



Report

Perceptions of EU in Central Europe amid COVID-related crisis

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On 23 March 2021 the Think Visegrad in Brussels and the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy organised an online webinar in which the Central European countries' perception of the EU was discussed. The debate was hosted and moderated by Žiga Faktor (Head of Brussels Office, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy) who opened the discussion with words of welcome. The panellists who participated in the discussion were: Vladislava Gubalova, Research Fellow at Globsec, Vít Havelka, Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, Velina Tchakarova, Director of AIES - Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, Karolina Zbytniewska, Editor in Chief at EURACTIV.pl and Nikolett Garai, Research Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. In addition, the debate was enriched by the precious contributions of Vladimír Bilčík. Deputy of the European Parliament since 2019, he is a member of the Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and Foreign Affairs (AFET) committees, as well as of the Democracy, Rule of Law & Fundamental Rights Monitoring Group.

The event was opened by a keynote speech of **MEP Bilčík** who commented on the consequences of the pandemic. According to him, only did the pandemic hit our economies hard, the spread of the Covid-19 virus has undermined political stability, weakened our democracies and let China and Russia prevail as geopolitical actors, especially in Central-Eastern Europe. In addition, although the digital revolution has much progressed, disinformation and dissemination of fake news were hard to be contained. On the other hand, despite some mistakes, the EU came up with the largest stimulus package ever, the Next Generation EU, and negotiated enormous quantities of vaccines with big pharma companies that have been of vital importance in particular for smaller member States.

Regarding the V4's perceptions, **MEP Bilčík** underlined unusual conflicting opinions on the role of the EU in the field of healthcare and on how they perceive the Future of Europe. While Hungary turned to China and bought large quantities of the

Sinovac vaccines, Slovakia is experiencing a political crisis, resulting from the Government's controversial strategies to the pandemic and the possible use of the Russian vaccine. The strength of the Visegrad group has always been the ability to adopt common positions, a unity that in this last year has been compromised and enhanced a much less cohesive cooperation.

This was also stressed by **Vladislava Gubalova**, who confirmed the dissatisfaction of Slovaks regarding the Government's approach, as well as questionable communication strategy that further enhanced a general discontent. Indeed, following the worsening of the situation, Slovak authorities blamed the citizens for being irresponsible, instead of trying to find a compromise between the containment of the virus and people's needs. According to recent polls, 83% of the Slovak population is unhappy with the Government. Conversely, the EU has not been a target for criticism, as 40% of Slovaks consider that the EU handled the first wave of the pandemic way better than China. More generally, 75% Slovaks recognise the importance of being part of the EU, which has probably been increased thanks to the influence of the pro-EU President Zuzana Čaputová. Regarding vaccinations, most citizens believe that the inefficiency lies in the Government's lack of a strategy and not in the EU inability to provide them.

Speaking about Hungary, the political situation is rather stable and **Nikolett Garai** believes that citizens feel reassured by the Government's statements on the ongoing of the pandemic and in particular by the data regarding the vaccines carried out, which demonstrates again how communication is important. Orbán made clear that only through massive vaccination, the fight against the virus can be won and this is why people did not contest the purchase of the Russian and Chinese vaccines. However, as in all Central European countries, before the pandemic there was a growing loss of confidence in the Government for some political choices, whose effects were further enhanced in this last year. Although Hungarians did blame the EU for being too slow in the provision of vaccines, according to the Eurobarometer, they are still convinced Europeanists. The pandemic made the



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appreciation slightly decrease, but not far from the European average.

As **Karolina Zbytniewska** highlighted, in Poland society is much polarised, as half the population fully supports the Government's actions and the way it faced the spread of the virus. Some put in question the much-acclaimed EU solidarity and were critical to the Commission's negotiations with pharmaceutical industries, in particular of the AstraZeneca affair. Indeed, according to some polls, 54% of citizens declared not to trust the British-Swedish vaccine. Similar to Hungary, the Poles are strong EU-enthusiasts.

In these weeks, the Austrian Chancellor's initiative has made headlines, as he sent a letter to the Commission and the European Council with complaints regarding the distribution of coronavirus vaccines. The letter was co-signed by four other Prime Ministers and was aimed at triggering a prompt and effective reaction from the EU leaders, which seemed to have worked. As **Velina Tchakarova** pointed out, it needs to be clear that Chancellor Kurz is pro-Europe and the letter was not against the EU in general. Concerning the population level of satisfaction, Austrians have supported the Government's measures enforced throughout the pandemic, but were disappointed by the community approach. Although 60% of the population is much in favour of preserving the EU, a worrying data regards the pandemic's impact on the EU: half of the interviewees believes that Europe will emerge weakened by the health crisis.

In Czech Republic the situation is much different, as said by **Vit Havelka**. According to some polls published in February, only 25% of Czechs declared to trust the Government's actions in tackling the pandemic, a percentage that has constantly decreased since the beginning of the second wave and that seems to correspond to the current support for the Prime Minister's party ANO. This slump is due to the pandemic development and the Government's weak responses. On the other hand, the trust in the EU follows an opposite trend: at the beginning it decreased and since September it has been rising again. However, from his experience, **Vit**

Havelka foresees another decline in trust, as it usually happens during economic crises.

Another issue object of the debate, was disinformation and foreign influences during the pandemic. According to **Karolina Zbytniewska**, tackling the spread of fake news and disinformation, especially from Russia and China, should be one of the top priorities for European countries. However, our politicians seem to be part of the problem, as what is needed is society's full trust in authorities and institutions, as well as education and media literacy, which is what lacks at the moment. **Velina Tchakarova** made a distinction between the strategies used by the two countries above-mentioned. While Russia used the traditional methods for spreading disinformation, which the EU has learnt to recognise and to stop, China adopted a different approach. Indeed, it was able to shift the blame for the spread of the pandemic and to create a positive image of itself. In addition, China managed to emerge as a winner and its economy was not as badly hit as in Europe and in the United States.

The debate was concluded with a mention to European solidarity. According to **Vit Havelka**, in Central Europe and in particular in Czech Republic, there would not have been any vaccines without the EU negotiations. Another question focused on the usage of yet unapproved vaccines by some Member states. **Nikolett Garai** argued that by using Chinese and Russian vaccines, EU member states only try to better protect its citizens and that vaccines shouldnt act as a political tool. **Velina Tchakarova** disagreed with the following statement, pointing out the dangers this approach brings to the table. Moreover, this leads to a further disproportion among the vaccination pace of EU Member states. Indeed, one of the lessons that can be learnt from the pandemic is the importance of the role of EU solidarity, which often is taken for granted, especially in Central Europe.



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About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. 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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About EUROPEUM in Brussels

Building on a long history of EUROPEUM in Prague, we opened our office in Brussels in January 2016. EUROPEUM has been the first think-tank from the Central Europe to branch out to the heart of the European Union. Our motivation has been to follow the debates on EU policies and politics from close and to contribute to them by strengthening the voice of the Czech Republic and other central and east European countries. At the same time, we would like to use our Brussels presence to boost discussions on the EU back in the region, through introducing research by Brussels-based experts, offering their perspective at local events, cooperating with the media, etc.

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