

**Update**

# Czech perception of the EU's COVID-19 response

Vít Havelka



## Contents

General perception.....	1
Economy.....	1
Vaccines .....	3
Conclusions .....	4

## Summary

This article develops on our last year's preliminary findings with regard to how the Czech society perceived the EU's reaction to COVID-19 pandemic. We mainly analyzed whether the EU managed to retain its level of popularity and to what extent Chinese and Russians improved their appeal<sup>1</sup>.

This year we focused in detail on how the EU performed in relation to the pandemic, what impact on the Czech society the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund has had, as well as how the EU money should be distributed. The article is therefore a review of the Czech contemporary sentiments towards the EU policies. If not stated otherwise, the data were gathered in April 2021 during our regular questioning conducted by STEM Research Institute in cooperation with EUROPEUM Institute for European policy.

The article is divided into several sections. Firstly, we examine the development of the overall attitudes towards the EU and what path it should take in the upcoming years. The next section elaborates on the vaccine purchase and the third tackles EU economic response, and whether it helped to promote Union's popularity in the Czech Republic.

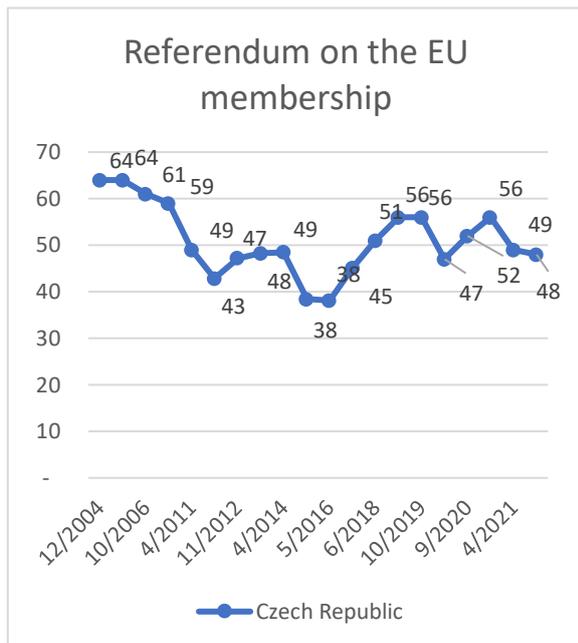
---

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please, visit: <https://www.europeum.org/articles/detail/3637/jak-ceska-republika-vnima-reakci-eu-na-covid-19>



## General perception

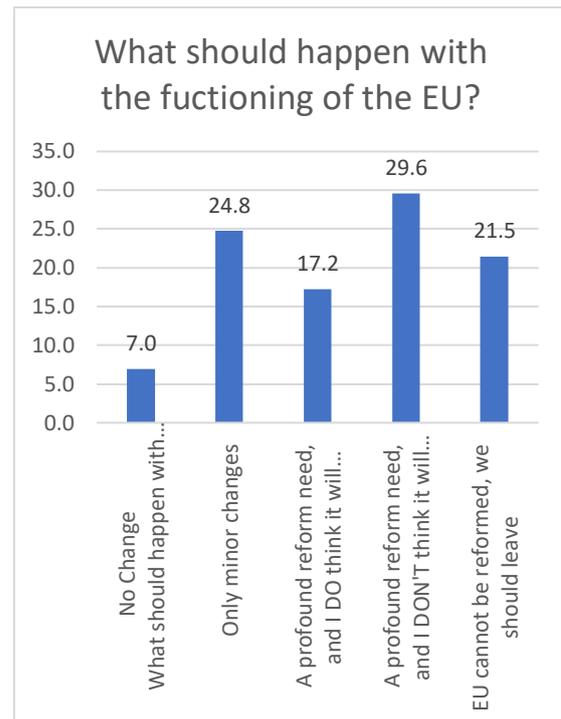
In terms of general attitudes towards the European Union, the Czech Republic experience an overall decrease of support to the EU membership (see chart below). As in every case, however, it must be stressed that this is very unlikely due to concrete steps of the European leadership, but rather as a result of the overall political fatigue with politics in the Czech Republic. From our previous studies we know that the support to EU membership correlate with satisfaction with the Czech politics as such. And this further corresponds to the general idea of whether someone expects her or his life to improve in the future.



Simultaneously, the previous binary question tends to be superficial and does not fully grasp the nuances in what the Czech society would like the EU to become. If we ask more elaborately, a new picture starts to appear. Only around 21% of the Czech population would leave the EU without deliberating whether the Union could be reformed. With a certain degree of simplification, this number represents a segment of the population that despises the EU for

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/3257/c>

everything it represents. The rest has an ambiguous opinion – they appreciate certain aspects of the EU membership, but simultaneously they feel the EU should be changed.

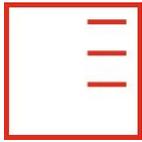


The advantage of this approach is that the familiarity with EU policies is extremely low in the Czech Republic (see the 'Brand EU' publication<sup>2</sup>) and thus the term "reform" can be filled with almost any content. Furthermore, politicians can repeatedly talk about reforming the EU, only ideas and narratives change. What remains is the feeling that the EU must be reformed and that we are "trying".

## Economy

Economic ties are one of the most important glues between the Czech Republic and the rest of the EU. Czechs know very well that the EU membership pays off and that it contributes to the overall stability of the Czech economy. This approach also mirrors in the conviction that without a growing European

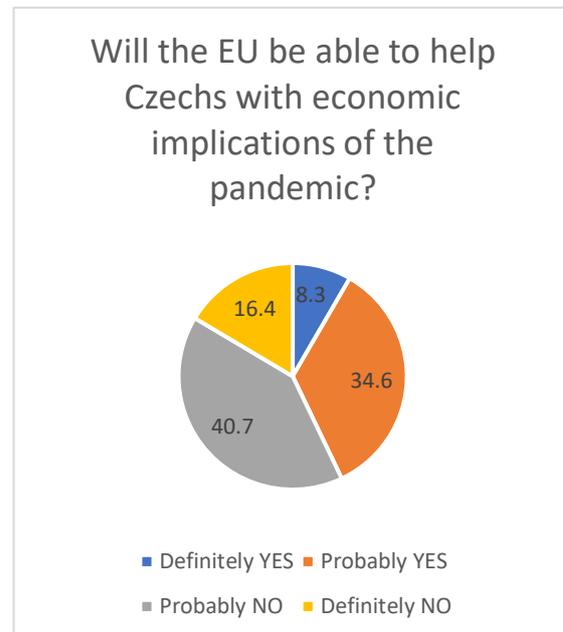
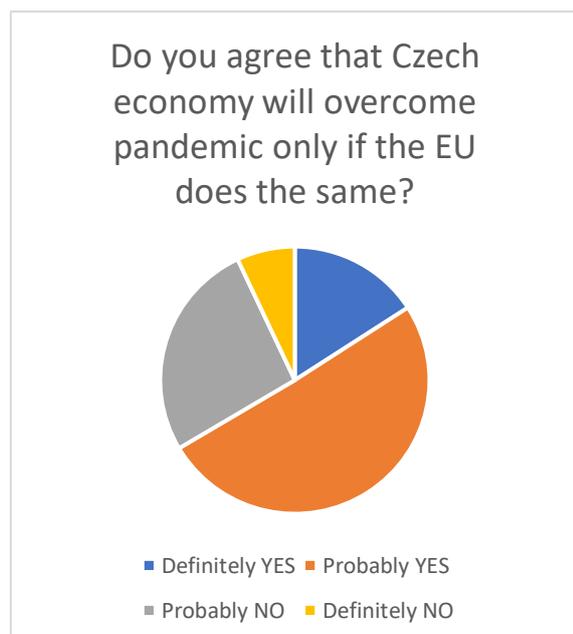
esi-a-znacka-eu-jak-se-citi-cesi-ohledne-eu-a-co-by-mohlo-zmenit-jejich-nazor



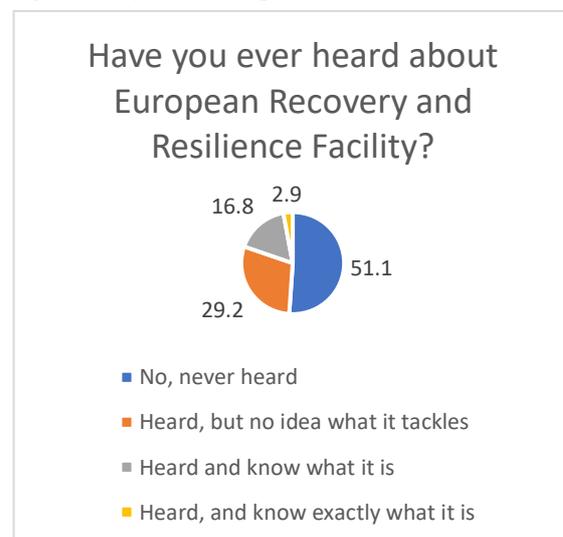
economy, there will be no post-pandemic recovery in the Czech Republic (see chart below).

This, however, does not mean that the Czech society would be fully appreciating the access to Single Market. The dependence can also be perceived as a subordination to Western companies using the relatively cheap Czech labor, and not reinvesting profits. Such a feeling is becoming more and more prominent and might eventually be turned into a strong anti-globalist and anti-EU sentiment.

Furthermore, even though Czechs are convinced that the growth of the European economy will be instrumental during the post-pandemic recovery, the same sentiment is not shared with respect to whether the EU itself would be able to help the Czech Republic. This hints to the fact that Single Market and the EU are perceived as two separate entities. Simultaneously, an opinion on any EU policy derives from personal perceptions on the EU itself. Someone who despises the Union will perceive any EU policy as a problem. Vis a vis, pro-EU citizens will uncritically accept anything “coming from Brussels”.



The overall skepticism about the EU’s future performance might also be due to a weak knowledge of what the Union actually does. A slight majority of Czechs have never heard about the Next Generation EU Fund, and mere 18% have some degree of familiarity. As mentioned above, it does not matter that much what concrete policies the Union introduces, but rather if someone is satisfied with his or her life. The entire EU and its activity is perceived as one package, and single policy changes cannot significantly alter its reputation.





Finally, it is also important to look how the EU funds should be allocated according to the Czech Republic. The entire recovery package was meant to spark innovation and modernization through the EU. In line with subsidiarity and proportionality principles, the Union focused on issues that can improve EU member state policies, but not substitute them. It is therefore surprising that the majority of Czech population would like to use the allocations for covering the rising debt.

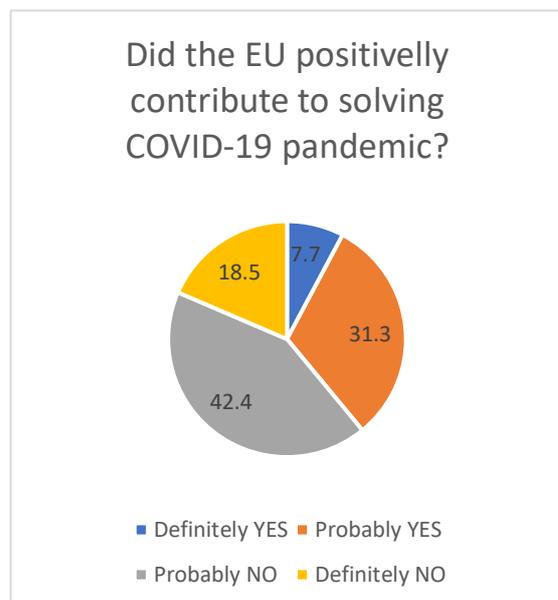
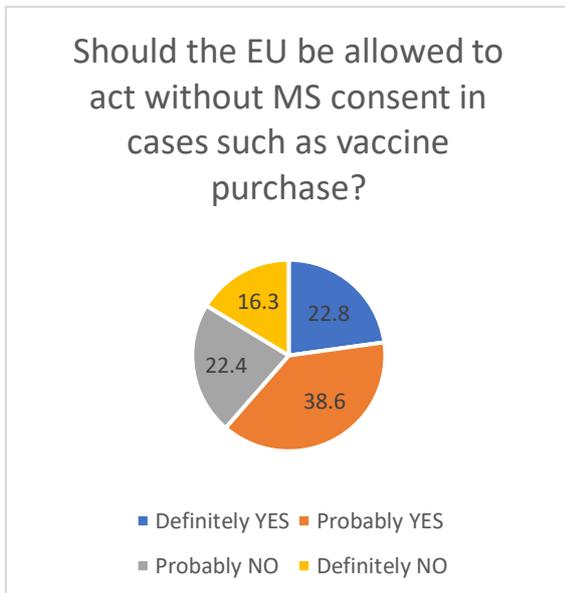
In any case, this points to the need to accustom narratives to each member state. For example, in the Netherlands one might want to pursue the innovation discourse, whereas in the Czech Republic how it helps to cover the national debt. The NGEU will indirectly substitute national budget and lower the rising debt. Eventually, both stories are valid. The new fund will support areas that would normally have to be covered from the national budget. This has been happening for some time, as e.g., large part of the Czech pre-school system directly depends on EU funding.

To summarize, the actual EU steps with regard to facilitation of the post-pandemic recovery will likely not have a direct impact on the Union's popularity. However, it might increase the chances that economy will continue in a positive trajectory. This will obviously translate into a higher trust in institutions, satisfaction with politics and subsequently the EU membership as such.

## Vaccines

The vaccine purchase was a flagship of the Union's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Without any exaggeration, the EU played a pivotal role in distribution vaccines across Europe and contributed significantly to its political and social cohesion. This was also reflected in last year's issue, where a majority of Czechs stated that the Czech Republic would not be able to acquire new vaccines more efficiently.

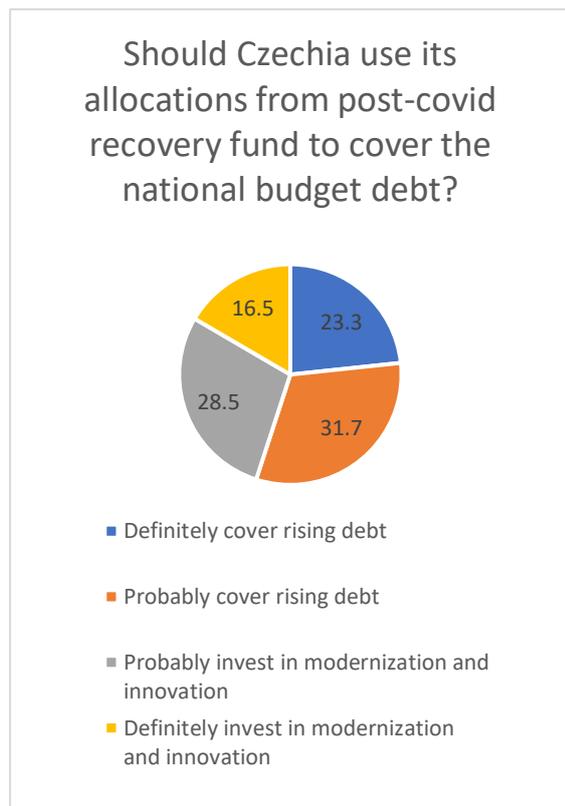
Such a conviction, however, did not translate into the general conviction of whether the EU positively contributed to solving the COVID-19 pandemic. As chart below shows, only 38% of the Czech population think that the EU had a positive impact on the pandemic. We measured a slight increase from the last year, but the EU's role is still evaluated rather negatively.





Finally, there is the question of whether the Union should get extra powers to move quicker in vaccine purchase than the current treaties allow. Around 60% of Czechs think that this should be implemented, which somehow underlines the overall appreciation of the EU's role in the vaccine purchase.

It also addresses one of the biggest problems with the COVID-vaccine purchase. The EU was partially slow in the vaccine roll-out due to a long negotiation at the EU level. The Commission was therefore not able to act as swiftly as the UK or US. Even with the support of population, it is a question whether the EC would ever be allowed to receive more powers. Still, the answers show a certain trend that should not be underestimated.



## Conclusions

The article tackled the impact of EU's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic on the Union's popularity in the Czech Republic. Several distinctive conclusions can be drawn on this. Firstly, we could see a drop in positive answers to question whether Czech citizens would vote for remaining in the EU. Currently, we are at approximately 48%, which is a slump by 8 p.p. since Autumn 2020. Notably, this decrease is not due to a specific EU activity, but the overall bad societal situation. We have seen it during last financial crisis that the EU's popularity derives from the general satisfaction with someone's life and Czech politics.

Secondly, the EU's economic response is not well known in the Czech Republic. Only a small fraction of the Czech society knows of the Next Generation EU's existence. Moreover, Czech would rather like to use the allocations as substitutes to weaker tax revenues that increased the Czech government debt. It points to the fact that EU's promotion activity should be tied to every single member state. In other words, the same policy must be explained differently through the EU.

Finally, Czechs predominantly appreciate the Union's role in vaccine purchase. Majority would even prefer if the European Commission would obtain more powers to act independently so that it could be more flexible in the ordering process. On the other hand, it is important to mention that EU policies do not necessarily translate in its improved reputation. As mentioned in the first paragraph, this is solely a matter of overall satisfaction with personal life rather than concrete EU actions.



December  
2020

## About the author

Vít Havelka is a Ph.D. student at the Department of European Studies, Institute of International Relations, Charles University in Prague. Mr. Havelka focuses on institutional relations of the EU and its member states, the EU budget, Europeanisation, and the transformative power of the EU. Since 2016 Vít Havelka was employed as the Political Officer at the Norwegian Embassy in Prague, and from February 2018 he is a Research Fellow at EUROPEUM.

Contact e-mail: [vhavelka@europeum.org](mailto:vhavelka@europeum.org)

## 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.

[More about us](#)

## Contact

Web: [europeum.org](http://europeum.org)

Prague Office address: Staroměstské náměstí 4/1, 110 00, Praha 1

Tel.: +420 212 246 552

E-mail: [europeum@europeum.org](mailto:europeum@europeum.org)

**Brussels Office** address: 77, Avenue de la Toison d'Or. B-1060 Brusel, Belgie

Tel: +32 484 14 06 97

E-mail: [brussels@europeum.org](mailto:brussels@europeum.org)

More publications can be found on [our website](#).

*The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union