

Babiš's government promotes youth smoking

To prove the effectiveness of the smoking ban last year in reducing the consumption of cigarettes, [Health Min. Adam Vojtěch cited figures from an annual study](#) of the government's own [SZÚ health institute](#). According to SZÚ, he said, the number of smokers declined last year by 3.5%. Vojtěch said that he has no explanation for a drop of this magnitude other than the smoking ban. And this figure, he said, is just for the first six months of the ban (actually seven months, because the ban took effect at the end of May 2017).

There are three main problems with Vojtěch's announcement. First, he was far too humble. The SZÚ study in fact showed a decline in the number of smokers of 3.4 percentage points, not 3.4%. This makes a huge difference. A decline of 3.4% means a drop of 81,600 in the number of smokers. A decline of 3.4 percentage points means that 300,000 stopped smoking. In percentage terms, this is 11.9%, not 3.4%. (According to SZÚ, 28.6% of Czechs aged 15+ smoked in 2016, and 25.2% in 2017).

The second problem with Vojtěch's announcement is that it wasn't really his mistake. It was SZÚ's. It didn't distinguish between percentage points and percentages and thereby released misleading figures into the world. The end result is that the entire SZÚ survey is suspect. It's easy to believe a one-year drop of 3.4% in the number of smokers, but can anyone really believe that 11.9% of the CR's 2.55m smokers quit last year because of the smoking ban? This would be such a phenomenal success that it would attract global attention.

The third problem is that by using the SZÚ study to claim a political success in terms of the smoking ban, Vojtěch opens the government up to an analysis of the same SZÚ study that casts doubt on the cabinet's decision this week to grant special tax treatment to Philip Morris's "heat-not-burn" tobacco products. The reason given by the finance ministry for

supporting a lower tax on heated cigarettes than on traditional burn-based ciga-

rettes than on traditional burn-based cigarettes is that they are supposed to be less harmful to the health. This is what Philip Morris says. Yet the SZÚ study shows a correlation between electronic cigarettes and a rise in youth smoking. As Vojtěch pointed out, youth aged 15-24 are already the biggest smokers (35.6% of them do so, compared to 27.4% in the 25-44 group). Youth are also near the top in terms of the number who never smoked before taking up e-cigarettes (18.9% of them did not smoke before) and who smoke regular cigarettes alongside e-cigarettes (64.9%).

Youth also account for the largest number of e-cigarette users (26.7% of the total). Only 5.2% of the overall population uses e-cigarettes, but 12.2% of youth aged 15-24 do. And the study makes the scientifically crucial mistake of not including

children under the age of 15, many of whom have latched on to e-cigarettes. Stated policy goals of SZÚ are to help people quit smoking, to encourage people not to smoke and to raise the tax on tobacco. Philip Morris argues, and the Czech finance ministry agrees, that its heated products (Iqos, Heets) are so much less toxic that they should be given favorable treatment. This reduction in toxicity is achieved by using less tobacco and heating it, instead of burning it.

This raises the obvious question of what replaces the missing tobacco. According to PM's own data, it appears to be sugar. Whereas a [Marlboro cigarette](#) contains 1.6% sugar and another 1.8% sugar-like substances, [Iqos tobacco contains 10% sugar](#) and 28% sugar-like substances among its 120 ingredients. Can the government be certain that such a sugar-laced product is truly that much less harmful?

At a time when governments are encouraging food makers to cut back on sugar, the e-cigarette industry is going in the other direction. The main motivation behind this strategy seems to be to attract young customers who like sweet things.

Philip Morris says: "We believe people should stop smoking, and we support measures to dissuade people from starting." Yet it asked for and has so far won support from the government of Andrej Babiš for a tax policy that would give it a competitive advantage in targeting new young customers. This could go against SZÚ's goal of discouraging smoking.

There's one more solid argument against giving Philip Morris preferential tax treatment for Iqos and Heets. The company says: "We've made the decision to build our future without cigarettes.... Ultimately, we want to be in a position to stop selling cigarettes altogether."

That would mean closing its existing Czech facilities. Anti-smoking advocates would be elated, but is it a policy that Czech lawmakers are ready to get behind?