

Report

Workshop for Serbian journalist and civil society representatives in the project "Supporting media freedom in Serbia in relation to the EU accession process"

28.06.2021

In the first part of the discussion, the speakers introduced the context in which the Czech Republic joined the EU, to what extent it was meeting the conditions and what were the most problematic areas as well as the overall atmosphere in the society. Then the speakers compared the circumstances of Czech EU accession to the current situation in the EU enlargement process.

The speakers stressed the fact that despite the present idealism over the idea of “return to Europe” in the Central and Eastern Europe, the process was still rather long and difficult due to the strict EU’s conditionality and the very high expectations the citizens as well as political elites in the CEE countries had. The task ahead was challenging as beside the democratic transformation in parallel there was an economic transformation and transformation of the legal system, thus a multiplication of transformation processes. The speakers furthermore identified several specific obstacles former Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic had to deal with, among them the dissolution of the joint Czechoslovak state, historic issues with the regions bordering with Germany and dealing with the past, or later the dispute with Austria over the Temelín nuclear power plant. The Czech political elites were also divided over the task of political and economic transformation and integration with some influential leaders (including the PM and later President Václav Klaus) prioritizing the economic dimension over the political one. A part of the political elites voiced their fears of losing significant part of the state’s sovereignty after joining the EU and these narratives were adopted also by a part of the society. These concerns led even to a unilateral memorandum accompanying the Czech application to the EU. On the EU’s side, however, the situation was to some extent similar to the current one with the EU dealing with its own reform and the present dilemma between deepening versus enlarging. The candidate countries thus faced a large uncertainty regarding the date for potential accession, number of countries that will join and in how many waves. In addition, there were some transitional periods and other limitations to be introduced at the event of accession in order to slow down the integration of the new member states

into all EU policies. Some of the unprecedented transitional periods related to the movement of people and labor as well as some reduction in the direct payments in the Common Agricultural Policy. Already at that time, the EU’s insistence on dealing with the past and resolution of bilateral issues. e.g. with Austria, together with the limitations introduced on the accession of the new member states into the EU provided some grounds for growing Czech Euroscepticism, especially accompanied by the narratives around loss of sovereignty promoted by some prominent politicians. However, in the question of Euroscepticism in the Czech society the speakers stressed that the public is generally ill-informed about the EU affairs and the negative attitudes towards the EU are associated with little knowledge about what the EU does and how it functions.

The discussion then moved to the question of the role of civil society and non-governmental sector in the accession process. The speakers stressed that although the context during Czech accession was different to some extent, our experience and activities are still relevant for other countries. The Czech civil society organizations at that time were cooperating closely with the government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in promoting the EU accession among the public and educating the society about the EU. Some NGOs also provided trainings for teachers and even civil servants and guidelines for state officials on how to communicate about the EU towards the public. The speakers shared some concrete activities which proved to be beneficial during the Czech pre-accession period with the participants of the workshop.

During the discussion about the media environment and reporting on the EU, the Czech journalists shared their feeling that the lack of information and disinterest of majority of the society in the EU affairs is a serious challenge for journalists reporting about these topics. They shared their perceptions about how the Czech Euroscepticism developed over time and what role media played in it. They also shared some strategies how they try to fight the Euroscepticism and negative attitude towards any EU-related topics among the audience, such as a closer cooperation with experts and think tanks or

the use of new media platforms. They also noted the fact that the number of Brussels-based Czech journalists has decreased rapidly since the last Czech EU Presidency in 2009 to only three journalists at this moment.

A discussion with the participants followed with the representatives of Serbian media and CSOs describing their experience and circumstances of their work in Serbia. It was noted that the dominant government-owned media generally portray the EU in a very negative way. Research has shown that the main source for reporting on the EU in media is the President Vučić, acting thus as the main source for explanations about the EU and accession process to the public. According to these narratives, the EU is viewed as too demanding and not helping, without a right to criticize Serbia for the problems in the rule of law area etc. The government and President are not promoting the EU membership in the public space and are not informing the citizens properly. Eventually it is thus only the pro-European media and civil society who are doing the government's job in this regard. In reaction by the Czech participants, it was mentioned that despite the rather positive environment before the accession, the situation in few years after the Czech EU membership was achieved was more similar to the one in Serbia when the anti-EU rhetoric was dominant in the CZ (presented mainly by then-President Klaus). At that point it was mostly journalists and NGOs steering the political debate in opposite direction but still these narratives led to extreme drop in EU's popularity in CZ. This fact can sadly serve as a lesson for next new member states that the Eurosceptic narratives can gain in prominence after the accession, also due to the disillusionment in the society with the improvements in their country after joining the EU. It also emphasises the importance of independent media and civil society who can counter the negative narratives and provide more objective and balanced information to the public. This, however, remains a challenge in Serbia, as also some of the participants noted, where the NGOs and media reporting on the EU are generally very few, small, understaffed and underfunded. The participants also agreed that part of the blame for the insufficient reporting on the EU and disinterest in the society lies

also in the EU and its member states. The Serbian participants stressed that for improved conditions, the EU officials as well as member states' representatives should explain more openly and clearly why and how exactly Serbia is lagging behind, what are the main problems, for example with the rule of law, and what consequences the inaction of the government has on Serbia's European perspective.

Moderator: Jana Juzová, Research Fellow, EUROPEUM

Speakers: representatives of Czech media and NGO sector



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