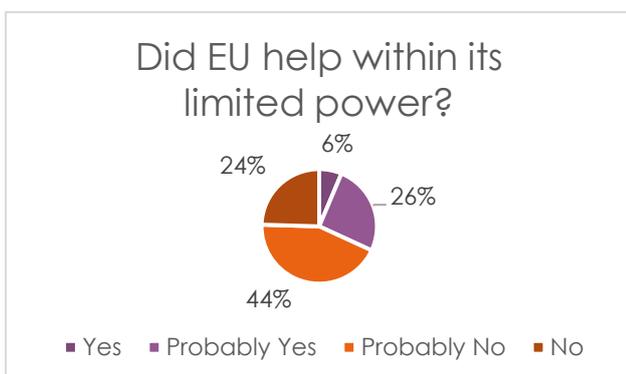
As mentioned above, China received a prominent coverage during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the EU suffered significantly worse reporting. This also translated into the public evaluation of Chinese help. Approximately 46% of the Czech population perceive the Chinese help positively, whereas only around 32% of Czechs think that the EU performed well within limits of its powers.

The more pro-EU a person is the more positively he/she perceived the role of the EU. In case of the Chinese contribution, the attitudes towards the EU or China did not play a significant role. This means that the Union's actual policy to combat the pandemic matters little, but what counts is the broader satisfaction with the Czech EU membership. On the other hand, the support to EU reaction is a bit lower than would normally be, hinting that the negative press presence had an impact on the evaluation of EU's performance.

government parties tend to perceive Chinese actions significantly more positively than voters of the opposition.



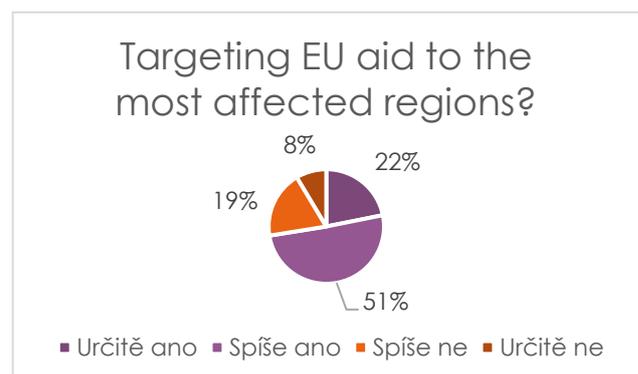
Since the data were gathered at the end of May, they do not yet include the impact of EU budget talks, joint procurement of PPE or development and expected distribution of a vaccine. It remains to be seen how the Czech population will perceive it, although we can only assume that, as in most cases, the acceptance will differ according to someone's general support to the Czech EU membership.



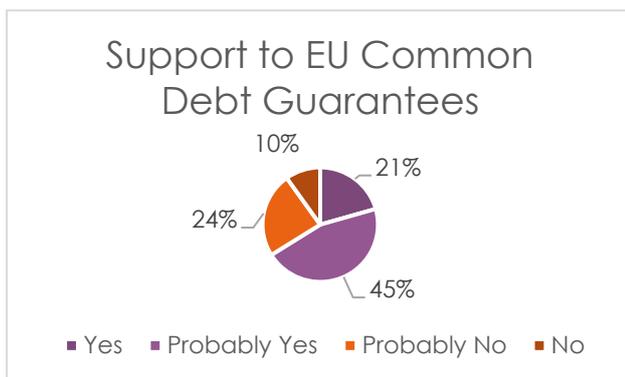
Attitudes towards the current Czech Government showed the highest correlation with the appreciation of Chinese aid. Voters of

Next Generation EU

The support to the European Council conclusions on the MFF and Next Generation EU enjoy quite strong support in the Czech Republic.



Around 76% of the population supports a joint EU bond scheme in order to mitigate economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. This also applies to support to the most affected regions in the EU, including southern Europe.



The broad acceptance of a solidarity with the most affected regions is extraordinary in the Czech context. One of the main driving forces behind the Czech resistance to Eurozone is the threat of “paying debts of southern Europe”, which does not seem to apply in case of the COVID-19 pandemic.

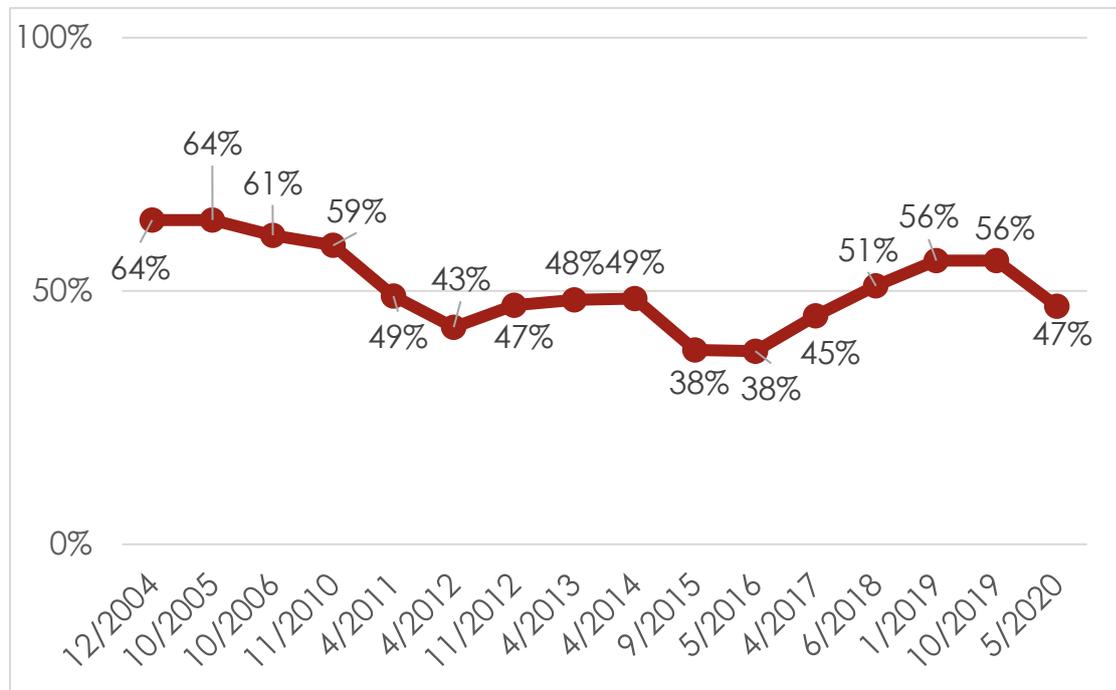
It is important to mention, though, that the Czech Republic will remain a net beneficiary from the EU budget, and the Next Generation EU fund. Previous surveys showed that the acceptance of Czech Republic being a net contributor is lower. This might be important in 10 years when the Czechs are expected to pay more to the EU budget than they receive back.

Support to the EU Membership

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced the support of the EU membership in the Czech Republic. At the end of 2019, approximately 56% of Czechs declared they would vote to remain in the EU. In May 2020, the number decreased by 9 p.p. to 47%⁸. After two years of a solid growth of the Czech EU membership support, the Czech society is once again in situation when the majority would vote for Czexit.

⁸ Counting „yes“ and „probably yes“ answers to „If there was an EU membership referendum in the Czech Republic, would you

vote in favor of continuation?“. The rest 53% would vote for Czexit -26% probably; 26% definitely.



The Czech attitudes can be expected to further worsen. The data were gathered during first phase of the economic crisis, in a situation when mainly business was affected, but unemployment rate remained at very low levels – around 3%. The Czech government moved quickly to introduce a *Kurzarbeit* scheme, which helped to temporarily preserve high employment, according to economic analysts⁹.

The previous surveys showed that economic crisis can significantly impact the acceptance of Czech membership in the EU. Thus, if the economic situation does not improve or the Czech Republic is hit by a second wave of the

pandemic, which could further strengthen an economic slump, we can

expect a further fall of support to 40 %, which approximate the lowest recorded numbers during the migration crisis. On the other hand, if nothing significant happens, the number could stagnate for some time, and presumably grow. In general, the Czech membership support has several months delay behind the events influencing it.

This does not mean, however, that the overall support to the idea of European integration or affiliation to Europe would decrease during the COVID-19 pandemic. Czech society perceive the EU as a government, or an institution detached from the idea of European

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https://www.irozhlas.cz/ekonomika/koronavirus-ekonomika-krize-dopady-cesko_2003241048_jak

integration or being European. In another words the support for the EU significantly fluctuates according to political events and social environment, whereas affiliation to Europe tends to be stable over time.

What to expect?

The debt of the ongoing economic crisis will be the most important factor in the future. Whether the EU manages to regain support in the Czech Republic will also depend on the overall satisfaction with the performance of the Czech Government. The Czech population consists of approximately 35% stable pro-EU citizens, and 25% those who derive their support to the EU from their current perception of economic and political situation. Thus, there is a pool of max. 60% who would actively support EU membership in a referendum

It is unlikely that the EU as such could alter negative trends in the short- and midterm perspective. Firstly, as mentioned above, the support to the EU does not often derive from its actual policies, but rather domestic economic and political situation. Secondly, the negative attitudes towards the EU have a much deeper roots than dissatisfaction with EU regulation,

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¹⁰ See „Czechs and the EU Brand: How do Czechs feel about the EU and what could change their mind?“ on <https://www.europeum.org/domains/europeum>

decision making process etc. They run deep to poor socio-economic situation in disadvantaged parts of the Czech society and regions, mistrust in government institutions as such, as well as economic pressure caused by global economy and economic transformation caused by digitalization and decarbonization. The problem is that these issues must be primarily tackled at the national level, and the EU can do very little to improve the situation.

Although we do not have new data about the popularity of China, the pandemic is unlikely to significantly change the public geopolitical perceptions. In last surveys¹⁰, China showed the worst performance of all countries and international institutions and there is no reason why one pandemic would cause any change. As of now, the Czechs seem to be ideologically drifting towards what they consider “Central Europe” – an area consisting of their neighboring countries. West is not perceived as a solid block of countries anymore, but more as a diverse space consisting of Western Europe, Northern Europe, Southern Europe and North America. More than affiliation to China or Russia, we can expect a strengthened regionalism.



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