

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE EYES OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has brought many positive things but also some negative ones. In this paper is analysed the current situation in the EU and politic thoughts of young first-graders in the University of Economics in Prague, in the Czech Republic. This research is based on a questionnaire which contains 10 questions on economic issues, with a special regard to the EU. The subjective views that come from 61 respondents, were anonymized, evaluated and extended by statistical data from the available statistical databases from the Czech Republic. 34 (55,7%) of the respondents were men, their average age was about 20 years and 42 (68,9%) of them were born in a bigger city (calc. 50 000+ people). The first question was whether the respondents had participated in the election to Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic in 2017 or not. Over 60% of them voted. The assumption of their interest in politics has been confirmed. Students responded that they would cooperate with the USA/UK rather than with France/Germany. On the other hand, it was surprising that most of the students selected Emmanuel Macron as the best president. One of the main problems today is the migration crisis, which these days has become a dominant part of populism, was another question of the survey. I have to admit that the responses to the questions were strictly profiled (yes or no), therefore more than 80% of students answered that they are against migration policy of the EU. This result is due to the rising Euroscepticism and fear that spreads across whole Europe. Maybe that's why only 54% students chose to stay in the EU and the rest calls for its reformation (6,6%) or become again an autonomous sovereign state (39,3%). Next two questions were concerned with positive and negative impacts of the EU. As the greatest positive impact was selected the free movement of persons and the free market. Many of them cannot differentiate between the EU and Schengen Treaties. Among the negative impacts belong bureaucracy (35%), regulations and directives (31%) and migration policy (30%). The last two questions focused on the subsidy policy. These results show that perception of the EU subsidy policy are again balanced (50/50), i.e. one group of respondents is happy that we are using the EU structural funds but the other one is neutral or negative concerning this issue.

Key words: European Union, Students, Czechia, Euroscepticism

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Introduction

The Czech Republic has become a part of the European Union for a long time, to be precise since 2004. Many things have changed until now. Actually, in 2018 we can hear eurosceptical voices flooding whole Europe. The European integration does not work and the Great Britain is being in the process of leaving Union community. This paper offers a view of first grade students on the University of Economics. After passing final exams students had to do one more step to successfully finish course of basic economics – questionnaire. Author analyses results from this questionnaire and added additional information about specific issue. The questions were set strictly and sometimes they have to choose from two options (if they didn't want to answer they could leave a field empty, however nobody chose this option). The results indicate a high level of Euroscepticism. (Pirro, 2018) Many questions resulted 50/50 (point of interest - 80% voters said that they don't want to accept other immigrants).

The original objective of the European Community has been and still is to develop the economies of the member countries. However, meeting the economic objectives has also led to interventions in non-economic areas, such as technical harmonization, environmental protection, social policy and others. The European Union intervenes quite a lot in all areas, and it can be assumed that this trend will be stronger in the future. Therefore, it is desirable for students to be sufficiently educated. The purpose of this paper is to help achieve this goal. I believe that this publication will help you to understand thinking of very young first graders. The European Union is a very popular topic these days. All of us can find a lot of information from different media on the internet. But what is truth and what isn't? What is media propaganda and what is statistical research? It is hard to find out these days. (Galpin, Trenz, 2018)

Methodology

Combination between questionnaires and group discussion is a core of this research. All respondents were students from the first grade of the University of Economics. Their main goal was to meet requirements for successful completion of the basic course of microeconomics. The course did not only deal with theories but also with practical demonstrations in the real world – sometimes with political aspects. That is why the questionnaire was focused on combination of economics and politics, more precisely on current situation in the Europe (EU). If some of the questions were not clear, they were solved through a group discussion. There

were overall 61 respondents. The results are given in percent on the scale 0-100%. At the end there was a free space for respondents' additional opinions.

The questionnaire contained 13 questions, 9 of them were closed and a respondent could pick only from predefined answers. If respondent didn't like any of predefined answers he/she was allowed to skip the question and continue to next one which, luckily, no one did. Other 3 questions were opened and a respondent could add another answer if he didn't like predefined ones. Last column was absolutely open, everyone could write everything in it – it was a space for free expression. The very last line was left for a signature. At the beginning of the questionnaire, students were told that no answer is wrong and that I was only interested in their personal opinions – if they stand up for their opinions, it should not be hard for them to put signature there. All of them did so. For this sake the questionnaire wasn't anonymous for me. From the results I could strong personal attitudes. Very similar feelings we can observe in a similar research carried out in Croatia, where students were concerned about possible economic costs. (Kersan-Skabic, Tomic, 2010)

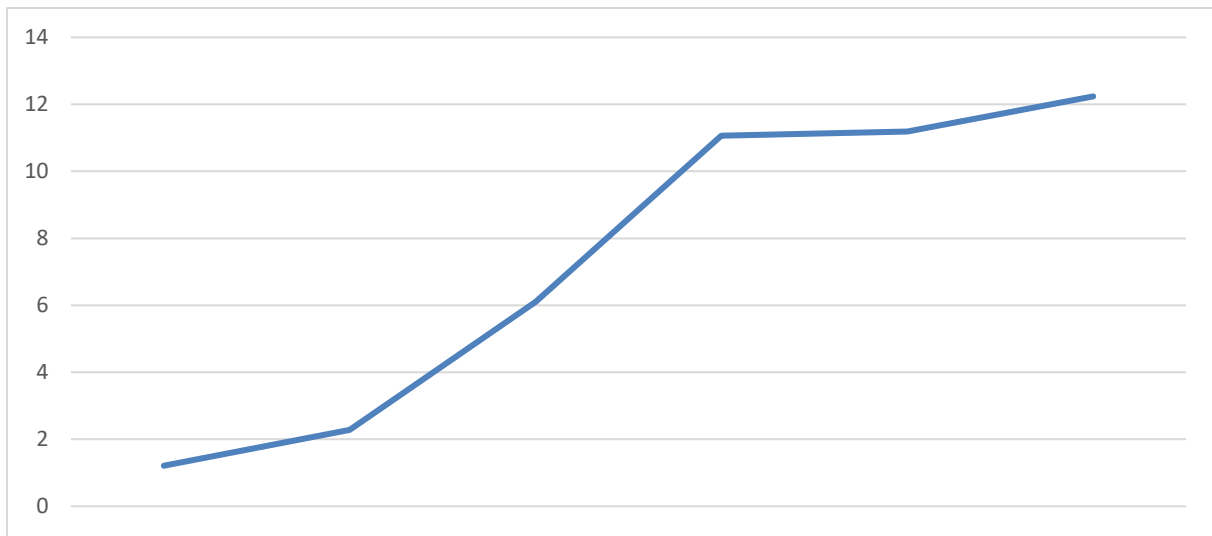
Questionnaire (respondents: 61 total)

The first three questions had an informative character. The very first question was about their gender (male/female) – 27 (44,3%) women and 34 (55,7%) men. It continued with question about age – 20 years and lower 47 (77%), 21 years 8 (13,1%), 22 years 5 (8,2%) and only one was in category 23 years and older. And finally the third one brings information about population in the cities where respondents are living. 42 (68,9%) in cities with population over 50 000 people, 11 (18%) of them were from small towns - 5 000 – 50 000 people and last group of 8 people were from villages – under 5 000 people. It is obvious that respondents of the questionnaire are mainly men and women with age around 20 years who are living in the big cities.

The next set of questions was focused on politics. It starts with question about participation in the last elections in 2017 in the Czech Republic. 37 (60, 7%) voted and rest didn't vote or couldn't (many of them weren't at home –permanent residence, and forgot their voter's pass. So we can say that more than 60% of students are interested in what happens in our country. It continues with question on economic cooperation. Students were asked with whom they would rather work. They had three choices – USA and UK, China and Russia, France and Germany. It wasn't surprise that on the third place ended China and Russia (5 students – 8, 2%) which are both very strong economies, especially China is one of the fastest

growing (Du, 2018) countries (Graph 1). When I asked them why they didn't choose China and Russia, they replied that they don't want comeback of the communist regime. I agree that human rights are being suppressed in China and Russia, but on the other hand, in economic issues they are very close to our Western democracy. Does it mean that we are communists or that Russia and China are economically democratic?

Graph 1: GDP of China (current US\$ in trillion) – 2000/2005/2010/2015/2016/2017



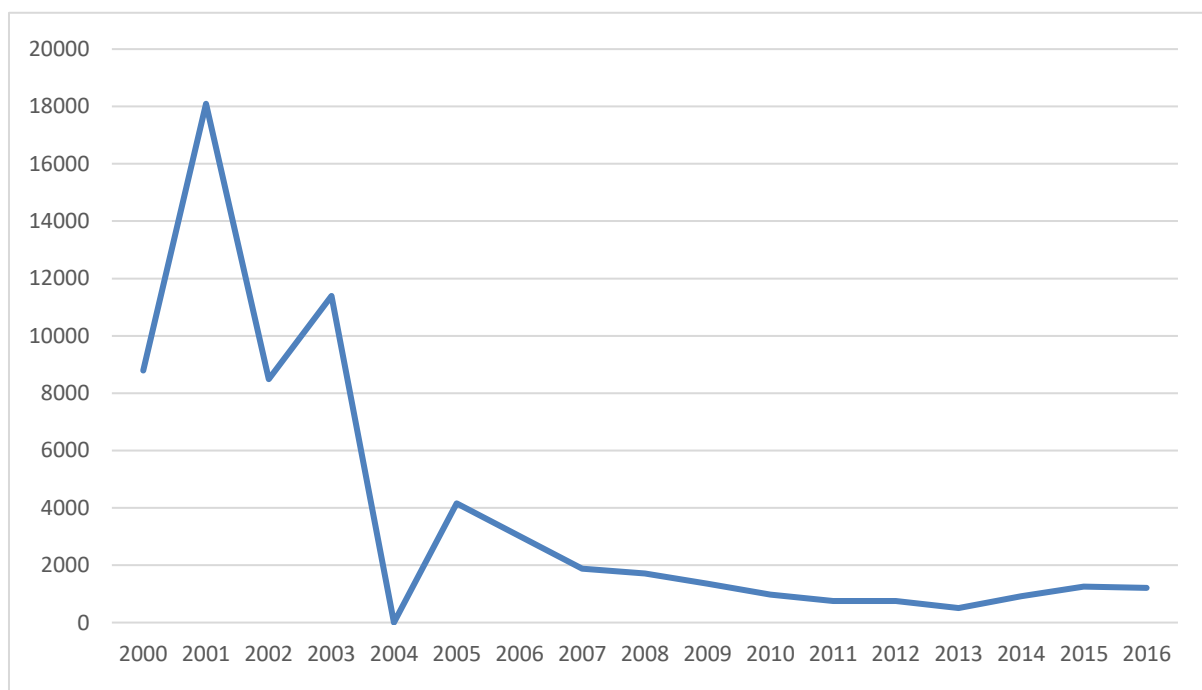
Source: THE WORLD BANK data (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/china>)

On the second place took the duo France and Germany (25 students – 41%) and, as I expected, the winners are a couple USA and UK that have a little bit more votes (31 students – 50,8%). The results were balanced, but it is important to think about students who prefer to work with countries that mass media doesn't like at all – distinctive president Donald J. Trump (Rodriguez-Andres, 2018) and country which is actually leaving the European Union. Many of them said that they prefer something what isn't same as everything else and coming with some change.

Third question of this set was open. Students could choose one of predefined answers, but also they could add anything. Question concerned with popularity of world presidents. The most votes got Emanuel Macron as president of France (28 – 45,9%), the second place belongs to Donald J. Trump, the president of USA (10 – 16,4%) and the third place to Vladimir Putin, the leader of Russia (4 – 6,6%). Rest of 19 students answered that they don't have popular president, or they added another one who acquired just one or two votes (Zeman, Kiska, Nazarbayev, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Moon-Jae In).

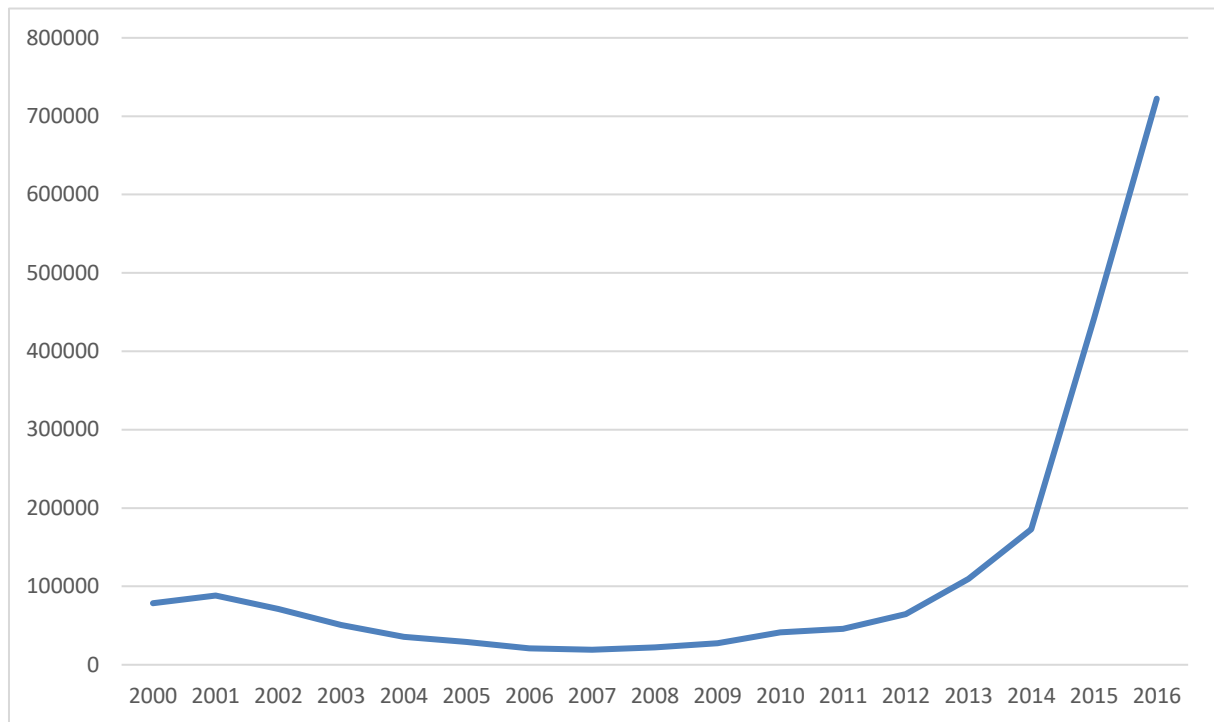
Questionnaire continued with one of the populist topics – migration crisis. Students had to pick one from two answers – accept immigrants or don't accept. Only 19, 7% (12) answered that they want to accept them. The result isn't surprising. The migration crisis is basically a daily headline of all media. In a follow up discussion a very few students knew the difference between "migration and immigration" was. Migration itself is a very common thing in a real world. A lot of people are coming from the east countries because they are searching for job, but students were talking about immigrants from Africa. They accepted that migration crisis isn't real problem of the Czech Republic, but it could be in countries like Germany.

Graph 2: Czech Republic – 2000 – 2016 – migration



Source: OECD International migration database (<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG#>)

Graph 3: Germany – 2000 – 2016 – migration

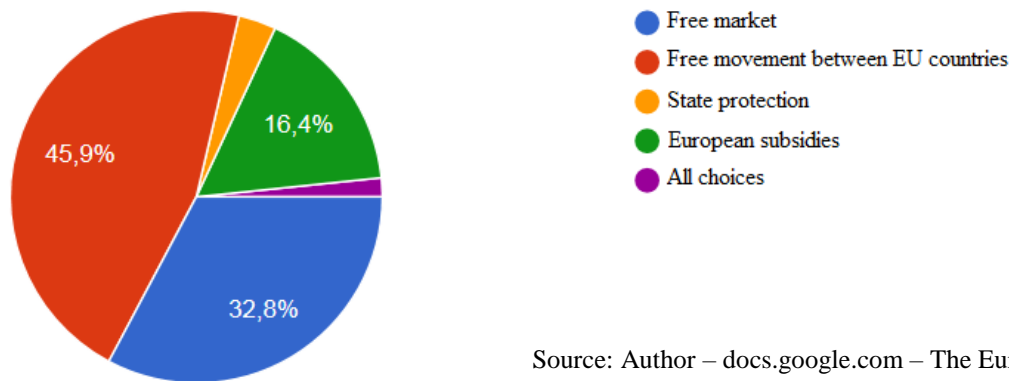


Source: OECD International migration database (<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG#>)

Graphs show full migration, not only the African, which is pretty new for Europe, specifically for Germany, as we can see, since 2013/2014. Students are afraid of video footages and news from mass media about immigration crisis. They fear of losing national sovereignty, culture, jobs, etc. (Baute, Meuleman, 2018)

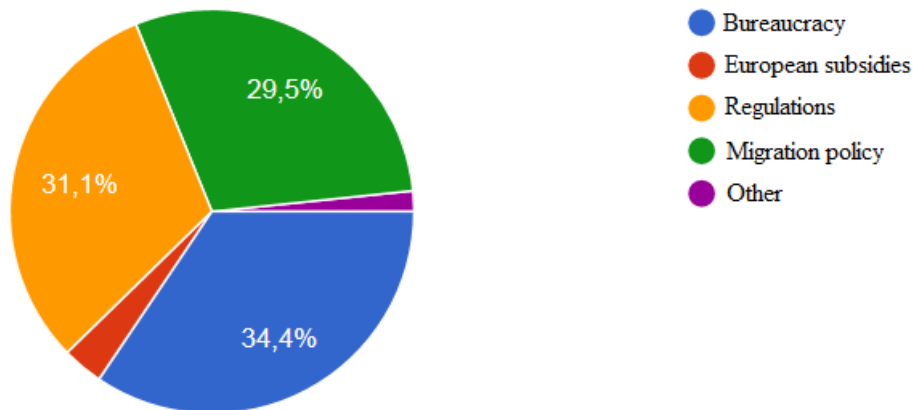
Next set of questions were purely about the European Union. Students have been asked on a single question: “Do you want to stay in the EU or not?” 40% of all respondents selected answer “autonomous sovereign state that can make its own decision”. Rest selected to stay in the EU, but most of them in discussion said that the EU needs to be reformed and that we need to go back in time on the beginning on the EU where this cooperation between countries was only about free trade and few political aspects.

Graph 3: the EU positives



Source: Author – docs.google.com – The European Union

Graph 4: the EU negatives



Source: Author – docs.google.com – The European Union

I will leave these two graphs without a comment because it's very subjective. I was little bit surprised how many students didn't know that NATO isn't part of the EU policy and that the Schengen Treaty can exist after leaving the EU. Bureaucracy, migration and regulations are three things what all people don't like on the EU. Experiment in the Greece proves that a 1 per cent increase in the share of refugees is associated with an increase of 5 per cent in the share of votes for Golden Dawn, what is actually Eurosceptic, extreme-right wing party. (Vasilakis, 2018)

Last two questions was focused on the EU subsidies if they are helping or not. (Šipikal, 2013) Nearly a half of respondents answered that they are happy that we are earning money from the EU structural funds. Basically, they were happy that we don't have to pay it and sometimes the EU helps some state. Second half was more sceptical. 18% was absolutely negative in case of subsidies and 32,8% was more neutral. In discussion about economical

private sector more people had a view that European subsidies have negative impacts. They wish to be the company which gets money from the EU funds but on the other side they can't stand the idea of not getting the money.

Conclusion (researcher's subjective view)

All statistical data show us the positive progress of the Czech economy. They indicated that living standards have improved and will continue so in the future (without another unexpected economy crisis or natural disaster). This research builds on the subjective views of university students of the Czech Republic and despite of improving economic situation is voice of eurocepticism getting stronger and stronger together with nationalism. (Cafacheiro, 2018) In my honest opinion I think that problem is fear. Czech people are afraid of situation what is happening in countries like France, Germany, Sweden, etc. Students agreed with statement that this situation isn't our problem yet, but it could be. The benefits outweighed the EU's weaknesses in last years have begun to diminish, and the fear of the immigration crisis and rising xenophobia are becoming a huge negative (like I wrote in my last paper) which cannot be ignored. Students are becoming more informed about the EU more than ever before and started asking questions. The results of this paper is reflection of today's world. Not only low educated, old regime people think that there is some problem out there. The EU isn't democratic system anymore. Only few people in Brussel decide what the best is for us. The "EUpanization" is continuing and transforming Europe into something where history doesn't exist and community is falling apart. Mark my words that something wrong is coming, something what cannot be stopped. Isn't too late for reformation? (Watts, 2014)

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