

European Green Deal on Czech Facebook: Lessons Learned for Strategic Communication

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Key takeaways

The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), in cooperation with its partners from the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Beacon Project, monitored the Czech debate concerning the European Green Deal on Facebook in the period 20 April – 20 September 2022. This monitoring constitutes part of a larger IRI initiative being implemented simultaneously in five EU countries. PSSI reviewed the top 100 posts based on the number of interactions on Facebook discussing the Green Deal policies each month to identify the main drivers of the debate and attitudes towards the Green Deal, the European Union and climate change more generally.

In the past months [1], the online debate in the Czech Republic about the Green Deal moved away from the content and goals of the political initiative itself and the topic of climate change. Currently, the Green Deal is almost solely discussed within the context of the ongoing economic and energy crisis. The initiative is mostly perceived negatively as one of the main causes of the current crises and often mentioned simultaneously with the EU Emissions Trading System and the European Energy Exchange in Leipzig as key drivers of the rising price levels.

[1] April-September 2022

The most active users (described below) perceived the increasing prices as an artificial problem caused by an incompetent Czech government and the EU and its policies such as the Green Deal. Using the Green Deal as an alleged proof of the government's incompetence and negligence of national interests was a frequent political narrative used especially within the context of the nearing municipal and senate elections that took place on 23 and 24 September. During the height of the pre-election campaign, the discourse around the Green Deal became very solution-oriented, in the sense that abandoning the Green Deal was suggested as the solution to the current crisis.[1] Overall, the role of the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine and the Russian weaponization of gas supplies in the process of increasing prices was largely ignored or even contradicted. Instead, the crisis was attributed to the consequences of the alleged European green ideology. [2] Similarly, the debate revolved around the need for an independent Czech energy market, however, not from the foreign malign influence associated with the Russian gas, but from the EU and the EU energy market.[3] In this regard, there were frequent references in the form of praise to other V4 countries and their crisis measures. Especially positive were mentions towards the Hungarian PM Orbán and his ban on energy exports.[4]

The monitored online debate did not take into account the Green Deal as a potential solution to the energy crisis, but instead presented it as being part of the problem. Among other things, its potential lies in the support for switching to renewable sources of energy which have the potential of covering a significant part of the Czech energy consumption without relying too much on external suppliers. The intensive pushback to the Emissions Trading system also disregards the very small share of this system in energy prices — canceling emission allowances would decrease a household's electricity bill only by 2 to 3%.[5] On the other hand, the considerable income (around 110 billion CZK annually[6]) it provides the Czech Republic can be used for purposes such as decarbonization but also compensation for vulnerable households. For example, the New Green Savings policy (Nová zelená úsporám), which provides subsidies for energy-saving housing, is already partially funded from sold allowances. Cutting off from the criticized European Energy Exchange would also bring a risk of isolation as an uncooperative solo player in the EU, with consequences especially in case of need of aid from other EU members in the form of energy supplies.[7]

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5884655591545207>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/507538479338658/posts/5487790067980116>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5836783816332385>

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5786531738024260>

[5] <https://www.greenpeace.org/czech/clanek/17479/zruseni-emisnich-povolenek-by-snizilo-ceny-za-elektrinu-o-2-az-3-procenta-a-neni-to-malo-antone-pavlovici/>

[6] 4.48 billion EUR/4.37 billion USD annually

[7] <https://www.amo.cz/cs/klimatym/pet-veci-co-cesko-nevi-o-soucasnem-vyvoji-v-energetice-mimoradna-rada-eu/>

Out of the 100 sources we identified as the most interactive with posts about the Green Deal, 80% spread manipulative information or disinformation about the initiative. Majority of the most active sources were politicians, specifically members of the right-wing, national-conservative and Eurosceptic political parties such as Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), Freedomites, Tricolour Citizens' Movement or Tea Party, a conservative fraction of the governmental Civic Democratic Party. SPD was the most active actor, especially its leader Tomio Okamura whose posts constituted almost 28% of the 500 most interacted with posts reviewed in this research. Okamura and SPD intensively promoted their 10-step solution to the current crisis, identifying the withdrawal from the Green Deal as step number one.[1] The 20% of sources informing about the Green Deal in an objective and neutral manner were the mainstream media such as the public broadcaster Czech Radio or members of liberally oriented pro-EU parties such as the Czech Pirate Party.

While the Facebook political discourse on the Green Deal is predominantly negative, newest opinion polls show that the Czech public feels, first of all, uninformed about the initiative. Only tenth of the population claims to have enough information, around half has some little knowledge and a third almost none. The majority perceives the Green Deal as a needed change with positive potential especially for the air quality and the state of the Czech landscape, but worry about its impact on the economy and the living standards in households.[2] As described above, it is exactly these doubts that were targeted and intensified in the pre-election campaigns of the right-wing parties by their Eurosceptic messaging and manipulated attribution of the current economic and energy crisis. However, the opinion polls also show that even people critical of the Green Deal support the use of renewables and are generally interested in protecting nature and climate.[3]

These findings should inform future planning for strategic communication of the Green Deal and green policies more generally. A proactive and regular strategic communication of these topics should emphasize those aspects of the policy in which the population already shows interest — in the case of the Czech Republic, both short-term and long-term positive impact on the landscape, nature preservation and climate. The opinion polls also uncovered gaps in the population's knowledge about the process of transformation into a low-carbon society, about the commitments of the Czech Republic in this field and the actual planned measures to uphold these commitments.[4]

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5700570409953727>

[2] <https://www.stem.cz/ceska-netransformace-2022/>

[3] <https://www.stem.cz/ceska-netransformace-2022/>

[4] <https://www.stem.cz/ceska-netransformace-2022/>

Future strategic communication should focus on filling in these gaps so that the public is not uninformed and, as a consequence, uninterested or passive towards green policies or do not seek information from alternative, often unreliable and manipulative sources.

Finally, strategic communication needs to focus on counter-messaging regarding the manipulative narratives targeting the populations' worries about the economic and social impact of the green policies, especially during the current economic and energy crisis. This counter-messaging should inform about the expected societal impact of the green policies, but more importantly, on plans of its compensation, with measures such as subsidies proving to be popular in the opinion polls.[1] Based on the experience with political misuse of the Green Deal in campaigns prior to the municipal and senate elections, counter-messaging will become more and more important with the nearing 2023 presidential elections to be held in January, where disinformation about the Green Deal can surface more intensely and nation-wide.

[1] <https://www.stem.cz/ceska-netransformace-2022/>