

# Review of the Czech EU Policy in 2020/2021

Vít Havelka, Kateřina Davidová,  
Danielle Piatkiewicz



November  
2021

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
EU Council during the pandemic .....	1
Presidency in the EU Council.....	1
Single Market & Economic Policies .....	2
COVID-19 pandemic.....	2
Climate and Environmental Policy.....	3
Justice and Home Affairs .....	3
Foreign and Defence Policy .....	4
Defence Policy.....	4
Foreign Policy .....	4
Conclusion.....	5



## Introduction

The institutional year 2020/2021 was marked by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. For most of the year, the European Union was preoccupied with solving issues linked to distribution of vaccines and finishing agreements about the post-pandemic recovery fund. In turn, the EU member states were imposing lockdowns, which were meant to keep the infection rate in their respective countries under the cap of hospital beds.

Even in this dire situation, the Union managed to proceed with some important decisions. In December 2020, the EU's heads of states agreed on new climate goals, and gave a mandate to the European Commission to introduce a comprehensive Fit for 55 package in July 2021. Environmental policies seemed to be in the center of European efforts.

That being said, the following article will investigate how the Czech Republic approached the EU decision making from Summer 2020 to Summer 2021. The paper is divided into five sections – the first describes the challenges related to intra-institutional operation during the heat of the pandemic. The second part analyses the preparations of the Czech Presidency in the EU Council. Finally, there are three sections devoted to particular EU policy fields – Single Market and Economic Policies, Justice and Home Affairs, Foreign and Defense Policy.

It is also necessary to stress that the aim of the article is to comment on the Czech EU policy and evaluate successes and failures. In this sense, it should be perceived as a longer commentary, not as a scientifically rigid paper. Our conclusions are based on our own expertise as well as on a dozen of interviews with persons familiar with the Czech EU policy.

## EU Council during the pandemic

The pandemic meant a blow for the traditional EU decision-making process. Personal meetings had to be held online. Newcomers could not get

familiarized with their colleagues, and already experienced persons suffered from lack of personal contact. As a result, two institutions that were meeting partially in person – COREPER and European Council – witnessed a significant increase in their importance.

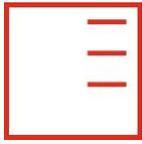
COREPER became one of the main forums for discussion where compromises were made, as the ministers simply could not discuss the matter in detail during online sessions. The European Council confirmed its position as the most important institution that meets regularly in person and where the EU grand debates are held. In this sense, the European Council played a major role during negotiations e.g. about the matrix of how to allocate additional vaccine supplies the European Commission managed to secure.

Although the pandemic influenced all the key players in the EU, the situation was extraordinarily difficult for the Czech representatives. The country was heading towards parliamentary elections, and simultaneously the government was under an extreme pressure to solve the unprecedented pandemic at home. Council meetings were just another and rather unimportant issue on their list of activities. In comparison to the domestic problems, the online meetings were uneventful and tiring. This resulted in decrease of activity, where the Czech ministers simply had next to no time to focus on development in the EU policies. The primary focus of Czech administration shifted towards meetings of the European Council and COREPER.

That being said, this does not mean that the ministers should be excused, but rather that the pandemic further exacerbated an overall passivity of Andrej Babiš's government. The last year's issue of this paper contained information that Czech ministers do not perceive EU politics as worth the problems. This situation continued and was further amplified by the necessity to run an election campaign.

## Presidency in the EU Council

Since the Czech presidency in the EU Council is swiftly approaching, the institutional year 2020/2021 was also marked by intensive



preparations. The Czech public administration set up a structure specifically devoted to the Presidency in the Office of the Government as well as other sectoral ministries. The first is now responsible for all the coordination work, and the ministries prepare sectoral programmes in their own respective field.

At this point, it can be asserted that the public administration is well equipped to conduct its responsibilities. The structure is created and analysis of future presidency work has been conducted.

On the other hand, the work on the presidency programme was undermined by two structural problems. Firstly, the European Commission published its working programme for 2022 only recently and thus the civil servants had to resort to backchannel information. Secondly, the Czech political elite still lingers in determining political priorities due to the past parliamentary elections. The current cabinet of Andrej Babiš did not want to take any premature decisions, and a new cabinet has not been established. The good news is that the public administration prepared a comprehensive document for the new cabinet, out of which the incoming government can cherry pick political priorities and determine which legislative files should be in the focus of the Czech effort.

Finally, there is the issue of the presidency budget. The cabinet of Andrej Babiš has been criticized due to an excessively low financial allocations, which in the eyes of critics undermined the prospects of the Czech Presidency. The lower budget also led to dissatisfaction within the public administration that felt being left alone. Public pressure eventually led to some success, and the presidency budget was additionally increased by 200 million CZK. This meant that the financial allocations reached a level of other EU member states of a similar size to the Czech Republic.

## Single Market & Economic Policies

### COVID-19 pandemic

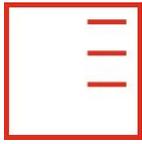
As mentioned in the introduction, the last institutional year was strongly influenced by the

COVID-19 pandemic, especially the distribution of vaccines was in the center of European discussions. Originally, every single state received a pro-rata allocation of vaccines that the European Commission purchased for the EU. National governments could decide whether they use the entire allocation, or buy less than they were eligible for. Some countries, such as Denmark, opted for the highest number of vaccines possible and even bought out unused production capacity of other EU member states. This situation, along with a slow ramp-up of AstraZeneca delivery, resulted in various vaccination rates across the EU member states.

In March 2021, the Commission announced that it had agreed a higher production rate with Pfizer/BioNTech and secured additional 10 million doses for the EU. The distribution should originally proceed according to a strict pro-rata formula, however, due to weak AstraZeneca deliveries, it was decided to allocate 3 million doses to the most impacted countries as an act of solidarity.

Exactly at this point, the Czech Republic suffered a major defeat at the EU level. Andrej Babiš decided to support Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz, who protested against the 3 million solidarity doses. This move was striking especially if we consider that the Czech Republic was one of those countries eligible for extra allocations. After a heated discussion, the Portuguese presidency decided to distribute Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia doses pro-rata, and the rest of the EU would split their jabs according to the solidarity formula. By doing so, the Czech Republic lost around 70.000 jabs that it might have received if it had not supported Austria.

The defeat and miscalculation was extraordinary. The Czech Republic lost its solidarity allocation due to a false belief of the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš that the country could receive a greater number of doses. By wanting too much, the country obtained less.



## Climate and Environmental Policy

The most significant development in the field of climate and environmental policy in the last institutional year was the adoption of an updated EU-wide emissions reduction target in December 2020. The EU was due to submit an increased climate target to the UNFCCC as part of its Paris Agreement pledge by the end of 2020. Its previous target was to reduce the bloc's emissions by 40% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.

In September 2020, the European Commission published an Impact Assessment<sup>1</sup> showing that it is manageable for the EU to achieve a higher target of at least 55% emission reduction by 2030. A rather heated discussion on the European Council level ensued and thanks to in part the German presidency leadership, the updated goal was finally approved by all the Member States at the European Council in December 2021. The following European Council meetings of 2021 only reiterated the new goal and made it clear the ball was now on the Commission's side to come up with a detailed legislative proposal on how to effectively reach the target, known as the Fit for 55 package.

However, to have all the Member States agree on the "at least 55% net target" wording in the Council conclusions<sup>2</sup> was not an easy task, as some Member States, most notably Poland, have been holding out the negotiations. The Czech Prime Minister's position was very opaque and unpredictable until the very end. Sometimes speaking openly against the higher climate ambitions, sometimes stating that he won't block an EU majority. In the end, Andrej Babiš followed up on his earlier promise and did not block the consensus on the higher climate target. As in other areas, even here we could see a strong discrepancy between what Babiš said at home when targeting his domestic electorate and what he later on said and did in Brussels.

<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020SC0176>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

Eventually, it can be argued that climate was not seen as such an important priority for the Czech Republic at the time to get into a dispute over it at the European Council level. Unlike other countries that are more reserved towards EU climate policy, such as for example Poland, which has a clear idea of the trade-offs it wants to achieve during the negotiations (e.g. raising the amount of funding available through the Modernisation Fund), the Czech Republic so far has not had such a clear objective.

The Prime Minister has branded as a major success the fact that the December Council conclusions include the mention that Member States have the right to decide their own energy mix and to choose the appropriate technologies to reach the 2030 target, including "transitional technologies such as gas".<sup>3</sup> However, the first notion is already acknowledged in EU treaties and has not been challenged by any actor. The second notion can be seen as an advance for those countries that plan to rely on fossil gas as part of their transition strategy away from coal. However, a more relevant decision regarding the transitional role of gas (especially in terms of its financial viability) will be made in the EU taxonomy on sustainable finance, which the Commission is due to unveil later this year. The sentence in the Council conclusions is thus more of a symbolic reference, than a policy indication.

## Justice and Home Affairs

In the light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Justice and Home Affairs policies have not seen significant progress. Migration remained a top agenda, however, substantially overshadowed by the health crisis. The Council discussed the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, but never came to a concrete conclusion. As of now, it seems that problems are being solved ad hoc, without any strategic deliberation<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> A perfect example is the construction of border fence on Belarussian border.



From the Czech perspective, this is a favourable situation, which corresponds with its short-term goals. There is a low appetite for any progress in harmonisation of migration and asylum in the EU as well as any substantial solidarity system. On the other hand, resisting any long-term solutions might backfire. Should another strong migration wave arrive in the future, mitigating impacts might be more costly than if a system is calibrated well from the very beginning.

Finally, the European Commission initiated a regular reviews on the conditions of the Rule of Law in its member states. The process was several times discussed in the Council, and two member states were in the centre of disputes - Poland and Hungary. Although the Council has not adopted any concrete decisions, the position of the Czech Republic was awkward. On one hand, the country is a member of the V4 and both mentioned countries are important regional partners. On the other hand, the controversies regarding Polish and Hungarian behaviour damages the reputation of the V4, and the Czech Republic. Czech diplomats have to move on a very fine line where they get along with all sides of the dispute.

## Foreign and Defence Policy

### Defence Policy

The Czech defense policy, like most EU countries, has been affected by the ongoing pandemic and found itself limited in scope of defense investment and procurement however, while Czech defence spending reached 1.31% of the GDP in 2020, Prime Minister Babiš' government proposed to increase defence spending to 1.46% of the country's GDP in the planned budget for 2021.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Czechs continued to support joint initiatives like multinational joint training within the NATO framework including Czech's ongoing

participation in Battle Group trainings, presence in Sahel within the Takuba Force and Afghanistan.

President Zeman came out strong against the US and NATO's decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and described it as a mistake. "Zeman had always defended the role of allied troops in Afghanistan as an effective way of fighting Islamic terror, the spokesman added. Zeman has frequently spoken of the danger of international terrorism."<sup>6</sup> This divergence with NATO has placed Czech on the periphery when it comes to the withdrawal but Czech Defence Minister Lubomír Metnar said Czechs will respect the decision and will continue to assist the fight against international terrorism in the future.<sup>7</sup>

Newly established head of the European Defence Agency, Jiří Šedivý, called out European Union member states by stating that EU countries need "to use the EDA to its full extent and rather than cutting national defense expenditure rashly, we need to "coordinate, pool and share our resources and invest more in collaborative capability development because a collective approach is much more cost-effective than national solo efforts" citing the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) as main drivers of this investment. While projects under PESCO were suspended in 2020, high hopes for future projects are in store but Czech remains active in their current projects including Military Mobility.

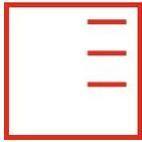
### Foreign Policy

With new leadership in the United States, the Czech government came out strong in supporting the election of US President Biden which indicated a return to 'normalcy' between US and Europe, including NATO but the change in leadership itself did not have profound changes within the U.S.-Czech relationship. Czechs remained a dedicated partner within NATO, and this was solidified again during the recent NATO Summit in Brussels but

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/czech-pm-babis-rejects-cuts-in-defence-spending/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/czech-pm-babis-rejects-cuts-in-defence-spending/)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/zeman-calls-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-a-mistake/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/zeman-calls-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-a-mistake/)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/zeman-calls-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-a-mistake/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/zeman-calls-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-a-mistake/)



their continued support in NATO activities despite concerns about the aforementioned withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan.

Czech foreign policy during 2020 focused on gearing up for their EU presidency in 2022, navigating the pandemic and coordinating with EU partners on the economic recovery package. Additional areas of focus included monitoring regional tensions along the Ukrainian border and in neighboring Belarus while countering growing threats from Russia, which resulted in the expulsion of Russian diplomats in early 2021. China also remained a focal point on various foreign policy issues including promised investments through the 17+1 framework and continues to divide Czech politics.<sup>8</sup>

Tensions with the EU escalated at several points throughout the year but primarily around the Czech's opposition of the EU's bid to reform its migration policy, which aimed to streamline the migration and asylum process with faster screening where the Prime Minister Babiš stated that "the protection of Europe's border and the cessation of illegal migration" must be the main components of the bloc's migration pact.<sup>9</sup> The firing of two Czech Foreign Ministers' by President Zeman for being in opposition to using the Russian-made Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, which was not approved for use by European Medicines Agency, also caused tensions around the EU covid-recovery process.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The institutional year 2020/2021 was strongly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only took over most of the agenda, but also influenced the functioning of the EU institutions as such. The European Council and COREPER became the most significant players, as the regular Council meetings were predominantly held online. This constellation had an impact on the EU policy

ownership of the Czech ministers, who were simultaneously forced to deal with the deteriorating domestic situation and upcoming elections. The COVID-19 crisis only exacerbated already weak interest in EU issues.

The institutional year 2020/2021 also meant a significant boost to the preparatory work on the Czech Presidency to the EU Council in 2022, where the Babiš's cabinet finally agreed to additional funding, which will stabilize personal situation as well as increase chances of the presidency to be a success. It is now up to the incoming cabinet to finalize the programme and steer the Czech public administration during the presidency.

Finally, the Czech Republic remained a mainstream EU member state that constructively supported EU's activity. On the other hand, the country suffered one major defeat during the negotiations of the additional COVID-19 vaccine distributions in Spring 2021. The Czech Prime Minister miscalculated his strength and caused a loss of 70.000 jobs amid worsening pandemic. Let it be a reminder that giving up on European solidarity does not pay off both in short and long term.

<sup>8</sup> <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/china-splits-czech-republic-down-the-political-middle/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/24/hungary-poland-and-czech-republic-oppose-eu-s-new-migration-pact>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-republic-foreign-minister-tomas-petricek-anti-sputnik-coronavirus-vaccine/>



November  
202

## About the authors

**Vít Havelka** is a Ph.D. student at the Department of European Studies, Institute of International Relations, Charles University in Prague. Mr. Havelka focuses on institutional relations of the EU and its member states, the EU budget, Europeanisation, and the transformative power of the EU. Since 2016 Vít Havelka was employed as the Political Officer at the Norwegian Embassy in Prague, and from February 2018 he is a Research Fellow at EUROPEUM.

**Kateřina Davidová** holds an MA degree in American Studies from Charles University in Prague and a BA in International Area Studies from the same university. She studied abroad at University of Bath and University of Melbourne. Her work experience includes internships at the British Embassy in Prague, Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic and Forum 2000 Foundation. She currently also works in the Centre for Transport and Energy. Her research focuses on issues related to climate change and energy.

**Danielle Piatkiewicz** is a research fellow at EUROPEUM focusing on issues around Transatlantic and Central and Eastern European foreign and security relations, democracy promotion and NATO. She is also an independent consultant for the Alliance of Democracies Foundation and Founder of DEP Consulting. Previously, she was a senior program coordinator for The German Marshall Fund of the United States' (GMF) Asia and the Future of Geopolitics programs (Washington, DC) and she worked on various leadership development projects including the Young Professionals Summit at GMF's flagship event, the Brussels Forum among others. Before that, she worked as a program assistant in GMF's Wider Atlantic program in Brussels and program intern in Warsaw. Before joining GMF, she worked for the European Institute of Peace in Brussels (EIP). She holds a M.A. in international and political studies with a concentration in transatlantic studies from Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. She received her B.A. in political science with an emphasis in international relations and a minor in German studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB).

Contact e-mail: [vhavenka@europeum.org](mailto:vhavenka@europeum.org); [kdavidova@europeum.org](mailto:kdavidova@europeum.org); [dpiatkiewicz@europeum.org](mailto:dpiatkiewicz@europeum.org)

## 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.

[More about us](#)

## Contact

Web: [europeum.org](http://europeum.org)

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: [europeum@europeum.org](mailto:europeum@europeum.org)

Brussels Office address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: [brussels@europeum.org](mailto:brussels@europeum.org)

More publications can be found on [our website](#).

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union