

Czech Perception of the EU Climate Policy

Vít Havelka

In November 2019, the European Union introduced a comprehensive policy package, termed the European Green Deal, whose aim is to foster green transition of the European economy as well as support the implementation of 2050 climate neutrality goal. Ten months later, the European Council agreed on the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-27 and €750 billion recovery fund, of which at least 30 % should finance only green projects while also being precluded being eligible to finance initiatives that endanger the EU's climate neutrality goals.

The European Green Deal and 2050 climate neutrality goal remain a contentious issue in some Member States. Poland has, for instance, not subscribed to 2050 climate neutrality goal, and in countries such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia there is an ongoing discussion about whether the green transition would not harm their economies.

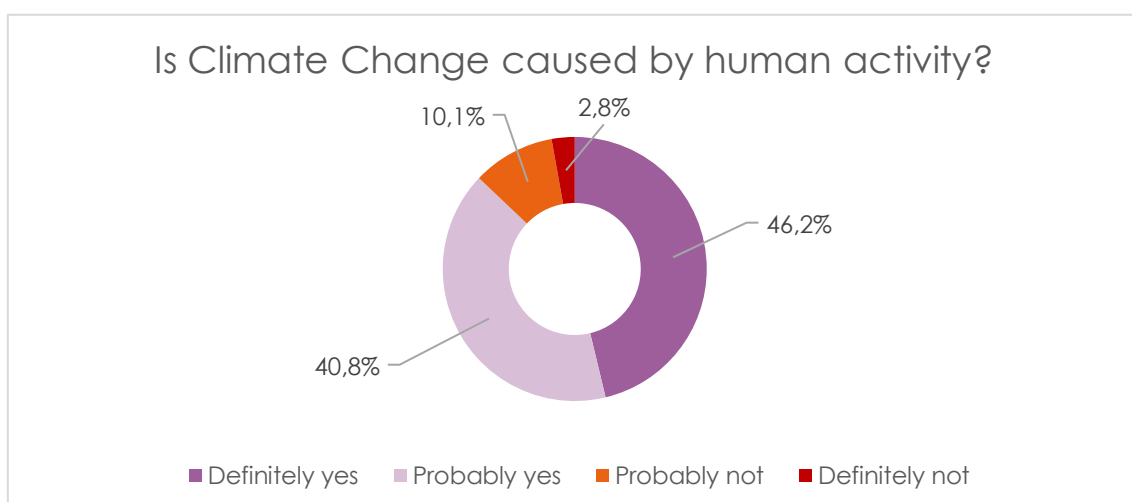
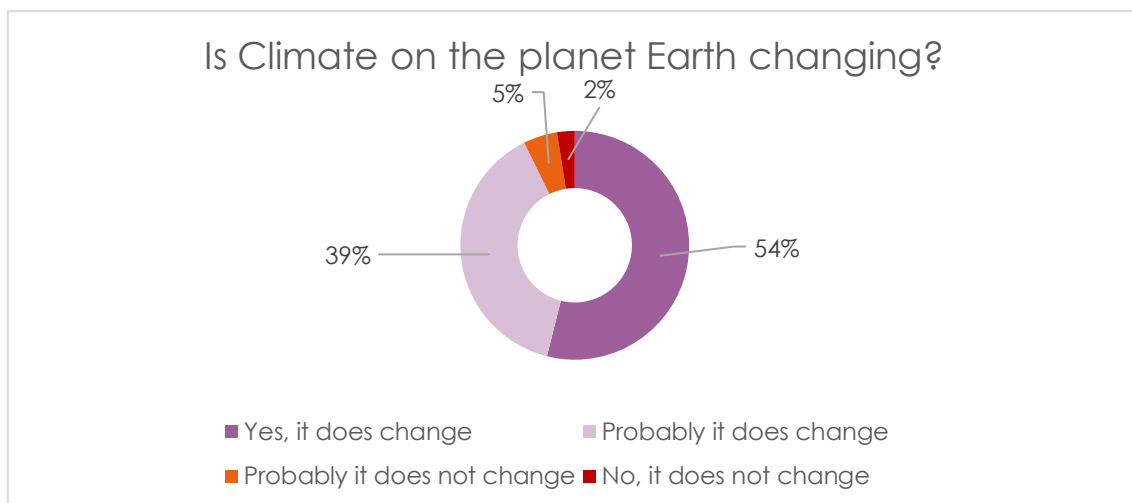
The following article aims at explaining how the Czech population perceives the EU Climate Policy. **If not stated otherwise, the paper is based on data gathered by research institute STEM in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy at the end of May 2020.** For more information about the methodology as well as detailed data, please contact either STEM or EUROPEUM.¹

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Existence of Global Warming

The Czech public debate has been marked by an ongoing discussion for many years whether the global warming exists and to what extent it is a ramification of human activity or a natural process. Former President Václav Klaus was a strong proponent of the 'natural-cause theory' during his presidency – a theory that was even back then and has since been thoroughly debunked – and many pundits think that he could have significantly influenced the public opinion. Furthermore, there are still many Czech politicians who appropriated and subscribed to his convictions once his mandate had ended.

Based on our data, we can confidently claim that climate change denialism was not internalized within the Czech public. Around 7% of citizens deny the existence of climate change, and only 13 % of Czechs think the climate transformation is not caused by human activity. Therefore, we can assert that there is a broad consensus in the Czech Republic that climate change exists, and that it is primarily driven by human behaviour.

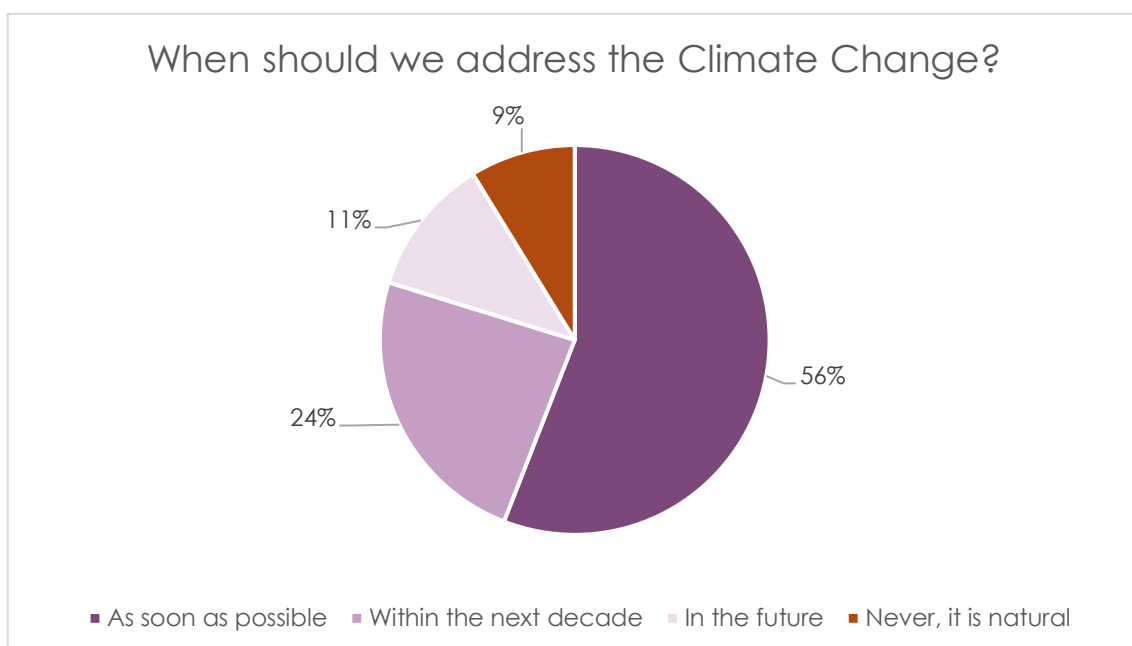


The consensus is strong, and it will be nearly impossible to change it in the future – no “alternative facts” could alter the conviction. Although there is not an adequate amount of viable data describing this situation ten or twenty years ago, it seems that Czechs overall got significantly more aware of climate change and its ramifications. Czechs experienced significant droughts and excessively high temperatures in the last five years, which mediated a direct experience with global warming. As a result, climate policy is slowly becoming one of the most important election topics, and there is next to no relevant political party that could ignore this issue. On the other hand, the Czech political parties do not have any concrete and comprehensive plans how to address climate change. Much of the discussion revolves around European climate policy, meaning that Czech political elite can be described as rather reactive.

Finally, Czechs seem to be pragmatic and rational in their selection of information sources – ecological organizations and especially scientists enjoy a strong trust among the public. The society takes their opinions seriously and is open to their suggestions how to tackle climate change.

Environment Protection & Emission Reduction

There is also a broad agreement on the fact that climate change and global warming should be addressed soon - 56 % of Czechs would start this process as soon as possible, and 24 % would start addressing climate change within the next 10 year. Only 9 % said in our survey that they would leave things as they are since they perceive global warming as a natural process.



The overall agreement on the necessity to address climate change, however, does not translate into a social contract defining what exactly needs to be done. It seems as if Czechs understand the challenges posed by changing climate, but would not be willing to alter their behaviour, or invest into a more low-carbon economy.

In focus groups survey conducted in autumn 2019, we identified a strong scepticism in the society that the Czech Republic could have any influence on global emissions – in other words, Czech feel they are too insignificant and small in order to feel reward for their contribution to tackling climate change. Furthermore, as the paper will discuss subsequently, citizens are not entirely sure how to become a more environmentally friendly society, and simultaneously not destroy their economy.

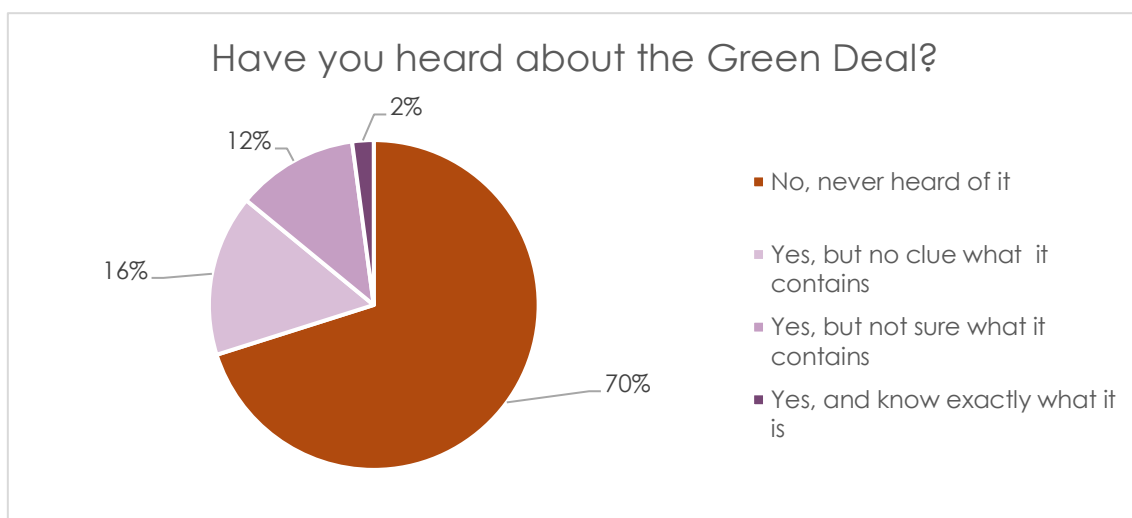
Consequently, Czech public debates tends to concentrate a lot on preserving environment, revive biodiversity, and improve land management, and much less on an actual transformation of energy sector and people's behaviour.

There is a prevalent feeling that Czech land have not yet recovered from the previous 40 years of Communism and thus, the Czech Republic should primarily focus on renovation of its environment than economic transformation.

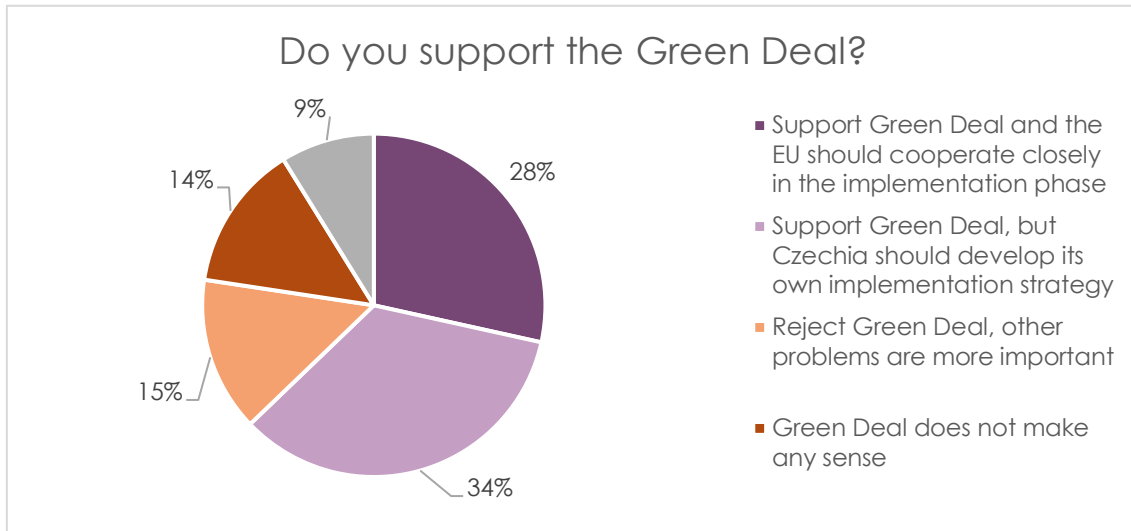
Attitudes towards the European Green Deal

Support to the European Green Deal

The European Green Deal is not well known in the Czech Republic. In fact, only 30 % of Czechs had heard the term prior our survey. Out of those 30 %, only around 14 % could tell the plan focuses on greening the European economy. As a result, all the below listed results required STEM to briefly explain the European Green Deal², which means that all the data is not stable and can change in the future, according to the prevailing public discourse.



² For more information about the exact wording of the explanation, please contact STEM or EUROPEUM.



Although Czechs have an extremely vague idea of what Green Deal entails, the plan makes sense to them; 62 % said that they would support such a policy. However, 34 % out of those stated that the Czech Republic should have an option to adjust the plan according to ‘Czech needs.’ This might be a result of a general Czech sentiment that is extremely sensitive to policies “imposed from above” courtesy of its communist past and subsequent embrace of neoliberalism. Czech society usually needs to feel tangible influence over European policies in order to accept them. This means that it will be crucial in the future to convince the Czech population that they are not put in front of already agreed plan, but that they can actively influence its final wording.

Influence of the European Green Deal on Climate

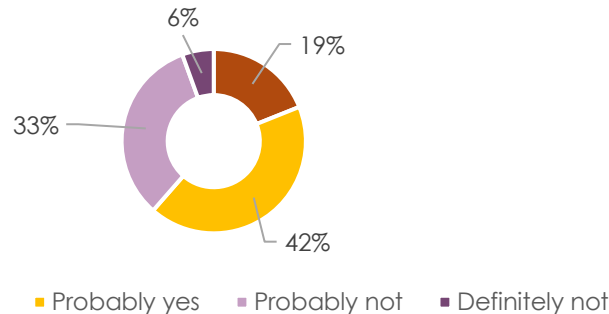
Czechs are sceptical about European ability to influence global emissions. The common sentiment is that there is China, the US and India who produce larger amounts of global pollution, and thus even if Europe transformed into a climate-neutral economy, the process of climate change would continue more or less unabated. Only 39 % of Czechs believe that the European Green Deal can influence global emissions, out of that a mere 6 % is convinced about it and 35 % said “probably yes.”

This is in line with the conviction that Czechs alone cannot change the tide of global warming. Czech society simply feels unimportant on global stage, and this sentiment translates to their perception of the EU. As a result, we can identify a strong tendency to pursue conservative policies rather than progressive solutions.

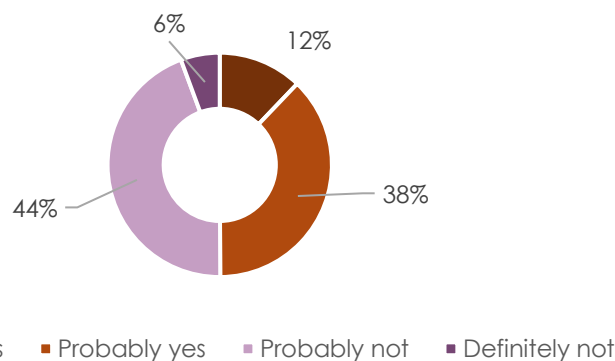
Economic Ramifications of Green Transformation

Czech society is split in their opinion about economic ramifications of the European Green Deal. Approximately 50 % of Czechs are convinced that the European Green Deal will harm the Czech economy, whereas another half believes the exact opposite. This might be result of the experience with post-communist transformation in the 1990s. Unlike the rest of Europe, Czechs still remember how difficult it is to change an economic model and what pitfalls it entails. Over the last 30 years, they have developed a competitive economy which significantly increased living standard in the Czech Republic, meaning that they are rather afraid to undergo another significant change with uncertain ramifications.

Green Deal will not influence the global climate due to already low emissions in Europe



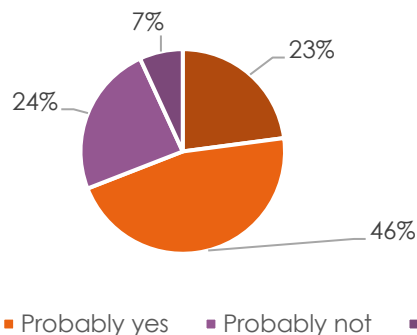
Will the Green Deal harm the Czech Economy?



These sentiments slightly differ through income groups. Lower income workers tend to be more afraid of changes than those who work in high-added value productions. Although the difference is not significant – ca. 10 p.p., we can surmise that with the implementation of the European Green Deal, the division might increase. A large portion of Czech workers are employed in low-added value jobs, which will likely be first to go given the ongoing digitalization, automation and decarbonization. Czechs have enjoyed a high employment rate in exchange for comparably lower wages than their counterparts in Western Europe. However, there is a danger that Czechs will stagnate with low wages and high unemployment as they end up with stranded production assets.

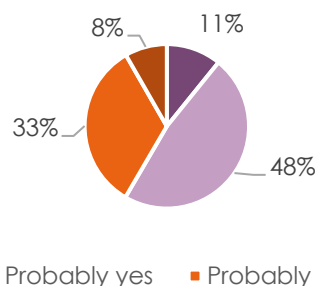
Although the Czech society is split in their conviction whether the European Green Deal will eventually harm the Czech economy, they think that the plan's implementation should be postponed to a time when the European economy has recovered from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an interesting result, especially given the fact that 59% of the Czech society thinks that the European Green Deal is an opportunity for modernisation of the Czech economy. It is a hint to the fact that the opinions about the European Green Deal, and EU green policies are not yet solid and can be subject to change.

CO2 reduction only after economic recovery



■ Definitely yes ■ Probably yes ■ Probably not ■ Definitely not

Is the Green Deal an opportunity for modernisation of the Czech economy?



■ Definitely yes ■ Probably yes ■ Probably not ■ Definitely not

Outlook into the Future

The discussion paper draw attention to several important facts regarding the European Green Deal and EU climate policy. Firstly, the Czech society is convinced that the Climate Change exists and that it is caused by human activity. This is by now indisputable, and there is probably nothing that could alter this opinion. Furthermore, Czechs tend to be pragmatic and believe scientists, meaning that there is little to no room for conspiracy theories or “alternative explanations” of global warming. Secondly, the Czech society still needs to thoroughly discuss how to address climate change – or in other words, how to change its behaviour so that the impact of human activity on the global climate is lower than today. Czechs are sceptical about their capability to influence global emissions. Simultaneously, they still remember the post-communism transformation in 1990s. The appetite to change economic model again is understandably low.

As a result, Czechs must initiate a thorough discussion which policy to follow. Western Europe is likely to be an important component here, as it has concluded their deliberation and moved towards renewables, e-mobility etc. while Czechs remain reluctant and lingering; however, the question is whether they will have enough time before they end up with an obsolete energy sector or the choice is inevitably forced upon them through global market changes. This outer pressure could eventually endanger the still more or less balanced discourse about the EU climate policy. As mentioned in the chapter above, Czechs are extremely sensitive to policies presented as “imposed from above.” It is easy to imagine that EU climate policy becomes a collateral damage for populist politicians who seek to externalize blame for late economic transformation.

The overall explosiveness of the topic might become even more visible as the economic transformation towards automatization and digitalization of industry proceeds. Many Czechs, especially those in a low-added value jobs, might lose their work without any substitute. While the overall Czech GDP output might be growing, not all parts of the society will benefit from the change. These processes are happening simultaneously with decarbonization, so there is a tangible danger that they might be linked together and presented as the sole reason for growing economic problems. On the other hand, greening, automation and digitalisation might have a positive impact on the living standard in the Czech Republic. It is only about timing and a solid strategy; Czechs need to embrace the changes and think carefully of their future steps. It would be tragic if the current Czech economic measures were later overtaken by global developments, which they could not control.

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