

# EU MONITOR

## Czech Perception of the EU Defence Policy

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- **On May 28<sup>th</sup> 2017, the German Chancellor surprised the world with a statement calling on Europe to 'take its fate into own hand', adding "the era in which we could fully rely on others is over to some extent". Pundits perceived her speech as a landmark change in a long-term European defence paradigm. Since the end of the WWII, the European security depended on the United States, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the American defence shield was further broadened to former soviet satellites in Central Europe. However, the last years were marked by a growing rift between the EU and the US. The election of President Donald Trump was a rude awakening for Europeans, who started asking whether military dependence on the US does not hamper EU's ability to conduct its foreign policy. Furthermore, the departure of the UK from the European Union underlined the crisis of European defence structures as the EU would lose a member state with the strongest European army, a seat in Security Council, and large part of its nuclear arsenal.**
- **As a result, the European leaders gathered shortly after the Brexit vote in Bratislava and decided they would launch PESCO, a voluntary defence cooperation on project basis. The aim was not only to renew the integrational process after the Brexit blow, but also to strengthen European defence research and provide the EU with missing hard power.**
- **Many articles have been written on this topic, be it elaborations on whether the EU needs strong defence and security pillar or how it should ideally be structured. The articles, however, remain delineated to political/policy level, omitting perceptions of the European population. Thus, the following paper aims at bridging this gap by analysing the Czech political as well as public attitudes to the newly strengthened defence pillar of the EU. It also presents recommendations for policymakers in light of the recent developments at the EU and Czech political level such as creation of new PESCO projects or significant increase of financial allocations in the European Defence Fund. The paper draws on quantitative as well as qualitative data gathered in research conducted by STEM and Behavio Labs in cooperation with the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy through 2018 and 2019.**

## EU defence in political parties' programme

During the years 2016-2018, the Czech Republic belonged to the strongest promoters of the PESCO cooperation. The then government led by Social Democrats was concerned about the growing rift between the West and the Visegrad 4 caused by disputes over solutions to Schengen Crisis and deteriorating state of Rule of Law in Hungary and Poland. Simultaneously, an energetic French President Emmanuel Macron was talking about the necessity to create a multi-speed Europe, preferably with Eurozone as the integration core. The Czech cabinet worried that the Czech Republic – as a non-Eurozone member state – would end up at the European political periphery, depriving it of any chance to influence the EU decision making. The PESCO cooperation was in this sense perceived as a leverage keeping the Czech Republic close to the EU's political core.

This paradigm continued for some time. However, after the change in government in 2018, Czechs made an almost complete U-turn. They did not participate in the second wave of PESCO projects, nor do they eagerly support the defence pillar in the new MFF. Such an abrupt change came as a surprise to many pundits. On the other hand, concerning that the treat of multispeed Europe vanished for the time of being, the policy shift was bound to come. Czechs perceived the defence cooperation as a vessel keeping them close to the EU's core; they did not support it due to ideological reasons. This approach to EU defence cooperation is also mirrored in programmes of Czech parliamentary political parties. They can be sorted into three groups:

1. The most numerous are supporters<sup>1</sup> of a deeper EU defence cooperation – the Pirate Party, conservative TOP09/STAN, and Social Democrats. They perceive NATO as a pillar for Czech defence,

but also stress the importance to develop EU's defence structures so that the Union can and exert hard power in time of deteriorating security in Europe's nearest surrounding. For the time of being, the parties do not present any grand future vision of EU army and limit their support to PESCO projects.

2. This group contains only the ruling ANO party, which does not have any specific position on EU defence cooperation. The party usually speaks only about internal security and fight against illegal migration. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš criticizes cuts in Cohesion Policy and Common Agriculture Policy, saying that the EU should abandon its aspiration to create a defence pillar in the new MFF and stick to traditional policies.
3. Finally, a third group of parties contains civic democrats ODS, and communist KSČM. Both parties are vocal about their resistance to any defence projects run by the EU, although for very different reasons. The ODS can be described as a "transatlantic promoter" stating that the Czech Republic should solely rely on NATO and the EU should remain an economic organisation. The KSČM, being the descendant of the old Czechoslovak Communist Party with strong links to Russia, rejects both NATO and EU Defence cooperation as a corollary. The party stipulates that collective defence must be tackled at pan-European level, even with states outside of NATO structures. OSCE should serve as an ideal platform for this activity.

<sup>1</sup> They only represent a ¼ of seats in the Czech Lower Chamber

## Perception of the EU related to Defence

In order to understand the ambiguous relationship of the Czech political elite to the EU defence integration, it is necessary to analyse the attitudes of the Czech society. After all, politicians are elected in free elections and without respecting public opinion to a certain extent, they would hardly be elected. Simultaneously, policy makers should always keep in mind the public sentiment so that they do not propose something politically unfeasible, or explain their suggestions in a manner that causes social rejection.<sup>2</sup>

## General remarks on Czech sentiments towards to EU

Before diving into discussions about the Czech opinion on EU defence, a few general remarks about the Czech attitudes to the EU merits mentioning. Firstly, Czechs lack any deeper knowledge of how the EU works, what policies it conducts and how the Czech representatives can influence the EU decision making. Simultaneously, qualified debate about important EU issues is missing in the public discourse, being usually limited to minor and sensationalist issues such as regulation of food names within the single market (e.g. what can be called “butter”), ban on single use plastics or limiting the engine strength in vacuum cleaners. This results in a general feeling that the EU focuses on unimportant dossiers or that it lacks the ability to solve grand challenges such as migration, terrorism and border protection, which are being securitized. Finally, there is also a strong sentiment within Czech society that the EU suffers from a “delivery gap” – European institutions tend to create grand European strategies in areas where they have very limited competency (v. European Pillar of Social Rights). As a corollary, average Czech citizens harbours expectations of new, grand European approach that does not materialize as

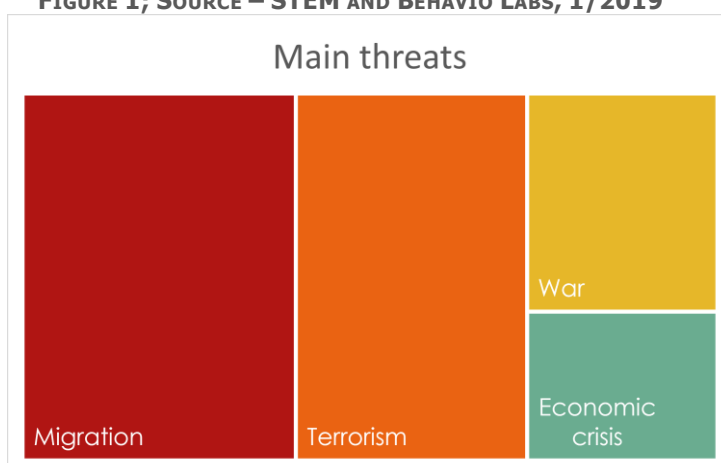
<sup>2</sup> In the following chapter, the article will primarily introduce data from a joint sociological research conducted by STEM agency and Behavio Labs in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy at the beginning of 2019.

effective policy<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, policy makers should always keep in mind whether they propose something the EU can deliver on, and whether their proposal aims at the hearth of the matter.

## Main threats perceived by the Czech Society

In general, Czech society seems to fear losing its current living standard. This is important mainly due to the fact that the most Eurosceptic groups of the Czech society suffer from this anxiety disproportionately more than supporters of the Czech membership in the EU. Spontaneous questioning showed that the largest perceived threats represented are migration, terrorism and war, followed by economic crisis. This is in line with the spring 2019 Eurobarometer, where Czechs also stated migration and terrorism as the main challenges to the European Union. This results in a situation where the Czech society – as well as the political elites – are still entangled in securitization of the recent migration crisis and terrorist attacks, making it extremely difficult to discuss other topics such as defence, digitalization, climate change or reform of the Common Agriculture Policy.

FIGURE 1; SOURCE – STEM AND BEHAVIO LABS, 1/2019

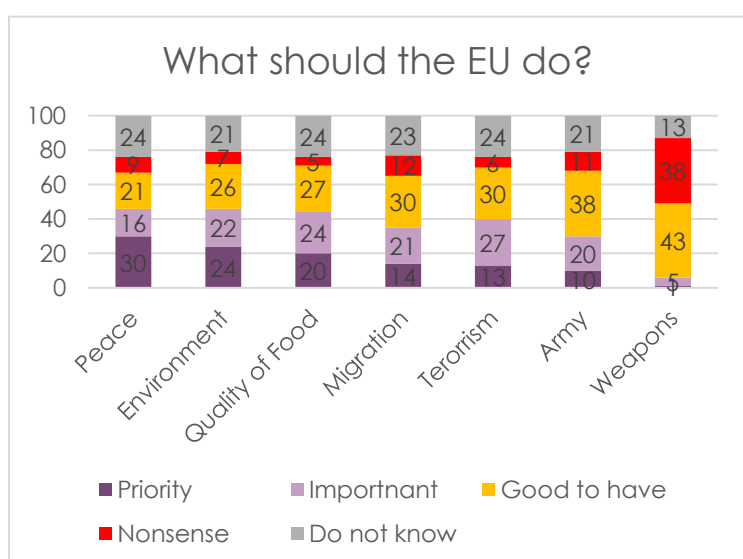


<sup>3</sup> These issues are not obviously always a fault of the European Union, but of the member state not willing to agree on effective measures at the European level. However, since the article focuses on public opinion and not reality, it is important to keep in mind the described Czech attitude towards the EU

## What kind of Union would you like to have?

In order to determine, what Czechs expect the European Union to do, we created our own campaign manifesto containing existing and future EU policies. The respondents were asked to sort the listed policies according to their importance – “priority”; “important”; “good to have”; “nonsense”; “do not know”. All proposed policies were packed in an appealing wording as if they were presented in a real election manifesto<sup>4</sup>.

The first spot is occupied by “preservation of peace”, “clean environment” and “good quality of food”. Regarding the security and defence issues, “protection against migration” and “fight with terrorism” reached good numbers. Contrary, the flagship of the broadening EU defence policy, joint procurement and development of weapon system”, did not manage to attract much of attention. In qualitative questioning (Focus groups), it turned out that the respondents could not imagine what this activity entails and what concrete purpose it serves.



Simultaneously, the interviewees mixed internal security/border protection with defence capabilities that the Union might use for protection against military threats and send abroad as part of peace keeping missions. Finally, defence integration tends to be closely linked with NATO, and the EU remains an economic integration in the minds of Czechs. It seems that the discussion about European defence autonomy has not arrived in a wider Czech public discourse.

Similar result showed in a prior questioning conducted in autumn 2019, which focused on priorities in the Commission’s proposal of new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027. The new European Defence Fund and financial support to joint military research and procurement showed the worst performance of all EU policies. Almost half (49 %) of the Czech population stated that financing military projects from EU budget would not be acceptable. Simultaneously, the more Eurosceptic a person is, the more they reject EU military projects.

Overall, it can be asserted that the newly created defence structures of the European Union are neglected by the Czech population. Czechs do not understand what purpose PESCO projects and EDF should serve. On the other hand, it seems they are open to the general idea of a European Army, or common European defence consisting of closely cooperating national armies. Migration and terrorism remain the primary concern for the Czechs, not a military threat by a foreign country. From this perspective, the original Czech enthusiasm for PESCO can be perceived as solely based on deliberation at political level and not rooted in the demand of the Czech society.

## Implications on Czech EU defence policy

The data showed that EU’s small concrete steps in the defence area – such as PESCO or European Defence Fund – are not fully comprehended by the Czech population. Joint

<sup>4</sup> For concrete wording of the questions, please see the annex.

České vize pro Evropu, evropské vize pro Česko  
Czech Visions for Europe, European Visions for the Czechs

procurement and development of weapon systems was labelled as “nonsense” by 38 % of the population, 43 % declared the policy as “good to have” and only 6 % said it should be priority or an important issue to tackle. These numbers are in a stark contrast to the general idea of European army protecting the EU, which was marked as “important” or “priority” by 30 % of the respondents, and as “good to have” by 38 %. Only 11 % resist the idea of joint EU forces, meaning that Czechs do not resist the notion of a joint European defence framework and the current scale simply misses the expectations.

It is reasonable to assume that Czechs would be open to do “big things” in the defence area. However, small steps towards an integrated EU army can be misunderstood. The Czech policy/opinion makers must understand that taking small steps might be politically easier at the EU level, but it cannot substitute grand projects in the minds of ordinary population. The average person has very limited knowledge of how the EU works and what purpose concrete policies serve. If an EU defence identity is to be created, it needs to aim high from the very beginning. Simultaneously, if EU defence is constrained only to minor projects, it can easily harm EU’s reputation in the Czech Republic. As mentioned above, our data showed that Czechs are very sensitive to the EU not living up to its promises, and a theoretical gap between a grand vision of EU army and its actual content may be derided as incompetency of the EU. Ultimately, Czech policy makers must decide whether they want to get on board the EU defence integration and push for

maximalization of its scope so that it is not restricted only to small projects, or they minimize Czech participation and further focus on economic integration.

Finally, another aspect that needs to be considered by the Czech policy makers is the latest development at the EU level (e.g. planned extension of EDF or a new wave of PESCO projects). It seems that the EU defence integration will be further developed, and simultaneously, the reasons that were behind the first Czech push for PESCO might easily recur in the future as discussions over common asylum policy will continue, and multi-speed Europe might experience revival with new German government created after the next German general elections. If Czechs decide to withdraw from their participation in PESCO, they might easily end up at the European political periphery, which strongly contradicts the main Czech interest – be a respected, constructive and active member of the Union. The Czech politicians must be careful how they communicate the dossier so that it does not become a misguided synonym for EU’s incompetence even before new plans are implemented.



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