

Czechs and the EU Brand

How do Czechs feel about the EU and what could change their mind?

Summary report by Behavio Labs and STEM Institute in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

About the Study

This study is mainly based on a series of 12 brief surveys by Behavio research agency and on longitudinal research by STEM Institute for Empirical Research. The expert's inputs were provided by EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

If not stated otherwise, the sample of respondents is 1000 interviewees, all from Behavio Lab online panel weighted according to findings from in-person CAPI/PAPI questioning by STEM Institute.

The main data collection was executed between December 2018 and March 2019, with additional data and individual interviews collected in April and June 2019.

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BLÍŽKSOBĚ Foundation, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Albatros Foundation, Ondřej Fryc and Jan Palaščík.

STEM Institute, Behavio Labs and the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy have teamed up with experts in marketing, political psychology and strategic communication to conduct in-depth research on the underlying emotions and framing that lead to anti-EU sentiments in the Czech Republic, but are in many aspects seen in several other European countries.

Using inputs from dozen of experts and stakeholders, we have also designed several quasi-experiments and advertising pre-tests to identify what type of communication can potentially influence the EU "brand".

PLEASE NOTE: This summary covers a small part of the research project. For details, please contact STEM Institute, Behavio Labs or Europeum Institute.



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



Behavio Labs is a Czech start-up that applies behavioral economics and psychology to marketing and societal research. It does pro-bono surveys on electoral preferences, media consumption and workplace satisfaction.



STEM Institute for Empirical Research is a non-for-profit and non-partisan center founded in 1991. It assists Czech NGOs in projects countering anti-EU and anti-NATO disinformation campaigns.

STEM Institute has been monitoring public attitudes on EU and NATO membership for over two decades. Its data was used during the Czech Republic's preparations to enter the EU.



The EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy-making.

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WE EXPRESS OUR GRATITUDE TO

the dozens of professionals that took part in our workshops on perceptions of the EU and who inspired several hypotheses and concepts tested by us.

A Bit of History and Context

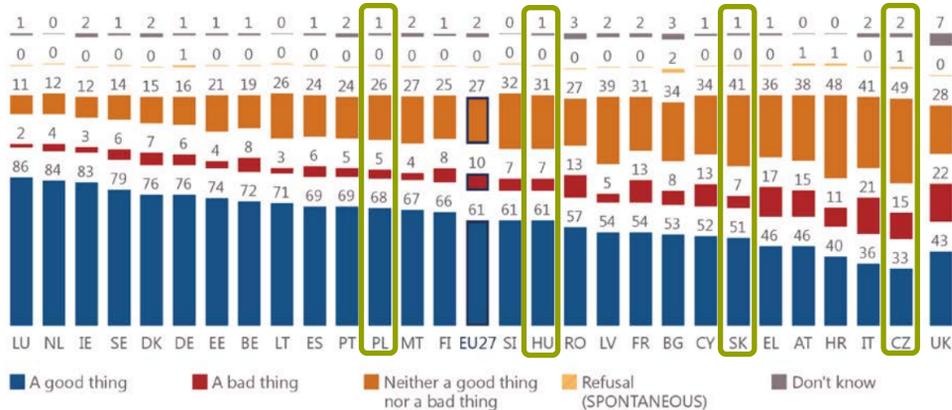
Despite strong economy, Czechs do not seem happy with the EU

The Czech Republic could serve as a kind of laboratory for investigating anti-EU sentiments. Czechs' perception of the EU membership is the poorest of all the EU citizens, (mere 33 % view it as a good thing). Not even a half of the adult Czech population (47 %) would vote to stay in the EU, despite having a booming economy and bearing almost no impact of the migration crisis.

Czechs' feelings toward the EU are similar to other Visegrad (V4) countries in many ways, but these similarities are less prominent than one would expect – especially in the case of Slovakia, where attitudes towards NATO and the EU are reversed. In many aspects, Czech Eurosceptics have been more influenced by British and Italian politicians than by their counterparts in Slovakia, Hungary or Poland.

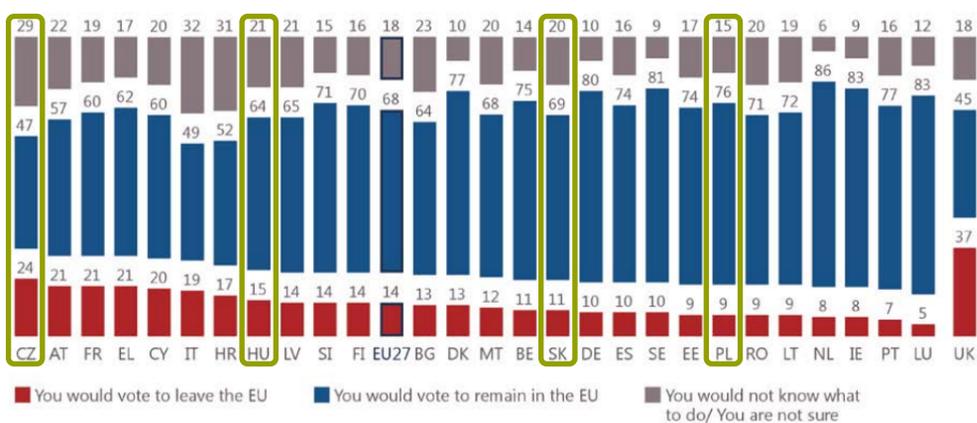
Moreover, the Czech economy is strongly export-oriented and benefits from the EU budget. Thus these negative sentiments seem to be very much about emotions and image.

Q Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the EU is...? (% - EU)



Source: Eurobarometer 2019 (91.1), QA11

Q If a referendum was held tomorrow regarding (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership of the EU, how would you vote? (%)



Source: Eurobarometer 2019 (91.1), QA3s

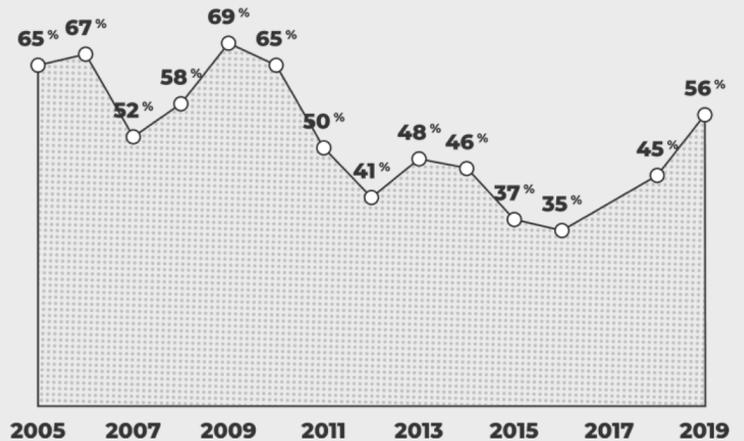
The EU's popularity dropped fast with real or perceived crises

The popularity of the EU in the Czech Republic has been very volatile over the past 15 years. It was even modest at the beginning and the first disillusion came soon after the country's accession, but was quickly countered by the Czech presidency of EU in 2009.

EU's image dropped again during the global economic downturn and the Eurozone crisis, which played a relatively strong role in the 2010 national election campaign. The migration crisis worsened negative sentiments even further, despite having little direct effect on the country. The recently observed increase in popularity can be mostly attributed to the country's economic growth.

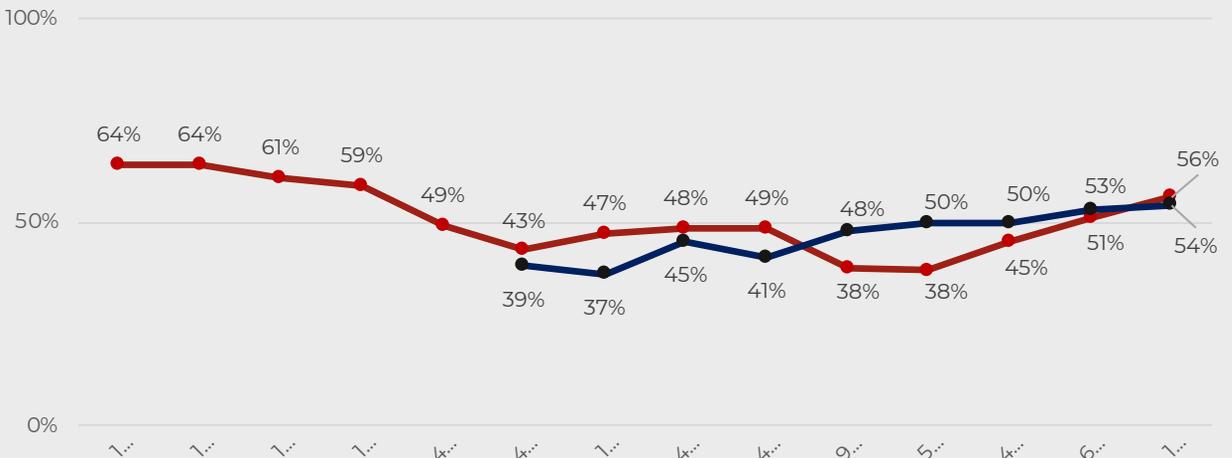
According to STEM Institute's historical data, the percentage of Czechs who would vote to remain in the EU was lower than that of Britons at the time of Brexit's referendum in 2016.

% Czechs strongly or rather satisfied with the EU
Source: STEM Trends 2005-2019



It is hard to name all the historical roots for this negative perception. However, some easily identified ones are: repeated experience of subjugation by foreign powers, the belief that the country is not under threat from the East, nor that it is an equal partner of the West.

Would you vote to remain in EU?



Question for Czechs (STEM Institute): If the referendum to enter into the EU was held again today, would you vote for the membership? (Definitely yes plus rather yes); For Britons: If there was a referendum on Britain's membership on the EU, how would you vote? (YouGov Eurotrack) (To remain a member of the EU). The question for Czechs was formulated as such because of historical comparison. It was observed that it strongly correlates with the question "Would you vote to remain in or to leave the EU" at the level of 0,8.

Source: STEM, Trends 2004-2019; YouGov.org 2012-2019.

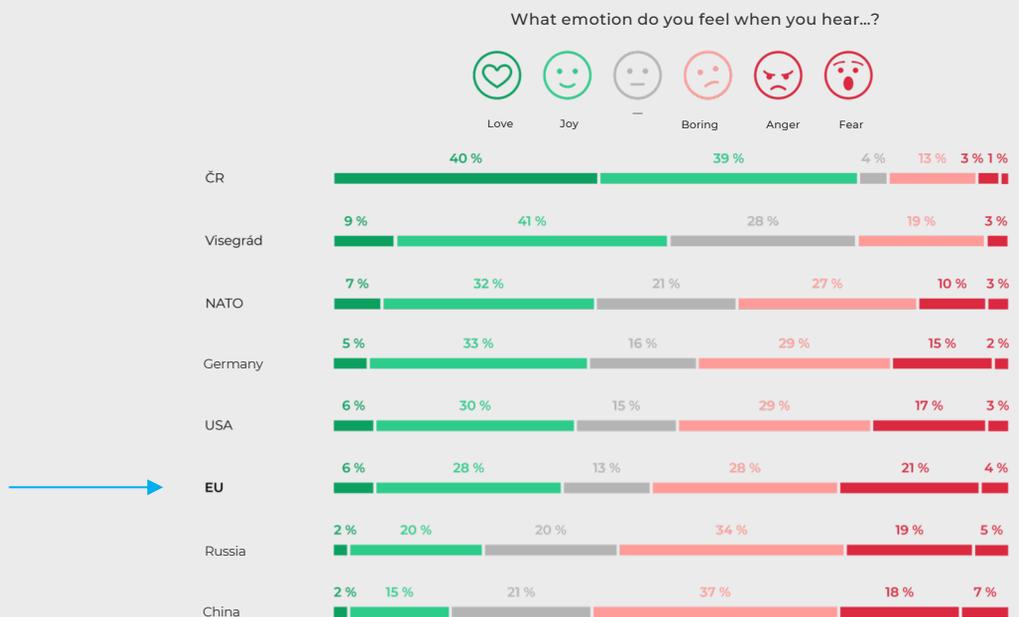


For Czechs, the EU is a weak “brand”

Czechs have few positive emotions regarding the EU. They feel more positive about V4, NATO or even Germany. This, however, does not mean that they automatically lean toward Russia and/or China.

Czechs are somehow losing their interest in “the West”, but instead of siding with “the East”, they are trying to find their own way.

Those two countries have few fans among Czechs, but the amount of negative emotions is somewhat similar. In short, Czechs are leaning away from the EU toward isolation, and not in direction to the East.



Methodology note:

Throughout our research project, we have looked both at “traditional” sociological questions and at more “marketing research” ways of interviewing. When we show and interpret the results, it means they were confirmed by our sources and in other additional surveys. For the sake of brevity and clarity, we chose to show the most user-friendly and simplest graphs and not all the supporting material.

However, even the EU's toughest critics like the idea of "Europe"

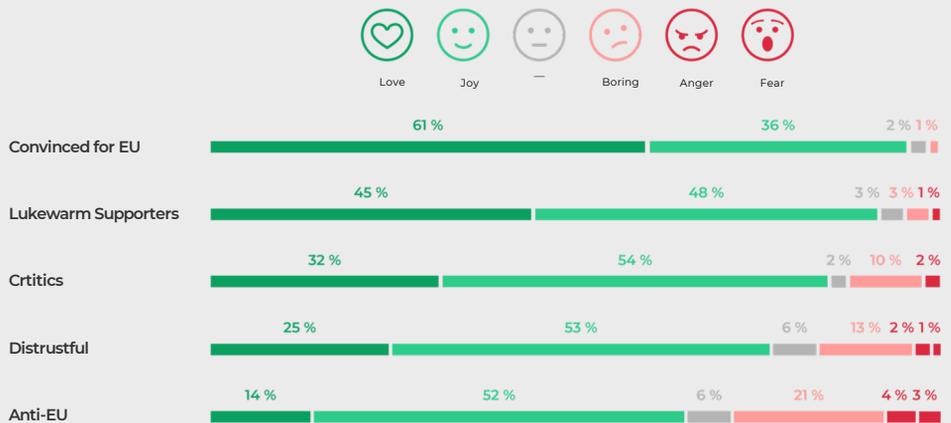
Unlike in other countries, the EU and Europe are perceived as two disconnected entities in the minds of many Czechs.

Even those who would vote to leave the EU have extremely positive emotions about Europe as such.

71 % Proud to be European

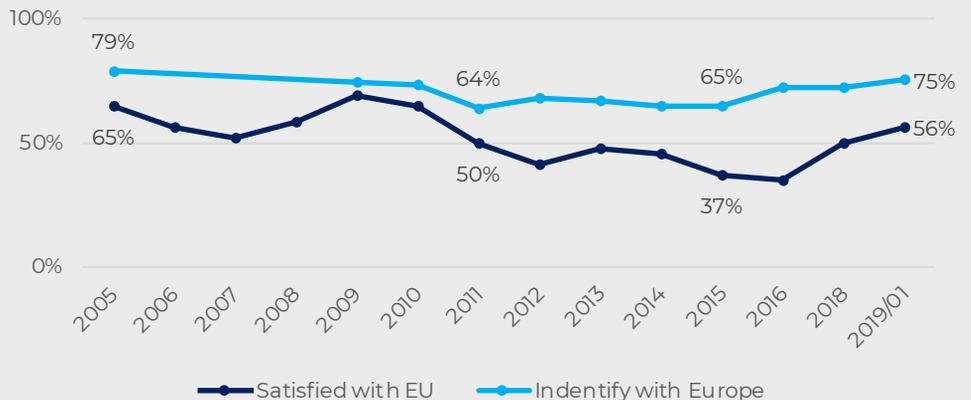
72 % To live in Europe is an advantage

What emotion do you feel when you hear "Europe"?



For the description of the groups, please refer to page 9.

The positive attitude towards Europe has also been much more stable than towards the EU. That is more than just a geographical identification; over 70% of Czechs feel they are part of Europe and are proud to be Europeans.



Why Are Czechs Not Keen on the EU?

The EU is a lightning rod for general distrust and disillusionment

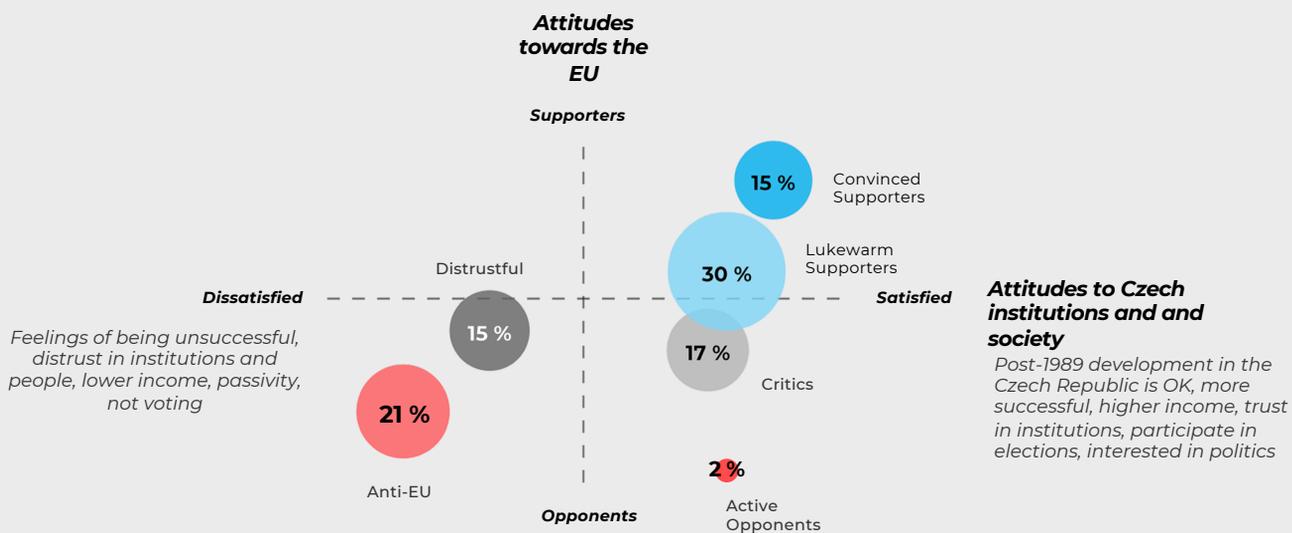
In general, Czechs are not interested in the EU; they spend little time thinking and forming an opinion about it. They view the EU mostly through the prism of their trust in national institutions.

If they are dissatisfied with either the post-1989 development or with the current political situation, they tend to strongly mistrust the EU as well. Only a small group (about 17%) is at the same time relatively content with national politics and holding a negative view of the EU.

Repeated measurements showed that the group of active EU opponents, i.e. Czechs who participate in elections, discuss politics and follow news, present only 2 to 4% of the population. Even though such small groups are hard to measure in surveys, they are visibly overrepresented in the media.

Since the distrustful group is generally not interested in politics and news, it is hard to reach them with facts about Europe and the EU.

The segments are based on two indexes: The first one measures views on the EU and Euro, and the second one on how much they trust Czech institutions and society.



SOURCE: STEM research for the Office of the Czech Government

Distrustful have little interest in the news and in politics and rely on their friends and family for opinions towards the EU. This group has more women than men and more manual workers.

Critics are very pragmatic, concerned mainly with wealth and safety. Critics are closest to the Czech population average in terms of sex, education, and age.

Convinced Supporters are more educated, affluent and more often live in bigger cities. They value not only safety and income, but also the freedom to travel, work, and study abroad.

Anti-EU group is similar to the one above, but its distrust is even stronger. Consists of older and less educated citizens.

Active Opponents are a too small of a group to be described well. However, they are very much represented in discussions in pubs, cafes, media and social media.

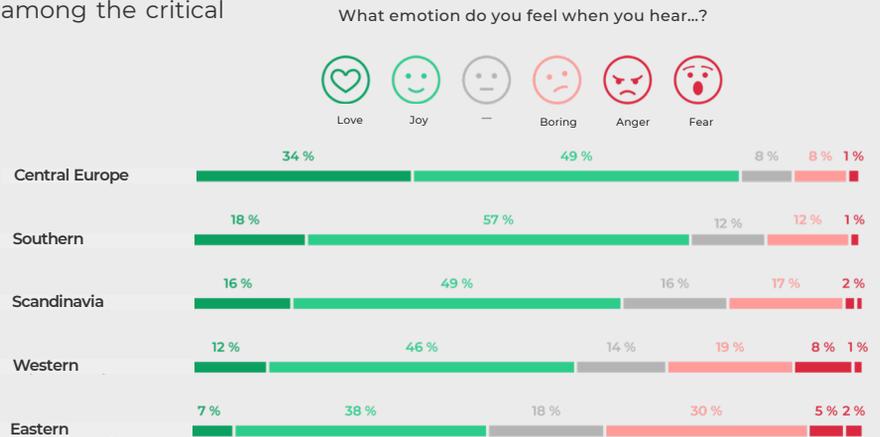
Lukewarm Supporters usually have much less information and arguments about the EU. They rely on their feeling that EU is a positive thing.

We are no longer keen on Western Europe

83% of Czechs have a positive emotion towards Central Europe. The region is popular among all segments of the population. That means that the popularity of EU and CE are not mutually exclusive.

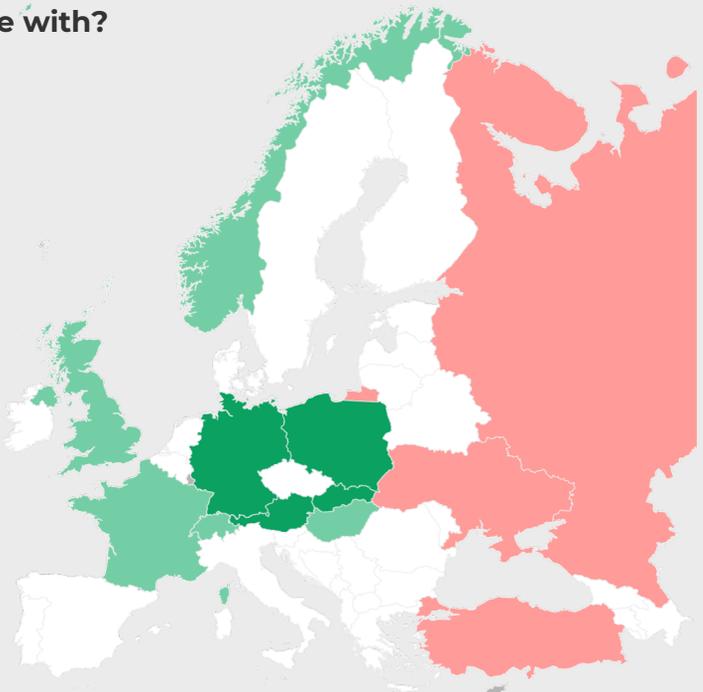
Czechs still want to closely work with Germany and Austria, not only their V4 neighbours. And that is despite the fact that Angela Merkel is as unpopular among the Czechs as Vladimir Putin.

Western Europe is more attractive to the pro-EU segments of the Czech population. Eastern Europe is not popular even among the critical segments.



Who do Czechs want to cooperate with?

- Close cooperation
- Cooperation
- Careful relations
- Not measured



The patriotic paradox: The more critical towards the EU, the less proud of the Czech Republic

The anti-EU attitudes are often attributed to renewed nationalist sentiments, but the underlying feelings are more complicated. Since those dissatisfied with the EU are also less happy with their own national institutions, they find it harder to be proud of the Czech Republic.

Hence, critics search for things to feel proud of and might pay attention to politicians who make them feel that way – often at the expense of various outgroups.

As described later, we tested how these feeling can be used while discussing topics related to the EU.

What are you proud of?

	Convinced Supporters	Lukewarm Supporters	Critical	Distrustful	Anti-EU
CZ	41%	28%	22%	10%	14%
EU	34%	6%	3%	2%	1%

Critics do not want to cooperate with anyone

Anti-EU feelings are not based on specific issues or policies that would actually affect citizens. Academics call it “euroscepticism of sovereignty”. That was confirmed by research, which showed that the more you dislike the EU, the more you think the Czech Republic is not a truly sovereign country. However, we see that this is partly true also for Lukewarm Supporters who think the loss of sovereignty is balanced by the benefits of EU membership.

EU critics are not very specific about the reasons for their discontentment. In fact, they dislike institutionalized cooperation in itself – they think the Czech Republic would be dominated by larger states in any multinational cooperation.

In their words, they often long to be a “Central European Switzerland” and gain from working with both the West and the East.



Czechs are unaware that their voice is heard in the EU

As said previously, Czechs have little interest in what is happening in the EU institutions and they also feel confused by world events.

For example, 60% of Czechs do not know that they are represented by a minister or PM at the Council level. Often, the media report about EU decisions as if there was no Czech voice or government position involved. Therefore, they feel as a recipient of decisions, not an active participant in their formulation.

That said, publishing more facts is very unlikely to change this perception. People tend to filter out even the most basic facts and feel patronized and attacked when “lectured”.

Knowledge is only a symptom of the emotional stance – see for example how the population segments differ in their awareness of the fact that the Czech Republic is a net beneficiary of the EU budget.

Czechs lack basic knowledge about the EU

38%

Do not know that the **Czech public administration decides** the particular recipients of EU funding.

60%

Do not know that we are represented by ministers/PM in the Council.

40%

Do not know the Czech Republic **has vetoed** most security and taxation issues.

44%

Do not know the Czech Republic **is a net beneficiary** of the EU budget.

IN DETAIL:

Strongly for Lukewarm	14%
Critics	30%
Distrustful	46%
Anti- EU	67%

73%

Do not know the EU established **FRONTEX for border protection.**

Czechs have few positive associations with the EU

Using various measures, we painted a picture of what Czechs think of when they hear of the "EU brand".

The strongest associations are negative: red tape, inflexible, complicating, patronizing etc. The main negative association is not "red tape" or "lack of freedom", but surprisingly the feeling that the EU devotes its time to banal topics, such as bans and regulations that intrude on citizens' everyday life.

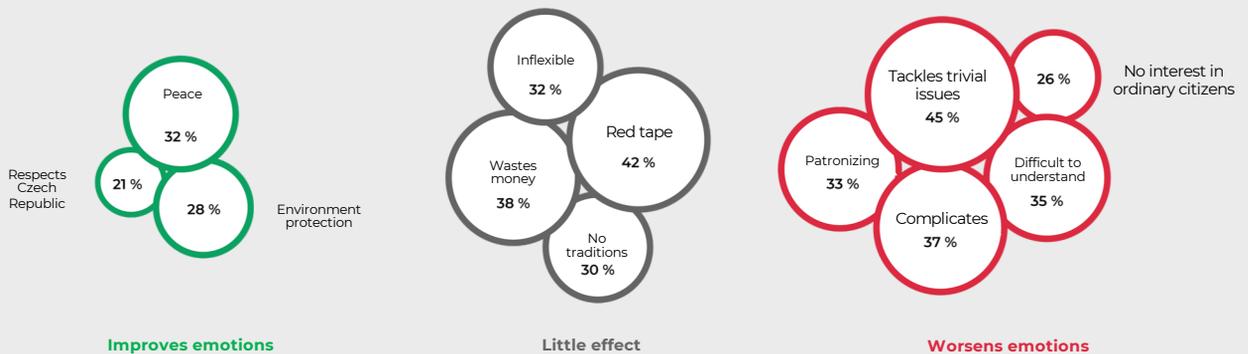
This applies even to citizens who like the EU. Their first spontaneous association is often with minor topics, for example "EU bans knives" or "EU bans Czech rum".

This feeling is usually exacerbated by the national media and by politicians who focus on the details of the implementation of EU laws instead of paying attention to global issues.

Since most Czechs share several negative associations with the EU, the expressions in the middle of the diagram are not linked to improving or worsening one's view of the EU.

On the positive end, many Czech citizens believe that the EU ensures peace and provides environmental protection.

Association with the EU in the context of other "brands"



Methodology:

The respondents were shown around thirty expressions, which they could assign to various entities, such as the EU, the USA or NATO. This was checked against spontaneous associations toward the same entities.

The circles show only the associations that reached at least 20%.

Using statistical regression, we divided the circles into three groups based on how much they are connected with positive or negative emotions toward the EU.

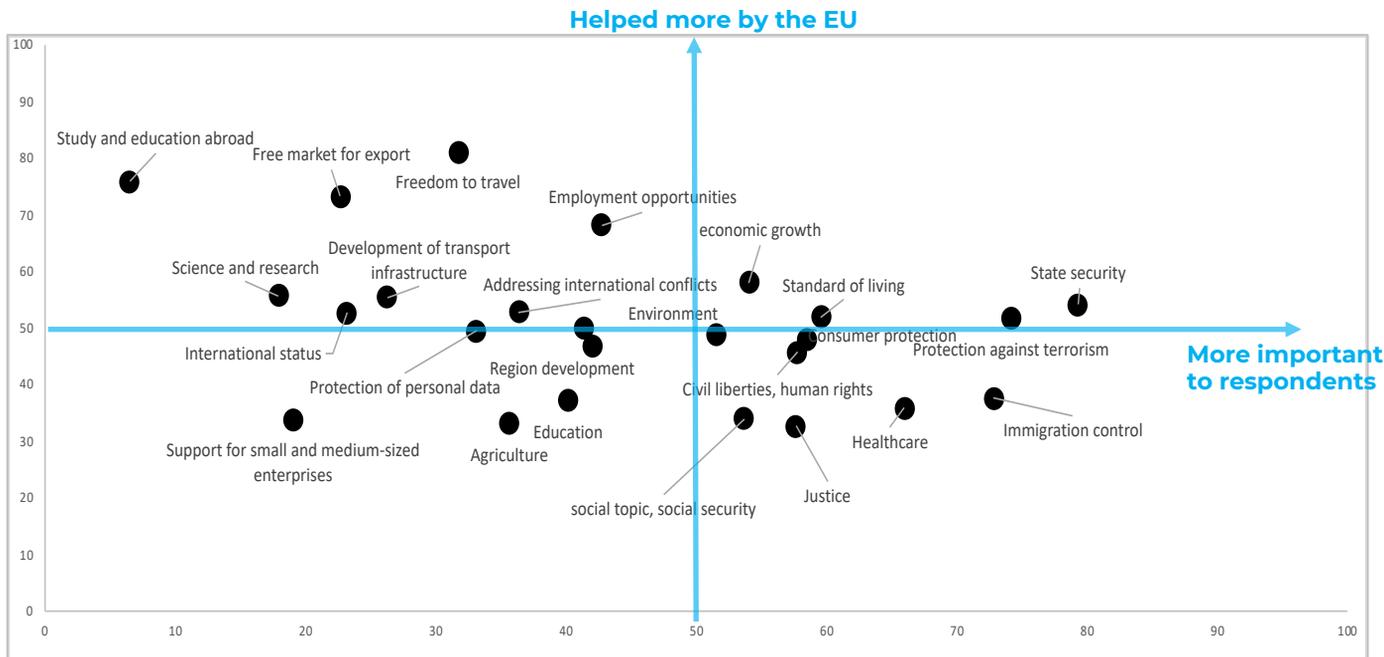
Perceived benefits of EU membership are seen as unimportant

Very often, proponents of the EU list benefits, which are not seen as important by the rest of the population: freedom to travel, study abroad, common market and easier export, and development of transport infrastructure. Even critics admit these issues were helped by the EU, but they find them irrelevant for their lives.

The Czech population nowadays focuses more on safety or security, terrorism, and migration, followed by consumer protection, healthcare and standard of living. In these areas, only EU supporters see a beneficial contribution of the EU membership, while others think the EU's role in those areas is rather negative.

It is important to note that the aforementioned groups in the Czech society see the situation very differently from each other, but the focus on safety and security is very much shared across various segments of the population.

It is worrying that standard of living and "free market for export" are not interconnected in the minds of the Czech citizens. In the personal interviews conducted, Czechs who are critical of the EU see common market as somehow important, but also think that it has a negative effect on the country's independence and see foreign companies both as "needed employers" and "intruders" who are only after cheap labor.



**What do Czechs
want (to hear) from
the EU?**

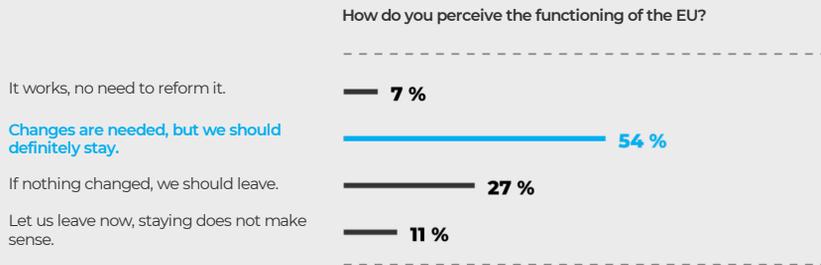
Czechs primarily want to “reform” the EU, not leave it

A more detailed question about leaving the EU shows that the situation is more complex than staying or leaving. Only 11% of the population wants an immediate departure from the EU.

“Leaving the EU immediately” is mainly preferred by the Anti-EU group (42% want to leave now). The Critics would leave the EU if nothing changed (43%).

Only 7% of Czechs think the EU works well and that there is no need to reform it.

That does not mean Czechs know or claim to know how to reform the EU. It is rather a more general feeling that the EU needs to move forward.

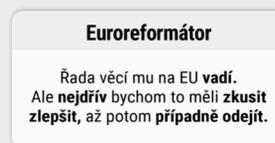


The right labelling

The labels we use for competing views on an issue often influence public opinion. For Czechs, at the moment, those are “Eurosceptics” and “Euroners”. But when offered another option, Czechs identify more with being “Euro-Reformists”.

In a pre-test with Lukewarm Supporters, Critics and Distrustful segments, one third of them said “Euro-Reformists” are people like me.

The term is favoured by both Lukewarm Supporters (74% feel a positive emotion) and the Critics group (65%).



Euro-Reformist

There are things I don't like about the EU, but we should first try to improve it, only then consider leaving.

Factor analysis points to two key areas where Czechs want more from the EU

When presented with a chance to “choose their own agenda for a new EU”, Czechs relatively agree on what should be the priorities.

They want less EU in their personal lives and more EU in defense and in protecting their “quality of life”. This is a novel situation for Czechs since quality of food and environment used to be issues neglected by the general public.

The devil, however, is in the details. An issue presented as “ban of polluters” is viewed negatively, whereas the same policy presented sometimes as “defense against air pollution from other countries” is accepted.

It is important to note that the economic side of the EU cooperation is often too complex to influence public opinion at the moment.

Freedom of travel and work abroad, as well as democracy safeguards, are not mainstream issues.

Security and defence

Life without wars in Europe
Better protection against terrorism
Common European border control
Solving migration in source countries
Better military defence against external threats
Czech Republic as part of a superpower
Czechs taking part in EU decision-making

Defending quality of life

High quality of food
Clean air, healthy water and soil
High quality of medicine
Safer food and goods
More effective search for missing children
Better remunerated job
More food from local suppliers
Cheaper and better food and products

Protection of business

Better protection against unfair commercial practices
Czech specialities will not be forged
SME's will be better protected against large international corporates

Safeguard of democracy and rule of law

We will not be seized by a foreign power
Safeguard against political influence in judiciary branch
Facilitation of legal proceedings in corruption cases

Freedom of movement

I can go abroad in order to obtain a better education or a job
I can travel as if I was staying within the Czech Republic

Methodology note:

Respondent were presented with 30 issues described in the best possible writing, mixing policies that are being considered with some that are already under way. The description included a headline and two or three sentences of explanation.

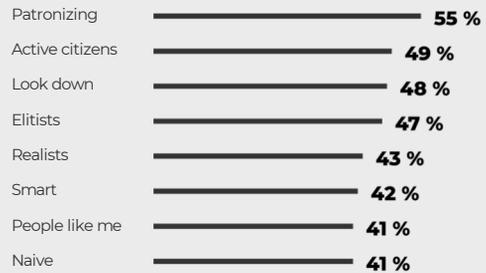
How to create a meaningful dialogue about the EU?

It is necessary to overcome barriers in communication which usually separate supporters and opponents of the EU. The first step is to avoid blaming and patronizing and admit that the EU is not a perfect institution.

Critical usually feel lectured (71%) and humiliated (62%) by supporters of the EU. Negative associations increase with age.

It means that trying to only educate people or counter myths with facts can be tricky, as it may be seen as pointing to people's ignorance. One needs to connect on the emotional level by finding views shared and appreciated by both sides.

What are the supporters of the EU like?



The impact of leaving the EU is ignored or filtered

Segments critical of the EU already feel strongly that the Czech Republic is endangered by various threats. Thus, communication relying on the fear of leaving the EU gets lost among the everyday news cycle.

When respondents were shown a mix of real headlines and those trying to depict - in a compelling way - how severe leaving the EU could be, these more remote future threats were seen as less important and interesting than current minor scandals and threats, e.g. the discovery of a toxic meat shipment from Poland.

České pivovary se bojí padělků. Bez EU nebudou mít ochranu

České pivovary poštují s tím, že odchodem z EU přijdou o ochranu známky „české pivo“. O práci by mohli přijít až třetina zaměstnanců v pivovarnictví. „Zahraniční firmy už se chystají vařit pivo, které budou vydávat za české. Dělá se to už teď ve Východní Evropě, ale EU má silu tuto nekalou konkurenci krázn“, říká výkonný ředitel pivovaru Bernard.

Nemocnice řeší, kde sehnat léky po odchodu z EU. Týká se to tisíců lidí

Pro případ náhlého odchodu z EU vznikají v nemocnicích plány, jak ještě vypáskat oblíbených léků. „Mnoho léků se k nám dostane později, nebo vůbec, protože nebudou společný trh EU“, říká ředitel nemocnice Miroslav Ludvík. „V Británii například už vytváří zásoby pro případ krize.“

Důchodci můžou klesnout o 3 tisíce. Po odchodu z EU má seniorům pomoci potravinová sbírka

Národní rada seniorů připravuje sbírku potravin a léků pro případ, že ČR odejde nahle z EU. „Odchod z EU znamená pokles české ekonomiky a nejvíce to ohrozí seniory“, říká mluvčí Lenka Desátová.

Poláci připravují armádu na krizi na Těšínsku. Když odejdete z EU, musíme jednat, říká velvyslanec

Bojme se o přístup našich občanů do Polska, když ČR odejde z EU. Na České straně jich byli desítky tisíce a my je musíme ochránit, když přestanou volně přichodit přes hranice. „Nechceme žádný konflikt, ale smutná připravenost obyvatelů a logistickou pomoc“, přiznává v rozhovoru velvyslanec Wojciech Božek.

Balkán je nášlapná mina. Když EU odejde, čeká nás sto tisíc uprchlíků

Válka na Balkáně pořád doutná, říká český lékař, který působil v Bosně. Když odejde evropská policejní mise z Balkánu, bude tam konflikt do roka zpět. To znamená 100 tisíc uprchlíků do Česka jako v 90. letech.

Zetor připravuje přesun do Polska. Kvůli odchodu z EU budou firmy propouštět

Výrobce legendárních českých traktorů potvrdil, že odchod ČR z Evropské unie by znamenal propouštění stovky lidí v Jihomoravském kraji. „Vyhledli jsme si polské Katovice, kam bychom továrně přesunuli, abychom měli lepší přístup na evropský trh“, říká ředitel Marian Lipovský. Podobné plány na přesun mají stovky českých podniků.

Potřebujeme tábory pro milion uprchlíků z Ukrajiny. Když se EU rozpadne, tak Rusko neudrží, varuje český generál

Evropské smůlce drží Rusko na uzdě. Když ale EU povolí Rusku rozjíždění, bude u nás žádat o azyl až milion lidí z Ukrajiny, říká český generál, který se účastnil pozorovatelských misí ve Východní Evropě. Vláda se na tuto vlnu vůbec nepřipravuje, dodává.

National pride works for the EU

Czechs do not actually see the EU in black and white. This means that the future holds far more than two possible scenarios - leaving or staying.

Perception of the EU is closely linked to dissatisfaction with domestic politics. Therefore, we created newspaper headlines combining things Czechs could be proud of with information about the EU or Europe.

Using a mix of real newspaper headlines and our test stimuli, we saw that even the Critics group reacted positively to news about the EU when it was mixed with this national element. Those articles were significantly more interesting to respondents than those based on negative impacts of potential Czexit.

Another experiment with articles in the media stream. Sample: Lukewarm supporters, Critics and Distrustful segments.

	Important	Nonsense	Any "positive" reaction
EU has the safest drugs	31%	10%	44%
Czechs and EU catching a terrorist	29%	2%	37%
EU helps Czech industry	25%	14%	35%
EU has the lowest murder rate	19%	16%	30%
EU's GPS is led by Czechs	18%	10%	37%
Czechs excel in EU army trainings	11%	22%	24%
Tusk to visit CR	10%	35%	16%
Personal data protection helps the Czech PM	8%	12%	12%
Czech excel in the EU space programme	8%	32%	25%

Benchmark **contaminated Polish meat**: Important 51%, Nonsense 4%, Any "positive" reaction 56%

Recommendations

What works?

It's about Europe, not the EU

Most Czech citizens like the cooperation within Europe, but many think that the EU is just an office that can be easily closed while Europe remains the same. The aim is to link the EU and Europe closer together in our minds; not necessarily to make the EU more likeable, but rather seen as a handy tool for Czechs and for European cooperation.

Focus on big issues that defend us from...

The general public wants the EU to be their defender in a chaotic and dangerous world and not a policeman checking on their life style. Promoting small benefits paradoxically risks reinforcing a negative view. However, the biggest benefits from the EU – such as the absence of war – need to be turned into specific stories in order to cut through the information overflow.

Patriotism can help the EU

Patriotism, national pride and warm feelings towards the EU are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the more satisfied with their country, the more open people are to international cooperation. These two feelings and needs – to belong to a successful country and to strong Europe – can work together as our experiments indicate.

Reformists, not leavers

Dividing society into pro-EU and anti-EU groups is reinforcing negative sentiments; it does not reflect reality and feeds populist attacks. Most Czechs prefer reform to exit and we should use labels that reflect this position. Also, Czechs think they have no say in EU institutions, so promoting a strong foreign policy agenda for the country could change that.

Visions are better than details

The debate on the EU is often about specific policies versus an unspecific promise of better future without the EU. In an experiment, we saw that citizens are more positive towards European cooperation when asked about the future and not the present.

What is less effective?

The risks of 'lecturing'

Pro-EU citizens are often caricatured as elitists. A large portion of the public shares this view and it is important not to reinforce it by talking about ignorance or by lecturing. Also, focusing on facts can be tricky as it is seen as patronizing by many.

Facts are not enough

The bias against facts about the EU is very strong. Czechs are not confident about even basic facts of the Czech-EU relationship and suspicion towards the media portrayals of the EU is high. With such a strong bias, explaining and presenting facts is difficult without speakers that can "connect" with their audience and work around those biases.

Threats of Czexit are filtered out and can backfire

Citizens critical of the EU are already preoccupied with too many other threats that the relatively remote risks of leaving the EU are seen as less pressing. Moreover, the more they feel that the country is threatened (even by risks of Czexit) the more they call for international isolation. As a side effect, focusing on Czexit means it becomes more salient scenario for many critical citizens.

Small or "cosmopolitan" benefits do not impress many Czechs

The often mentioned benefits of EU membership – such as easier travel, working or studying abroad – are not important enough for the majority of Czech society. The critical parts of the society are most concerned about general safety and safety of their income and health.

Do not dwell too much on myths

Debunking them and showing how disinformation works is important, but merely repeating myths and 'fake news' means they become even more widely remembered. Also, debunking myths without offering a more memorable story has little effect in the long term.

We would like to hear what you think!



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