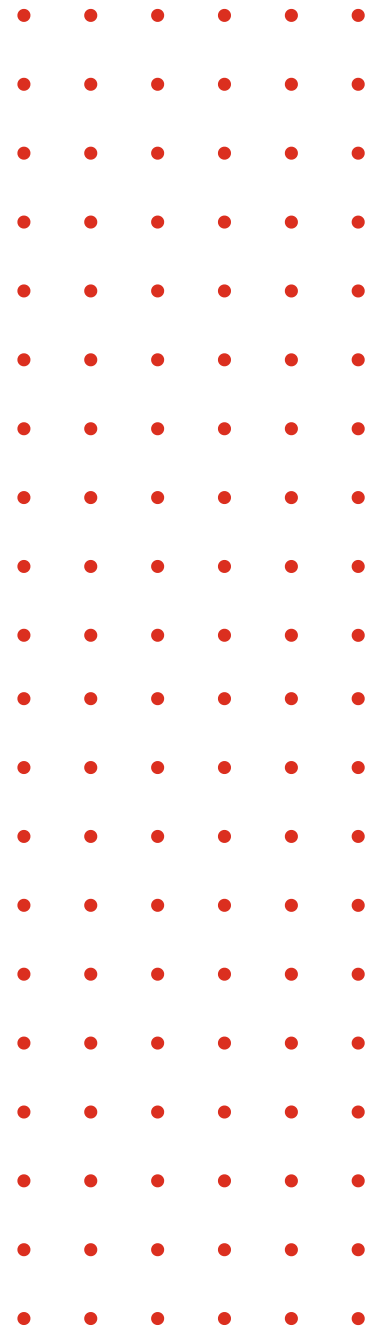


CZECH PUBLIC OPINION: EUROPEAN ENERGY CRISIS

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Just right after the EU started recovering from the two-years-long COVID-19 pandemic, the continent was hit by yet another crisis. On February 24, Russia started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and consequently set in motion a series of events resulting in the EU energy crisis. Lack of Russian gas along with French nuclear powerplants being out of order created a perfect storm culminating in extreme energy prices in August 2022. Only then, the EU decision makers agreed on strong interventions on the energy market that capped profits from electricity production and by doing so secured additional funding for consumer subsidies at the national level. Discussions about the prices of natural gas are still underway as of writing this article.

The energy crisis is without a doubt a serious problem with extensive implication in social cohesion as well as economic performance of the EU. After all, stability of every political system is based on its performance and ability to provide citizens with wealth and stability. Skyrocketing inflation and energy prices cause the exact opposite, and might eventually lead to political instability and rise of populism and radicalism.

For this reason, it is important to study the development of public opinion in real time, and use the research's results in every day political work. As part of this discussion, the EUROPEUM institute in cooperation with STEM Institute conducted an extensive quantitative and qualitative public questioning at the beginning of October 2022 focusing on Czech attitudes towards the EU and the energy crisis as such. The following article will inform the reader about our results and outline potential problems for the EU's reputation in the future.

Political context in the Czech Republic

The past 9 months have not revolved only around the energy crisis in the Czech public discourse, but the Czech society rather changed its focus from one topic to another. In accordance, the activity and attention of Czech politicians shifted.

The beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine was marked by intensive discussions about to what extent the West should support Ukraine, and how to deal with the incoming refugees. The overall situation started changing during summer 2022, when the public focus clearly shifted from deliberations about an all-out NATO-Russia war to inflation and energy prices.

This was caused by two major events. Firstly, the European energy market practically collapsed during August 2022. The gas and electricity prices reached untenable level that no consumer would be able to effort. Secondly, the Czech Republic experienced its first large protests condemning the Czech government response to the energy crisis in September 2022, which proved to function as a wakeup call for the current cabinet.

Since then, the government communication as well as public discourse have heavily focused on solving the rising energy prices. The government tried to take advantage of the ongoing presidency, and portray itself as a European leader rescuing the entire EU. This, however, failed to avert the reputational damage entirely. The Czech opposition managed to frame the public discourse and presented the government as arrogant, incapable, and unwilling to tackle costs of living.

General sentiment

As a result of the above-mentioned, the Czech government remains excessively unpopular. The overall government rating is worse than what Babiš's cabinet experienced during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and even the current government's electorate is not fully satisfied with its performance¹.

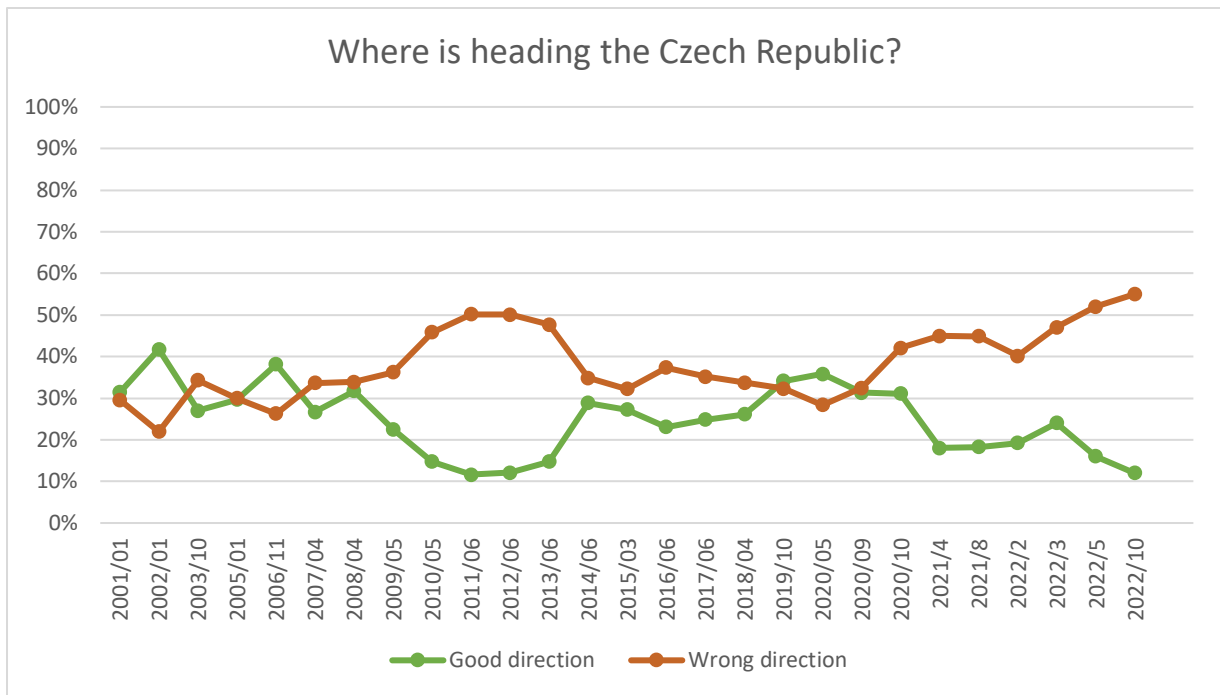
This is important in relation to the EU popularity. From historic data, we know that the economic situation, as well as satisfaction with national politics, are important determinants to the overall support to the EU membership and its institutions². Simultaneously, it is worth mentioning that the high energy prices have not fully hit the population yet, as many citizens had contracts for fixed energy price until the end of the 2022. The real challenge will come in 2023. Government capping of electricity at 6 CZK/KWh³ might help, but it will still mean that an average citizen will pay several times more for energy than in 2021. A situation that is difficult to explain; you can hardly promote as a success a significant increase of energy prices and the closely linked slump in purchasing power.

Furthermore, the inflation and dissatisfaction with the government is also mirrored in the population's expectations of their future economic situation. Those expectations are reaching record lows, even when compared with the last economic crisis (see the chart below).

¹ According to the last poll by CVVM, only 28% of Czech citizens declared, they trust the current Czech Government. See: <https://cvvmapp.soc.cas.cz/#question6>

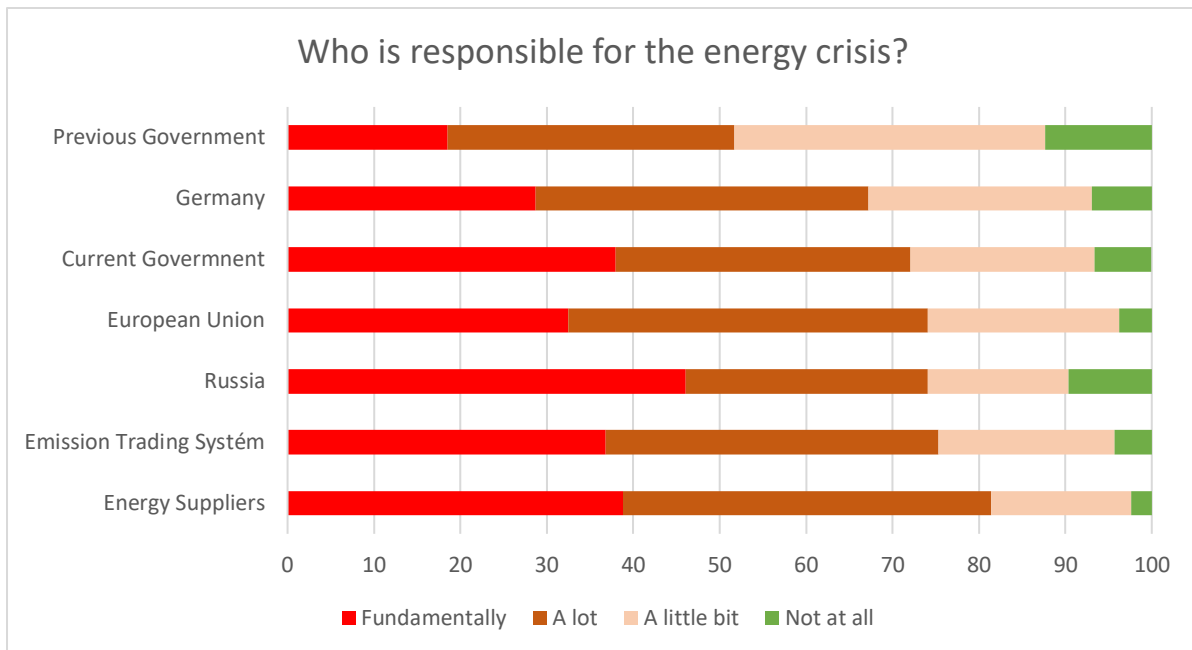
² See: Brand EU Report, EUROPEUM <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/3257/cesi-a-znacka-eu-jak-se-citi-cesi-ohledne-eu-a-co-by-mohlo-zmenit-jejich-nazor>

³ <https://www.mpo.cz/cz/rozcestnik/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/vlada-schvalila-zastropovani-cen-energi--pomuze-jak-domacnostem--tak-firmam--270228/>



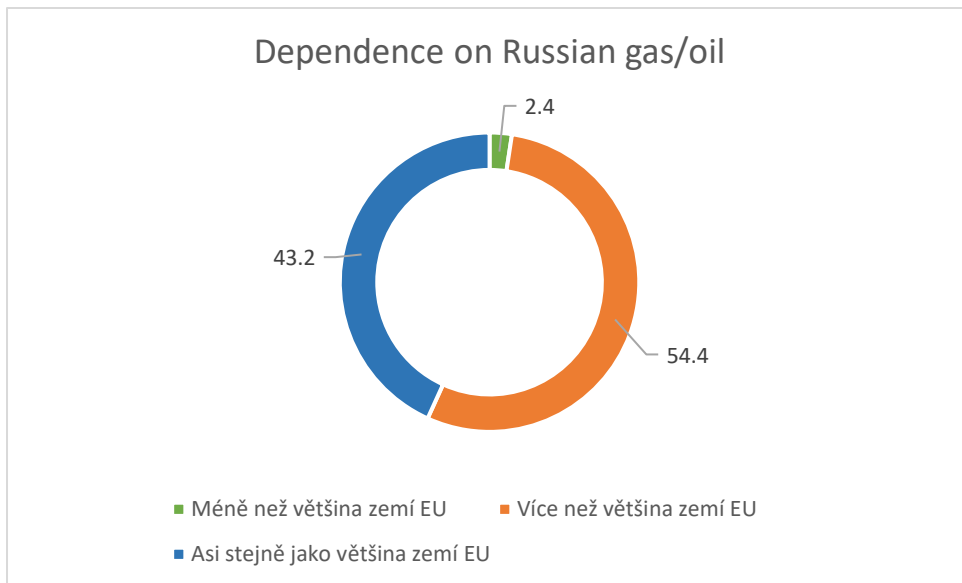
Confusion over the perpetrators

The extreme skepticism and dissatisfaction in the Czech society is a warning sign, and the overall frustration will have ramifications. Their extent and target will depend on who is to be blamed for the current economic hardship. As of now, the Czech society is not sure who is responsible for the high energy prices, as manifested by the chart below. The Czech public thinks that almost everyone except for the former Babiš's government triggered the energy crisis - this is not a mistake in measurement, but simply a portrayal of the current confusion. Several months from now, we can expect that the amount of "main perpetrators" will decrease, and someone will be attributed the primary blame.



We cannot exclude that Russia will be marked as the primary cause of the problems, but this will largely depend on where the public discourse will develop in the upcoming several months. Today, the Czech society understands the country has been strongly dependent on Russian oil and gas (see chart below), and that this dependency is above the EU average.

On the other hand, during in-depth focus-groups interviews, our respondents did not manifest a strong belief that the high prices were caused by lack of resources, but rather by other factors such as the internal EU energy market or national government regulation.

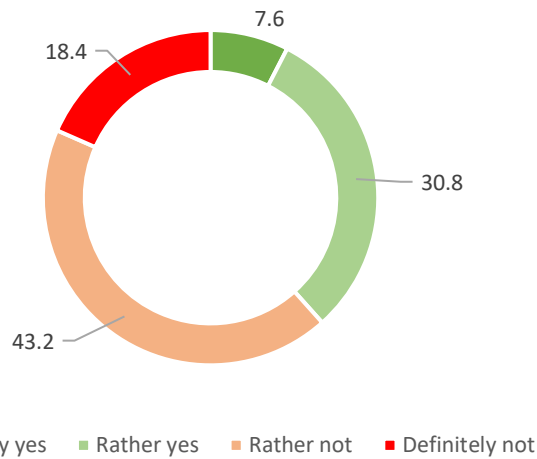


The EU might help, but no one believes so.

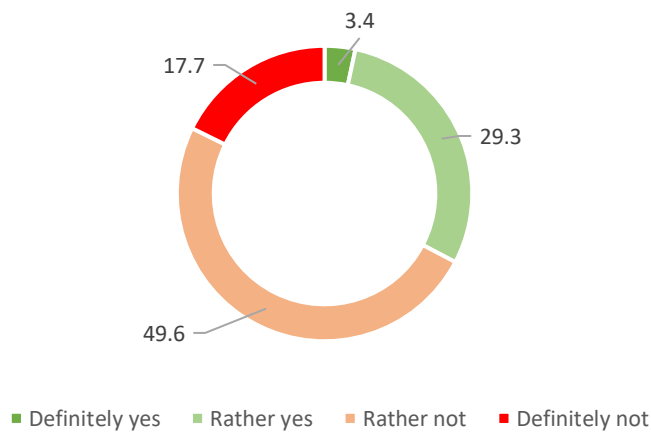
The energy crisis caused a new phenomenon where national authorities enjoy a lower trust than the EU, or, more specifically, the Union's popularity shows a lower slump than the Czech government. This might lead some to think that EU's activity will be better perceived by the citizens, and most measures should be implemented at the EU level. This is, however, not the case.

Based on our in-depth interviews, it seems rather that the EU represents only a last resort of citizens' hopes, not a primary policy level where energy crisis should be solved. The trust in EU member states showing solidarity with gas supplies, or the belief that the EU will actually be able to help, remains rather low.

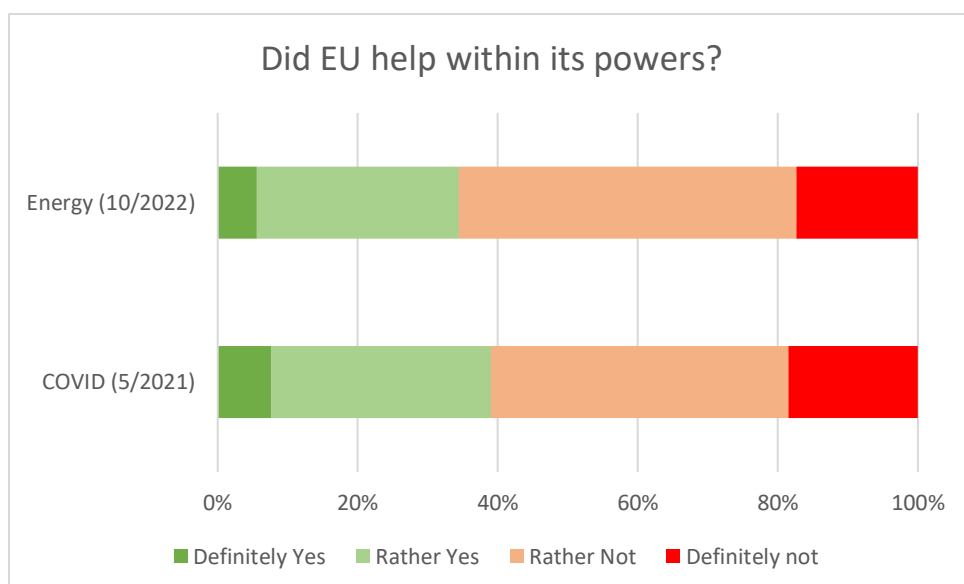
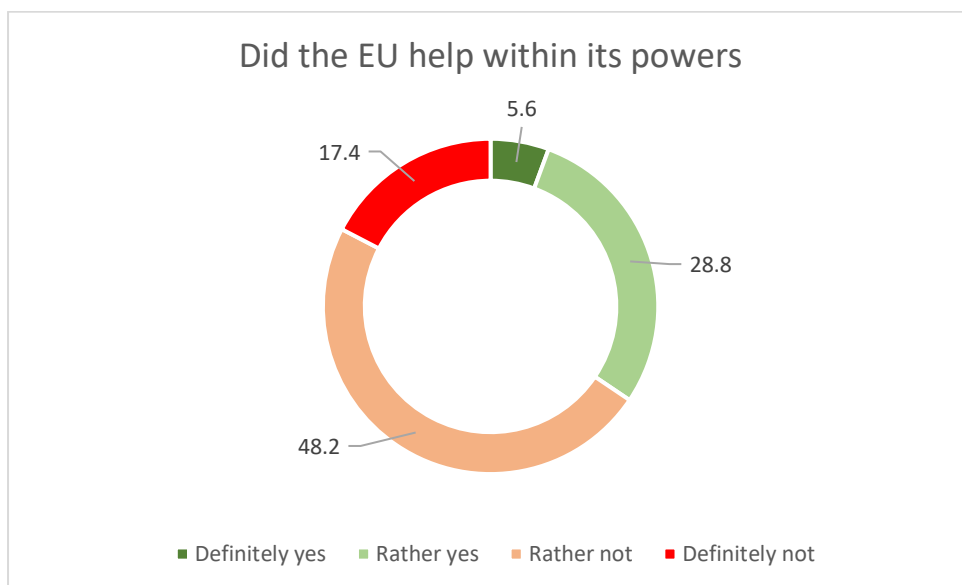
Will the EU help us with high energy prices?



Will the EU countries show solidarity with gas supplies



The same also applies to the belief whether the EU performed well during the ongoing energy crisis. Czech citizens are overall skeptical with Union's activity, and only 23 % declare that it used all its power to solve the problem. On the other hand, it seems that this rather poor performance is typical for ongoing crises. The EU achieved similar numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and eventually scored significantly better after the pandemic waned out.



Suggested next step

Without any doubt, the current energy crisis poses a significant challenge to the EU and the Czech Republic, and it will be essential how the public narrative will evolve. As of the end of 2022, Czech society has not made up its mind on who to blame for the rising prices. It can be the EU, Russia, but also the Czech government or the EU internal market. The policymakers should therefore focus on framing

the energy crisis, and point to the main cause of trouble; the Russian attack of Ukraine and the resulting lack of gas in the EU.

Secondly, it is imperative to lower the cost of energy. This can be done either by regulating the prices in the short-term, as well as securing enough stable supply in mid- and long-term. The inflation in the Czech Republic will probably reach staggering 17% in 2022, and the purchasing power of Czech citizens has already decreased by 10 %. Radicalization of those most threatened can be dangerous, as we witnessed during the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The Union can also do significantly more. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the leaders agreed to create the Next Generation EU fund, which should address the economic implications of lockdowns, and health crisis. In this respect, there must be discussion about an adjustment of the EU fiscal policy, which can be revised only once in seven years.

O Autorovi

Vít Havelka studuje doktorský program na Katedře evropských studií, IMS, Fakultě sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy. Zaměřuje se na institucionální vztahy EU a jejích členských států, EU rozpočet, europeizaci a transformativní roli Evropské unie. Od ledna 2016 byl zaměstnán Velvyslanectvím Norského království v České republice na pozici Political Officer a od roku 2018 pracuje v EUROPEUM jako výzkumný pracovník.

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