

A Month of EuH Conversations – Josef Bič

For the fourth part of our series of EuH interviews we decided to speak with Mr. Josef Bič, our Academic Supervisor. Mr. Bič teaches at the Department of World Economy of the Faculty of International Relations, Prague University of Economics and Business, has helped with the founding of our Chapter and has supported us and helped with our activities ever since. In his academic works he focuses on the current issues of the European Integration, with the economic aspects at the forefront. He has also participated in several research projects for the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic. The interview was conducted by Iranda Chaki, the Social Media & Communications Manager.



Why did you decide to become the academic supervisor of our Chapter? What persuaded you?

I met Jana Stehlikova, the initiator of the European Horizons Prague Chapter, and she proposed this idea to me. I hadn't been aware of this organization before that, but I was excited about being a part of it when I heard about this student-led think-tank. This organization is very different from the standard student clubs that we have. It is driven by the idea of better knowledge and research about Europe and European integration, among others. It is an organization not limited to just our university but is connected worldwide with universities in America, Europe and Asia. It was interesting to see the students of this organization being so active. From choosing topics of discussion, to organizing debates, everything is conducted and executed by the students themselves. Since I am a teacher of Major and Minor specialization of European Economic Integration at the Faculty, I was highly motivated to join this student organization, as I was able to connect my courses with the activities of EuH and thus make the courses more interesting. During my studies I was also a member of a club called "Young Europeans" when the Czech Republic has not been part of the EU yet, which added to the motivation.

What was the Young European Club about?

We would organize events where we invited politicians, foreigners, and our teachers to talk about different issues related to the EU, for example, the relation of the Czech Republic with Germany and informing people about European Integration. Unfortunately, the club terminated its activity in approximately 2004 or 2005, once Czechia became part of the European Union and the interest in the EU topics decreased. One of the last activities of the club was participating in pro-EU campaigns before the referendum. We created a lot of public debates and interacted with the people outside of the university. This led to an interesting observation that the closer we were

getting to join the EU, the more skeptical - or should I say careful - the Czech people were getting about joining the union.

What is your role as an academic supervisor of the EuH?

I think this role is given already by European Horizon. Officially my role in the Chapter is to guide the students, advising the students when they need it. I believe it has been an easy role for me till now because our Chapter has been one of the best and active ones from the very beginning, in my opinion. We have had active, very diligent students as part of our Chapter who have built a good reputation. Our university organizes the Internal Grant Competition, which provisions grants for research realized usually by PhD students. I wanted to use this opportunity to collaborate with EuH. Our chapter succeeded in this competition, so we can send students to the US and other countries in Europe to attend conferences and discussions, meet students from other universities, collaborate with them, and create new learning opportunities for our students. Thanks to our research grant, several chapter members were able to go to the European Student Conference at Yale over the last two years.

Why do you think it is important for students to join student platforms like EuH? What new perspectives could students bring to a public discussion?

Students develop their ability to communicate and defend professionally encouraged opinions or arguments based on concrete facts. At the same time, they can also meet several students from different countries and cultures. From the students` perspective, it's a platform to be open-minded and to learn how to confront a demanding environment. EuH does not only help students academically but also arranges far-reaching lessons that create better opportunities for future life after university. It's not only about the fact that students get introduced to new ideas and perspectives, but you can meet new friends, people, and create a broader network of contacts through this organization. It also helps in creating a stronger hold of the language. Today's generation, in general, speaks more fluently English than older generations. Still, such cross-networking helps people to grasp languages better when they can interact and work directly with native English speakers. Also, you can visit many countries as well! It is also beneficial for our Faculty of International Relations to have an international organization like EuH.



I think students are more open-minded and can offer new and innovative insights to discussions. The young generation can provide a better perspective on how to face modern challenges. Today's youth have a more open-minded attitude, which has not been the case for the older generation. Young people today want to live in a good and healthy environment and bring a new perspective to dealing with issues like climate change and technological development.

Do you think the young generation is more Pro-EU than the older generations?

It is not possible to say a generalizing judgment. Nevertheless, I assume the division line is due to the level of education. Those of the younger generations attending universities are generally more optimistic about the EU or any international cooperation. On the other hand are their counterparts, who have just finished basic education, which tends to be rather skeptical, close-minded, and afraid of cooperation. They prefer closed borders and are less prepared for new ideas and policies. It is not possible to say whether the young generation is more pro-EU or not. I personally know many people from the older generation as pro-EU. But I can imagine if somebody from the older generation has a negative experience with the loss of national sovereignty, they are generally more skeptical.

As a lecturer and researcher of the European Union and European integration, where do you see the value added in the activities of EuH to your students? Can you see some in the EuH members?

This is impossible to say because all students are individuals, and also each member of EuH has different characteristics. If the members are really active in our organization, they are so pro-active in their free time, and they can spend their time more effectively and meaningfully. This doesn't mean that people who are not members of EuH do not have this discipline. Although it is true that being a member of EuH automatically gives a person the opportunity to attend many events and discussions and gain in-depth knowledge. It is also a great networking opportunity. However, I know many people who are not EuH members but are equally active.



Are there any areas that you think EuH members should focus more on?

I think EuH has already been covering vast areas of topics, so there is not much left. One area that I feel requires more focus is climate change, and also informing the general public about the EU's policies and function would be beneficial. Given that all our members are students and are already busy with their academic work, the amount of work the members already put in EuH is sufficient. If we want, we can find many areas where more attention can be given, however, the limited time is a big factor for everybody.

Do you have a message to young people regarding the importance of European Union?

I think they already know! The young generation should more defend the idea of the European Union and be proud of it. To have a positive attitude towards this idea. That doesn't mean that they shouldn't address or debate the negative aspects. Let's explain to the general public, why the EU is important. People who still prefer closed borders and protectionist economic measures need explanations why the EU is favourable. For example, open borders don't just allow for vacation travels in summer but also enable

such activities as Erasmus, which is beneficial for the students. There are many more such opportunities present today because of EU-support.

The whole world has turned upside down this year due to COVID-19. Do you believe there will be any positive side effects of this?

As an environmentalist, I appreciate that the amount of pollution and carbon dioxide emissions have decreased due to the current situation. It can be said to be a blessing in disguise for our environment. However, it is a short-term effect. If I take a more long-term perspective, I believe this pandemic has proven that unity is required for the whole of humanity to tackle any serious situation. In the beginning, countries worked alone but later they started to realize the importance of working together, especially within the EU. I hope that this newly created solidarity in the EU will increase in the future. For example, look at the EU financial system. The EU will provide additional funds to countries that had an adverse effect due to the pandemic and whose economies have significantly suffered. This is something new in the EU. At the beginning of the pandemic, according to some polls, the view on the EU was very critical in Czech Republic as the EU was not very active at first, but later it changed when the EU started to take the initiative. Now the attitude of Czechs towards the EU has improved significantly.

Five years down the line, where do you see the EuH VSE Chapter?

I am a bad visionary! I wish that EuH will still be active and will continue to represent students like our current members do. Because I think right now, we have a great team with vision, coming from all across the world. We have members who are also sceptical about some EU aspects, which is natural and makes the discussions more vivid and open. And maybe if we can grow stronger with more members in the next five years, it is my wish to arrange a conference like the ones they have in Yale for the EuH VSE Chapter. That is a goal that I would like to achieve with EuH.

What will be the main challenges for the EU in 2021?

Right now (*beginning of December 2020*), I suppose there will be issues related to Brexit. Also, we don't know how the discussion about the upcoming multinational financial framework will unfold. It looks like the decision will be reached during the German Presidency. Still, it is evident that there are differences between key states. It is also unknown how the European Parliament will attain the final agreement among the member states. The pandemic will still be a core problem - if it lasts for an even longer time into 2021, the economy might suffer even more severely. As we have seen in past situations, states tend to take up more protectionist and national-based measures during a crisis, which might be dangerous for the EU, but I hope the EU will overcome these challenges.



Next year Angela Merkel will step down from her position as the German Chancellor. How will this affect the EU and could it cause a leadership vacuum in the EU?

Thankfully, we have Emmanuel Macron, who will be more than happy to fill the power vacancy, however for that to happen, he has to be re-elected again in the 2022 elections. I am very sceptical about the possibility of his second presidential term. I hope Germany will find a new leader who will be able to fit into Merkel's shoes. However, if that doesn't happen, the EU can still survive. In the past, we have had such times when no strong personality was there in the EU, but we still survived. It's a shame that Merkel is about to end her political career, but I hope that she will still be active in policy making and lend her vision to the EU by holding some position within the EU.



Thank you so much for this interview for our mini-series “A Month of EuH Conversations”.

Thank you so much!