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## Czech citizens' and parties' attitude towards the EU in the 2019 European election campaign

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European Parliament elections in the Czech Republic confirm deep-seated beliefs about European integration and Czech role in the institutions rather than facts. The biggest political parties play to the popular tune of “us vs. Brussels” so much so that conservatives are barely distinguishable from populists as well as from social democrats. The only party standing out are the outlying Pirates.

### Introduction

In the run-up to European Parliament elections, Czechs are trying to reconcile calls for reform with keeping things as they are: membership with nationalism, prosperity without limitations, security without much responsibility. Unrealistic political posturing reveals just how divided and just how removed the Czech public is from day-to-day European politics.

### Keeping the EU at a distance

Czech relationship with the European Union is a perplexing one: 15 years from EU enlargement, the Czech Republic is no longer the frontrunner of the accession process, the poster child of

economic transformation and a winner of democratic transition compared with its less fortunate neighbours. It seems that in the last 15 years Czechs have lost their European drive just as the European Union plunged into yet another decade of crises.

In the protracted Lisbon treaty ratification, the Czech president Vaclav Klaus was the last person to attach his signature after a series of constitutional complaints effectively holding the rest of the EU members “hostage” from reform. During the economic and fiscal crises that swept the Economic and Monetary Union, Czechs observed from the sidelines, keeping the Czech koruna exchange rates low and patting themselves on the back for being the smarter for avoiding the expense of rescuing Greece and other states in dire straits. The 2016 migration crisis sparked yet another division of opinion when the Czech Republic along with Hungary, Slovakia and Romania voted against the asylum

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seekers relocation scheme. This confirmed that Czech membership in a somewhat reluctant bloc of V4 countries was increasingly at odds with underlying European values, as manifested also by the support shown to Poland during a European Commission infringement procedure against its Law on Ordinary Courts (2017) or to Hungary during a Commission infringement procedure related to the country's asylum policies, criminalisation of the third sector for support to asylum seekers and general breach of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2018).

While most Czechs still prefer EU membership to a “Czexit”, they remarkably remain one of the staunchly Eurosceptic nations in Europe with levels of dissatisfaction and (lack) of trust in the EU comparable or even surpassing those of currently Brexiting Britain.<sup>1</sup> Czechs also recorded the second lowest turnout in the 2014 European Parliament elections. Such attitudes might be puzzling, but not entirely surprising. Public knowledge about the European Union, its functions, policy agenda, goals or even about Czech representation's achievements is low.

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<sup>1</sup> Eurobarometer, Spring 2018 p13. Czech Republic ranks the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest after Greece with 69%, UK with 57% and CZ with 56% of population not trusting the EU institutions: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/83548>. The most recent poll from Spring 2019 shows that only 33% of Czechs think membership in the EU is a good thing and 24% percent would straight away leave: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/spain/resource/static/files/PDF/2019/eb911\\_sp\\_eurobarometer\\_en\\_web.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/spain/resource/static/files/PDF/2019/eb911_sp_eurobarometer_en_web.pdf). On long-term Eurosceptic trends, see for instance an interview with Petr Kratochvíl of IIR at <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1060236/EU-news-European-Union-Czech-Republic-UK-euroscepticism-latest> or Jan Kovar's thoughts on Euroscepticism at: <https://emerging-europe.com/voices/euroscepticism-rise-czech-republic/>.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction is between domestic and international rubrics only.

Media information on European policies is sporadic: none of the mainstream newspapers report on EU affairs daily;<sup>2</sup> civic education in primary and secondary schools on EU institutions and Czech role in the EU is just *pro forma*; and the country is host to dozens of fake news servers easily feeding off of popular myths about the EU.

For a long time, the Czech political elite pursued a lacklustre European policy based on a mantra of economic benefits.<sup>3</sup> Politically though, the discourse seems to echo a historical narrative of Czechs being the victims of stronger neighbouring powers,<sup>4</sup> being too small to make any substantial impact in EU, so why even try? According to sociologists, similar attitudes lead to a kind of self-absorption and isolationism<sup>5</sup> or “externalization” of Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Under such circumstances, the Czech debate on EU politics remains on the one hand highly abstract and technocratic<sup>7</sup> – a subject for “experts” – and thus out of reach for most. On the other hand, the “general” debate reaches

<sup>3</sup> The Czech Republic is a net beneficiary of EU funds, as well as an export-oriented economy profiting from open borders.

<sup>4</sup> Being ruled by the Habsburgs, then betrayed by the West and occupied by the Nazi Germany only to be “saved” by the Soviet Russia for 40 years caught in a slogan: *O nas bez nas* (“About us without us”).

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/serial-evropska-unie-myty-euomyty-smernice-ceske-vyrobky-ceska-identita.A180605\\_105910\\_domaci\\_jkk](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/serial-evropska-unie-myty-euomyty-smernice-ceske-vyrobky-ceska-identita.A180605_105910_domaci_jkk)

<sup>6</sup> For more on externalization and contributing factors, please see Michal Koran's analysis of Central European countries' European politics: <http://europeum.org/data/articles/ivf-koran.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Technical topics such as percentages of biofuel additives, EU regional funds allocation schemes or even understanding the legislative process itself in light of the asylum seekers redistribution mechanism!

often absurd levels blowing “butter” spread, cucumbers, light bulbs or drinking straw myths out of context and out of proportion. In such socio-political environment, it is thus quite easy to play the “praise the acting government/blame it on Brussels” policy game; populists, including the prime minister and his party, benefit from splitting the population into two opposing camps of “Eurohujers”<sup>8</sup>, “Truthlovers”<sup>9</sup> and the common-sense folk.

### Facts of Czech EU Life

As a matter of fact, in day-to-day European institutional processes the Czech representation is not doing such a bad job at all! According to Vote Watch Europe, the Czech parliamentarians “got the second highest average influence per MEP in the European Parliament.”<sup>10</sup> The Czech delegation consists of 21 parliamentarians, nevertheless it includes some long-term MEPs in leadership positions: Pavel Telička, Pavel Svoboda, Petr Ježek, Pavel Poc or Jan Zahradil. According to Vote Watch Europe: “Interestingly, Czech members scored the highest when it comes to influence exerted through formal leadership positions in the European Parliament’s bodies (bureau, committees, groups, etc.), whereas they have been less

prolific with regards to their legislative activities.”<sup>11</sup>

Another high-profile Czech in EU institutions is Commissioner Věra Jourová, who is in charge of an influential portfolio covering Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality. She is involved in key policy areas such as digital agenda,<sup>12</sup> energy and social dialogue. This year she was named among top 100 most influential people by the TIME magazine.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, even though not formally involved in European policy-making, the positive Czech image in Europe is challenged by a xenophobic, pro-Russian president supported by half of the electorate and abovementioned disinformation webs.

### Main party positions during the 2019 EU election campaign

So how did the 2019 European Parliament election campaign look like under these circumstances? Let us start with the prime minister’s ANO party, considered populist by some. “*The priority is EU reform!*” ANO claims.<sup>14</sup> It wants a Europe of stronger member states, clearly delineated competences among the institutions, a “depoliticised” European

<sup>8</sup> A derogatory term to describe supporters of European integration – a “Eurofile”.

<sup>9</sup> A derogatory term for liberals rooted in Vaclav Havel’s famous motto: Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/top-100-most-influential-eu-parliamentarians/>

<sup>11</sup> Pavel Telička (Vice-President of the European Parliament), Pavel Svoboda (Chair of the Committee on Legal Affairs), Petr Ježek (Chair of the Special committee on financial crimes, tax evasion and tax avoidance), Pavel Poc (Vice-Chair of ENVI and

political coordinator of S&D in the special PEST committee) and Jan Zahradil (President and Spitzenkandidat of the ACRE party): <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/top-100-most-influential-eu-parliamentarians/>

<sup>12</sup> Including the General Data Protection Regulation and regulation of Facebook or Google.

<sup>13</sup> Time Magazine top 100 Influential People: <http://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2019/>

<sup>14</sup> ANO EP elections programme: <https://www.anobudlip.cz/file/edee/ke-stazeni/ano-cesko-ochranime.pdf>

Commission and a stronger European Council<sup>15</sup> giving the European Commission a mandate to act, rather than allowing it to take concrete initiatives. In other words, this party is clearly pushing Czech European politics in an intergovernmental direction, seeing EU institutions as “servants” of the member states. Protecting national interests was best caught in the campaign motto: *“We Will Protect Czech Republic. Hard and Without Compromise”*. This relates also to protection of the Schengen area,<sup>16</sup> different quality of groceries sold under the same label,<sup>17</sup> greater liberalisation of services, etc. A big request relates to the European budget and EU structural funds, the common denominator being: Czechs (i.e. a Czech government lead by ANO) want to decide themselves where to invest the money.<sup>18</sup>

The main opposition party Civic Democratic Party (ODS) campaigned in a similar vein: more power to the members states as they are the only sources of legitimate power<sup>19</sup> (including greater competences on redirecting structural and cohesion funds). In a classic liberal vein, the EU institutions are there for the member states and not the other way around. Just like ANO, the Civic Democrats campaigned for a clear

delineation of roles and institutional competences, in other words making sure which policy areas are suitable for EU supranational governance, and which ones are better governed at home. Curiously enough, one can read between the lines of their programme the approval for differentiated integration. TV campaigns nevertheless imitated ANO's PR style: rely on our experience<sup>20</sup> and common sense.

The Social Democrats, ANO's coalition government partner, remained somewhat subdued – actually without an official EP election programme(!), echoing the popular themes from its coalition partner:<sup>21</sup> Czech national interest, secure Schengen area, no to double standards, less bureaucracy. Unlike ANO, the Social Democrats want to support green projects protecting water and soil.

The fourth prolific party that played a role in the 2019 election campaign is the Pirates<sup>22</sup> (opposition), who campaigned for more freedom, an “upgrade” of EU governance, more wealth, more sustainability and more justice. Quite predictably they call for more digital freedom, reform of copyright laws, more investments into technology, and better and

<sup>15</sup><https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/projevy/projev-predsedy-vlady-na-konferenci-15-let-clenstvi-ceske-republiky-v-evropske-unii-173770/>

<sup>16</sup> In 2017 migration and security were the topics which helped the party achieve a victory in the parliamentary elections.

<sup>17</sup> Double standard of the same food products is a relevant popular concern, nevertheless some pundits point out this is quite a bit hypocritical as the food manufacturing companies in the prime minister's trust fund are not particularly known for quality products (Marek Švehla in *Respekt* 20/2019 <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2019/20/milka-s-krenem-a-horcici>)

<sup>18</sup> Paradoxically Prime Minister billionaire Andrej Babis is currently investigated by the European Commission for a conflict of interest: being in a position to influence the direction of structural funds and being connected with the biggest consortium of chemical and agricultural producers in the country Agrofert (currently in a trust fund).

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.ods.cz/volby2019/program-evropske-desatero>

<sup>20</sup> Jan Zahradil is a household name, embodying a successful MEP (see above) and also a Spitzenkandidat for the next Commission.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.cssd.cz/data/files/volby-do-ep-argumentar-final.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.pirati.cz/program/euoparlament2019.html>

more transparent communication with EU representatives. They also propose online commentaries on legislative proposals. The Pirates' priorities also include the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (in connection with environmental protection and support for small and medium-sized farmers), better waste management and use of technologies to decrease fossil fuel dependency. In terms of justice, they advocate for equal chances for men and women, equal access to digital services and fair job market. It is the only party which does not imitate others and which clearly formulates its own priorities.

## Conclusion

The 2019 European Parliament elections campaign in Czech Republic revolved essentially around three issues: first, national interest – ideally a reform or redefinition of roles of European institutions towards giving a greater say to member states. Second, a secure Schengen area with member states deciding on migration matters. Third, second class – second class quality food, implicitly also second class “membership” relating back to defence of national interest vis-à-vis Brussels.

These themes seem to have found resonance with the public at last, as the election turnout increased by 10% to 28.72% (still third lowest in the EU<sup>23</sup>). Predictably, ANO won the election gaining 6 seats, followed by the Civic Democrats with 4, while the Pirates won 3 seats. The rest of the seats were divided between liberals, radical right and communists. The Social Democratic party lost its 4 seats and will not have a representation in the EP at all.

These results should nevertheless be taken with a grain of salt: it remains to be seen to what extent it is even possible to reform the EU institutional roles without renegotiating primary law. It also remains unclear how the ANO party wants to reconcile popular expectations of a European policy “without compromise” with the day-to-day *modus operandi* of European institutions based on coalition building and compromises. Surely a less detached, gullible electorate and less “externalised” European debate would support greater citizen knowledge and participation in shared governing of European affairs.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://election-results.eu/turnout/>



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