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EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL IN THE CZECH ONLINE INFORMATION SPACE

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The European Green Deal, a political initiative of the European Commission aiming to reach climate neutrality by 2050, became a target of disinformation in the Czech information space already in early 2021.¹ It became a polarizing issue especially prior to the Czech parliamentary election in October 2021.² This year, the debate around the Green Deal acquired a new dimension due to the unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine and the associated issue of energy dependence and diversification. Moreover, with the Czech presidency of the EU Council in July, the Czech debate about the Green Deal is expected to intensify in the upcoming months.

The Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), in cooperation with partners from International Republican Institute's Beacon Project, will be monitoring the public debate about the European Green Deal in the Czech online space in the upcoming months. The monitoring covers political messaging about the Green Deal and its penetration of outlets such as news websites and Facebook groups. It will be complemented by regular analysis of the strategic communication of state institutions and stakeholders with green agenda and their efforts to counter Green Deal related disinformation and manipulative narratives.

Our initial monitoring in May 2022³ has revealed the prevailing negative attitudes to the Green Deal in the online space. The criticism of the policy can be divided into three categories. First, political – the political opposition using the Green Deal as a popular argument against the current government. Second, economic – mocking the official presentation of the Green Deal as an economic and innovative opportunity and perceiving it only as an ‘opportunity’ for poverty, thereby presenting it only as an economic burden.⁴ Third, scientific – presenting it as a purely ideologically motivated project contradicting “both physics and economics”.⁵ In sum, the Green Deal is mostly perceived as artificially propagated by both the EU and the Czech government despite clear evidence of its infeasibility.

Online political messaging about the Green Deal in May 2022 was dominated by the far right Eurosceptic political party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), especially by its leader, Tomio Okamura and MP Radim Fiala. The party launched an online Facebook campaign associating the current strained economic situation and increasing price levels with the Green Deal. To quote SPD's frequently repeated statement: “A systemic solution of the extreme price increase is to withdraw from the EU Green Deal and the system of trad-

1 Dominik Presl, „Změna klimatu a dezinformace v českém informačním prostoru“, Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky, https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AMO_Zmena_klimatu_a_dezinformace-1-1.pdf

2 Jonáš Srovátka, Kristína Šefčíková, “Parlamentní volby 2021”, Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/9417_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf

3 The monitored sources included 15 websites known for spreading disinformation (based on readership and expert consensus, see the list of [konspiratori.sk](https://www.pssi.cz/konspiratori.sk)), 10 nationalist/antisystem Facebook groups (based on number of members), Facebook accounts of major political movements and politicians, and lastly, websites and Facebook pages of state institutions/stakeholders engaged in the Green Deal agenda.

4 TEA PARTY CZ, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/109070914764766/posts/309479814723874>

5 Svobodní, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/43855944703/posts/2809908892647435>

ing carbon credit and to stop exporting our electricity to supranational energy exchanges”.⁶ SPD’s underlying message seemed to present the Green Deal as one of the causes of the current economic and energy related problems.

The second driver of the political messaging was the Freedomites party (Svobodní), an Eurosceptic right-wing libertarian party oriented towards classic liberalism, and its leader Libor Vondráček. Freedomites teamed up with the Tea Party, a conservative faction of the governing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) inspired by the American republican Tea Party of the same name. The fraction declares its orientation towards “right wing populism, cultural conservatism and economic libertarianism”.⁷ It originated in 2021 due to disagreements with ODS leadership over progressivism, claimed constrictions of civil liberties and policies such as the Green Deal.

Freedomites and the Tea Party issued a joint statement which criticizes the Green Deal from the scientific and ideological, moral, and security point of view.⁸ They see the policies as dogmatic and immoral because they reject “accessible” fossil fuels. The parties also claim that the Green Deal ultimately helped to provoke the Russian invasion of Ukraine because it strengthened the position of Russian gas in the European energy mix.

The political statements of SPD, Freedomites and the Tea Party also circulated in the monitored nationalist/anti-system Facebook groups which often serve as discussion and mobilization platforms for supporters of these parties. Examples include the Eurosceptic group CZEXIT⁹ or TV Šalingrad – skupina,¹⁰ created for viewers of the alternative internet TV which was set up during the COVID-19 pandemic for people dissatisfied with the government’s handling of the situation.

The reach of political statements was also boosted by certain websites that republished them, e.g. Parlamentní listy¹¹, which is a bridge medium between mainstream and disinformation media and provides space to voices from the whole political spectrum, including extremists.¹² Another such medium was the website Pravý prostor, which calls itself a space for right-wing minded authors.¹³ The causal relationship between the Green Deal and dependence on Russian gas was a frequent narrative on the monitored websites, perceived negatively in 70% of the articles.¹⁴

The topic of the Green Deal was also exploited by these actors as a point of general criticism of Petr Fiala’s (ODS) government. The current strained economic situation due to rising energy and groceries prices was dubbed “the price of Fiala’s government”,¹⁵ which is a play on the slogan used against the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš ahead of the October 2021 parliamentary election. The Green Deal was presented as an ir-

6 Tomio Okamura – SPD, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5618349601509142>

7 TEA PARTY cz, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/teapartycz>

8 Tomio Okamura – SPD, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/109070914764766/posts/292945376377318>

9 CZEXIT !!!, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/198969230693691/permalink/1070329540224318>

10 TV Šalingrad – skupina, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/855125338553263/permalink/1140121486720312>

11 Libor Vondráček, “Vondráček (Svobodní): Společně s Tea Party nesouhlasíme s klimatickými záškoláky”, Parlamentní listy, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-volicum/Vondracek-Svobodni-Spolecne-s-Tea-Party-nesouhlasime-s-klimatickymi-zaskolaky-701275>

12 Michaela Dvořáková, Jonáš Syrovátka, “VRBĚTICE: CASE STUDY OF CZECH RESILIENCE AGAINST HOSTILE PROPAGANDA”, Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8744_pssi-perspectives-12-vrbetice-case-study.pdf

13 Milena Doušková, “Tak to je vážně šílené”, Pravý prostor, <https://pravyprostor.net/tak-to-je-vazne-silene/>

14 “Závislost na Rusku? Poděkujme zeleným aktivistům, říká Skopeček z ODS”, Parlamentní listy, <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Zavislost-na-Rusku-Podekujme-zelenym-aktivistum-rika-Skopecek-z-ODS-701685>

15 Svobodní, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/43855944703/posts/10159946540669704>

rational project which lowers Czech living standard. It was also labeled as the cause of inflation and loss of market competitiveness.¹⁶ Due to these, it has become a paragon of “Fiala’s price” for the monitored outlets.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine did not push the Green Deal topic out of the public debate. On the contrary, various drivers of the political debate quickly worked Green Deal into their current geopolitical and economic narratives as an important mobilizing agenda against the EU, state institutions, and the government.

Our monitoring also covered if and how relevant stakeholders from the public and civil sectors reacted to the circulating harmful narratives about the Green Deal. The goal was to assess their strategic communication of the topic and their efforts to counter disinformation about the Green Deal. In the month of May 2022, our monitoring has not identified a comprehensive response to the above mentioned potentially harmful debate, only singular efforts of the civil society in the form of public debates on the future of the Green Deal.^{17,18} The last response of the state institutions was traced back to 26 February, when the Ministry of Environment issued a press release in response to the claim that the European Green Deal is dead because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ However, this was a reaction to an extraordinary situation and not part of a systematic endeavor.

In the upcoming months, PSSI will track whether the strategic communication of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, starting in July 2022, has an impact on the Czech discourse on the European Green Deal, whether in mainstream media or media known for spreading disinformation. We will be looking at how much the debate on Green Deal expands or lessens and how the attitude towards the policy develops.



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16 Tomio Okamura – SPD, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/5612570718753697>

17 Obnovitelně.cz, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/obnovitelne.cz/posts/2900564160242591>

18 TOP 09 – Plzeňský kraj, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/TOP09.Plzensky.kraj/photos/a.10150644381668383/10160228859513383/>

19 Tiskové oddělení MŽP, “MŽP reaguje na tvrzení ‘Kvůli ruské invazi na Ukrajinu je Zelená dohoda pro Evropu mrtvá’”, Ministerstvo životního prostředí, https://www.mzp.cz/cz/news_20220226-MZP-reaguje-na-tvrzeni-Kvuli-ruske-invazi-na-Ukrajinu-je-Zelena-dohoda-pro-Evropu-mrtva