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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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Czech Republic

Daniela Chalániová, Kryštof Kruliš, Alžběta Kuchařová

Institute of International Relations (IIR)

1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections*Kryštof Kruliš**Attempts to explain the very role of the European Parliament to the general public*

The key topics of the individual political parties corresponded to their specific political orientations and ranged from the functioning of the internal market (including, in particular, the lower quality and higher price of food that is imported to the Czech Republic in contrast to the food standards in the Western states of the EU) to issues of unemployment and claims of the possible adverse effects of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Among the visible topics of several political parties, most notably the Civic Democrats (ODS), was also the issue of the Czech (non-)adoption of the Euro. These parties were heavily criticized in the media and by experts for stressing this topic as there is no direct competence of the European Parliament (EP) in this matter.

Several Czech think-tanks had tried to turn the public attention to a deeper reflection on economic topics for the new EP, as, for instance, in the case of the debate of the representatives of the key political parties organized by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) and the Prague Twenty. The debate covered topics such as the proposed directives on gender equality in supervisory boards and the Common Consolidated Corporate Tax Base. A series of debates was also organized by the European Values think-tank.

The EU-wide ‘Spitzenkandidaten’ played almost no role in the Czech campaign. The Czech public television broadcasted one of the frontrunners’ debates, but support for the individual EU-wide frontrunners was declared only sporadically by the parties and hardly attracted the attention of the general public. In contrast to this, the discussion between the parties in the Czech national government about the nomination of the prospective Czech Commissioner attracted significantly more media attention.

The diminished relevance of euroscepticism in the Czech Republic

The overall relevance of euroscepticism in the electoral campaign was lower than in the previous elections to the European Parliament. The right-wing political party Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which won the last elections to the European Parliament, remained the main standard bearer of euroscepticism. However, it was diminished into a second-rate political party due to corruption scandals of its former national government and its subsequent dismal results in last year's Czech parliamentary elections. Thus the main clash in the current European Parliament electoral campaign was between the liberal party ANO 2011 (a relatively new subject on the political scene, whose policy on the EU was largely under construction during this electoral campaign), the social democratic party (ČSSD) and the conservative TOP 09, with all of them showing a mostly pro-European orientation.

Despite proudly proclaiming its allegiance to euroscepticism, the electoral campaign of the ODS showed moderate eurosceptic positions and argued that Czech membership of the EU is necessary.

Extreme eurosceptic positions were held only by minor political parties. Out of these, the Party of Free Citizens (Svobodní) was the only relevant player, with the potential to get across the 5 percent threshold for winning a mandate.

On the radical left, the Communist party (KSČM) voiced its requests for a more democratic and socially oriented EU together with some anti-establishment eurosceptic language.

An indifferent majority

The most significant outcome of the 2014 European Parliament elections in the Czech Republic is the shift from the eurosceptic political parties to parties with stronger pro-European visions. From the 21 Czech seats in the European Parliament only 6 went to eurosceptic parties. The right-wing and moderately eurosceptic ODS won only 2 mandates and thus it has 7 mandates less than in the previous elections. The remaining four seats went to the EU-hostile Svobodní (1 seat) and the mildly eurosceptic KSČM (3 seats). This confirms the fact that the ODS was supported not for, but despite its eurosceptic ideas (surveys had shown its electorate was always more pro-European than the party itself). With the general loss of support for the party, the former electorate of the ODS moved to other conservative or liberal pro-European parties, implying that euroscepticism did not attract votes.

The remaining 15 mandates went to political parties which are mostly pro-European. The winners of last year's elections to the national parliament, the liberal ANO 2011 and the social democratic ČSSD, won 4 mandates each. The third and smallest party of the incumbent coalition government, the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), won the remaining 3 mandates, mostly thanks to its strong position in southern Moravia and its hard-core electorate there, which was decisive in this low-turnout election. The opposition TOP 09 party also received 4 mandates; thereby considerably overshadowing its former coalition partner ODS on the right side of the political spectrum.

The Czech Republic's voter turnout of 18.2 percent is the second worst in the EU (after Slovakia with 13 percent). It can be contrasted with the turnout at the last parliamentary elections (59.5 percent) and the last European Parliament elections (28.2 percent). A possible explanation for this, besides the Czech public's general lack of interest in the complicated issues of the EU, is that national elections took place only several months ago and people were thus not using the European Parliament elections to vote against the incumbent government, as was the case in the past. Moreover, Czech voters are becoming indifferent to elections due to their rising frequency: national parliament elections and the newly introduced direct election of the Czech president were held last year, whereas elections for the upper chamber of the Czech parliament and for municipalities are scheduled to take place later in 2014.

Links:

- EurActiv, [Record low turnout in Czech vote](#), 25 May 2014.
- Europe Decides, [Czech Republic – European Parliament election candidates](#), 27 May 2014.
- Zdeňěk Jirsa, [The 2014 European Parliament Election in the Czech Republic](#), 10 April 2014.

2. The EU's Neighbourhood

Daniela Chalániová,

Czechs caught between norms and economic gains

Numerous officials and large sections of the public opinion in the Czech Republic see parallels between the Russian annexation of Crimea of 2014 and the Warsaw Pact's intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The common theme is, of course, the violation of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. In light of the annexation of Crimea, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs summoned the Russian ambassador and criticized the Russian engagement in Ukraine as disproportionate and aggressive. The mainstream media largely support this view: Russia is an aggressor in breach of international law.

Currently, there is no unified position regarding the future of Czech-Russian relations – the biggest dilemma lies in respecting the Western values and keeping up economic relations with the Russian Federation at the same time. The issue of Temelín (a Czech nuclear power plant looking to expand its capacity) is a case in point. On the one hand, ministers Jiří Dienstbier and the Minister of Defence Martin Stropnický said it was “hardly imaginable” that a Russian consortium could compete for the bid, while on the other hand Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka replied that it is unlikely that the Czech Republic would cease its economic activities with Russia because of Ukraine. Fear of Russia and defence of European values (democracy, liberalism, diversity) also appeared in the European Parliament election campaign of the Green Party.

Despite the mainstream criticism of Russia, there is a small but loud group supporting Russian policies that is ideologically rooted in euroscepticism. According to Jiří Vyvadil (who founded the *Friends of Russia* group earlier this year), we are in an ideological battle between the West and Russia: the West started the conflict by supporting the “Maidan fascists”, Putin got what he wanted (Crimea, and destabilized Ukraine) and the West is already defeated because Ukraine will end up in ruins, a burden for the West. Former president of the Czech Republic Václav Klaus indirectly supported the pro-Russian cause by attending a Second World War Victory Day party at the Russian embassy in Prague.

Finally, the media dissected Stropnický's slip-of-the-tongue statement about a hypothetical permanent presence of NATO troops in the Czech Republic, which he called “psychologically problematic”; he also implied a comparison with the presence of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia after 1968.

The Czech government supports Ukraine and Georgia and wants their ties with the European Union to be stronger

The political discourse in the Czech Republic is in line with the EU position towards Ukraine and the remaining Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly denounced the use of violence in Ukraine, both on the side of separatists and on the side of the Ukrainian government, and supported the Ukrainian territorial integrity along with EU level sanctions targeting representatives of the Ukrainian and Russian regimes that are responsible for the current situation. Furthermore, the Czech government, along with its Visegrad Four partners (Poland, Hungary and Slovakia), called on the European Union to step up the political association and economic integration with Ukraine.

The Czech government also strongly supports the Euro-Atlantic orientation of other EaP countries, namely Georgia (which is about to sign an EU Association Agreement in June 2014) and Moldova (which has recently gained visa-free access to the Schengen area). In April, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Association for International Affairs (AMO) hosted a high-level conference on the topic “The Eastern Partnership - Five Years On”, which was attended by politicians and diplomats from the Czech Republic as well as the EaP countries, with a view to evaluate the first five years of the Partnership's existence and discuss future strategies related to it in light of current events.

There is virtually no Czech discourse on Azerbaijan or Armenia; however, Belarus recently got more media attention in connection with the International Hockey Championship it hosted. Especially the

opinion-making media and civic society organizations (such as Amnesty International) recalled the sorry state of political freedom and economic stagnation in Belarus. Before this, in March, a Christian Democratic politician (Petr Vysloužil) voiced the possibility of Belarus becoming Russia's next victim.

Turkey is not an issue, but Islam is

Turkey and the prospect of EU membership for Turkey are not a major issue in the Czech political or public discourse. The most extensive coverage Turkey recently got was related to the Gezi Park/Taksim protests last summer.

However, the European Parliament elections served as a pretext for the anti-immigration and anti-Islam statements of extreme right parties such as the Úsvit přímé demokracie Tomia Okamury (Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy), the Česká suverenita (Czech Sovereignty) or the NE Bruselu – národní demokracie (NO to Brussels – National Democracy).

Furthermore, the results of the EUVox election calculator for the Czech Republic show (on a sample of 18,000 respondents) that Czech voters are the least tolerant towards Islam in the whole EU.

Links:

- Prague Post, [Dawn party most fearful, Greens most tolerant according to EU-wide election calculator](#), 16 May 2014.
- Amnesty International, [Czech Republic Watch the Human Rights Match with Us in Belarus](#), 6 May 2014.
- Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [Joint V4 Ministers' Letter on Ukraine to Baroness Ashton and Štefan Füle](#), 5 March 2014.

3. Power relations in the EU

Alžběta Kuchařová

Germany – a strategic partner with a key role in European politics

The Czech Republic has only very rarely doubted the leading role of Germany in the EU. This point is mainly valid because of Germany's economic dominance. The conceptual basis of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic, which was adopted already in July 2011, regards Germany as a strategic partner and even emphasizes its key role in European politics, European security and the global economy. German-Czech relations are based on an extraordinary economic interconnectedness.

Although the former Czech government led by Petr Nečas (Civic Democratic Party - ODS) took a sceptical stance towards and tried to keep distance from Eurozone affairs, it strongly supported the German approach to the debt crisis and the efforts to find a solution to it (e.g. the Czech Republic claimed to be a "shadow signatory" of the Fiscal Compact) and stressed that Germany is its closest ideological ally.

The incumbent government has pursued greater involvement in EU economic issues. In March, it agreed to join the Fiscal Compact, which should enhance the Czech Republic's cooperation with Germany as a key player in the stabilization and reform of the Eurozone. The Czech Republic has also lately shown that it would welcome a stronger German leadership in foreign policy and defence issues, either through its greater engagement in NATO or by its stronger and more active involvement in the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The leading role of Germany in the EU was also acknowledged by the Czech President Miloš Zeman during a meeting with his German counterpart Joachim Gauck in Prague in May 2014. Zeman claimed that Germany is the engine of the EU and that he would like the Czech Republic to act at least as a “gearbox” and join Germany in the “hard core” of European integration.

According to a public opinion poll conducted in March, the Czech public shares the view of the current government and president and considers Germany the most influential country in the EU. The only recent critical voice in regard to this issue came from the former president Václav Klaus, a long-time critic of the EU. He believes that the dominance of Germany in Europe is now much greater than it ever was during the 20th century, and that it is, in fact, the German Chancellor together with the French president who make decisions in the EU.

A focus on fiscal discipline

Unlike in other European countries, there has not been any substantial “austerity vs. growth” debate in the Czech Republic.

The Czech economy, while not in a bad shape in the beginning of the crisis, suffered from decreased exports throughout the crisis years. Therefore, the necessity of corrective measures was accepted across the political spectrum. The former centre-right coalition government dominated by the conservative Civic Democratic Party, was ideologically in line with European austerity trends, and focused primarily on macroeconomic stability and fiscal responsibility. It was able to maintain two of the Maastricht criteria (price stability and public debt), however it was criticized by the opposition and also by the trade unions for not paying enough attention to growth measures and thus causing an economic decline. The “end of the year” 2013 deflation of the Czech “koruna” under the auspices of the caretaker Rusnok government, aimed at supporting Czech export to the Eurozone countries, was met with mixed reactions.

Although fiscal discipline and stabilization of public finances were promoted at the European as well as the domestic level, the Nečas government opposed proposals for greater coordination of economic policies at the EU level and refused to adopt the Euro Plus Pact or join the Fiscal Compact.

On the other hand, the incumbent government led by Bohuslav Sobotka (of the centre-left Czech Social Democratic Party) has adopted a more pro-European stance. It claims that stabilization of the economic and monetary situation in the European Union is a primary concern of the Czech Republic and the government is taking concrete steps towards deeper coordination of economic and fiscal policy, including joining the Fiscal Compact.

The UK as an active and key actor in the EU and a counterbalance to the European “hard core”

There was a lively debate about the possibility of the so-called “Brexit” after British Prime Minister David Cameron delivered his speech in January 2013, in which he promised to hold a referendum on EU membership in the UK. The then Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas joined David Cameron and decided to stay out of the Fiscal Compact. The Czech Republic was thus seen as a rather Eurosceptic member and was regarded as a potential British ally in the EU. Although the former Czech government shared the British stance towards the future of the EU and the need to reform it, it clearly stated that it did not want Britain to leave the EU.

The Czech political representatives gave several reasons as to why the UK should stay in the EU and continue to be an active and key actor of European integration. Petr Nečas and the Civic Democratic Party stressed that both the UK and the Czech Republic promote a more flexible and more open Europe and attach great importance to the completion of the single market as a tool for boosting the

EU's economic growth and competitiveness. The Czech political scientist Ladislav Cabada pointed out that the Civic Democratic Party is a member of the same political group in the European Parliament as the British Conservative Party – the European Conservatives and Reformists Group – and thus the UK's exit from the EU would considerably weaken its political clout. Furthermore, the UK has been perceived as a counterbalance to tendencies towards a deeper integration or federalization of Europe.

The current pro-European Czech government also speaks in favour of continued UK membership of the EU. Tomáš Prouza, the State Secretary for European Affairs, primarily emphasizes the single market as a common priority of both countries (the Czech Republic and the UK are both members of the like-minded group that is committed to expanding the single market) and the key role of the UK for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Last but not least, the UK exit would definitely harm Czech business. The UK is the fifth most important export partner of the Czech Republic, and the Czech Republic has experienced its third biggest trade surpluses in its relations with the UK.

Links:

- Christian Oliver, [New Czech prime minister vows to ratify EU fiscal compact](#), 20 February 2014.
- [Policy Statement of the Government of the Czech Republic](#), February 2014.
- [Conceptual Basis of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic](#), July 2011.