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Influence of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU on public opinion on the EU among Czech citizens

Master‘s Thesis

Olomouc 2024

Declaration of authenticity I hereby declare that this Master's Thesis on the topic: Influence of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU on public opinion on the EU among Czech citizens is my original work and I have acknowledged all sources used. I further declare that the text of this thesis including footnotes has 138 385 characters with spaces.

In Prague on the 29 October 2024 _____

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Mgr. Petra Měšťánková, Ph.D. for her willingness, guidance, insights, knowledge and all the other support she has provided. Additionally, I am deeply thankful for her flexibility and understanding, without which this thesis would not have been possible.

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Introduction

The presidency of the Council of the European Union presents a significant political, technical, and administrative challenge for many countries, particularly those that joined the EU in recent decades. However, holding the presidency is not only challenging; it also offers substantial benefits. These benefits include representing national interests within the EU, increasing visibility on the European stage, and highlighting issues that the EU should address.

Thus, especially since the 1990s, the interest of academics in the topic of the presidency has increased,[1] while "much of the existing literature focuses on the key roles and functions of the presidency when it comes to EU-level decision-making, i.e., agenda setting; political leadership (including priority setting); brokerage in policy disputes; and national and external representation".[2] The literature on this topic is therefore described by some authors as repetitive.[3]

However, the great and unique opportunity for countries holding the presidency to improve the perception of the EU among their citizens is often overlooked by the authors.[4]

Some of the few authors who have addressed this topic then came to different conclusions based on their research. For example, Grumbinaite, based on her analysis of Eurobarometer data between 2004 and 2014, argues that when a country holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, this has a modest yet meaningful impact on public perceptions of the EU and strengthens trust in the EU.[5]

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[1] KANIOK, P. The Influence of the EU Council Presidency on Public Opinion. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, [online] 2012, vol. 12, no. 3, [viewed 24 June 2024] pp. 19. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/rojaeuf12&i=209.

[2] BURES, O., A Performance Assessment of the 2022 Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU: External Security. *Czech Journal of International Relations* [online] 2023, vol. 58, no. 1, [viewed 24 June 2024] pp. 113–130. Available from: https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1177906

[3] SCHOUT, A.The Dutch EU Presidency: The Continuing Relevance of the Rotating Presidency in a Political Union. [online] *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, [viewed 25 June 2024] pp. 54–63. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jcms.12576

[4] EISELE, O. et al. A Window of Opportunity? The Relevance of the Rotating European Union Presidency in the Public Eye. [online] *European Union Politics* [viewed 25 June 2024] 2023, vol. 24, pp. 329. Available from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14651165221142504?icid=int.sj-full-text.similar-articles.3

[5] GRUMBINAITE, I. The Influence of the EU Council Presidency on Public Opinion in the Member States: An Individual Level Analysis. European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), 2016, Available from https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/
28260

Kaniok, on the other hand, based on a similar analysis of Eurobater data between 2002 and 2007, argues that the EU Council Presidency has minimal impact on domestic public opinion regarding EU integration or awareness of EU affairs.[6]

It is also important to mention that "Political domestic context and importance for the home country have not been adequately researched. Yet, in many member states and in academic texts the socializing impact of the Presidency is often assumed as well as its educational effect ".[7]

The aim of this thesis will be to try to outline how the Presidency of the Council of the European Union influences the perception of the European Union by the citizens of the country that is holding the presidency – specifically in the case of the Czech Republic, which held the presidency in 2009 and in 2022. The Office of the Government of the Czech Republic - Section for European Affairs stated in a document called „Basis of the priorities of the Czech presidency in the Council of the European Union", that:

„The Presidency will also help to bring the EU and its practical functioning closer to the citizens of the Czech Republic, thus strengthening their understanding of and support for European integration."[6]

The hypothesis defined for this thesis is based on the statement mentioned above. The hypothesis, that this thesis will attempt to confirm or refute is: *The Presidency of the Council of the EU influences the positive perception of the European Union by the citizens of the Member State holding the Presidency.*

This will be achieved by answering three research questions:

- Has the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022 influenced the perception of the European Union by Czech citizens?
- Do the citizens of the Czech Republic understand Czech presidency in the Council of EU more after the Czech Presidency in 2022?
- Are the citizens of the countries holding the EU presidency changing the way they perceive the European Union?

[6] KANIOK, P. The Influence..., p. 20
[7] Ibid.
[8] Vláda ČR. Material on the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU: Principles and Guidelines. [online]. [viewed 12 May 2024. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/assets/urad-vlady/poskytovani-informaci/poskytnute-informace-na-zadost/36289-VV-EU_III_material_Vychodiska.pdf.

The answers to these three questions will be answered both by analyzing secondary data and by using own research in the form of a questionnaire survey.

The thesis has two parts – in the first - theoretical part, the first chapter introduces the Council of the European Union itself, including its history and the way it was developed. It then describes how the institution of the presidency itself has evolved before and after the Lisbon Treaty and concludes with an introduction to the functions of the presidency. The second chapter of the theoretical part presents the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2009. The emphasis is placed on the programme priorities and the context in which the Presidency took place, as well as on the evaluation of the Presidency. In the next chapter – second Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022 is described in a similar way. Finally, the two presidencies are also compared to better understand their evaluation and to be able to assess how public opinion has evolved during these presidencies.

The practical part of the thesis offers an analysis of secondary data, where the public opinion of the citizens of the selected countries (Czech Republic 2009, Slovakia 2016, Austria 2018, France 2022 and Czech Republic 2022) on the European Union before and after their country's presidency is examined.

The second part of the practical part presents the research methodology itself - and then the findings from the questionnaire surveys. Two versions of the questionnaire were created - one version - the pre-presidency version, was distributed before the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, the second version was distributed after the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. For both questionnaires, the minimum number of respondents (152 respondents for pre-presidency and 164 for post-presidency version) was met, in order to at least partially fulfil the condition of sufficient representativeness of the sample. At the same time, emphasis was placed on a sufficient distribution of demographic characteristics, which also formed the first part of both questionnaires. In the second part of the questionnaires, the focus was then mainly on understanding how much people know about the Presidency and also how and in what ways people perceive that the Presidency will take place/has taken place - and thus how their awareness has changed during the Presidency. The last part is then mainly to understand whether the Czech Presidency has influenced their perception of political parties, but more importantly of the EU, and/or what other factors has influenced their perception of the

EU. The research methodology is described in more detail in the Method of own research chapter.

Finally, the results of these analyses of the secondary data and the questionnaire survey are compared and conclusions are drawn - while the research questions are answered, and the hypothesis is evaluated.

Due to its limited scope, the thesis does not deal with several other circumstances (for example, a closer examination of the institution of the Presidency, the various formations in which it sits, a specific technical description of its functioning or the legislative successes or failures of the Presidency, and so on) that would certainly be relevant to the topic of the perception of the European Union during the Presidency. At the same time, it only covers a limited number of respondents - and the research is based on a questionnaire, so it is very difficult to find reasons behind why respondents answered the way they did.

Much more extensive research would be needed to address these shortcomings mentioned above. The paper can thus serve as a summary of the basics and an outline of the ways in which the impact of the EU Presidency on the perception of the European Union by the people of the countries concerned could be further explored.

1. The Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union, often referred to simply as the Council or Council of ministers, is one of the key institutions within the European Union framework. It is a core component of the EU's "institutional triangle," along with the European Parliament and the European Commission.[9] The Council of the European Union plays a crucial role in the European union's legislative process, policy coordination, and decision-making. The Council's main task is to adopt legislative proposals submitted by the Commission, as well as deciding on other key issues and matters, including especially the enlargement of the EU and the budget of the EU.[10] The Council of the European Union also serves as an intergovernmental forum where member states can actively represent and advocate for their national interests – therefore it makes it an unique institutions that plays a key role in balancing the diverse interests of its member states while shaping the collective future of the EU.[11]

This chapter should serve as a tool to get a better grasp of what the Council of the European Union was created to do, what its main objectives and interests are, also what role the Council of the European Union had in the formation of the European Union and what role the Council of the European Union has now. The function of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union itself will also be described. Finally, it will also present how some authors portray the influence of the EU Council Presidency on public opinion in the country that holds the EU Council Presidency.

1.1. History of the Council of the European Union

The origins of what we now recognize as the Council of the European Union can be traced back to 1951 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The institutional model for the ECSC, that was initially proposed by Jean Monnet, a key architect of European integration, who is also often called one

[9] Eurostat. Glossary: European Union institutions (EUI). [online]. [viewed 13 August 2024]. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php
[10] European Union. Council of the European Union. [online]. [viewed 16 August 2024]. Available from: https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies/council-european-union_en
[11] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. *Evropská unie*. 3rd ed. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury (CDK), 2018, pp. 253-255.

of the "founding fathers of the European Union" did not include an institution similar to the Council. His initial design focused more on supranational structures that could drive European integration forward, rather than intergovernmental cooperation.[12]

However, the idea of including an intergovernmental body emerged following pressure especially from smaller member states, which wanted to ensure that their national interests would be represented enough in the decision-making process and that the ECSC won't be controlled mainly by bigger member countries. With these concerns in mind, Monnet revised his institutional model to include a new body known as the Special Council of the European Coal and Steel Community.[13] This institution was intended to represent the member states and provide a forum for intergovernmental collaboration. Although Monnet remained skeptical about the long-term effectiveness and benefits of such Council. He viewed this form of intergovernmental cooperation as a transitional measure, useful only in the early stages of integration. Monnet believed that union could not be achieved through intergovernmental cooperation alone, but rather through deeper integration.[14]

That is why the Council was designed, as a kind of insurance for cases where a decision of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community could fundamentally undermine the interests of the majority of countries. The Council adopted decisions by majority or qualified majority. In many cases, the voting mechanism in the ECSC Council also took into account the factor of each country's share of total Community coal and steel production. Only a few areas listed in the ECSC Treaty - mainly concerning finance - were adopted by unanimity.[15]

This Council of Ministers served as a precursor to the modern Council of the European Union, setting the stage for even greater intergovernmental cooperation in the decades to come. The Council was tasked with ensuring that the decisions made

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[12] PETERSON, J., SHACKLETON M., The Institutions of the European Union. 3rd ed. London, England: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 68-69.
[13] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. *Evropská unie.* 3rd ed. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury (CDK), 2018, pp. 253-255.
[14] SU, H. Jean Monnet's Grand Design for Europe and its Criticism. *JEIH Journal of European Integration History [online],* 2009, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 29–46. Available from: https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/0947-9511-2009-2-29.pdf
[15] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. *Evropská unie….* pp. 254-259.

by the ECSC were implemented in a way that balanced the interests of the member states, while also advancing the collective goals of the community. Over time, this model of intergovernmental collaboration would evolve and expand, leading to the creation of the Council of the European Union as we know it today - an institution that plays a central role in the EU's legislative process and policy coordination.[16]

In retrospect, the establishment of the Council of Ministers within the ECSC was a pivotal moment in the history of European integration. It marked the beginning of a complex and ongoing process of balancing national sovereignty with the collective interests of Europe as a whole. While Jean Monnet's original vision leaned more towards supranational governance, the inclusion of the Council of Ministers highlighted the importance of intergovernmental cooperation in the European project. This dual approach—combining supranational institutions with intergovernmental bodies—has been a defining feature of the European Union's development and continues to shape its functioning even today.

1.2. Presidency of the Council of the EU before the Lisbon Treaty

The Presidency of the Council of Europe arose primarily out of a need shaped by the historical development of European integration. Since (at least at the beginning) it was not a coherent and clear concept, it existed for a long time without a solid basis in the primary law of the European institutions.[17]

The first mention of the Presidency is in the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, where it was mentioned in relation to the Special Council of Ministers. According to Articles 27 and 28, the Presidency was rotating, with a three-month period during which it was responsible for convening the Council and for communication between the Council and the ECSC Member States.[18]

What the presidency should look like was then defined by the Provisional Rules of Procedure adopted by the Special Council of Ministers in 1952. For example, Article 2 of this required the presidency to prepare the Council meetings, including the drafting

[16] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. *Evropská unie….* pp. 254-259.
[17] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 14.
[18] Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community 18 April 1951 [online]. [viewed 3 August 2024]. Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:11951K/TXT

of the agenda. Articles 4 and 9 then authorized the Presidency to sign the minutes of the Council's proceedings and to communicate the results of the Council's deliberations to the authorities.[19]

The Provisional Rules of Procedure of the EEC Council of 18 March 1958 went even further in assigning powers by giving the Presidency the role of spokesperson for the Council in its contacts with other EEC institutions. The Council consisted of representatives of the Member States - each government sent one of its members.[20]

However, this development was not reflected in primary law - it was only through the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community that the length of the presidency was extended, namely by Article 146, which stated: „The Council consists of representatives of the Member States. Each government sends one of its members. The Presidency is held by each member of the Council in turn, for a period of six months".[21]

Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, the role of the Presidency was partly reinforced by the crisis of European integration. The Presidency, for example, acquired a crucial role in representing the European Communities on the international scene, although the Commission would probably have been better suited to this role - however, due to the circumstances of the time, strengthening its influence could not be considered.[22]

Although a precise definition and formalization of the presidency was already suggested by the Tindemans report from 1975 or the report of the "Three Wise Men" from 1978[23], the formal declaration of these new rules was set out both in the Solemn Declaration on European Union of 1983[24] and also in the Single European Act of 1986.[25]

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[19] KANIOK, P. České předsednictví Rady EU… pp. 15-17.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Treaty establishing the European Economic Community 25 March 1957 [online]. [viewed 3 August 2024]. Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A11957E%2FTXT
[22] WESTLAKE, M. and GALLOWAY, D*. The Council of the European Union.* London: John Harper, 2004. pp. 327
[23] SCHOUT, A. *Beyond the Rotating Presidency*. [online] In: *Leaderless Europe* May 2008, [viewed 21 August 2024] pp. 269–287. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199535026.003.0015.
[24] Solemn Declaration on European Union, Stuttgart, 19 June 1983. [online]. [viewed 21 August 2024]. Available from: https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/solemn_declaration_on_european_union_stuttgart_19_june_1983-en-a2e74239-a12b-4efc-b4ce-cd3dee9cf71d.html
[25] Single European Act, Luxembourg 17 February 1986 [online]. [viewed 21 August 2024]. Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A11986U%2FTXT

The 1992 Treaty on European Union then further strengthened the role of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Presidency was entrusted with policy coordination and a leading role in the development of common positions among Member States, particularly in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.[26]

Next change was because of the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden to the EU in 1995, which led to a significant change in Article 146 of the Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community (Article 203 of the Maastricht Treaty).[27]

This update ended the alphabetical rotation of countries in the EU presidency and introduced a new rotation based on political criteria. Under the new system, a "large" member state would always be part of the "troika" responsible for representing the EU in international affairs.[28]

The Treaty of Amsterdam, which introduced the post of High Representative, created a certain competitive environment for the Presidency in terms of representation on the international scene in the areas of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.[29]

The Treaty of Nice only outlined the direction in which the presidency could take, but it did not bring any substantial changes to the definition of the presidency and was therefore a failure in this respect.[30]

1.3. Presidency of the Council of the EU after the Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty, which came into effect on December 1, 2009, redefined the structure and powers of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. Before the Lisbon Treaty, the rotating presidency held significant authority, allowing

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[26] Treaty on European Union, Maastricht 7 February 1992 [online]. [viewed 21 August 2024]. Available from: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A11992M%2FTXT

[27] Treaty establishing the European Community (Nice consolidated version) Part Five: Institutions of the Community *December 24 2002* [online]. [viewed 23 August 2024]. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12002E203

[28] TONEVA-METODIEVA, L. Evaluating the Presidency of the Council of the EU: towards a comprehensive evidence-based framework for performance assessment. *European Politics and Society*, 2020, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 650–667. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1712539

[29] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 14.

[30] LAURSEN, F. *The Treaty of Nice: Actor Preferences, Bargaining and Institutional Choice*. Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 1-21.

each member state to shape the EU's high-level agendas and lead key policy areas, including foreign affairs, for a six-month term. However, the Lisbon Treaty redistributed these powers, resulting in a more structured and shared leadership model, aiming to enhance continuity and stability across the EU.[31]

One of the most notable changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty was the creation of permanent roles, such as the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This shift meant that high-profile responsibilities, like representing the EU in foreign policy matters and setting long-term strategic agendas, moved from the rotating presidency to these permanent officeholders. The presence of these roles allowed for greater consistency in EU policies, though it also reduced the influence of individual member states during their presidency terms.[32]

In addition to creating these permanent positions, the Lisbon Treaty established the "Trio Presidency" system, where three consecutive presidencies collaborate to coordinate an 18-month agenda. This approach helps promote stability in the EU's decision-making processes and reduces fluctuations in policy priorities, which could previously occur with each six-month presidency. The Trio Presidency system is particularly beneficial for member states with less experience in EU leadership, as it allows them to rely on the support of the preceding and succeeding presidencies.[33]

In areas such as justice, freedom, and security, the Lisbon Treaty also introduced co-decision procedures, giving the European Parliament a more active role as a co-legislator alongside the Council. Although this change extended the legislative process, it aimed to enhance democratization and consistency in EU laws. However, some challenges persist, including a slower legislative process and limitations in binding legislation in fields like police cooperation.[34]

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[31] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. Evropská unie. 3rd ed. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury (CDK), 2018, pp. 257-258.
[32] VAZNONYTE, A. Entrepreneurs of Compromise: The Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU After Lisbon. [online]. 2022 [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2022/entrepreneurs-of-compromise-the-rotating-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-eu-after-lisbon/
[33] Ibid.
[34] GLEWSKA, I. The Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the Post-Lisbon System in Relation to Police Cooperation. Internal Security, 2011, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 15–24. Available from: https://www.proquest.com/docview/1314696385

Despite these changes, the rotating presidency of the Council retains important functions. It still manages the legislative process, chairs meetings in most Council configurations, sets the Council's working agenda, and represents the Council in negotiations with the European Parliament and the European Commission.[35]

These roles allow the presidency to influence policy discussions, although its capacity to shape the EU's overall agenda has diminished compared to the pre-Lisbon era. Today, the rotating presidency focuses more on administrative duties and coordination, which requires strong diplomatic and organizational skills to successfully navigate its "low-profile" role in the EU's complex institutional framework.[36]

1.4. Functions of the Presidency

The Presidency's role in the Council includes agenda management, brokerage, and representation. The Presidency, with support from the Council Secretariat, manages the Council's agenda, creating an 18-month program with two other countries to outline the Council's objectives. It sets specific agendas and controls the focus and timing of discussions, determining which policies receive attention. In its brokerage role, the Presidency facilitates negotiations by structuring talks, maintaining a single negotiation text, and proposing compromises. Bilateral meetings allow the Presidency to understand member states' positions, aiding in consensus-building.[37]

The representation function of the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union involves presenting and defending the Council's collective views, particularly in negotiations with other EU institutions. Following the Lisbon Treaty, which delegated certain responsibilities to the President of the European Council and the High Representative, the rotating Presidency retains significant importance for internal representation.[38] This is especially evident in trilogue meetings, where it negotiates with representatives from the European Parliament and the Commission. These informal negotiations have become the primary mechanism for reaching inter-institutional agreements on EU legislation.[39]

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[35] VAZNONYTE, A. Entrepreneurs of Compromise: The Rotating Presidency…
[36] Ibid.
[37] PETERSON, J., SHACKLETON M., The Institutions of the European Union. 3rd ed. London, England: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 68-69
[38] Ibid.
[39] FIALA, P., KRUTÍLEK, O. and PITROVÁ, M. *Evropská unie.* 3rd ed. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury (CDK), 2018, pp. 257-258.

To effectively fulfill its responsibilities, the Presidency is equipped with considerable resources and prerogatives that allow it to manage the Council's agenda.

This power can enable the Presidency to shape the political agenda in a way that favors its own priorities. Additionally, the Presidency enjoys enhanced access to sensitive preference information, which aids in brokering agreements and provides a first-mover advantage in negotiations. While these agenda-setting powers can be utilized to achieve outcomes that benefit the collective, they can also be leveraged to disproportionately favor the interests of the Presidency's home country.[40]

Moreover, the discretion granted to the Presidency is essential for effectively representing the Council as a collective actor in negotiations. This discretion can sometimes lead to inter-institutional agreements that advance the Presidency's own interests, potentially at the expense of the collective will of the Council as a whole.[41] As such, while the rotating Presidency plays a crucial role in the EU's legislative process, it also possesses the potential to prioritize national interests over collective decision-making.[42]

1.5. The impact of the EU Council presidency on the perception of the EU by citizens of the presiding state

Except what was mentioned in the previous chapter, the Presidency of the Council of the EU can be also seen as part of the EU's efforts to bridge the gap between the European institutions and citizens, with the aim of addressing the democratic deficit. By encouraging national involvement, increasing media attention and focusing on communication with the public, the Presidency seeks to raise the profile of EU decision-making and its relevance to citizens.[43]

As was mentioned in the introduction, the link between the presidency and its impact on the perception of the EU by the citizens of the country holding the presidency

[40] KANIOK, P. České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 40-42
[41] VAZNONYTE, A. Entrepreneurs of Compromise: The Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU After Lisbon. [online]. 2022 [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.sieps.se/en/publications/2022/entrepreneurs-of-compromise-the-rotating-presidency-ofthe-council-of-the-eu-after-lisbon/
[42] Ibid.
[43] European Council - Council of the European Union. What does holding the presidency of the Council of the EU mean? [online]. [viewed 5 November 2024]. Available from: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/presidency-council-eu/

of the Council of the European Union has not been sufficiently explored by the authors.

That is because the literature often struggles to examine the influence of the EU Council Presidency on public perception of the EU because it combines both European and national political levels, which are difficult to reconcile analytically. While the presidency's European role has been well-studied, linking it to domestic public opinion is challenging due to differing priorities and sometimes opposing themes between the EU and the presiding country.[44]

The academic literature on the EU Council presidency has largely focused on evaluating individual presidencies and their institutional impact, rather than exploring their influence on public debate.[45]

Authors who explore this topic often find it challenging to reach definitive conclusions and frequently arrive at differing outcomes. While some identify potential influences or effects of the EU Council presidency on public opinion, others find these effects to be inconsistent or minimal. This variability reflects the complex nature of the presidency, influenced by factors like the national political climate, media interest, and the specific agenda of the presidency term, leading to a lack of consensus across studies.

Ieva Grumbinaite conducted research examining whether holding the EU Council Presidency impacts public opinion, awareness, and support for the EU, with a focus on newer member states. Using Eurobarometer data from 2004–2014, the study compares the presidency's effects on public perceptions. She suggests: “that holding the Council Presidency has a minor, but a significant impact on public awareness of and support for the EU”.[46]

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[44] KANIOK, P. The Influence of the EU Council Presidency on Public Opinion. Romanian Journal of European Affairs, [online] 2012, vol. 12, no. 3, [viewed 24 June 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/rojaeuf12&i=209

[45] EISELE, O. et al. A Window of Opportunity? The Relevance of the Rotating European Union Presidency in the Public Eye. [online] European Union Politics [viewed 25 June 2024] 2023, vol. 24, pp. 329. Available from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14651165221142504?icid=int.sj-fulltext.similar-articles.3

[46] GRUMBINAITE, I. The Influence of the EU Council Presidency on Public Opinion in the Member States: An Individual Level Analysis. European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), 2016, Available from https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/
28260

Kaniok, on the other hand, uses a similar research methodology - i.e., an analysis of Eurobarometer data, albeit for a different time period - from 2002 to 2007 - to reach a different conclusion, arguing that the study suggests that the EU Presidency has had minimal impact on domestic public opinion on EU integration or awareness of EU issues. It examined public support for EU membership and knowledge of EU issues and found that increased media attention during the Presidency did not significantly change public opinion or the level of information. Although there are occasional temporary fluctuations in support or knowledge, the Presidency generally does not lead to sustained pro-EU sentiment or increased knowledge.[47]

Eisele at al. conclude in their analysis of the Austrian Presidency and in particular its media coverage that while the EU Council Presidency may have diminished influence in the decision-making process, it remains a significant tool for raising public awareness about EU issues and promoting EU politics among citizens.[48]

They also state, from the other side (instead of examining the impact of the presidency on public opinion about the EU, they examine whether public opinion about the EU influences how much the public is informed about the presidency), that: “In contrast to what we expected, higher public trust in the EU in the country holding the presidency leads to more salience”.[49]

[47] KANIOK, P. The Influence of the EU Council Presidency on Public Opinion. Romanian Journal of European Affairs, [online] 2012, vol. 12, no. 3, [viewed 24 June 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/rojaeuf12&i=209

[48] EISELE, O. et al. A Window of Opportunity? The Relevance of the Rotating European Union Presidency in the Public Eye. [online] European Union Politics [viewed 25 June 2024] 2023, vol. 24, Available from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14651165221142504?icid=int.sj-fulltext.similar-articles.3

[49] Ibid.

2. Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU – 2009 and 2022

This chapter will outline the two presidencies of the Council of the European Union that the Czech Republic has held in its history 2009 and 2022. First, it will describe how the Czech Republic prepared for both Presidencies. Then the priorities and the agenda of the two Presidencies will be described, as well as their context, which is very important to be able to evaluate the Presidency. The chapter concludes by comparing the two presidencies.

This chapter should therefore serve both to understand the preparations, circumstances, course and evaluation of the presidencies, but especially to highlight how different the two presidencies were - which will then be further explored in the final part of the thesis when analyzing the research results.

2.1. Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU – 2009

The Czech Republic held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time from 1 January - 30 June 2009. The Czech presidency was held by the Czech Republic together with France, which held the presidency in the second half of 2008, and Sweden, which followed the Czech presidency in the second half of 2009. After Slovenia, it became the second Eastern enlargement country to hold the Presidency. Not only because of this, a lot of attention was focused on the Czech Republic, and other countries and institutions watched with interest how the Czech Republic would take on the Presidency.[50] That is also one of the reasons why it was one of the greatest political-technical-administrative challenges of modern history for the Czech Republic - comparable perhaps only to the process of accession to the European Union. Preparations for the Presidency were further complicated by the planned entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, which was originally scheduled to take effect on 1 January - i.e. together with the start of the Czech Presidency. The Czech Republic therefore had to prepare for both variants of different institutional settings.[51]

[50] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 40-42.
[51] BENES, Vit, KARLAS, J. The Czech presidency. Journal of Common Market Studies [online]. 48 Annual Review , 2010 [viewed 17 July 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/jcmks48&id=1488

Because of the Irish referendum and the Czech initial opposition to the Lisbon Treaty, the presidency was eventually held under the "pre-Lisbon" institutional framework.

The Czech political representation chose a "so-called mixed model for the preparation and the actual course of the Presidency, consisting of two levels of preparation and execution of the Presidency, with the first level consisting of a content coordination team and the second of an organizational coordination team."[52] The Content coordination team then functioned as inter-ministerial steering bodies, with each relevant department responsible for the preparation and organization of working meetings. The Permanent Representation in Brussels also played a strong role, chairing many meetings of working groups of EU Council bodies. However, the process of preparing and exercising the presidency involved not only many more state institutions and working groups, but also, for example, universities, media, companies and others.

Although, due to the choice of the mixed model of the Presidency, it was expected that the preparation and the Presidency itself would be covered by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, this option was not chosen in the end.[53] The Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra was selected to be responsible for the organizational preparation of the Presidency and was appointed Minister for European Affairs of the Czech Republic - a newly created position of Minister without Portfolio.

2.1.1. Programme and priorities of the Czech Presidency 2009

Unlike in the case of organizational preparations, where there are certain models from which Member States preparing for the Presidency more or less deviate, there are no such commonly used models for the preparation of the priorities themselves. The preparation of priorities is entirely individual for each country.[54]

The country thus has a great and unique opportunity to shift attention to issues it considers important - here to promote its own national interests. At the same time,

[52] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 73.
[53] Ibid.
[54] SCHOUT, A and VAN SCHAIK, L. Reforming the EU Presidency?. *Zeitschrift für Staats-und Europawissenschaften (ZSE)/Journal for Comparative Government and European Policy*, 2008, pp 36-56.

however, the presidency is also expected to respond to current geopolitical, economic or other major events.[55]

In the case of the Czech Republic, the first document on which the priorities were subsequently based was considered to be a compilation based on the contributions of individual ministries within their respective agendas. The cross-cutting material prepared by the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic in Brussels, which contained a cross-sectional list of areas that were proposed as potential key themes of the Presidency, can also be considered as a second such basic document.[56] At the end of 2006, a document on the „Priorities of the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2009“ was discussed at the governmental level - in the Committee for EU.[57]

The official motto of the Presidency - "Europe without Barriers" - was also chosen during this meeting.[58] The main priority themes proposed were competitiveness, four freedoms and a liberal EU trade policy. The document also outlined 5 other potential themes - energy and security issues, transatlantic relations, the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, the revision of the budgetary reform and the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the development of the area of freedom, security and justice and institutional reform, together with the election of the President of the EC and the High Representative of the Common Security and Foreign Policy.[59]

Of course, consultations with France and Sweden - the other countries of the Presidency trio - also influenced the preparation of the priorities and the Presidency.[60] Together, an eighteen-month programme was created, which was divided into two

[55] ROZENBERG, O. A Political Presidency: The 2022 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Svenska institutet för europapolitiska studier (Sieps), 2022, pp 2.
[56] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 84-87.
[57] ŘIHÁČKOVÁ, V; KASAKOVA, Z. *The Czech 2009 EU Council Presidency: A Starting Point Assessment*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2008, p. 6.
[58] Ibid. p. 4.
[59] KANIOK, P. *České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, p. 87.
[60] FUKSIEWICZ, A; ŁADA, A. The Czech Presidency in the Council of the European Union–the view from Poland. [online] *Institute of public affairs.* [viewed 18 July 2024] Available from: https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/uploads/2014/03/a_fuksiewicz_a_lada_the_czech_presidency.pdf

parts - a strategic framework and an operational pragramme. The strategic framework focused in particular on the fact that the Lisbon Treaty was due to take effect during the 18-month programme.[61]

The second part, the operational programme, contained a detailed plan of the Council's activities during the three presidencies. It is therefore a concrete plan of what countries would like to do in the next year and a half. It also serves as a mapping of the current state of the priority areas.[62]

The final version of the priorities on which the Czech Presidency would like to focus was presented at the turn of 2008 and 2009, i.e. at the very beginning of the Presidency. The Czech Republic's Presidency focused on three priorities: Economy, Energy, and Europe's Role in the World.[63]

For the economy, a strong EU was deemed essential to address global challenges. The Czech Republic aimed to boost EU competitiveness by advancing education, research, and innovation, reducing administrative burdens for small and medium enterprises and strengthening the internal market. Financial stability was also critical, and the Czech Republic supported the implementation of the European Commission's recovery plan to counter recession risks.[64]

Energy was fundamental to EU growth and security. With rising demand and limited resources, energy security remained vital. The Czech Republic worked to complete the climate and internal energy market packages, balancing environmental and economic goals. Efforts to improve infrastructure, especially through interconnecting grids, strengthened the EU's energy network, while the planned Southern Corridor summit in Brussels supported energy diversification by engaging Caspian region transit countries in projects like the Nabucco pipeline.[65]

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[61] Ministerstvo vnitra ČR Common Programme of the French, Czech and Swedish Presidency. [online]. [viewed 27 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.mvcr.cz/mvcren/article/common-programme-of-the-french-czech-and-swedish-presidency.aspx

[62] Ibid.

[63] Vláda ČR. Priorities of the Czech EU Presidency. [online]. [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/projevy/archiv-vondra/priorities-of-the-czech-eu-presidency-46806/

[64] Ibid.

[65] KRAL, D., BARTOVIC, V., and RIHACKOVA, V. The 2009 Czech EU Presidency. [online]. Swedish institute for European Policy Studies [viewed 28 July 2024] pp. 46-48. Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=11859467aee8cb81747e5eb403ba5e593bbd076e

On the global stage, the Czech Presidency prioritized Europe's role as a responsible actor. Recent crises, such as in Georgia, highlighted the need for a strong EU foreign policy. The Czech Republic focused on the Eastern Partnership to foster ties with neighboring countries and formally launched it with an Eastern summit in Prague. Relations with Russia were crucial, and the Czech Republic supported a united EU policy that balanced engagement with security. Transatlantic relations were equally essential; the Czech Republic fostered cooperation on security, the Middle East, and regulatory issues, hosting a Prague summit with President Obama and EU leaders.[66]

Further priorities included EU enlargement, with a focus on advancing integration for the Western Balkans and Turkey, which were essential for regional stability. The Czech Republic also pursued stronger EU-Israel ties to support stability in the Middle East. Czech Presidency therefore emphasized moderation, balance, and inclusive solutions, aiming to create a Europe with open borders but clear rules, thus enhancing stability and unity across the EU.[67]

2.1.2. Context, progress & evaluation of the Czech Presidency 2009

As far as the global or even European context is concerned, it was fundamentally influenced by the economic crisis that started in 2008 in America. Given the interconnectedness of the various economies, it did not take long for the crisis to be felt in Europe. Czech Republic was not a member of the Eurozone, which meant that it had a considerably reduced position, especially during ECOFIN meetings. Thus, there were not many ways in which the Czech Republic could have tried to address the impact of the crisis during its Presidency.[68]

At the same time, the Czech Republic was taking over the presidency from France - i.e. experienced and large country from presidential trio. France, however, did

[66] Vláda ČR. Priorities of the Czech EU Presidency. [online]. [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/projevy/archiv-vondra/priorities-of-the-czech
[67] KRAL, D., BARTOVIC, V., and RIHACKOVA, V. The 2009 Czech EU Presidency. [online]. Swedish institute for European Policy Studies [viewed 28 July 2024] pp. 46-48. Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=11859467
[68] Ibid. p. 6.

not want to give up the presidency in favour of the Czech Republic. A very media-active President Sarzkozy has repeatedly expressed concern that the Czech Republic is not ready for the Presidency and may not be able to cope with it.[69]

This French reluctance was based mainly on the unstable political situation in the Czech Republic. Not only was there a government in power whose confidence rested on the support of two opposition MPs. In the previous elections to the Chamber of Deputies, right wing parties received 100 votes as well as left wing parties which also received 100 votes, making it almost impossible to form a functional and strong government. Moreover, there were also concerns about the person of the President of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus, who showed his Euroscepticism to the full when he refused to sign the Lisbon Treaty for a long time.

Therefore, when the Czech Republic finally took over the Presidency from France, there was almost no expectations at all from other member states or from EU institutions. However, from the very beginning of its mandate, attention was focused on the Czech Republic, and it was expected that the Czech Presidency would somehow address the emerging energy crisis that had arisen from Russian-Ukrainian gas conflict. Initially, it viewed the gas dispute as a bilateral issue, intervening only when gas supplies to the EU were impacted. By January 3, the situation had escalated, causing supply shortages in over 15 EU Member States. In this crisis, the Czech Republic played the role of mediator between Ukraine and Russia and the crisis was resolved relatively quickly - one of the first major successes of the Czech Presidency.[70]

The second problem right at the beginning of the mandate was the armed conflict in Gaza. The Presidency sought to mediate a ceasefire by dispatching an EU mission led by Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg. This problem, on the other hand, ended in failure for the Presidency of the Czech Republic when the Czech

[69] WITKOWSKA, K. The Czech Presidency in the Council of the European Union as a Lesson for the New EU Member States. Annales Universitatis Apulensis Series Jurisprudentia, [online] 2011, vol. 14]. [viewed 28 July 2024]. p. 191. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/auaplsj14&id=192

[70] BENES, Vit, KARLAS, J. The czech presidency. Journal of Common Market Studies [online]. 48 Annual Review , 2010 [viewed 17 July 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/jcmks48&id=1488

Republic, as a traditional and one of Israel's biggest allies in the world, sided with Israel and described Israeli operations in Gaza, during which over 1000 Palestinians died, as defensive.[71]

Since then, apart from a few other unfortunate statements (such as when Prime Minister Topolanek said that if anyone wants to consider admitting Ukraine to the EU, they should also consider admitting Chile), the Czech Republic has achieved minor legislative victories (or political, such as the visit of the new US President Barrack Obama to Prague) and the presidency began to look as if it could succeed and have a real impact. Unfortunately, these chances were fundamentally scuppered by the opposition in the Czech Chamber of Deputies when, after gaining a few votes from the ruling parties, it called a vote of no confidence at the end of March. In this vote, 101 MPs voted in favour of the no-confidence motion. The government therefore lost confidence and resigned. There was still a possibility that the government, albeit in resignation, would complete the presidency. However, President Klaus refused to do so. The relevant option, which was also supported by the majority of parliamentary parties, became a caretaker government. This caretaker government did arrange for some changes in personnel, but since it held the EU Presidency for only six weeks, this did not have a major impact on the programme for the rest of the Presidency.[72]

The fall of the Czech government during led to concerns in Brussels about its ability to lead effectively. While the instability posed challenges, the establishment of a caretaker government allowed the presidency to continue functioning. Brussels recognized the importance of the Czech presidency during a critical time, and although the political turmoil was a setback, it did not completely derail the presidency's objectives or the collaborative efforts among EU member states.[73]

As far as the evaluation of the Presidency is concerned, the government of the Czech Republic itself (unsurprisingly) described it as a great success. "The Czech

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[71] DVORAKOVA, A. Česká reakce na útok Izraele vyvolala v Evropě zděšení. iDnes.cz [online]. 5 January 2009 [viewed 2 August 2024]. Available from: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/tisk-ceska-reakce-na-utok-izraele-vyvolala-v-evrope-zdeseni.A090105_163010_zahranicni_abr

[72] KANIOK, P. České předsednictví Rady EU – most přes minulost. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2018, p. 168.

[73] BENES, Vit, KARLAS, J. The czech presidency. Journal of Common Market Studies [online]. 48 Annual Review , 2010 p. 72. [viewed 17 July 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/jcmks48&id=1488

Presidency came to this summit to support the stability of the European Union and I am pleased that in this respect has brought success in the three key areas: institutional issues, finance and economy, and climate protection".[74] The Presidency was also perceived positively by the Czech population, with 54% describing it as a success (10% as definitely successful) and only 36% as a failure (of which only 7% as definitely unsuccessful).[75]

However, the evaluation of the Czech Presidency by authors or European institutions is much more interesting. There are three ways of looking at the Presidency - optimistic, pessimistic and realistic.[76] The authors evaluating the Presidency mention positively in particular the successful resolution of the emerging crises - particularly the Russia-Ukraine crisis. At the same time, they also praise the achievement of not only legal but also political successes.[77]

Some also appreciate that the Czech EU Presidency in 2009 played a pivotal role in promoting the "Eastern Partnership," a policy initiative aimed at strengthening ties between the EU and its eastern neighbors, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Additionally, the Czech Presidency effectively managed various EU institutional issues, demonstrating resilience despite internal political challenges.[78] Some authors, however, are much harsher on the presidency and some even describe it as "the worst ever presidency in the case of the Czech Republic".[79] Mostly, of course, for an unprecedented reason - the fall of the government during the presidency.

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[74] Vláda ČR. Czech Presidency Rounds Off European Council with Success. [online]. [viewed 4 August 2024]. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/czech-presidency-rounds-offeuropean-council-with-success-59174/

[75] Factum. Evaluation of the Czech EU Presidency. [online]. [viewed 18 July 2024]. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20210508163236/https://www.factum.cz/aktuality/hodnoceni-ceskehopredsednictvi-eu.

[76] ŠLOSARČÍK, I. Good, Bad or Boring? Three Views of the Czech Presidency. *Politics / Political Sciences.* [online]. Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA). [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=42123

[77] KRAL, D., BARTOVIC, V., and RIHACKOVA, V. The 2009 Czech EU Presidency. [online]. Swedish institute for European Policy Studies [viewed 28 July 2024] pp. 46-48. Available from: https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=11859467aee8cb81747e5eb403ba5e593bbd076e

[78] BENES, V., KARLAS, J. The czech presidency. Journal of Common Market Studies [online]. 48 Annual Review , 2010 p. 78. [viewed 17 July 2024]. Available from: https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/jcmks48&id=1488

[79] LISOŇOVÁ, Z.. What Makes the Difference Between the Worst and the Best EU Council Presidency? Approaches to Evaluation of the EU Council Presidency. [online]. *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 2009, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 12–24. [viewed 29 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=42124

The 2009 Czech EU Presidency was a milestone, strengthening the country's civil service, diplomacy, and EU networks, with politicians becoming more engaged in EU affairs than ever before. While it provided memorable moments for the public, the presidency had limited impact on domestic political culture, highlighting a "down-to-earth" approach to EU leadership.[80]

2.2. Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU – 2022

The Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2022, from 1 July to 31 December 2022, was the second Presidency after the 2009 Presidency, which is the subject of the chapter above. However, unlike the previous presidency, this one took place under the Lisbon institutional framework.

The Czech Presidency of the EU Council, a prestigious six-month role, required years of preparation. The Czech government's Resolution No. 729 from October 14, 2019, appointed the Office of the Government as the central coordinator for preparing and executing the Czech Republic's EU Council Presidency for 2022. The plan included increasing budget allocations and personnel, creating strategies for staffing, and setting up communication to enhance public awareness of the Presidency's goals and EU topics. Ministries must have reported progress annually, with collaboration between the Office of the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other central government bodies to ensure smooth operation.[81]

Office of the Government therefore managed both logistics and communications, including organizing high-profile political events, such as EU summits and ministerial meetings, as well as handling translation, transportation, security, and event promotion.[82]

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[80] ŠLOSARČÍK, I. Good, Bad or Boring? Three Views of the Czech Presidency. Politics / Political Sciences. [online]. Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA). [viewed 28 July 2024]. Available from: https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=42123

[81] Usnesení vlády dne 14. 10. 2019 č. 729 Available from: https://odok.cz/portal/zvlady/jednani-detail/2019-10-14/

[82] Tvoříme Evropu. Czech Presidency Requires Months of Preparation Coordinated by the Office of the Government. [online]. 29 May 2021 [viewed 2 September 2024]. Available from: https://tvorimevropu.cz/2021/05/29/ceske-predsednictvi-vyzaduje-mesice-priprav-ktere-koordinuje-urad-vlady/

The Presidency team within the Office of the Government consisted of a logistics division and a communications division. Logistics oversaw event coordination, while the communications division promoted the Czech Republic's work in the EU. This team was responsible for outreach to both domestic and international audiences, enhancing awareness about the EU among the Czech public, and managing media relations, social media, and the official CZ PRES website.[83]

The Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU was again given a very strong role (as during the previous Presidency in 2009 - see capital above) to coordinate activities in Brussels.

As for the previous presidency, the position of Minister for European Affairs, who was responsible for the coordination and overlooking of the presidency, was again created. Mikuláš Bek from the political party STAN became Minister for European Affairs at the end of December 2021.

Other key players included individual ministries, which collaborate on the Presidency's agenda. Additionally, various institutions, cities, and organizations within the Czech Republic contribute to promoting the EU and the Presidency's goals.

2.2.1. Programme and priorities of the Czech Presidency 2022

The official programme and therefore the political priorities of the Czech EU Presidency were presented on 15 June 2022 by Czech Prime Minister and Minister for European Affairs Mikuláš Bek. The official document containing the Czech Republic's priorities was published on the same day.[84]

This document had two parts - the first, more concise, contained the 5 policy priorities of the Czech Government during the Presidency, which went across a range of European policy areas. The second part of the document was then more technical

[83] Tvoříme Evropu. Czech Presidency Requires Months of Preparation Coordinated by the Office of the Government. [online]. 29 May 2021 [viewed 2 September 2024]. Available from: https://tvorimevropu.cz/2021/05/29/ceske-predsednictvi-vyzaduje-mesice-priprav-ktere-koordinujeurad-vlady/

[84] Vláda ČR. The Government Presents Logo, Motto, and Priorities of the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU. [online]. [viewed 3 September 2024]. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/vlada-predstavila-logo--motto-a-priority-ceskeho-predsednictvi-v-rade-eu-197157/

and structured according to the different formations in which the EU Council meets, giving an insight into which legislative proposals the Czech Presidency wanted to prioritise.[85]

At the same time, the motto of the Czech Presidency was presented: 'Europe as a task', inspired by a speech given by former Czech President Václav Havel in 1996. This motto should refer to a reflection on the changes the world is going through and Europe's role in this world.[86]

The motto was also accompanied by three words: "Rethink, Rebuild, Repower". These three words were chosen to focus the debate on the priorities. They were also chosen for their multiple meanings. For example, the word Rebuild should refer both to physical building - such as green transformation, building new energy networks and the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine - but also to organisational or functional rebuilding - such as reforming European institutions. Similarly, the word Repower referred both to the energy sector, but also to the strengthening of the European Union, both in a military sense and in terms of its diplomatic and political international engagement.

Managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine´s post-war recovery:

The Czech EU Presidency focused on supporting Ukraine in two main areas: immediate refugee aid and long-term reconstruction. In response to Russia's aggression, the Presidency prioritized defending Ukraine's sovereignty, endorsing EU measures such as strengthened sanctions and military support. The Czech Presidency welcomed Ukraine's EU candidate status and supported its integration efforts. Managing the unprecedented refugee crisis required mobilizing EU resources, especially for women and children. The Presidency emphasized solidarity and flexibility, facilitating funding transfers and creating support structures. Key initiatives included protecting children's education, providing sufficient childcare, and ensuring healthcare access. For Ukraine's post-war recovery, the Presidency prioritized

[85] Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Official Website of the Czech EU Council Presidency. [online]. [viewed 3 September 2024]. Available from: https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/cs/.
[86] Ibid.

rebuilding essential infrastructure, restoring services, and supporting economic stability through robust EU-Ukraine cooperation and international funding.[87]

Energy security:

The Czech EU Presidency emphasized reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels for EU security. Key initiatives included accelerating REPowerEU, focusing on energy diversification, conservation, and expanding low-emission sources. The Presidency also promoted renewable energy, energy efficiency, and the critical role of nuclear power in securing the EU's energy future. In transport, it prioritized reducing emissions, supporting clean mobility, and developing the Trans-European Transport Network to enhance inter-state transport and decarbonize mobility. To counter high energy costs, it advocated for social measures like household energy savings to help manage the economic impacts of the green transition.[88]

Strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and cyberspace security:

In response to rising global instability, the Czech EU Presidency prioritized strengthening security and defense, emphasizing cooperation with NATO and implementing the Strategic Compass. Key initiatives included advancing long-term military cooperation, reducing technological dependence, and bolstering critical value chains for strategic tech systems. The Presidency also focused on enhancing EU industrial capacities and investing in new and disruptive technologies. Cybersecurity was another major focus, including tackling cyber threats, supporting EU institutions' cybersecurity, and advancing the EU's secure space-based communication. Efforts also targeted developing tools to counter hybrid threats, combat disinformation, and shape international norms on cybersecurity in partnership with democratic allies.[89]

Strategic resilience of the European economy:

The Czech EU Presidency prioritized strengthening EU resilience amid inflation, supply chain fragility, and geopolitical instability from the pandemic and Russian

[87] Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Official Website of the Czech EU Council Presidency. [online]. [viewed 3 September 2024]. Available from: https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/cs/.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

aggression. Key objectives included reducing dependency on unstable regimes, especially for strategic resources like food, medicine, and semiconductors, while bolstering EU production capacities and free trade with democratic countries. The Presidency aimed to secure supply chains, focusing on IT and strategic raw materials, by advancing trade deals and deepening EU-US cooperation under the Trade and Technology Council. Digitalization and automation of industries were prioritized to enhance competitiveness, alongside circular economy practices to reduce material imports. The Presidency also pushed for internal market reforms in services and digital sectors to support a competitive business environment. A significant goal was the establishment of a secure European Digital Identity Wallet, fostering trust and integration within the digital economy.[90]

Resilience of democratic institutions:

In light of Russian aggression, the Czech EU Presidency prioritized bolstering democratic resilience across Europe. Efforts included enhancing institutional transparency, securing media independence, and fostering civic engagement, particularly by involving youth through initiatives like the European Year of Youth and the Conference on the Future of Europe. Additionally, the Presidency focused on safeguarding rights and European values in both digital and offline spaces. It aimed to establish fair standards for global trade, address human rights, and advance a human-centric approach to technology, especially in areas like AI. Other priorities included increasing transparency in cryptocurrency markets, implementing the European Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, and supporting partner nations against cyber and hybrid threats.[91]

2.2.2. Context, progress & evaluation of the Czech Presidency 2022

Like the first Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, the second Presidency did not come in calm times. All of the countries were still partly dealing with the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic, which, apart from the overwhelming number of victims, had major economic consequences that only began to be fully felt after the Covid 19

[90] Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Official Website of the Czech EU Council Presidency. [online]. [viewed 3 September 2024]. Available from: https://czech-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/cs/.
[91] Ibid.

of the Covid 19 pandemic, which, apart from the overwhelming number of victims, had major economic consequences that only began to be fully felt after the Covid 19 pandemic had faded. In addition to the slow growth, no growth or even declining GDP of the European Union countries, rising inflation has started to join in.

However, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army on 24 February 2022 definitely had the most significant impact on the preparation and the actual implementation of the Czech Presidency. This happened at the time of France's Presidency, but the Czech Republic was the first country that could fully adapt its programme and priorities to this conflict. In addition to the conventional war - i.e. the attempt to occupy Ukraine with military forces - Russia has also started to wage a hybrid war with the European Union - on the one hand by deliberately creating a refugee crisis, on the other hand by using energy resources as a weapon and by creating food crisis by targeted attacks on infrastructure.

As regards the internal political situation during the preparation and during the Presidency, the situation was much calmer than during the 2009 Presidency. The preparations for the presidency were started by the Second Government of Andrej Babiš (i.e. the coalition of ANO and ČSSD) who was becoming increasingly Eurosceptic, especially because of his investigation for fraud and misuse of EU subsidies. Babiš has repeatedly been very critical of the presidency, criticising in particular the high costs, the inability to react quickly and therefore also the possibility of a real impact.

However, after the 2021 elections to the Chamber of Deputies, the situation turned around fundamentally when the government was formed by a coalition of 5 parties (ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, STAN and Piráti), most of which are pro-European except ODS, the strongest government party with a Prime Minister - Petr Fiala, which is slightly eurosceptic.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 streamlined Czech EU presidency preparations by uniting domestic political factions and shifting the presidency's focus. The government quickly adjusted its agenda to prioritize EU support for Ukraine and strengthening EU resilience.

This external crisis fostered broad alignment among Czech government parties and increased EU member states' willingness to support unified positions, enabling the Czech presidency to mediate with a strong focus on shared objectives.

The course of the Presidency itself was relatively calm (with emphasis on the relative and only in comparison with the previous Presidency, taking into account the fact that the biggest European war since the Second World War started in Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 and the circumstances of the Presidency were therefore certainly not calm). This time, there were no major problems with the Presidency, as was the case with the last Presidency. Achievements were made, particularly in the areas of aid to Ukraine, in the field of energy, by concluding many trade agreements or in the area of Schengen enlargement.[92]

The Government assessed the Presidency as very successful. After the Presidency, Prime Minister Petr Fiala said: „Over the past six months, thanks to our joint efforts, we have reached a number of agreements that many had described as impossible. Thanks to this, the Czech Republic is once again regarded in Europe as a reliable partner and a respected member of the Union.“[93]

The opposition was then more divided in its assessment. For example, Dita Charanzová, MEP for ANO, answered the question whether the Czech Republic had improved its reputation in the EU as follows: "Certainly, the Czech Republic did not make any shame this year, the government did not fall and overall our presidency this year was calm."[94] In contrast, Andrej Babiš, the leader of ANO, the strongest opposition party, was very critical of the Czech presidency - in particular, he criticized the fact that the Czech Republic helped the Green Deal while having no topic of its own.[95]

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[92] Vláda ČR. Evaluation of the Fulfillment of Priorities of the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU. [online]. [viewed 16 October 2023]. Available from: https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/evropskezalezitosti/predsednictvi-cr-v-rade-eu/aktuality/vyhodnoceni-naplnovani-priorit-ceskeho-predsednictviv-rade-eu-202514/.

[93] ČTK. EU Presidency: Prime Minister Fiala on the Achievements of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. [online]. 31 December 2022 [viewed 29 August 2024]. Available from: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/eu-evropska-unie-predsednictvi-fiala-premier-praha-rada-evropske-unie.A221231_073105_domaci_klf

[94] NOVOTNA, K. iDNES.cz. Evaluation of the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU. [online]. 13 December 2022 [viewed 29 August 2024]. Available from: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/ceske-predsednictvi-v-rade-eu-hodnoceni.A221213_104017_domaci_knn

[95] BABIŠ, A. ANO Bude líp. Mr. Fiala is Not Leading; He Didn’t Stand Firm on Gas Price Caps. [online]. [viewed 29 August2024] Available from: https://www.anobudelip.cz/cs/makame/aktuality/z-medii/andrej-babis-pan-fiala-nepredseda-u-zastropovani-cen-plynu-nebouchl-do-stolu-48729.shtml.

The external perception, mainly by diplomats of other member states or European institutions, was positive. Most diplomats mainly emphasized that the Czech Republic had managed to maintain EU unity during the war in Ukraine.[96]

Non-profit and non-governmental organizations rated the Presidency as average, according to research by the Glopolis agency. [97]

The Czech citizens also rated the Presidency as average. Only 12% of the Czechs rated the Presidency as excellent, 21% as above average, 22% as average and 17% as below average, with 13% of the Czechs describing it as an absolute failure.[98]

2.3. Comparison of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2009 and 2022

As can be seen from the chapters above, the presidencies in 2009 and 2022 were fundamentally different.

In 2009, the Czech presidency encountered significant challenges due to domestic political turmoil and an unstable global economy during the financial crisis. In contrast, the 2022 presidency took place in a highly complex geopolitical environment shaped by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the energy crisis, and economic instability after covid-19 pandemics.

France, as the previous presidency in 2009 and 2022, expressed in 2009 that the Czech Republic was not ready, and the Czech presidency was viewed with concern. Nothing similar was repeated in 2022 and the Czech Republic was seen as ready to lead the EU Council Presidency for six months.

[96] BALUCHA, M. Český rozhlas. Czech Presidency of the EU: A Summary of Achievements. [online]. 29 December 2022 [viewed 3 September 2024]. Available from: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ceske-predsednictvi-eu-evropska-unie_2212291615_hav.
[97] MILÉŘOVÁ, Jana. Glopolis. Evaluation of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. [online]. [viewed 16 October 2023]. Available from: https://glopolis.org/site/assets/files/1415/hodnoceni_cz_pres_zalomena_verze_15_05_2023.pdf.
[98] ČTK. Summary of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. [online]. [viewed 16 October 2023]. Available from: https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2303449.

In 2009, the Czech Republic's presidency was marked by internal political instability, including the fall of the government of Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, which undermined the continuity and effectiveness of the presidency. Consequently, Czech leadership struggled to assert influence in the EU's response to the global financial crisis, and its term was often seen as lacking cohesion and strategic vision. Many EU members and observers criticized the Czech presidency as ineffective, and it became associated with a somewhat Eurosceptic stance due to the political context in the Czech Republic at that time.

In 2022, the Czech presidency benefitted from a more stable government and a clear pro-EU stance under Prime Minister Petr Fiala. The government prioritized solidarity with Ukraine, the strengthening of EU energy security, and managing inflation, aligning closely with the EU's strategic goals. The Czech presidency was widely praised for its leadership in responding to the energy crisis. Unlike in 2009, the Czech presidency in 2022 was viewed as competent and responsive, reflecting the Czech Republic's deepened integration within the EU and commitment to its shared values.

In summary, the 2009 Czech presidency is often remembered for its domestic instability and limited EU impact, while the 2022 presidency demonstrated strong, cohesive leadership during a period of crisis. Therefore the 2009 presidency is generally regarded as one of the worst ones, the 2022 presidency is widely accepted as a success.

3. Practical part

This chapter is essential for answering the research questions and confirming or refuting the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the thesis.

The practical part of the thesis is divided into two parts. In the first part, the individual selected presidencies of the Council of the European Union of different countries (Czech Republic 2009, Slovakia 2016, Austria 2018, France 2022 and Czech Republic 2022) are analyzed using secondary data collected mainly from the Eurobarometer. This data examines the perception of the European Union by the citizens of the selected countries before, during and after their country held the Presidency in the Council of the European Union.

The first part - that is, the analysis of secondary data - aims to answer the last research question, which is: *Are the citizens of the countries holding the EU presidency changing the way they perceive the European Union?*

In the second part, the Czech Republic's Presidency of the Council of the European Union between 1 July and 31 December 2022 is examined in more detail by means of a qualitative survey (own questionnaire survey). The questionnaire is used to collect, analyze and evaluate data based on the answers of individual respondents - i.e. selected inhabitants of the Czech Republic. Two questionnaires were created for the purpose of the work - one in the pre-Presidency version and one in the post-Presidency version.

The questionnaire collected data from 152 and 164 respondents respectively for two versions of the questionnaire. Both questionnaires then had the same first part where the questionnaire tried to find out socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education etc. These indicators were later worked with to see what socio-demographic indicators influenced the responses and if so, how.

In the next part, the respondents were then asked questions to show how much information they had about the Presidency (e.g. which country holds the Presidency, who is the Minister for European Affairs, when is the Czech Presidency, what is the motto of the Presidency, etc.). This section was intended to help answer the research question: *Do the citizens of the Czech Republic understand Czech presidency in the Council of EU more after the Czech Presidency in 2022?*

Finally, the last sections were slightly different for both versions of the questionnaire in several questions. In this part, respondents were asked what the priorities of the presidency should be (or should have been), how their perception of the EU has changed during the presidency - and possibly what factors influence their perception of the EU. This section was crucial to answering the first research question - i.e.: *Has the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022 influenced the perception of the European Union by Czech citizens?*

The findings from both parts (secondary data and own research) are then compared, evaluated and further analyzed in the following section, as well as the limitations of the research - and therefore of the whole thesis - are mentioned.

3.1. Secondary data analysis

In this, the first part of the practical part, secondary data for 5 selected presidencies of the Council of the European Union will be analyzed. Firstly, the Czech Presidency in 2009, which was described in the theoretical part. For Slovakia, which held the presidency from July to December 2016 - and which at the same time is economically, culturally, demographically and linguistically the closest to the Czech Republic of the whole European Union. For Austria, which held the presidency in the second half of 2018 and is at the same time a geographically very close country to Czech Republic - however economically and culturally very different, being firmly placed among the Western states of the European Union. The other selected country is France, which held the presidency before the Czech Republic from January to June 2022. France, the Czech Republic together with Sweden formed a so-called *presidency trio.* At the same time, France presidency is very relevant for this thesis, as it can be used to better analyze the specific circumstances surrounding the Czech presidency (in particular the war in Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis and the waning influence of the covid).

All presidencies, except the Czech Presidencies (2009 and 2022), which has already been described in the previous section, will be briefly described. They will also be set in context - i.e. major events that could influence the perception of the European Union by the citizens of the European Union, and in particular the population of the country that has just held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The priorities of each country will then be presented - what they wanted to achieve and

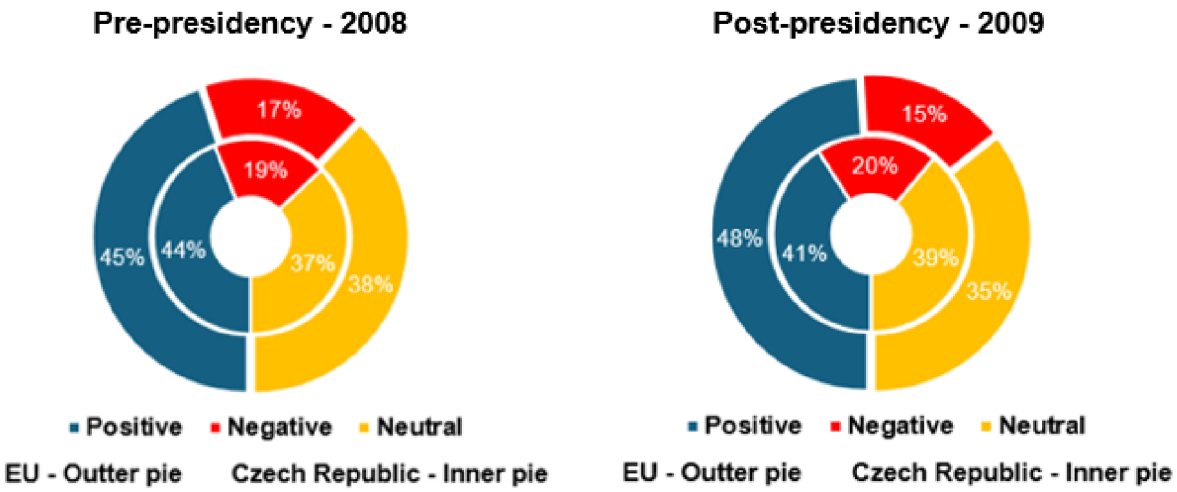
focus on during their presidency. Finally, using data from the Eurobarometer, it will examine how the perception of the European Union has changed among EU citizens - and again especially among citizens of the country that has just held the EU Presidency. Finally, it will be compared how the mood towards the EU has shifted during the presidency by examining the survey question, which was the same in all Eurobarometer surveys: *In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?*

This analysis on 5 selected presidencies will indicate how the presidency may have affected the perception of the EU by the population of the country that held the EU Presidency. The results of this analysis will then be compared with the second part of the practical part of the thesis - in which the impact of the Czech Presidency on the perception of the EU by the inhabitants of the Czech Republic will be examined in more detail using a questionnaire developed for the purpose of the thesis.

Czech Presidency - first half of 2009

The Czech Presidency has already been described in the theoretical part of the thesis. Therefore, in this part, attention will be paid only to the comparison of the perception of the European Union by EU citizens and citizens of the Czech Republic before and after the Presidency.

Graph: 1 & 2 - In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?



Source: Graphs made by author based on data from Standard Eurobarometer 70 - Autumn 2008 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/832 and Standard Eurobarometer 72 - Autumn 2009 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/831

During Autumn 2008 - before the Czech Republic assumed its first Presidency, 44% of the Czech population had a positive perception of the EU and 19% a negative one. The rest - 37% - had a neutral perception of the EU.

In the period after the Presidency, i.e. in the autumn of 2009, the perception of the EU by the Czech population was very similar: 41% perceived it positively, 20% negatively and 39% neutrally.

There has therefore been no major shift in the period before and after the Presidency. 3% less of the Czech population perceived the EU positively and 1% more of the Czech population started to perceive the EU negatively. In the case of neutral perception, there was an upward shift of 2%.

However, a shift can be seen in the perception of the EU by residents of other EU countries. The number of people with a positive perception of the EU has also changed by 3% - but upwards, unlike in the Czech Republic. In contrast, 2% fewer EU residents perceived the EU negatively. In the case of neutral perceptions, the shift was then 3% downwards.

Slovak Presidency - Second half of 2016

The Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which ran from 1 July to 31 December 2016, was Slovakia's first Presidency since it joined the European Union in 2004. The Presidential Trio, as the three countries holding consecutive presidencies are called in the European Union, consisted of Slovakia together with the Netherlands, which held the presidency before Slovakia, and Malta, which took over the presidency after Slovakia. The context of the Slovak Presidency was fundamentally influenced by three very important circumstances for the European Union: the migration crisis, which peaked in 2015 and 2016.[99] The Brexit vote, in which the British people voted for the unprecedented withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, which took place just a week before the Slovak Presidency began[100], and finally the large number of terrorist attacks in Europe. At the very beginning of the Slovak

[99] DOGACHAN, D. Refugee Crisis in Europe (2015-2016): The Clash of Intergovernmental and Supranational Perspectives. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 2017, Vol. VI(1), pp. 1-8.,
[100] BILČÍK, V. Council Presidency and Brexit: from unexpected calm to likely storm. europeum.org [online]. January 2017 [viewed 24 September 2024]. Available from: https://europeum.org/data/articles/tvpbbilcik.pdf

programme for its presidency it was stated that: ‘At this moment, it is essential for the EU to undertake self-reflection. Its aim should be to restore citizens' confidence in the common European project, to develop its tangible benefits and to defend the results of the integration process on our continent’.[101]

Slovakia, like other countries, conceived the Presidency as an opportunity to help the citizens of the European Union - and therefore also the citizens of the Slovak Republic - to better understand how the European Union works and thus to strengthen their confidence in the European integration project. In order to achieve not only this goal, it has defined 4 main objectives for its Presidency:

Economically strong Europe: The Slovak Presidency prioritizes a strong European economy through growth-oriented investments, with support for SMEs, a stable Economic and Monetary Union, and essential structural reforms across the EU.[102]

Modern Single Market: The Slovak Presidency aims to adapt the single market to new needs by expanding it into energy and digital sectors, strengthening projects like the Energy Union and digital single market to boost competitiveness, innovation, and consumer trust.[103]

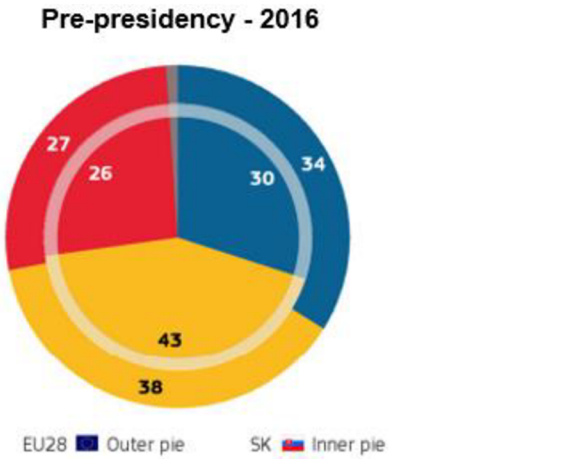
Sustainable Migration and Asylum Policies: The Slovak Presidency focuses on sustainable EU migration and asylum policies by securing external borders, restoring the Schengen area, and fostering cooperation with third countries. It also emphasizes a coordinated approach to enhance Europe's internal security and fight terrorism effectively.[104]

Globally Engaged Europe: The Slovak Presidency emphasizes a united EU commitment to global peace and stability, supporting an international order grounded in human rights and security. Strengthening the EU’s global role involves an active

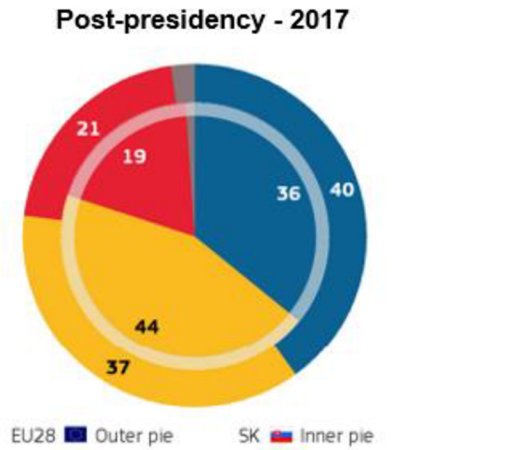
[101] Government of Slovakia. Presidency Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union. web.archive.org [online]. 2016 [viewed 24 September 2024]. p. 3. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20170902194944/http://www.eu2016.sk/data/documents/presidencyprogramme-eng-final5.pdf
[102] Ibid., p.6
[103] Ibid., p.8
[104] Ibid., p.9

Common Foreign and Security Policy based on the EU Global Strategy, aiming to address complex global challenges and stabilize Europe's neighborhood.[105]

Graph: 3 & 4 - In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?



	EU28		SK	
	EB85 Sp.2016	EB84 Aut.2015	EB85 Sp.2016	EB84 Aut.2015
Total 'Positive'	34	- 3	30	- 5
Neutral	38	=	43	+ 3
Total 'Negative'	27	+ 4	26	+ 2
Don't know	1	- 1	1	=



	EU28		SK	
	EB87 Sp.2017	EB86 Aut.2016	EB87 Sp.2017	EB86 Aut.2016
Total 'Positive'	40	+ 5	36	+ 2
Neutral	37	- 1	44	- 1
Total 'Negative'	21	- 4	19	- 1
Don't know	2	=	1	=

Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 85 - Spring 2016 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2130 and Standard Eurobarometer 87 - Spring 2017 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2142

The previous two graphs show the general mood of the Slovak population towards the European Union in 4 periods from autumn 2015 through spring 2016 and autumn 2016 up to spring 2017, thus capturing the period before and after the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

In the spring of 2016, just a few months before the Presidency, 30% of the population had a completely positive perception of the EU, 43% had a neutral perception and 26% had a negative perception.

[105] Government of Slovakia. Presidency Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union. web.archive.org [online]. 2016 [viewed 24 September 2024]. p. 11. Available from: https://web.archive.org/web/20170902194944/http://www.eu2016.sk/data/documents/presidency-programme-eng-final5.pdf

During the Presidency, in the autumn of 2016, 34% of the Slovak population perceived the EU positively, 45% neutral and 20% negative.

After the end of the Presidency, in spring 2017, 36% of the Slovak population had a positive perception of the EU, 44% a neutral perception and 19% a negative perception.

Thus, there was a shift between the period before the beginning of the Presidency and after the end of the Presidency, with 6% more people perceiving the EU positively, and a slight shift in the neutral perception, with 1% more people perceiving the EU in this way. The most significant shift was in the negative perception of the EU, which fell by 7%.

However, an almost identical shift was observed among other EU citizens - 6% more citizens began to perceive the EU positively, 1% more citizens began to perceive the EU neutrally and 6% fewer citizens perceived it negatively.

Austrian presidency - Second half of 2018

Austria's third presidency of the Council of the European Union took place from July to December 2018 – but for the first time since the Lisbon Treaty reshaped the role, introducing new structures like the permanent President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, under the theme “A Europe that protects”.[106] Austria was the last in the presidency trio, which also included Estonia (after the UK voted for Brexit and the countries moved up one term) and Bulgaria.[107]

Like Slovakia, Austria stated in the very beginning of its programme for the Presidency of the Council of the EU that it sees the Presidency as an opportunity to

[106] Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Programme of the Austrian Presidency. eu2018.at [online]. 2018 [viewed 24 September 2024]. p. 7. Available from: https://www.eu2018.at/dam/jcr:52862976-3848-403e-a38a-6aac8bcbe34d/Programme%20of%20the%20Austrian%20Presidency.PDF

[107] KERIKMÄE, T. Estonia and the European Union. researchgate.net [online]. 2019 [viewed 27 October 2024]. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tanel-Kerikmaee/publication/337499115_Estonia_and_the_European_Union/links/5ddc310f299bf10c5a333ff8/Estonia-and-the-European-Union.pdf

increase the confidence not only of Austrian citizens, but also of EU citizens in the efficiency and functionality of the EU: "The EU has had to deal with several crises that have shaken citizens' confidence in the European Union [...] Austria's efforts will be aimed at strengthening the European Union, helping it to get closer to its citizens and re-establishing trust – citizens' trust in the EU's capacity to act."[108]

This presidency came at a time when the EU faced challenges around migration, Brexit, and the rise of populism in several member states. Austria, therefore, aimed to focus the EU on security, economic growth through digitalization, and stability in the EU's closest neighborhood. Austria has defined three main priorities for its Presidency:

Security and the fight against illegal migration: Austria prioritized a unified EU approach to illegal migration by reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening FRONTEX to secure external borders. Emphasis was placed on collaboration with third countries to improve return policies and support those in need before they reach the EU. Austria also pushed for enhanced cooperation and data sharing among member states to combat organized crime, terrorism, and radicalization. These priorities were discussed at the Salzburg summit on 20 September 2018.[109]

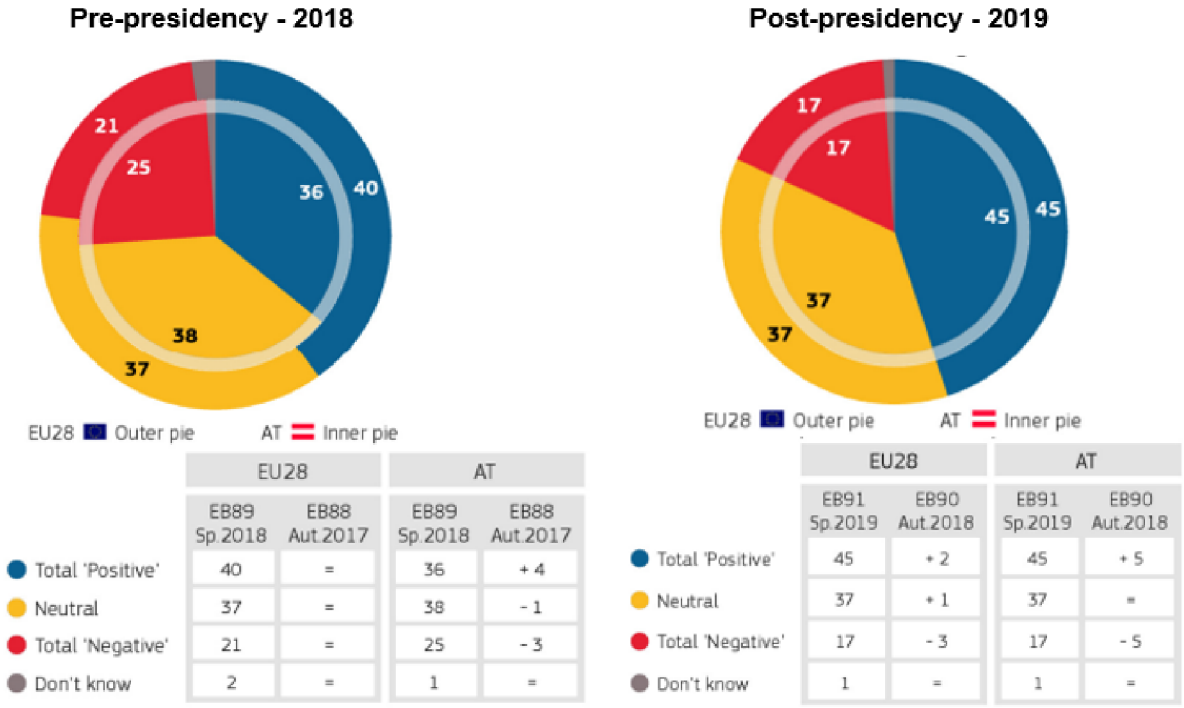
Securing Prosperity and Competitiveness through Digitalization: As global economic power shifts, the EU must avoid overregulation and advance digitalization to sustain its competitiveness. Digital transformation is key to future growth, with a focus on completing the Digital Single Market, modernizing public administration, and updating industrial policies. Austria's Presidency prioritized a balanced regulatory framework, fair competition, and taxation reform to ensure digital profits are taxed where generated, supporting both growth and fair competition.[110]

Stability in the European neighbourhood – EU perspective of the Western Balkans/South Eastern Europe: Austria's Presidency emphasized

[108] Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Programme of the Austrian Presidency. eu2018.at [online]. 2018 [viewed 24 September 2024]. p. 7. Available from: https://www.eu2018.at/dam/jcr:52862976-3848-403e-a38a-aac8bcbe34d/Programme%20of%20the%20Austrian%20Presidency.PDF
[109] Ibid., p. 8.
[110] Ibid.

strengthening ties between the EU and the Western Balkans/Southeastern Europe, recognizing the region's strategic importance for European stability, security, and economic interests. Building on Bulgaria's work and the EU Enlargement Strategy, Austria supported a clear EU integration path for these nations, focused on measurable progress and specific criteria. This approach reflects shared historical and cultural bonds and acknowledges the region's partnership during the migration crisis.[111]

Graph: 5 & 6 - In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?



	EU28		AT	
	EB89 Sp.2018	EB88 Aut.2017	EB89 Sp.2018	EB88 Aut.2017
Total 'Positive'	40	=	36	+ 4
Neutral	37	=	38	- 1
Total 'Negative'	21	=	25	- 3
Don't know	2	=	1	=

	EU28		AT	
	EB91 Sp.2019	EB90 Aut.2018	EB91 Sp.2019	EB90 Aut.2018
Total 'Positive'	45	+ 2	45	+ 5
Neutral	37	+ 1	37	=
Total 'Negative'	17	- 3	17	- 5
Don't know	1	=	1	=

Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 89 - Spring 2018 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2180 and Standard Eurobarometer 91 - Spring 2019 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2253

The previous two graphs show the general mood of the Austrian and EU population towards the European Union in 4 periods from autumn 2017 through spring 2018 and autumn 2018 up to spring 2019, thus capturing the period before and after the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[111] Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Programme of the Austrian Presidency. eu2018.at [online]. 2018 [viewed 24 September 2024]. p. 9. Available from: https://www.eu2018.at/dam/jcr:52862976-3848-403e-a38a-6aac8bcbe34d/Programme%20of%20the%20Austrian%20Presidency.PDF

Before the presidency started, in Spring 2018, 36% of Austrians perceived the EU as positive. 38% of Austrians saw the EU as neutral and 25% as negative.

During the Austrian presidency, in Autumn 2018, the perception of the EU among the Austrian population changed slightly in favour of trust in the EU, with 40% of them perceiving the EU positively, 37% neutrally and 22% negatively.

After the presidency, in spring 2019, the perception of the EU has improved even further - this time to 45% of Austrians having a positive perception of the EU, 37% neutral and only 17% negative.

Thus, there is a significant shift between the pre- and post-Presidency periods, with 9% more of the Austrian population having a positive perception of the EU and a similarly - 8% less having a negative perception of EU.

A much smaller shift can be observed among residents of other EU countries. Before the Presidency, 40% of residents had a positive perception of the EU and 21% a negative one. During the Austrian Presidency, positive perceptions moved up by 5% and negative perceptions down by 4%.

French Presidency - First half of 2022

France's presidency of the Council of the European Union took place from January to June 2022, marking its thirteenth time in this role. This presidency occurred against a backdrop of significant geopolitical challenges, particularly due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and also in the gradually fading pandemic of Covid 19. Under the theme Recovery, Strength and a Sense of Belonging"[112] France sought to strengthen the EU's autonomy in areas such as defense, energy, and digital policy.

This Presidency was the first of a trio that included the Czech Republic, which took over the Presidency after France, and Sweden, emphasizing continuity in policy direction. France prioritized a robust European response to the Ukraine crisis, advocating for solidarity with Ukraine and pushing for sanctions against Russia.

[112] French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Programme of the French Presidency. wayback.archive-it.org [online]. 2022 [viewed 25 September 2024]. p. 1. Available from: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20221120104852/https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/media/qh4cg0qq/en_programme-pfue-v1-2.pdf

Additionally, the presidency focused on advancing the European Green Deal and promoting the EU's digital transformation, reflecting the bloc's commitment to sustainability and innovation.[113]

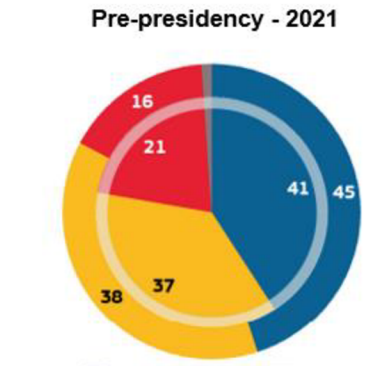
A More Sovereign Europe: The EU focused on strengthening the Schengen Area, enhancing border protection, managing migration, and reforming asylum policy in line with European values. Efforts included building a more capable Europe in security and defense, promoting stability and prosperity in neighboring regions like the Western Balkans and Africa, and advancing solutions to global challenges.[114]

A New European Model for Growth: The EU aims to make Europe a hub for production, job creation, and technological excellence, with economic growth aligned to climate goals. This model promotes innovation, supports European digital industries with self-defined rules, and creates high-quality, skilled, and better-paying jobs.[115]

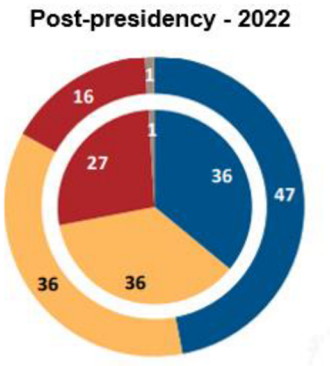
Humane Europe: The EU is committed to listening to citizens' voices through the Conference on the Future of Europe, defending the rule of law and core values, celebrating culture, fostering trust in science, fighting discrimination, and securing a sustainable future for the next generation.[116]

[113] HEIDBREDER, G. Withering the exogenous shock: EU policy responses to the Russian war against Ukraine. West European Politics, 2024, p. 1392-1418.
[114] French Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Programme of the French Presidency. wayback.archive-it.org [online]. 2022 [viewed 25 September 2024]. p. 3. Available from: https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20221120104852
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid.

Graph: 7 & 8 - In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?



	EU27		FR	
	EB95 Sp.2021	EB94 Win.20/21	EB95 Sp.2021	EB94 Win.20/21
Total 'Positive'	45	- 1	41	=
Neutral	38	=	37	- 1
Total 'Negative'	16	+ 1	21	+ 1
Don't know	1	=	1	=



	EU27		FR	
	ST97 Sum. 22	Δ ST96 Win. 21/22	ST97 Sum. 22	Δ ST96 Win. 21/22
Total 'Positive'	47	+3	36	=
Neutral	36	-2	36	-1
Total 'Negative'	16	-1	27	+1
Don't know	1	=	1	=

Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 95 - Spring 2021 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2532 and Standard Eurobarometer 97 - Summer 2022 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693

The previous two graphs show the general mood of the French and EU population towards the European Union in 4 periods from winter 2020/2021 through spring 2021 and winter 2021/2022 up to summer 2022, thus capturing the period before and after the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Before France took over the presidency, the general mood of the French population towards the EU was 41% positive, 37% neutral and 21% negative.

At the time of the presidency (although this survey was conducted in the early February, a relatively short time after the start of the presidency), 36% of the population perceived the EU positively, 37% neutrally and 26% negatively.

After the Presidency, the EU was perceived positively by 36% of the population, neutrally by 36% and negatively by 27%.

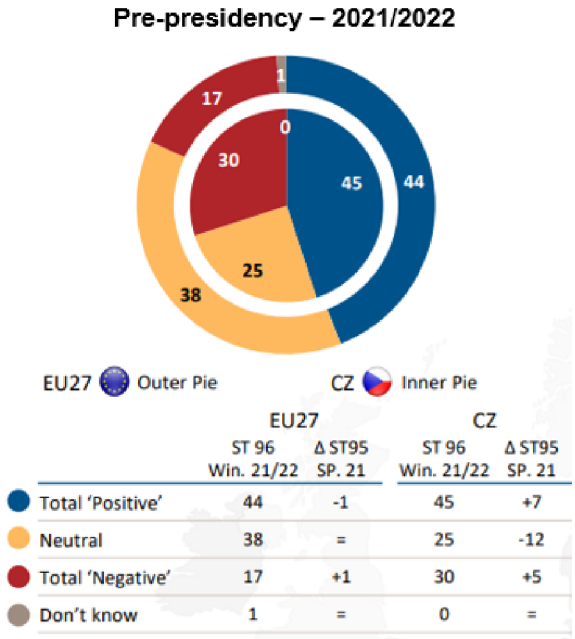
What we can observe here is a deterioration in the perception of the EU by the citizens of France. 5% less people have a positive perception of the EU - 6% more people have a negative perception. One per cent less perceive it neutrally.

For EU residents, the shift is not nearly as strong - however, in this case it is more in favour of the EU - with 2% more residents describing their perception of the EU as positive. 2% fewer EU residents then describe their attitude as neutral - the percentage of residents perceiving the EU negatively has, logically, not changed.

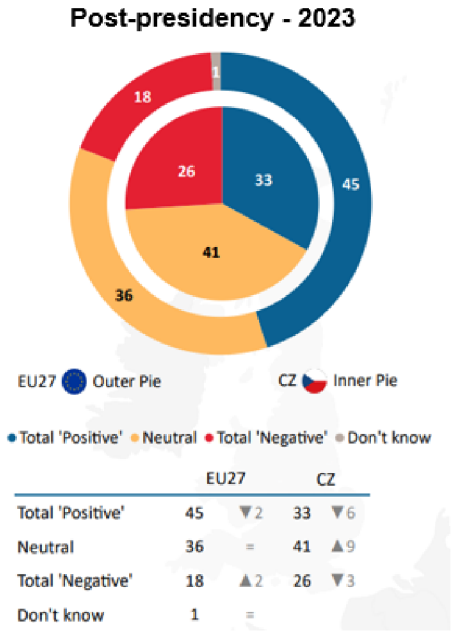
Czech Presidency - second half of 2022

As already mentioned many times, the Czech Republic held the presidency after France from 1 July 2022 until 31 December 2022, when it handed over the presidency to Sweden. This section will therefore only analyse how Czech and European citizens perceived the EU in the period before and after the Czech Presidency.

Graph: 9 & 10 - In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?



	EU27 ST 96 Win. 21/22	EU27 Δ ST95 SP. 21	CZ ST 96 Win. 21/22	CZ Δ ST95 SP. 21
Total 'Positive'	44	-1	45	+7
Neutral	38	=	25	-12
Total 'Negative'	17	+1	30	+5
Don't know	1	=	0	=



	EU27		CZ	
Total 'Positive'	45	▼2	33	▼6
Neutral	36	=	41	▲9
Total 'Negative'	18	▲2	26	▼3
Don't know	1	=		

Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 96 – Winter 21/22 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553 and Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 22/23 available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872

The two charts above show how the Czechs and Europeans perceived the EU in 4 periods - from spring 2021 through winter 2021/2022 and summer 2022 to winter 2022/2023.

In the period before the Presidency, i.e. in the winter of 2021/2022, 45% of the Czech population perceived the EU positively, 30% negatively and 25% viewed it neutrally.

During the Presidency (even though it was the very beginning of the Presidency, as the data collection took place mainly during July), 39% of the population had a positive perception of the EU. It was then perceived negatively by 29% and neutrally by 32%.

After the Presidency, in the winter of 2022/2023, the Czechs' perception of the EU was even worse, with only 33% of the population perceiving it positively, 26% negatively and 41% neutrally.

Between the pre-Presidency and post-Presidency periods, we can therefore observe a relatively significant shift against positive perceptions of the EU. A staggering 12% fewer people in the Czech Republic perceived the EU positively. An even bigger shift occurred in the neutral perception of the EU - 16% more. A slight shift - 4% fewer people perceived the EU negatively.

For the rest of the EU population, perceptions of the EU remained almost unchanged over the period under review. Only 1% more residents began to perceive the EU positively - 2% less were neutral and 1% more negative

3.2. The method of own research

The second part of the practical part of the thesis analyses and examines only the second Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which took place in the second half of 2022. This research was carried out through a quantitative survey using an online questionnaire. This method of research was chosen mainly because of the possibility of collecting data from a larger number of respondents, clear, obvious possibilities of evaluation and the ability to distribute to all geographical parts of the Czech Republic. The questionnaire was distributed in three phases – pilot, pre-Presidency and post-Presidency. Since the target group was the Czech population, all three versions of the questionnaire were distributed in Czech language.

In order to be sufficiently representative of the entire population of the Czech Republic, the minimum number of respondents was set at 150. This number was determined by the traditional method:

$$\boldsymbol{n} = \frac{\boldsymbol{Z^2} * \boldsymbol{p} * (\boldsymbol{1} - \boldsymbol{p})}{\boldsymbol{E^2}})$$

Where **Z** is the z-score for a confidence level, which was set to 0,95 – coefficient is therefore 1,96, **p** is the estimated proportion which was set to 0.5 for maximum uncertainty and **E** is the margin of error, which was set to 8% -therefore 0.08).

$$\boldsymbol{n = \frac{1,96^2 * 0,5 * (1 - 0,5)}{0,08^2}}$$

In which **n** is approximately 150 respondents even after adjusting for a population of 10.5 million.

However, it is important to note that the 8% margin of error is quite high. In political surveys, a margin of error of 3 per cent is normally assumed - a maximum of 5. However, for such a margin of error, the number of respondents would have to be at least 1000 (for 3 %) or 400 (for 5 %), which is not feasible within the limited resources of this paper. Thus, a margin of error of 8% was used, which is one of the main limitations of this thesis, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter. However, to maintain at least partial representativeness, great emphasis was placed on sufficient representation of all demographic groups (especially gender, age, socio-economic status, etc.).

The questionnaire was first distributed to a limited group of people as a pilot survey - to test the technical functionality and content logic on a smaller group of people before the questionnaire was distributed to a larger number of people. This pilot survey was conducted from 22-24 June 2024. As this survey showed almost no deficiencies apart from minor formal errors, this pilot survey was closed and the questionnaire was adapted into its final form. The results from this pilot survey have been deleted and have not been further processed - the respondents knew that this was a pilot survey, and they were contacted and could not be guaranteed anonymity - so it can be assumed that the responses do not truly reflect the views of the respondents.

After the pilot phase was completed, a pre-presidential version of the questionnaire was distributed. This part of the research took place from 24 June to 2 July 2022 and was distributed mainly through social networks - Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram and through online forums and discussion groups. Although the survey was originally planned to take place before the Presidency, it was not completed until three days after the start of the Presidency, because it was only then that the target number of respondents - namely 152 - was reached.

The last part of the questionnaire collection was the third phase - after the Presidency. This phase took place between 3.1. and 16.1.2023. At the beginning (3.1), respondents who had provided their email address in the pre-presidency questionnaire were contacted by email. Due to the low response rate (11 respondents - roughly 28%), one more email was sent on 12.1.2024 asking respondents to complete the questionnaire if they had not already done so - which raised the response rate to 24 people - a final response rate of roughly 63%. As in the previous phase, the remaining respondents were approached mainly through social networks - Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram and through online forums and discussion groups. This raised the number of respondents to 164 - whereupon the survey data collection was closed.

During the data collection process, the demographic groups completing the questionnaire were monitored and the channels where the questionnaire was distributed were adjusted – for example in both cases reaching a younger age group of respondents relatively quickly - which then led to the questionnaire being distributed into online communities, groups and discussion forums attracting particularly older potential respondents. However, in addition to the aforementioned channel matching in the case of underrepresentation of a demographic group, respondents were distributed randomly.

Of all the questions, the overwhelming majority are closed or semi-closed in both phases of the questionnaire and the respondent therefore chooses the best-fit option, or more than one option, or has the opportunity to complete his or her own answer.

Google forms web application was used to create the questionnaire. The responses from this web application were then exported to Microsoft excel software, where it was further modified and exported to MAXQDA software, where the analysis of the responses and the correlation between, for example, the demographic status of the respondents and the responses, as well as between the different versions of the questionnaire, was carried out.

3.3. Evaluation of the questionnaire

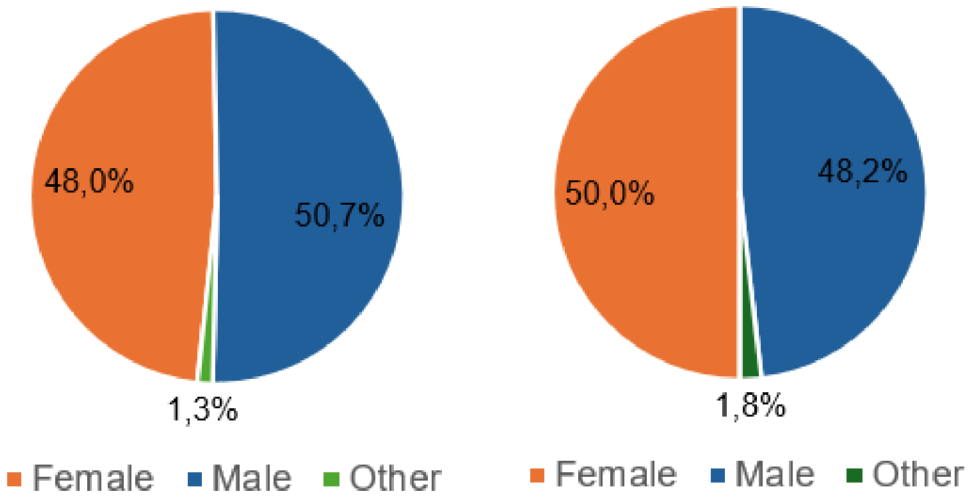
What is your gender?

This question was intended to ensure sufficient representativeness of both genders in both questionnaires, as one of the most important Sociodemographic

factors. This representativeness has been ensured as the sexes are almost equally balanced in both versions of the questionnaire - which also corresponds to the population of the Czech Republic, which is also equally represented with a slight deviation.

The question also explored the effect of gender on responses to other questions. However, no major differences were found in how the two answered. Partial differences could only be observed in question 16 in the case of the pre-presidency version of the questionnaire. Differences could also be observed figuratively in the following questions examining socio-demographic factors (for example, women were more likely to be more educated and humanities-oriented, while men were more likely to be less educated and more technically oriented) - which already had an impact on the answers to the questions.

Graph: 11 & 12 - What is your gender? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

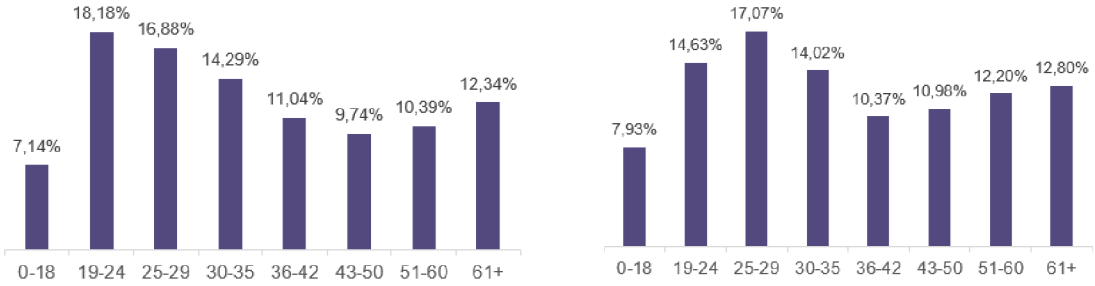
What is your age?

Similar to the previous question, this question aimed to ensure sufficient representation of all ages. This goal was only partially achieved in both versions of the questionnaire (when all age categories had at least 10% of respondents, except for the 0-18 category in both questionnaires and the 43-50 category in the pre-presidential version of the questionnaire) - a much higher representation can be observed in the younger generations - especially in the 19-29 age group. This is probably mainly due to their higher presence on social networks or higher willingness to fill in the

questionnaires. However, this does not correspond to the age structure in the Czech Republic, where the strongest generational years are mainly around 50 years old. The 36-50 age groups in particular are therefore underrepresented, which is one of the limitations of the paper and something that needs to be considered when evaluating other responses for their impact on the age of respondents.

However, age is already one of the socio-demographic indicators that influenced the answers to the following questions quite substantially. In general, it could be seen that the younger people were, the more pro-European they were - however, this will be analysed in more detail in the following questions and their answers.

Graph: 13 & 14 - What is your age? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency

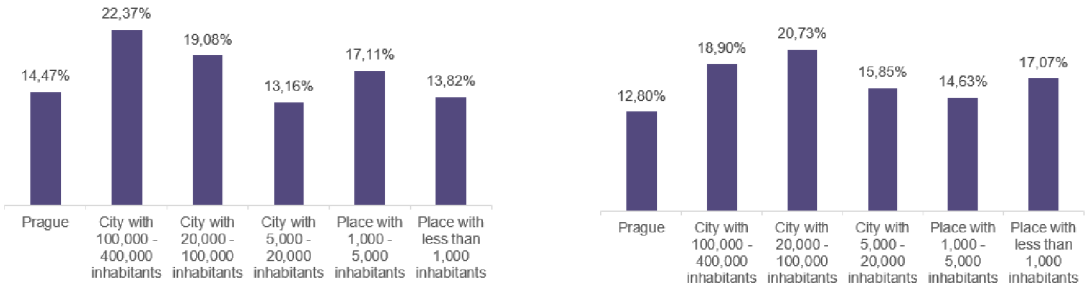


Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

Where do you live?

The aim of this question was also to ensure that all residents - or rather the places where they live - were sufficiently representative. The categories were chosen to cover approximately 15-20% of the population of the Czech Republic. Here, it was possible to ensure a sufficient representation of all places in the Czech Republic. Again, it can be seen here that where respondents live has an impact on how they answered the other questions, with respondents from larger cities - i.e. the first two categories - answering the questions more in favour of the EU.

Graph: 15 & 16 - Where do you live? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



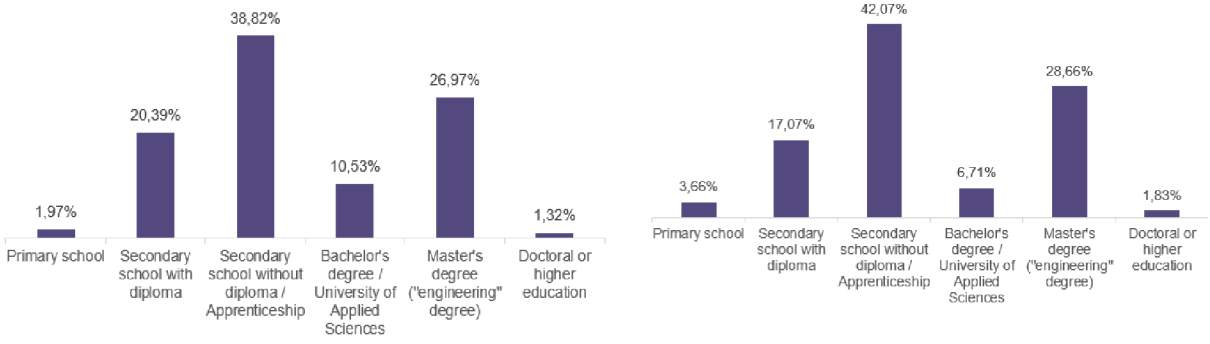
Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

What is your highest level of education?

In the case of the question on highest educational attainment, sufficient representativeness was only partially achieved. For example, only 2% and 3,6% of respondents had primary education - but this representation is much higher in the general population. On the other hand, respondents with a university degree, either a bachelor's or a master's degree, are over-represented in both cases of the questionnaire.

Given that the highest educational attainment is again something that quite substantially influenced subsequent responses, the lack of accurate representation is again one of the limitations of the paper that needs to be taken into account when evaluating subsequent responses to subsequent questions.

Graph: 15 & 16 - What is your highest level of education? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

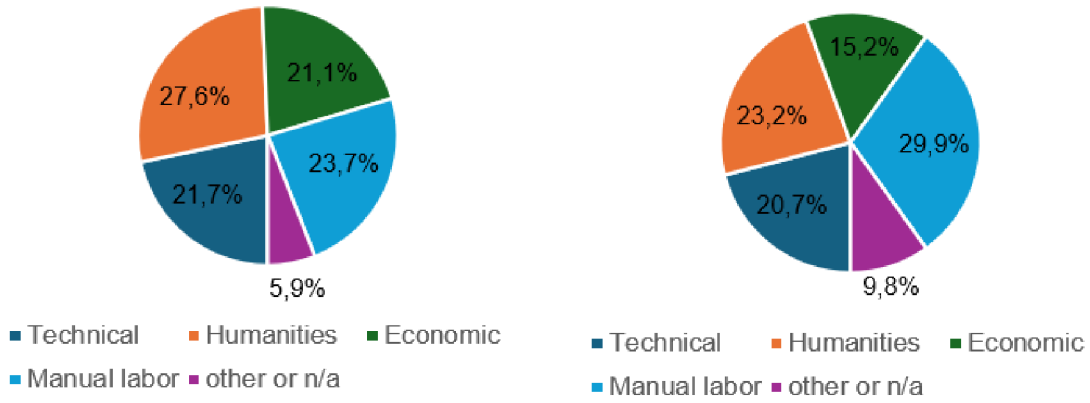
What is your main field of focus?

This question was intended to show how respondents' orientations differ and, more importantly, how this affects their perception of the EU.

This question was also the subject of several feedback forms at the end of the questionnaire. Respondents mentioned that they did not know what to fill in if, for example, they were working in a technical field, however manual. Therefore, this question should be evaluated with some caution as it is possible that other respondents were not fully sure of their answer.

However, there are some strong correlations (e.g. manual workers and people in technical fields were more likely to be in favour of leaving the EU, or more likely to vote for certain parties, and people in the humanities or economics were more likely to be pro-European), which will be explored further in the following questions.

Graph: 17 & 18 - What is your main field of focus? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



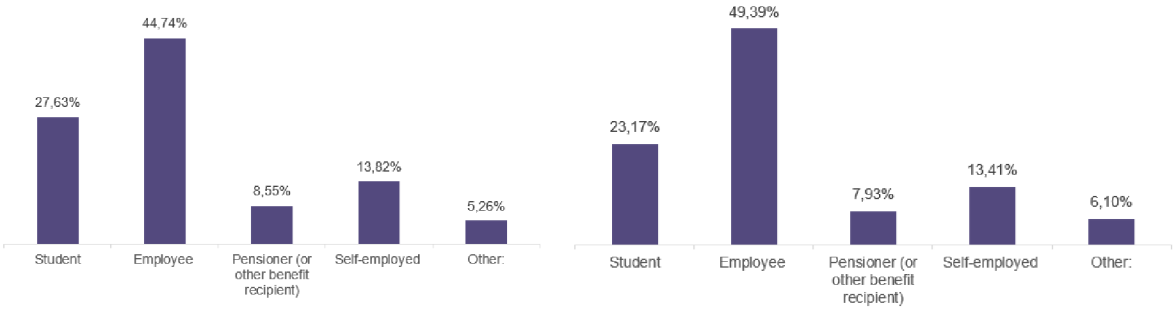
Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

You are currently: *(If you are doing more than one of the options, please select the option you spend more time on).*

The last of the socio-demographic indicators was again designed to analyse how different population groups responded. Overwhelmingly, employees were the most represented in the questionnaires - as in the population.

However, whether a person was a student, employee or entrepreneur did not have a major impact on the answers to the other questions. Only in the case of students was it possible to observe a more positive perception of the EU - which is, however, already reflected in the age distribution.

Graph: 19 & 20 - You are currently: Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



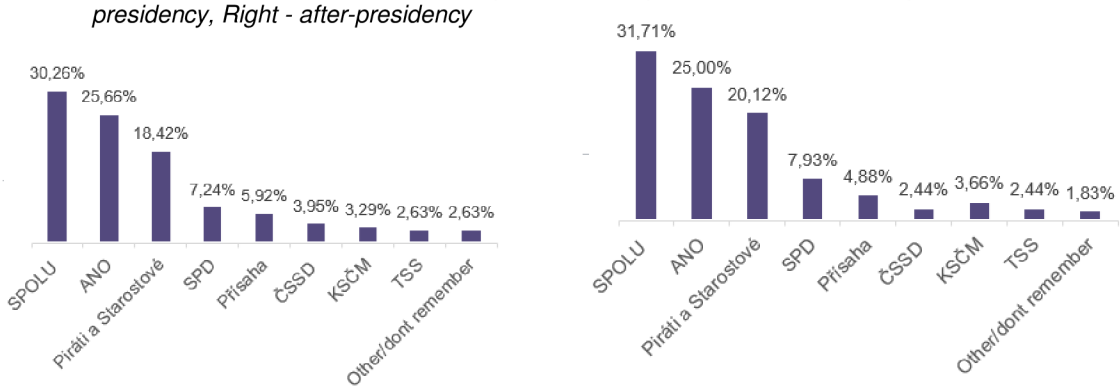
Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

Which political party/coalition did you vote for in the 2021 general election?

This question was designed to determine whether the voters of all relevant political parties in the Czech Republic are sufficiently represented. It was also to check whether the sample of respondents was indeed sufficiently representative across the entire political spectrum. At the same time, given that all socio-demographic facts were sufficiently represented, it was possible to achieve a distribution similar to the actual results of the 2021 general election. Slight differences can be observed mainly in the fact that the ruling parties are slightly over-represented, which is related to the fact that the lower age and higher education categories are also over-represented. In contrast, they are underrepresented for the opposite reason - underrepresentation of older and less educated categories.

In the case of the second version of the questionnaire, this question is followed by another question - has the presidency in any way changed the party you plan to vote for in the next elections?

Graph: 19 & 20 - Which political party/coalition did you vote for in the 2021 general election? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

Post-presidency version: **Has the presidency or any other event in any way changed the party you plan to vote for in the next election?**

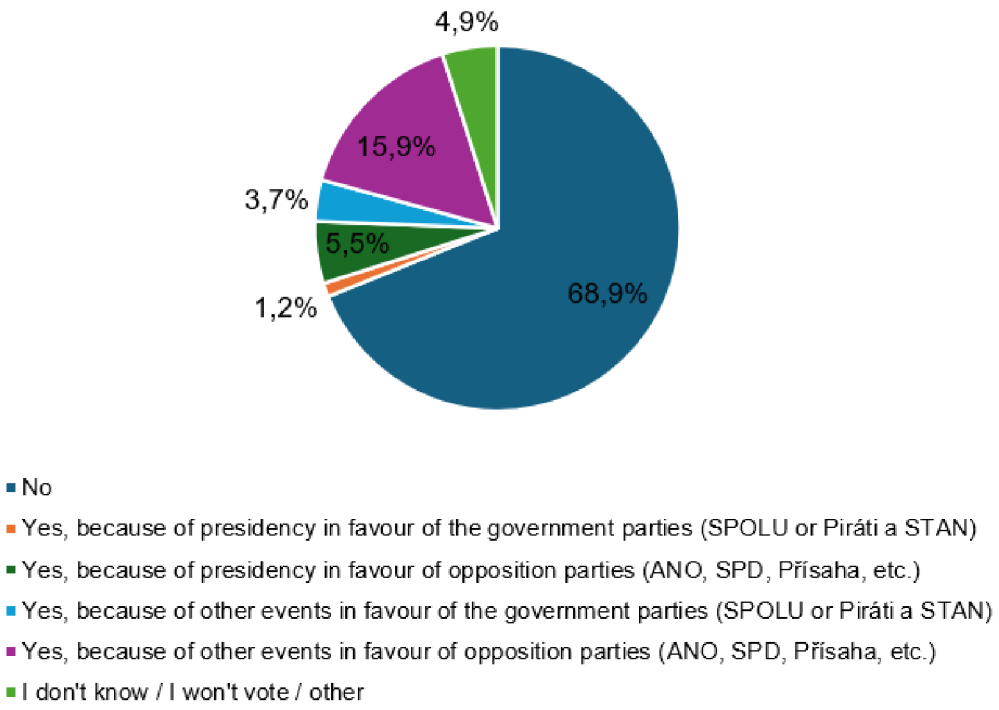
The answers to this question showed that the vast majority of respondents - 72% - do not intend to change the party they planned to vote for because of the Czech Republic's Presidency of the EU Council.

Then, 6.7% of the population plan to vote for another party because of the pre-seat - 1.2% in favour of the ruling parties and 5.5% in favour of the opposition parties.

However, about three times as many residents (19.5%) plan to vote differently because of other events and circumstances. 3.7% plan to change their vote in favour of the ruling parties and 15.9% in favour of the opposition parties.

Respondents who chose "Yes, because of other events in favour of [...]" were further asked a follow-up question: "For what reasons do you plan to vote for another party?"

Graph: 21 Has the presidency or any other event in any way changed the party you plan to vote for in the next election?



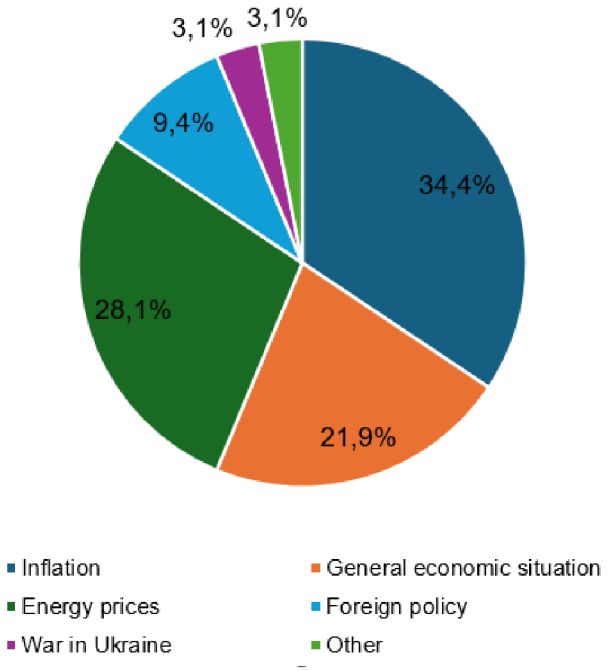
Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

Post-presidency version: **For what reasons do you plan to vote for another party?**

As already mentioned, this question was only asked to respondents of the second (post-presidential) version of the questionnaire who answered the previous question "Yes, because of other events in favour of [...]". The aim of this question was to understand the main reasons that respondents plan to change who they vote for in the next election.

Inflation and energy prices (which are at the same time events that are very closely related, as the price of energy is fundamentally written into prices and thus increases inflation) can be considered as the two main reasons, which together have 62.5%. Another reason was the general economic situation, which was the main reason for change for almost 22% of the population. 9.4% of the population then want to change their choice because of foreign policy - all respondents who want to change their choice because of foreign policy additionally want to do so in favour of the government parties.

Graph: 22 For what reasons do you plan to vote for another party?



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

Would you vote for or against the Czech Republic leaving the European Union in a referendum?

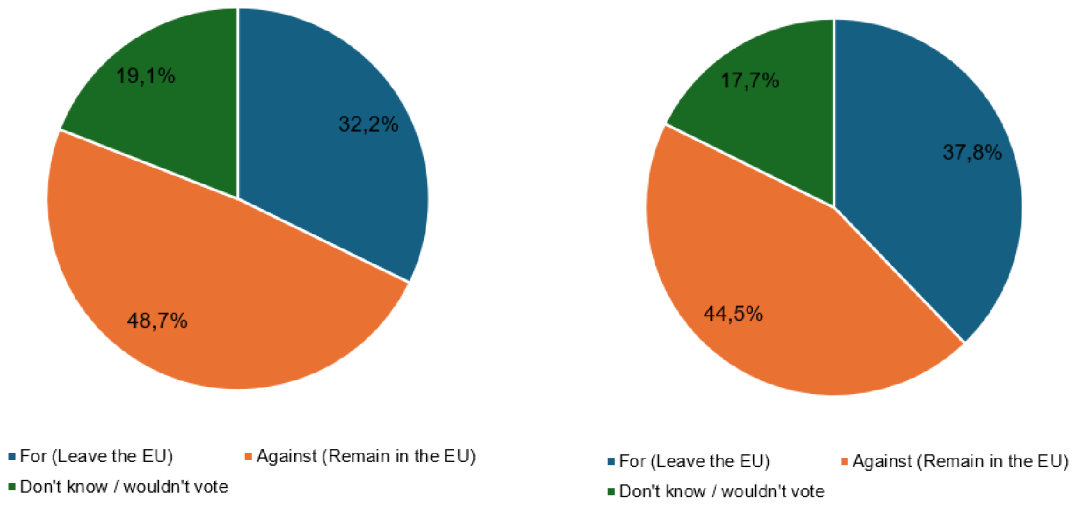
This question was designed to find out whether respondents would vote for or against leaving the EU and to try to capture the shift that has occurred during the Presidency. In the pre-Presidency version of the questionnaire, 32.2% of the population was in favour of leaving. Then 48.7% were against withdrawal, almost half of all respondents. 19.1% of respondents did not know what they would vote for or would not vote at all.

In contrast, in the post-presidency version of the questionnaire, respondents are more open to the Czech Republic leaving the EU, with more than 5% more respondents voting in favour - 37.8%. Roughly 4% fewer respondents would vote against withdrawal - 44.5%. The remaining number would not vote or are undecided.

As mentioned above, the answers to this question were quite strongly correlated with the location of the respondent (Prague and large cities mean that the respondent is more likely to vote to remain in the EU, while smaller towns and villages often mean

that the respondent would like to leave the EU), how highly educated they are (here, the more educated a person is, the more they would prefer to stay in the EU and conversely the less educated they are, the more they would prefer to leave the EU), or age (the younger the respondent is, the more they would prefer to stay in the EU and alternatively the older they are, the more they would prefer to leave the EU).

Graph: 23 & 24 Would you vote for or against the Czech Republic leaving the European Union in a referendum? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey.

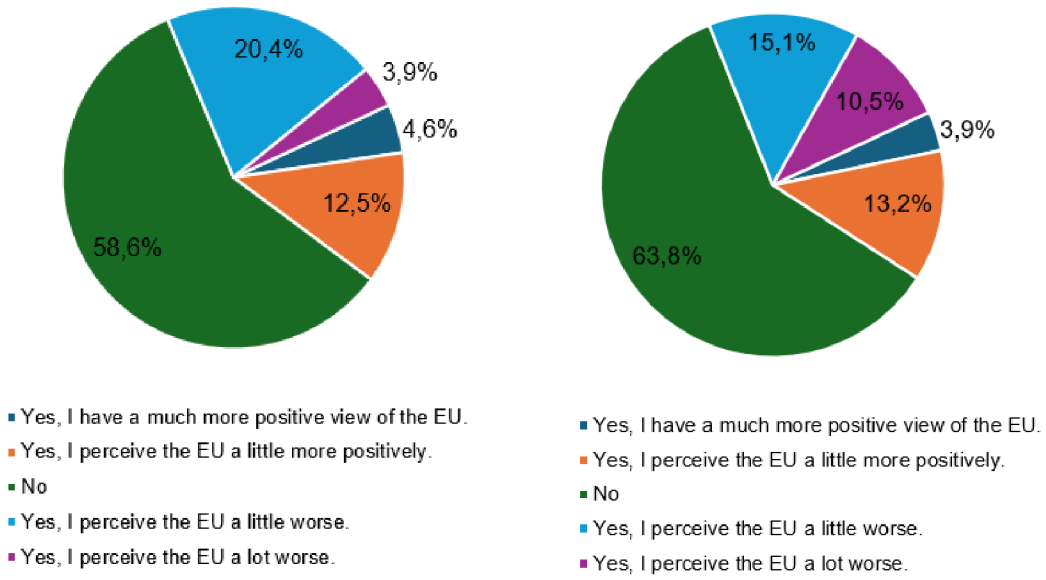
Has Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed your attitude towards the EU?

The aim of this question was to understand how much influence an unprecedented event such as the war in Ukraine had on the perception of the EU among the Czech population. Although the main goal of the thesis is to understand the impact of the presidency on the perception of the EU, it is also important to understand the circumstances that are completely different than what Europe has been used to for decades - a time of peace. The European Union immediately became involved in the war in Ukraine. This is probably why over 40% of the population changed their opinion of the EU in the time since the outbreak in the first - pre-presidential version of the questionnaire. More positively, 17% of the population started to feel more positive about the war in Ukraine - almost 5% of them much more positively. On the other hand, almost 24% of the population started to perceive the EU more negatively because of the war - of which 4% much more negatively.

In the case of the second version of the questionnaire (after the presidency), about 36% of the population changed their opinion of the EU - but of which much more

negatively than in the previous version of the questionnaire. Over 25% of the population changed their opinion of the EU for the worse, of which 10.5% even started to perceive the EU very negatively. More positively, 16% have started to see the EU more positively - of which 4% very positively.

Graph: 25 & 26 Has Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed your attitude towards the EU? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

Which country currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU?

The aim of the following questions was to find out how informed the Czech population in general is about the Presidency of the Council of the EU, as well as to observe the differences in how informed the Czechs were before and after the Czech Presidency and therefore how successful the communication of the Presidency was.

In the case of the first question: Which country currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU?, not all respondents were included in the first version of the questionnaire - because as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter respondents answered this questionnaire until 3 July - and from July onwards the Czech Republic already held the Presidency - so theoretically there were two correct answers for two periods and therefore I excluded respondents who answered after 30 June 2022 from the answers.

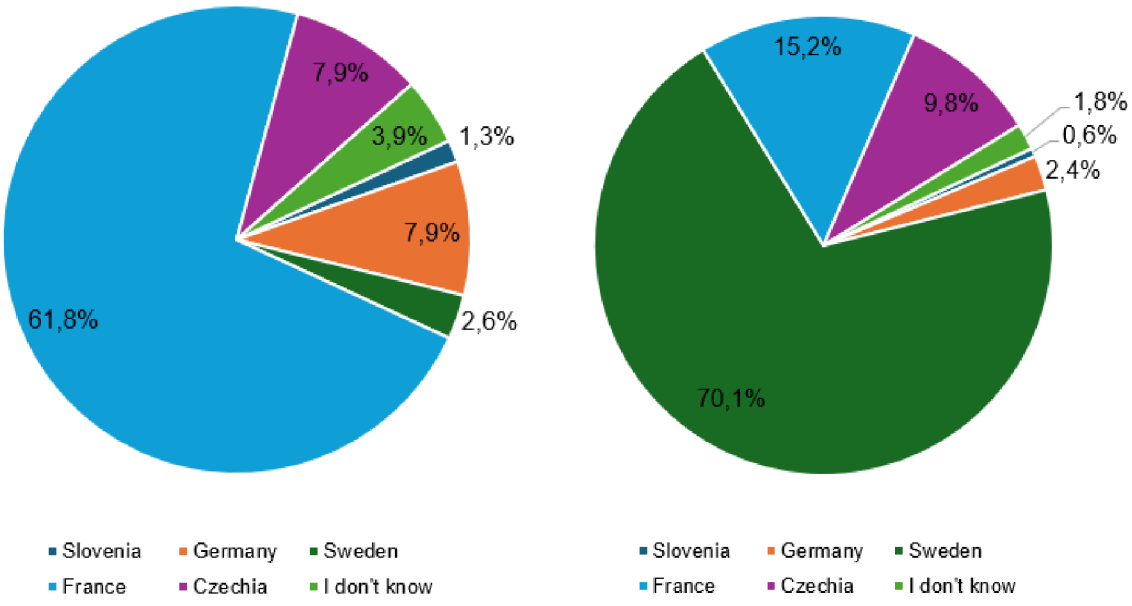
For the first version of the questionnaire - where the correct answer was France (As the first of the *presidency trio)* - 62% of respondents answered correctly. Germany

and the Czech Republic came second with 8% each. Only 4% of respondents said they did not know who holds the Presidency of the EU Council - almost 10 times as many did not know correctly.

For the second version of the questionnaire - i.e. the post-presidency version - the correct answer was Sweden (i.e. the last country of the presidency trio), the answers were more accurate, with 70% of respondents answering correctly. France came second with 15,2% and the Czech Republic third with 10%.

In both cases, education was correlated with whether the respondent answered the question correctly, as was their occupation (humanities-oriented respondents were more likely to answer correctly and manual workers were more likely to answer incorrectly).

Graph: 27 & 28 Which country currently holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

When does (did) the second Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU start?

Another question to find out how informed the Czechs were about the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. In this case, 78% of respondents answered

correctly in the first version of the questionnaire (1.7.2022). The second most frequent answer was 1.1.2023 with 9% and the third with 8% 1.6.2022.

In the case of the second version of the questionnaire, 88% of respondents answered correctly. All other answers had less than 4% of respondents.

Responses were again correlated with education and major, similar to the previous question.

What is the name of the current Czech Minister for European Affairs?

Given that the newly created post of Minister for European Affairs was to coordinate the preparation and subsequent implementation of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, his role during the Presidency was absolutely crucial.

The aim of this question is therefore to find out how familiar respondents are with this minister and, more importantly, how much the Presidency has changed this.

In the case of the first version of the questionnaire - before the presidency - 56% of respondents answered correctly (Mikuláš Bek (or some variation of his name - Mikoláš, Miroslav, Beck, etc.). The next most frequent answers were Ivan Bartoš with 17% and Jan Lipavský with 12%.

In the case of the second version of the questionnaire, the answers were correct in more cases when 73% picked Mikuláš Bek. The second most frequent answer was Jan Lipavský with 9% followed by Vít Rakušan with 5%.

In this case, there was a correlation with how a person voted - Voters of the current government parties (SPOLU, Pirátů and STAN) answered correctly more often.

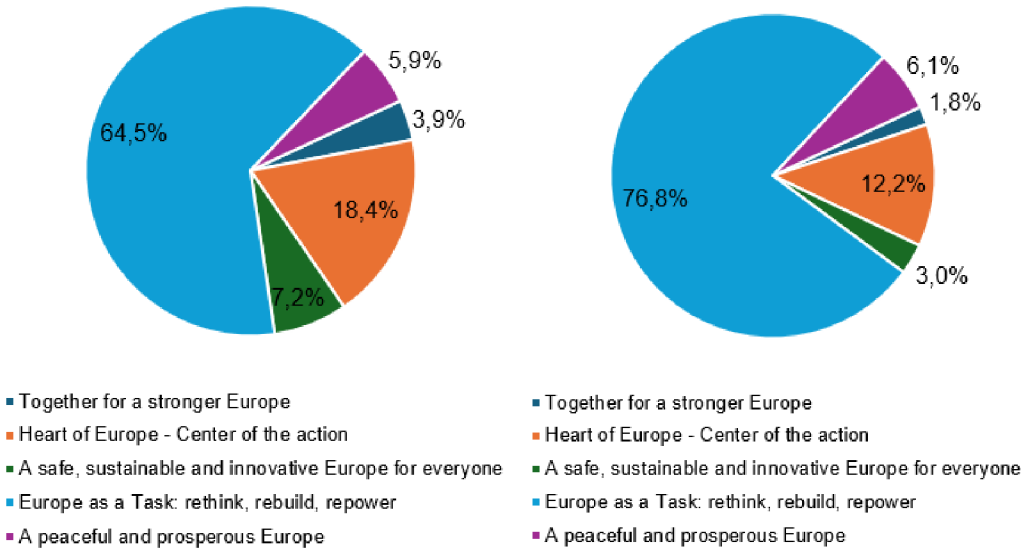
What is the motto of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU?

Similar to the previous question, this question also aimed to capture how well respondents perceived the ongoing Presidency.

In the first version of the questionnaire, 65% of respondents knew the correct answer (Europe as a Task: rethink, rebuild, repower). The second option (Heart of Europe - Centre of the action) was chosen by 14.5% of respondents.

More than three quarters of respondents answered correctly in the second option. The second option was again Heart of Europe - Center of the action, this time with 12%.

Graph: 29 & 30 What is the motto of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

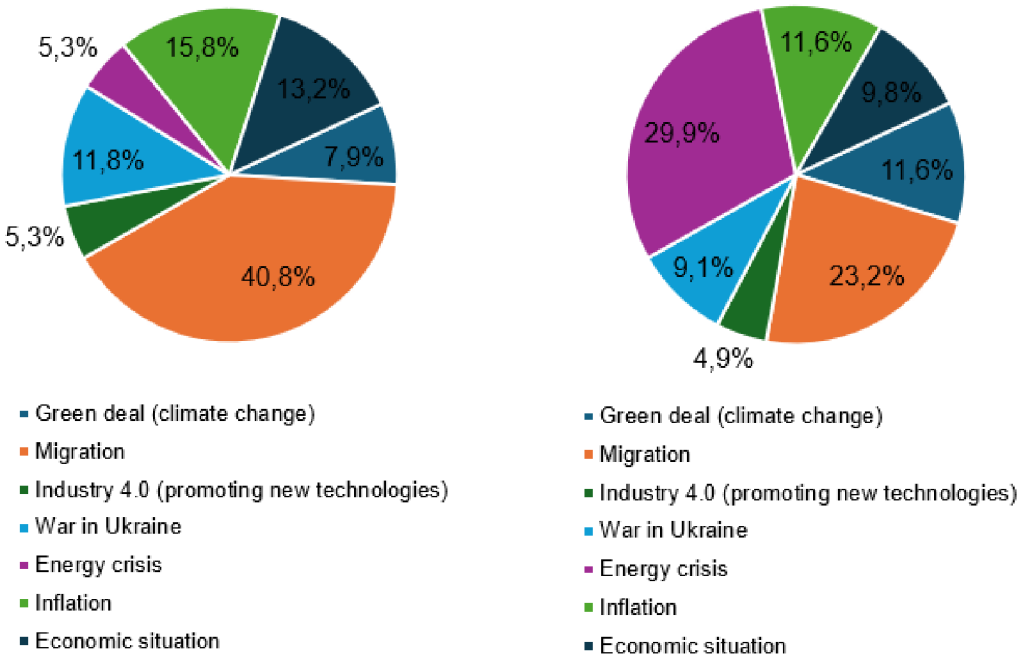
What do you think should be (should have been) the priorities of the Czech Presidency?

It is interesting to see how the priorities the Czechs would like to see for the Presidency have shifted. Whereas before the Presidency, the strongest topic was clearly migration - which was chosen as the primary priority by almost 41% of the population. Inflation came in second place by a wide margin, with 16% of respondents. In third place, and by a small margin, was the economic situation.

By contrast, after the Presidency, only 23% would have chosen migration as their top priority. By contrast, 30% would have chosen the Energy Crisis as their top priority, almost 25% more people than before the Presidency.

Again, the answers to this question correlated mainly with which parties the respondent voted for. In particular, on the topic of migration, voters of opposition parties were very predominant. On the other hand, in the case of Industry 4.0 or the Green Deal, voters of the governing coalition were more prevalent.

Graph: 31 & 32 What do you think should be (should have been) the priorities of the Czech Presidency? Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



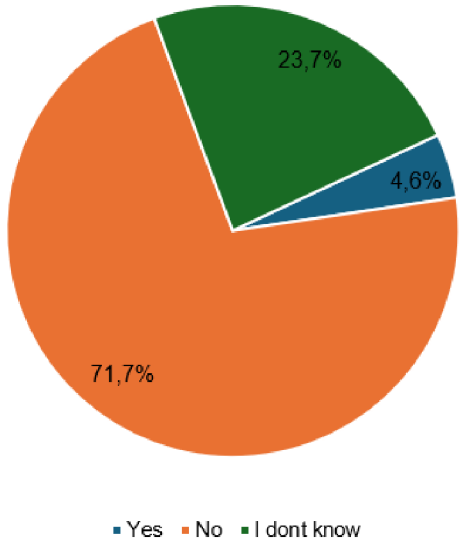
Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

Pre-presidency version **Do you expect the Presidency to change your view of the European Union?**

The aim of this question, which was only in the pre-presidential version of the questionnaire, was to find out whether the Czech population expects to change its opinion on the European Union. The overwhelming majority of respondents answered that they do not expect such a change - 72%. Roughly almost a quarter of respondents, 24%, did not know what to answer. Only 4.6% of respondents answered that they expected their perception of the EU to change.

In particular, the answer "don't know" was quite strongly correlated with education. Less educated (no high school diploma and bellow) people did not choose this answer in any case.

Graph: 33 Do you expect the Presidency to change your view of the European Union?



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

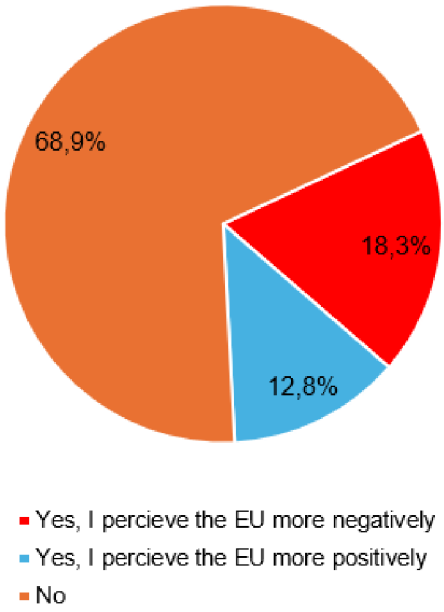
Post-presidency version: **Have you changed the way you perceive the EU because of the Czech Presidency?**

This question was then very similar in the post-presidential version of the questionnaire to the pre-presidential version. In this version, respondents were asked whether the Czech Presidency had changed their opinion of the EU.

Similarly to the previous version, around 70% of respondents answered that they had not changed their opinion because of the Presidency. Of the remaining 30% of respondents, 18% answered that they had changed their opinion of the EU for the worse because of the Presidency. The remaining 12% of respondents had changed their opinion of the EU for the better.

Whether the respondent changed his/her opinion about the EU was correlated with whether the respondent changed his/her opinion about which party he/she wants to vote for in the next parliamentary elections. In particular, respondents who answered the question: Has the presidency or any other event in any way changed the party you plan to vote for in the next election? answered that they planned to vote for the opposition party again because of the presidency, were more likely to answer that their perception of the EU had changed for the worse because of the presidency.

Graph: 34 Have you changed the way you perceive the EU because of the Czech Presidency?



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

From the given options, choose which 1 circumstance influences the way you perceive the EU the most:

The last, and for the purposes of the questionnaire perhaps the most important question. In both versions of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to choose one of the given circumstances that most influences their perception of the EU.

In both versions of the questionnaire, about half of the respondents chose the option that they had never changed their opinion of the EU.

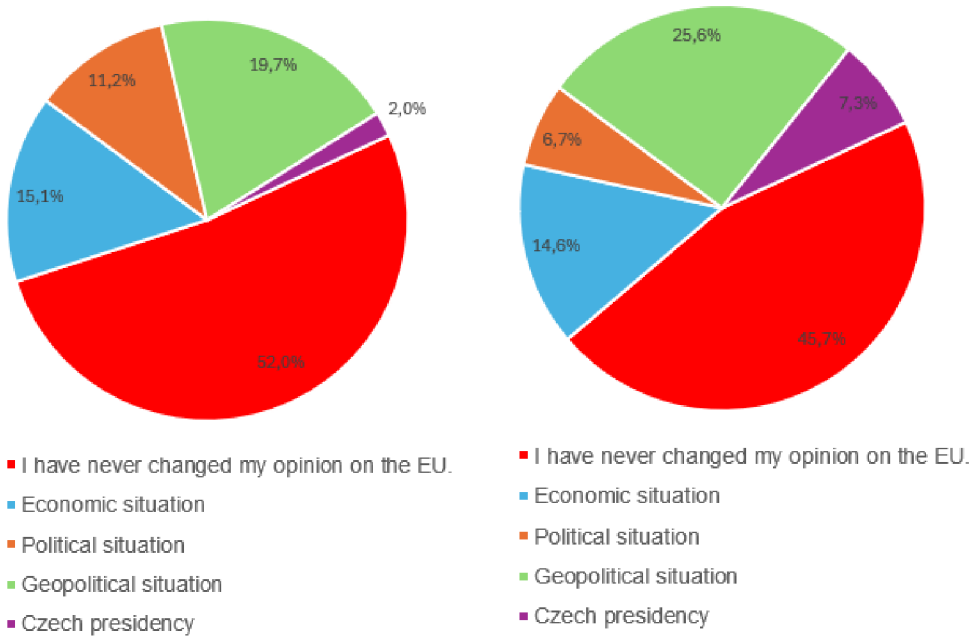
In the first version - i.e. before the Presidency - the geopolitical situation ranked second, with a fifth of respondents choosing it as the main circumstance influencing their perception of the EU. The economic situation then came in third place with 15%, followed by the political situation with 11%. The presidency was then chosen by only 2% of respondents.

In the case of the second version of the questionnaire, the situation was similar. The geopolitical situation also came second - but in this case with 25%. This was followed by the economic situation with 15%. The presidency then overtook the political situation in this version of the questionnaire, with 7% of respondents.

In this case, there was no major correlation. The only exception is, that respondents who have never changed their opinion on the EU were more likely voters of both government or opposition parties (especially STAN and Pirati) and SPD.

On the other hand, SPOLU or ANO voters were much more likely to change their perception of EU - whether because of the geopolitical, political or economic situation.

Graph: 34 From the given options, choose which 1 circumstance influences the way you perceive the EU the most. Left - Pre-presidency, Right - after-presidency



Source: Graphs created by the author based on data from the conducted questionnaire survey

3.4. Comparison of results, analysis and limitations

Analysis of secondary data showed that during the Czech Presidency (which ended in a major failure for the Czech Republic). The overall change, i.e. that 3% less people perceived the EU positively and 1% more people perceived it negatively, is at the level of statistical deviation and therefore we cannot talk about the influence of the Presidency on the perception of the EU by the citizens of the Czech Republic. In contrast, the perception of the EU by other EU citizens has changed in the opposite direction, i.e. 3% more started to perceive the EU positively and 2% less negatively.

In the case of the Slovak Presidency, a change in the perception of the EU among Slovak citizens has already occurred during the Presidency. 6% more people started to perceive the EU more positively and 7% less people perceived it negatively. A similar shift occurred among other EU citizens.

An even greater shift in the perception of the EU by Austrian citizens can be observed in the period before and after the Austrian Presidency. After the Austrian Presidency, 9% percent more Austrian citizens started to perceive the EU positively. By contrast, 8% less were negative. There was a smaller shift, 5% more positive and 4% less negative, in the opinion of other EU citizens during the Austrian Presidency.

There was also a shift in the perception of the EU among French citizens during the French Presidency. However, this shift was on the other side of the two previous Presidencies. 5% fewer French citizens had a positive perception of the EU in the post-Presidency period and 6% more had a negative perception. However, other EU citizens changed their opinion of the EU for the better during the French Presidency. In this case, 2% more leaned towards a positive perception and conversely 2% fewer EU residents then describe their attitude as neutral - the percentage of residents perceiving the EU negatively has, logically, not changed.

However, the biggest change in the perception of the EU can be observed in the case of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022. A staggering 12% fewer people in the Czech Republic perceived the EU positively. An even bigger shift occurred in the neutral perception of the EU - 16% more. A slight shift - 4% fewer people perceived the EU negatively.

For the rest of the EU population, perceptions of the EU remained almost unchanged over the period under review. Only 1% more residents began to perceive the EU positively - 2% less were neutral and 1% more negative.

Thus, out of the five selected presidencies, the opinion of the people of the country holding the presidency changed only very subtly during one of them. In two cases, it changed at least partly for the better. In two instances, the change was, at least partially, unfavorable.

Only the 2009 presidency, which was described by the authors as the worst presidency in history, stood out in the evaluation of the presidency - and this is the only presidency where there was no fundamental change in the perception of the citizens

of the country holding the presidency. On the other hand, the Czech Presidency in 2022, which was generally assessed as a success, brought the biggest decrease in the perception of the EU by the Czech population.

The analysis of secondary data therefore does not show that the presidency had a significant positive impact on the perception of the European Union of the citizens of the country holding the EU presidency.

My own research using a questionnaire survey, which focused in much more detail on the Czech Presidency in 2022, confirmed that although the Czechs were aware of the Presidency (this was explored mainly through questions such as which country holds the Presidency of the EU Council, what is the motto of the Presidency, who is the Minister for European Affairs, when does the Presidency start, etc. - the answers to these questions show that the Czechs perceived the Presidency and knew enough about it), the Presidency did not have an impact on their perception of the European Union.

For the people of the Czech Republic, other issues are much more important in terms of their perception of the European Union - for example, the geopolitical or economic situation. However, most people have already formed an opinion about the EU and do not change it. Furthermore, the research confirmed the well-known fact that more educated and younger people perceived the presidency much more intensely.

At the same time, the impact of the start of the war in Ukraine (and subsequent events such as the refugee crisis, the energy crisis and high inflation) was also evident, which rather damaged the perception of the EU in the eyes of the Czech population and is probably responsible for such a large drop in the positive perception of the EU.

Of course, the research has several limitations that prevent the results from being considered definitive. Most of these limitations stem from the limited scope of the work and therefore the lack of depth of the research. The first and the biggest one is the insufficient sample size; given the scope and possibilities of the work, the level of statistical deviation was chosen at 8%, which is a high number for a political science paper. Another limitation is then the evaluation of only 5 other countries in the secondary data analysis. Last but not least, the research method itself is also a limitation - a questionnaire survey by its very nature can never explain the reasons why a respondent chose the option they did.

Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to confirm or refute the hypothesis expressed by the Government of the Czech Republic in preparation for the Presidency:

"The Presidency of the Council of the EU influences the positive perception of the European Union by the citizens of the Member State holding the Presidency."

To determine whether the hypothesis can be confirmed or refuted, three research questions were used to be answer within this thesis.

- Has the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022 influenced the perception of the European Union by Czech citizens?

The answer to the first question is twofold. If we were to accept the premise that the strong deterioration in the perception of the EU was caused by the Presidency, this statement would go against the results of my own research, which confirmed that other circumstances were behind the deterioration in the perception of the EU. Given that even though the Presidency was generally perceived as a success, the perception of the EU by Czech citizens has worsened, the answer to the research question is that the Presidency has not had a major impact on the way Czech citizens perceive the EU.

- Do the citizens of the Czech Republic understand Czech presidency in the Council of EU more after the Czech Presidency in 2022?

The second question was asked in order to find out whether the people of the Czech Republic perceived the Presidency at all. The survey itself confirmed that the vast majority of the population was aware of the Presidency - and that this had changed for the better during the Presidency. The answer to this question is that the majority of the Czech population had a good understanding of when and how the Presidency took place after the pre-presidency period.

- Are the citizens of the countries holding the EU presidency changing the way they perceive the European Union?

The third question aimed to determine, through secondary research, whether the findings from my own research during the Czech Presidency could be applicable to other countries as well. As already mentioned, of the five Presidencies selected, the opinion of the people of the country holding the Presidency changed only very slightly

during one of them. In two cases it has changed at least partly for the better. And in two cases it has changed at least partly for the worse. Thus, it has not been shown that the fact that a country holds the EU presidency has a major impact on the perception of the EU by the citizens of those countries.

In view of the answers to the previous questions hypothesis can be refuted by the results of secondary research, which showed that the perception of the European Union by Czech citizens has fundamentally changed for the worse. The refutation of this hypothesis has subsequently been confirmed by own research. Moreover, it has shown that this change in perception is not so much due to the Czech Presidency and that other circumstances are much more important for Czech citizens, which influences the way they perceive the EU.

While the Czech population demonstrated awareness of the presidency, it did not translate into a positive shift in their perception of the EU, suggesting that broader geopolitical and economic factors, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine and its economic repercussions, played a more significant role in shaping public opinion.

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Summary

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the impact of the Czech Presidency in the Council of the European Union in 2022 on the perception of the European Union by the Czech public. The primary aim was to determine whether this Presidency led to a significant positive shift in attitudes toward the EU among Czech citizens. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including a questionnaire survey to gather firsthand insights from Czech respondents and a comprehensive analysis of secondary data from various European sources. The findings indicate that, despite the visibility of the Czech Presidency, it did not result in a substantial improvement in public perception of the EU. Instead, the analysis suggests that other factors, notably geopolitical and economic conditions, particularly those stemming from the recent crises in Europe, had a much stronger influence on how the EU is perceived within the Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, a general ambivalence remains, as many citizens appear to have pre-established opinions on the EU that are relatively resistant to change. In light of these findings, the thesis underscores the need for future research to focus on external influences - such as economic shifts, political developments, and international events - that shape public opinion on the EU.

Key words: European Union, Council of the European Union, Czech presidency, Perception of the EU, Czech citizens