
INTERVJU WITH TOMÁŠ ZDECHOVSKÝ

Interviewed by: Davor Dijanović¹

Tomáš Zdechovský (born 2 November 1979) is a Czech politician, crisis manager, media analyst, poet and author. Since 2014 he has been a Member of the European Parliament with KDU-ČSL, which is part of the European Peoples Party. Tomáš Zdechovský has earned three master's degrees. Two of them at the University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice (Pastoral Assistant and Educator of Free Time). The third he made at the Masaryk University in Media studies. He also holds a bachelor's degree in Political Communication which he earned at the Salesian Pontifical University. Since 2006, he regularly gives lectures on crisis communication, crisis management and crisis communication in politics at various universities. 2004 he founded the PR and communication company Commservis.com, which he ran in a position of Chief Executive until he was elected as a Member of the European Parliament MEP. He also managed its subsidiary company WIFI Czech republic. He is a member of the KDU-ČSL and in 2007–2008 served as its regional manager in the Pardubice region. He ran for the European Parliament for the first time in 2009 on the 14th place of party list, however he was not elected. He received much appraisal and great response for his nomination speech at the Congress of KDU-ČSL, held in June 2013 in Olomouc. In European Parliament Elections 2014 he ran for the KDU-ČSL for the second time. He was placed on the 3rd place of the party list and was elected a Member of the European Parliament for the 8th legislature of the house. In 2019 he ran for the European Parliament for the third time and was reelected.

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On 2 December 2019 he announced his intention to run for chairman of KDU-ČSL. However, at a party conference he announced, that he had decided to withdraw his candidacy and instead he ran for the deputy chairman of the party and was eventually elected. Since 2014 Tomáš Zdechovský has been dealing the Michalák Case. He criticises the practice of the Norwegian Barnevernet and Norwegian child protection policy as a whole, and demands its change. In late 2014, together with his fellow MEP Petr Mach, he began to actively engage in a campaign to return of Eva Michaláková's two sons, who had been taken away by Norwegian local Child Welfare Service. Both MEPs organized money collection for counsel in mother's litigation. He also initiated an open letter to the Norwegian authorities, which was signed by nearly 50 MEPs from different countries and factions in the European Parliament. He is also the author of the introduction to the book *Stolen Childhood: The Truth About Norway's Child Welfare System*. The book was published in 2019 and deals with the issue of taking children away from their parents by Norwegian child protection service Barnevernet, the causes of the great influence of this institution and the reasons of the frequent criticism of Barnevernet for human rights violations. Several times Tomáš Zdechovský has also commented on the European migrant crisis and in July 2015, he visited a couple of refugee camps in Sicily. He said, most of the people in local refugee camps were actually economic migrants. Furthermore, his criticism is aimed at Greece, which according to his words has neglected the border controls and registration of newcomers. In this respect he also published an article in a renowned scientific publication by the Potomac Institute in Washington D.C. As an MEP, Tomáš Zdechovský also called for further investigation of Andrej Babiš on the grounds of alleged fraud in obtaining EU subsidies, which were designated for small businesses and where actual ownership of a farm and convention center called

Stork Nest by Mr. Babiš was allegedly concealed. Mr. Zdechovský also referred to alleged conflict of interest of Andrej Babiš in receiving EU subsidies for the Agrofert group, due to suspicion, that Babiš is still actual owner even when a member of the Czech government. As an MEP, he has also pointed out the problem of mileage fraud, which concerns the second-hand car market in the Czech Republic in particular and other EU countries in Central and Eastern Europe in general. Tomáš Zdechovský argues, that the introduction of the Car-Pass System, which is being applied in Belgium since 2006, throughout the EU is an effective way to tackle and prevent such fraud, (illicit manipulations with odometers) throughout the EU. Tomáš Zdechovský has also long been involved in the cases of Czech truck drivers in England and France, who have gotten into trouble when their vehicle checks revealed that illegal migrants had got into the cargo area without consciousness of drivers.

Has your country seen more benefits or harm from joining the European Union from today's perspective?

Joining the European Union was clearly the best decision we could have made for us. In regards to budgetary policy, we are beneficiaries in the European Union, hence there should not be even a discussion in this matter. We have been able to support our businesses in all areas with European subsidies, and that would certainly not have been possible without the European Union. However, the European budgetary fund is not the only thing we benefit from as the Czech Republic. It must be emphasized that membership is a guarantee of the stability, democracy, security, and prosperity that we have been calling for in Europe for so long. An obvious advantage is also access to a large European market.

How important do you consider the principle of subsidiarity, i.e.

keeping the autonomy of the jurisdiction over internal affairs for the Member States (e.g., education, culture, freedom of the media, etc.) for the future of the European Union?

Very important. Despite membership in the European Union, the country should have a sufficient degree of autonomy in these areas. The EU should not strive for the unification of all states, it should ensure that human rights are not violated, that minority groups are not oppressed, but it should not try to intervene in all areas. This is one of the most frequent criticisms from Eurosceptics, that there is a Brussels' dictatorship. So the principle of subsidiarity is extremely important for the future development of the European Union.

What is your personal preference: the European Union as a federal state or as a confederation of sovereign nation-states, and why?

My presidency of the Union of European Federalists in the Czech Republic clearly indicates my position on this matter. However, I really do not think that today is the time for a debate on a federal EU. Rather, we need to focus on the issues of EU reform.

Can the European Union be an equal power to Russia, China, and the United States in the future?

Of course. The European Union is already an equal player in the international political scene. As a whole, it acts much stronger and more compact against large powers such as Russia, China, or the United States. But it is necessary to catch up with the part of the EU that will manage EU security and be a partner of NATO.

How well does the European Union articulate a common foreign policy today? Are you in favor of creating an EU army?

There are still clear gaps in the European Union's common foreign

policy that need to be addressed. The European Union sometimes lacks consensus and a coordinated approach in foreign policy. Moreover, if it does not have a military force, it will be difficult to enforce foreign policy through preventive interventions, for example. This is also one of the reasons why I am in favor of setting up a joint brigade and rapid reaction force.

Given that the European Court of Justice may give a different judgment than the entire legal order of a Member State, is the judicial sovereignty of the Member States lost in this respect?

This is a very debatable question that needs a broader answer. In my opinion, the Member States are not losing judicial sovereignty.

Is the common currency suitable for all EU members, and how has the introduction of the EURO affected your country's economy?

Certainly not for everyone. Of course, the states must meet certain criteria for the process of adopting the euro to begin, but in our case, I am clearly in favor of adopting it. The Czech Republic has been driving in the slower right lane for too long and it is time to throw the turn signal and join the faster lane, in which Germany, France, Austria, or even Slovakia are driving, for example.

What are most resources coming from the European funds used for in your country?

The biggest part of a grant from the European funds go to the modernization of transport, the next group is the area of digitization and so-called Modern Europe. A significant part of the funds from European subsidies also goes to sustainability and the environment. Other areas are agriculture, social services, etc.

How was the migration crisis perceived in your country, and do you think the EU had an appropriate political and legal response to the situation?

In the Czech Republic, the attitude towards migration is very critical, but in this context, it is necessary to distinguish between legal and illegal migration. The European Union has a clear migration and asylum policy. If anyone wants to come, they have to do it legally - across the border and meet the visa requirement. The criteria are strict, not everyone enters the EU. However, we cannot afford to repeat the mistake of 2015, when Germany in particular opened the gates to refugees and chaos reigned in many places.

Given the migration trends and population growth in Africa and the Middle East, do you believe there may be a substitution of the domicile population in Europe, and how has your country approached the issue of migration from those parts?

This is a very difficult question. It is clear that migration pressure from parts of Africa or the Middle East will intensify. Climate change and the lack of drinking water in some areas will certainly help. Europe is aging overall. According to surveys, EU citizens prefer careers and rather fewer children to give them quality education and all the comfort. There are already not enough ordinary workers in Europe. It will be extremely important for the EU to respond to migration in the coming years.

Czech citizens are against migration. At that time, the quotas for accepting migrants caused a great stir in Czech society. The SPD (Czech parliamentary party, not to be confused with the German SPD). Based on contrived stories and misinformation, it manipulates a relatively large part of the population who believe that. It simply trades with fear. However, since the migration crisis in 2015, attitudes have changed across the political spectrum, and

this is also the case in many other EU countries.

In his book *Understanding Europe*, Christopher Dawson argued that as Europe became less Christian, its influence in international relations also declined. In your opinion, is Europe's Christian identity important for its political future, and should its place be regulated at the European level, as in, say, the Hungarian constitution?

Christianity in Europe is deeply rooted and, as such, needs to be protected. However, I do not think that it should be regulated in any way, in my opinion, it does not correspond to the democratic principles of free choice of religion.

Did the Brussels administration have a good or bad response to the corona crisis, and how did your country position itself on this issue?

Belgium was in as bad situation last year as the Czech Republic. However, by gradual and appropriate measures it managed to bring the situation under control. Unfortunately, we did not succeed in the Czech Republic. It was the fault of an incompetent government that made chaotic decisions that people did not understand. Some government politicians have not complied with these restrictions themselves, which has further undermined people's confidence in government decisions. As a result, hospitals were overcrowded and medical staff absolutely exhausted and at their breaking point.

What does Europe mean to you in the broadest context of the term?

The place where my home is. Where my parents have already lived in peace, my four children and perhaps my grandchildren will live here as well.