

PSSI BRIEFING — OCTOBER 2022

THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AS A SCAPEGOAT: THE GREEN DEAL IN THE CZECH ONLINE INFORMATION SPACE

Kristína Šefčíková, Prague Security Studies Institute

THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AS A SCAPEGOAT: THE GREEN DEAL IN THE CZECH ONLINE INFORMATION SPACE

Author: Kristína Šefčíková, Prague Security Studies Institute

Domestic political actors in the Czech Republic are invoking the EU's environmental initiative to smear their opponents.

The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), as part of the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Beacon Project, monitored the Czech debate on Facebook concerning [the European Green Deal](#), climate change, and energy-related issues in October 2022. This monitoring is part of [a larger IRI initiative](#) that has been taking place in five EU countries simultaneously. PSSI's monitoring covered political messaging that recorded the most interactions on Facebook,¹ articles from mainstream media that had the biggest visibility,² and discussion of the Green Deal on websites known for spreading disinformation.³ Besides mapping the general debate, the goal of this research was to explore if, and through what channels, disinformation or manipulative narratives about the Green Deal and energy-related issues have penetrated into mainstream discourse.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mainly the right-wing, national-conservative opposition spreads manipulative messaging on the topic while also gaining the most interactions on social media.
- A total of 32% of posts viewed withdrawal from the Green Deal as a systemic solution to the ongoing energy and economic crisis, which generally framed the debate around green policies.
- Domestic politics dominated the content of 43% of the posts, with their authors using the topics of green policies and energy-related issues to promote anti-government stances. They claimed that support of the Green Deal and other EU policies related to energy is evidence of the government's incompetence, which will drag the Czech Republic down.
- Recently, the Green Deal was pushed to the background by a more forceful appeal to limit Czech participation in the European Energy Exchange. This poses a potential threat of supporting isolationist tendencies in energy-related issues.
- The current situation could become a missed opportunity for stakeholders to draw attention to the Green Deal and transition to renewable sources of energy as at least a partial solution to the ongoing crisis and future energy security issues.

1 Based on the number of interactions (shares, comments, and likes), using the CrowdTangle tool.

2 Based on data from the Pulsar monitoring tool, looking at news sources that gained the biggest visibility.

3 We monitored 15 websites chosen based on popularity (number of visits according to [Similar Web](#)) and expert consensus that these websites have been spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories long-term (e.g., see the list on [konspiratori.sk](#)).

In October, websites known for spreading disinformation directly mentioned the Green Deal in 31 articles, negatively in 84% cases. They presented the policy as [the real culprit of the energy crisis](#) along with the politics of an “incompetent” Czech government that is destroying the Czech Republic because [it bows to alleged EU dictatorship](#) and the EU’s destructive policies. The entire topic of climate change and green transformation [was underplayed and mocked](#) as climate alarmism and simply an ideological agenda that does not entail any real or positive change for the future.

The Green Deal was not a significant topic in the Czech mainstream media in October. From the analyzed articles that gained the biggest visibility, only 6% focused directly on the topic of green policies, while others overwhelmingly covered the context of the energy crisis. Only articles that cited public figures who are critical of the Green Deal managed to gain visibility. They argued either that the policy’s goals are unachievable or that [there is a direct causal link](#) between the Green Deal and the ongoing energy crisis.

This penetration of manipulative messaging into the mainstream was, however, still minor. Most of the articles (70%) focused on the energy crisis and discussion of its various possible solutions and measures the government is already taking on the national or EU level. These measures received balanced coverage from [both supportive and constructively critical voices](#).

Overall, the Green Deal has been overshadowed by the energy crisis, which has become the new accepted reality and context for all other discussed public affairs. However, the current situation could become a missed opportunity for stakeholders to draw attention to the Green Deal and transition to renewable sources of energy as at least a partial solution to the ongoing crisis and future energy security issues that require diversification away from Russian fossil fuels and fossil fuels as such.

As seen elsewhere, disinformation narratives become especially harmful when they are transferred from fringe platforms to the public debate, boosting their potential impact among the general public. In the case of the Green Deal, mainly the right-wing, national-conservative opposition spreads manipulative messaging on the topic while also gaining the most interactions on social media. Some of them, such as Tereza Hyřhová from the Tricolour Citizens’ Movement, are themselves contributors to [the websites that spread disinformation](#) and/or conspiracy theories. However, the leader of the Facebook debate on the Green Deal is still the Freedom and Direct Democracy party and its head Tomio Okamura, who has held this position since the start of our monitoring in May 2022. In the top 100 most-interacted-with posts we reviewed, Okamura’s took 36 places in the top 50.

Messages supporting or pointing out the potential positive impact of the Green Deal drew no significant attention. A total of 32% of posts saw withdrawal from the Green Deal as a systemic solution to the ongoing energy and economic crisis, which [generally framed the debate around green policies](#). Domestic politics dominated the content of 43% of the posts, with their authors using the topics of green policies and energy-related issues to promote anti-government stances. They claimed that support of the Green Deal and other EU policies related to energy is [evidence of the government’s incompetence](#), which will drag the Czech Republic down. Around 37% of the political messaging as a whole was directed personally at Prime Minister Petr Fiala. For months, the opposition has been using [the phrase “Fiala’s costliness”](#) to paint the energy and economic crisis almost solely as the doing of the government, while underplaying the context of the war in Ukraine and the culpability of the Russian government and Russian energy companies.

FINDINGS

The above-described situation demonstrates that in the Czech online political debate, green policies are not discussed and promoted enough. Instead, they are being used almost solely by their antagonists as weapons in political infighting. It is also worth noting that the narrative of blaming the government for the energy crisis is [a trend observed in several other EU countries](#).

[As recent opinion polls](#) have demonstrated, the lack of a constructive debate has left most Czechs feeling uninformed about the issues of green transformation: only 10% say they have enough information, and a third responded that they know next to nothing. The lack of active communication of green policies also leaves room for the creation of overwhelmingly negative connotations. On the political level, much room exists for increased efforts to forge a proactive debate on the actual content of green policies and the opportunities they present for energy mix diversification, new jobs, and financially accessible energy. A positive example would be the [New Green Savings policy](#), a Czech program that offers subsidies for building energy-saving homes. [Polls have shown](#) that subsidies are one of the most effective ways to promote a positive image of green policies and climate protection in general.

When it comes to the right-wing opposition's active messaging on the Green Deal, developments have actually pushed the topic to the background, although attitudes remain strongly negative. In the previous months, these actors listed withdrawing from the Green Deal as the first step of a long-term solution to the energy crisis.⁴ But recently, these calls have been replaced by a more forceful appeal to limit Czech participation in the European Energy Exchange.⁵ This poses a potential threat of increasing support for isolationist tendencies in energy-related issues that could lead to international isolation of the Czech Republic as an uncooperative solo player in the EU, with consequences especially if the country would need to request other EU members for energy supplies.⁶ Considering Czech local resources, the country needs to maintain good energy relations with partners from the EU and the West, in general. The online debate also illustrates that the EU energy and green policies are interconnected, and one cannot fully function or be implemented without the other.

The benefits of these good relations for the Czech Republic were already demonstrated when the country, after the Russian invasion, was able to quickly diversify its energy mix. Czech dependence on Russian gas has significantly decreased – while it was at 98% in February 2022, no Russian gas has traveled to the Czech Republic since September, [according to information from the Ministry of Industry](#). Most of the deliveries come from Norway, and the Czech Republic has also been purchasing liquefied natural gas (LNG), mainly from the United States. In April, [the government also announced plans](#) to present a comprehensive five-year project to ensure the country's energy security and to eliminate dependence on Russian fossil fuels completely.

Therefore, strategic communication of energy-related issues should pay more attention to this quite quickly executed reaction of the Czech Republic, showing the importance of European and Western partners for securing accessible energy. At the same time, the energy crisis can also become an opportunity to promote green transition, especially its role in preventing future struggles with energy supplies and boosting energy independence.

This article has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of IRI.



4 <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5618349601509142>

5 <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/6018369751507123>

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