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Ethics in Practice: The Experience of EU Fund Evaluators in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: This study examines ethical challenges faced by evaluators of EU-funded projects in the Czech Republic, addressing gaps in existing research. Using a mixed-methods approach—including surveys, World Café discussions, and interviews—the study identifies key dilemmas such as balancing independence with stakeholder collaboration, pressures to distort findings, and/or data integrity issues. Findings highlight evaluators' strong commitment to impartiality, transparency, and accuracy, while systemic barriers like political pressures and incomplete data hinder ethical practices. Recommendations include enhancing ethical guidelines, providing targeted training, and establishing independent evaluation bodies to safeguard objectivity. The study offers practical insights for strengthening ethical standards and professionalizing evaluation practices in EU contexts.

Keywords: EU funds; evaluator; ethics; World Café

JEL Classification: H83

1. Introduction

Ethics in program evaluation is critical to ensuring accountability, transparency, and equity, particularly in contexts where evaluations inform significant societal and economic decisions (VÂRTEIU, 2016). It encompasses the assessment of research quality and impact while navigating complex ethical dilemmas, such as pressures to distort findings, selective reporting, or the suppression of unfavorable results. These dilemmas often arise in the multifaceted social, political, and organizational contexts in which evaluations occur (Kerssens-van Drongelen and Fisscher, 2003). Frameworks such as Kitchener's principles (Kitchener, 1984), the Program Evaluation Standards (Sanders, 1994), and the American Evaluation Association's (AEA) (https://www.eval.org/) Guiding Principles provide foundational guidance for addressing ethical challenges across all stages of evaluation.

Designing evaluations ethically requires methodological soundness, impartiality, and sensitivity to diverse worldviews (M. A. Morris, 2007; Schwandt, 2007). Evaluators must resist conflicts of interest and undue pressure to adopt biased approaches that compromise fairness. Ethical data collection involves informed consent, confidentiality, and harm avoidance, particularly in vulnerable or cross-cultural contexts (Groves Williams, 2016; Sanders, 1994). Waele et al. (2021) emphasize data protection as a frequent challenge in EU-funded projects. In data analysis and interpretation, evaluators face pressures to misrepresent

findings to satisfy stakeholder agendas. Barnett & Camfield (2016) note the prevalence of "clashes between right and right," where competing ethical principles require careful balancing. Transparent communication of results is equally vital, ensuring clarity, accuracy, and accessibility while safeguarding sensitive data (M. A. Morris, 2007). Simons (2006) highlights the importance of maintaining independence when reporting in politically sensitive contexts. Relationships with stakeholders must balance collaboration and independence to foster trust without compromising integrity (Samsonova-Taddei & Siddiqui, 2016). Active stakeholder involvement can enhance utilization of results, provided evaluators guard against undue influence (Okul & Nyonje, 2020). Ultimately, ethical evaluators ensure findings promote fairness, accountability, and societal benefit, aligning with broader goals like sustainable development (Brandão & Santos, 2023).

As we can see, many studies provide empirical evidence regarding ethical challenges faced by evaluators. Thus, key ethical challenges faced by evaluators include:

- Conflicts of interest (Gorman, 2018; Resnik, 2004),
- Necessity to meet tight deadlines or to accept incomplete or inaccurate data (Kerssens-van Drongelen and Fisscher, 2003),
- Reporting findings and misuse of results (M. Morris & Cohn, 1993; Simons, 2006),
- Stakeholder involvement (Brandon & Fukunaga, 2014), requests to tailor results or suppress negative findings to protect institutional interests, sometimes under threat of financial or professional repercussions (Calzoni, 2016),
- Data protection and confidentiality (Turcotte-Tremblay & Sween-Cadieux, 2018; Waele et al., 2021),
- Ethical dilemmas in complex or high-risk contexts (Ferretti et al., 2021; Wood, 2006).

Despite the increasing prominence of evaluation activities in the EU context, little is known about how evaluators in the Czech Republic experience and address ethical dilemmas in practice. This paper aims to bridge this research gap by examining the ethical challenges faced by EU fund evaluators and the principles guiding their decision-making processes. Specifically, we ask: What are the key ethical issues encountered by evaluators of EU-funded projects in the Czech Republic, and how do these influence their professional practices? By focusing on this underexplored context, the study seeks to provide practical insights that can enhance ethical evaluation standards and contribute to the professionalization of evaluators working with EU funds.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Collection and Procedure

Three distinct methods were employed to collect data: a questionnaire survey, the participatory World Café method, and semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire survey, designed to explore evaluation practices, ethics, professional development, stakeholder engagement, supplier relationships, evaluation impacts, and the professional identity of EU fund evaluators, targeted evaluators from managing authorities

identified through the Ministry of Regional Development – National Coordination Authority (NOK-MMR). Comprising 42 questions, primarily using five-point scales, the survey aimed to facilitate broad application, including presentations at the NOK-MMR conference. Administered online via Survey Monkey in October 2024, it achieved a response rate of 62.5% (30 of 48 evaluators). Although comprehensive, its length caused some participant disengagement. For this paper, only relevant sections of the survey were analyzed to align with the study's objectives.

A parallel survey, partially mirroring the first, was conducted among the managing authorities and private-sector evaluators to examine evaluation practices, professional development, client collaboration, evaluation impacts, and public procurement fairness. Respondents were identified through publicly available resources, including the Dynamic Purchasing System of the Ministry of Regional Development and the online Library of Evaluations. Selected evaluators involved in EU fund evaluations were invited to participate, with additional distribution using the snowball method. The survey, consisting of 40 questions in various formats (scales, multiple-choice, and open-ended) and demographic information questions, collected both quantitative and qualitative data, offering a nuanced perspective on evaluators' experiences. Only sections pertinent to this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Excel and SPSS v. 29.

The World Café method was implemented during a session of the Evaluation Working Group, coordinated by NOK-MMR, in September 2024. This participatory approach facilitated group discussions across four thematic areas: professional identity of evaluators, ethics and independence, stakeholder engagement and evaluation use, and innovations such as artificial intelligence. Participants, including managing authority representatives, rotated among thematic tables moderated by facilitators, who guided discussions with pre-defined questions. Key insights were documented and shared in a plenary session. This paper focuses exclusively on findings from the discussion on ethics, examining how evaluators of EU funds perceive ethical challenges in their work, the principles guiding their decision-making, and the impact of ethical considerations on their professional practices.

To further complement the survey findings, six semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted online by the Ministry of Regional Development in October 2024. Three representatives from managing authorities and three external evaluators from supplier organizations participated in these one-hour interviews. Guided by detailed scripts, the interviews addressed evaluators' roles, challenges, and perspectives on professional identity and development, among other topics. Participants provided in-depth insights into challenges, potential solutions, emerging trends, and ethical considerations within the evaluation field. This paper reports exclusively on findings related to ethics in the work of evaluators, offering a focused analysis of ethical challenges, decision-making, and their implications within the evaluation community.

2.2. Respondents

The survey encompassed evaluators from both managing authorities and supplier organizations, offering valuable insights into their demographics, education, and

professional experience. Among managing authority evaluators (N=30), gender distribution was evenly balanced, with 50% men and 50% women. The majority (63%) fell within the 41–50 age group, while 29% were aged 31–40, and 8% were over 50, indicating a predominance of mid-career professionals. Educational qualifications were overwhelmingly high, with 96% holding Master's degrees and 4% having postgraduate qualifications; no participants reported having secondary or Bachelor's level education. Academically, respondents came from diverse fields, primarily Economics and Finance (22%), Social Sciences (22%), and Regional Studies (19%). Most participants had extensive experience, with more than six years in the field and an average of 17 evaluations conducted throughout their careers, reflecting significant professional involvement.

The sample of evaluation suppliers (N=12) similarly represented a highly experienced cohort. The gender distribution included 40% women and 60% men. Most respondents (60%) were aged 41–50, with smaller groups under 30 (20%) and over 50 (10%). Like their counterparts, they were highly educated, with 60% holding Master's degrees and 30% having postgraduate qualifications. Their academic disciplines were varied, with Regional Studies (22%) and Social Sciences (22%) being prominent, alongside other fields such as Economics, IT, and Education. Their professional experience surpassed six years on average, with participants reporting an average of 30.5 evaluations conducted during their careers. This highlights a multidisciplinary group of skilled professionals bringing significant expertise to evaluation work.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

The graph (Figure 1) quantifies the frequency of ethical dilemmas evaluators encounter in their work. Most responses fall in the "Never" or "Rarely" categories, accounting for approximately 75% of all responses. For example:

- Pressure to distort results: Over 80% of respondents indicated "Never" or "Rarely."
- Suppressing or omitting negative findings: Almost 80% reported these occur "Never" or "Rarely."
- Accepting incomplete or inaccurate data: Around 80% selected "Never" or "Rarely."
- Selective presentation of results: While still infrequent, 12% of respondents marked "Sometimes" or "Often."

The chart employs color coding to emphasize these trends. Green shades dominate the distribution, representing 70–90% of responses in the lowest frequency categories. In contrast, red shades, indicating "Sometimes" or more frequent encounters, account for 10–15% of responses for selective reporting and less than 5% for other dilemmas.

One respondent explicitly stated they had never faced such issues. Another, an evaluation commissioner, highlighted their commitment to ethical practices by fostering open discussions on findings rather than pressuring evaluators, further reinforcing transparency and collaboration in the evaluation process.

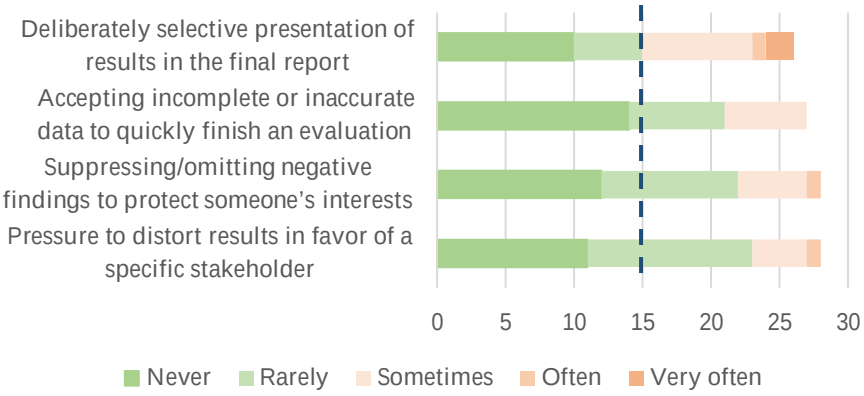

Figure 1. Ethical dilemmas faced by managing authorities´ evaluators

Furthermore, the data shows that most respondents (managing authorities´ evaluators) report no change in the frequency of encountering ethical dilemmas in evaluation work. For example, 80% noted stability in pressure to distort results, though 13% see it happening more often. Similarly, 69% reported no change in omitting negative findings, but 32% observed an increase. Inadequate data protection saw the highest rise, with 38% noting more frequent issues, while 63% reported stability. Selective result presentation also increased for 31%, though most (63%) saw no change.

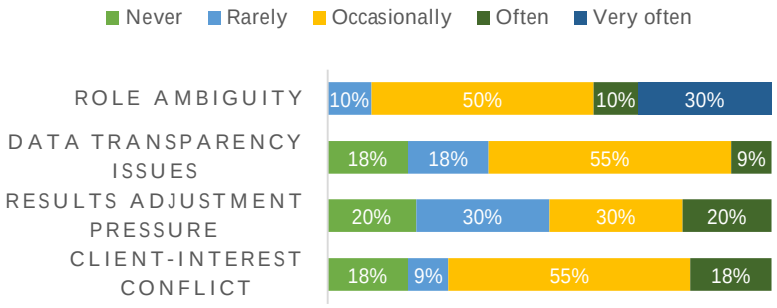

Figure 2. Frequency of ethical dilemmas in conducting evaluations for clients

A parallel survey among private sector evaluators working on public contracts commissioned by managing authorities revealed similar but distinct concerns. These evaluators addressed questions tailored to their context, focusing on challenges related to contractual pressures, adherence to procurement guidelines, and maintaining impartiality while managing diverse expectations from commissioning units. Key findings (see, Figure 2) include:

- Client-interest conflicts encountered occasionally by 55% of respondents, rarely by 9%, and never or often by 18%, with no reports of very frequent occurrences. These conflicts are relatively common but not consistently severe.
- Pressure to adjust results reported occasionally and rarely by 30% each, with 20% indicating they never or often faced such pressure. No respondents experienced this very often, suggesting a general commitment to integrity despite occasional challenges.

- Data transparency issues experienced occasionally by 55%, rarely or never by 18%, and often by 9%, with no reports of very frequent occurrences. These findings highlight variability in client openness, particularly in the public sector.
- Role ambiguity in decision-making encountered occasionally by 50% and very often by 30%, while 10% reported rare or frequent occurrences. No respondents indicated they never faced this issue, signaling a need for clearer role definitions in public-sector evaluation processes.

The respondents (managing authorities´ evaluators) were also asked to evaluate the importance they place on specific principles during evaluations, using a scale from "Very important" to "Completely unimportant." The results reveal a strong consensus on the significance of transparency in communication, impartiality and objectivity, and responsibility for accuracy and precision. Transparency was highlighted as a critical value, with 70% respondents rating it as "Very important" and 20% marking it as "Rather important." Similarly, responsibility for accuracy and precision was deemed essential, receiving "Very important" ratings from 77% respondents and "Rather important" from 13%. Impartiality and objectivity emerged as the most universally prioritized principle, with 80% respondents marking it "Very important" and only 17% selecting "Rather important." Neutral or negative responses were minimal, and no participant rated any principle as "Completely unimportant." These findings demonstrate a shared professional commitment to ethical standards and high-quality evaluation practices, with impartiality and accuracy leading as top priorities and transparency closely following.

Similarly, private-sector evaluators were asked about changes in the importance of maintaining independence and objectivity when presenting evaluation results, even in challenging situations. While 55% reported stability in its importance, 27% noted an increase, suggesting growing recognition of these principles amid evolving professional demands, while 18% observed a decline, indicating that for some, emphasis on these values may have diminished in specific contexts. Overall, the data reflect a shared understanding among evaluators (from both groups) of the critical role these principles (transparency, objectivity, impartiality, responsibility for accuracy and precision) play in maintaining ethical and effective evaluation practices. Impartiality and accuracy emerged as the most universally prioritized values, with transparency following closely behind. This highlights a strong professional commitment to both ethical standards and the quality of evaluation outcomes.

The data show how evaluators handle findings that may be unfavorable for clients or organization. The most common approach (36%) is to present a balanced view of both positive and negative aspects, prioritizing fairness and transparency. Another 26% engage in discussions with clients or organizational leadership to address differences between expectations and findings, emphasizing collaboration. This approach suggests that dialogue is seen as a key tool for managing sensitive outcomes. 20% of respondents present results exactly as found, reflecting a strong commitment to objectivity, while 14% of them adapt presentations to make findings more acceptable, showing sensitivity to their audience. Only 5% suggest reworking the evaluation, preferring to address challenges within the original process.

Regarding adjustments to align results with client expectations, 30% of respondents report never witnessing such practices, reflecting a commitment to transparency. However, 70% acknowledge these adjustments occur, though infrequently—43% "Rarely," 23% "Occasionally," and only 3% "Often." While not widespread, these adjustments raise ethical concerns in some contexts.

3.2. Results of Qualitative Approach

This presents ethical challenges in EU fund evaluations, based on insights (using World Café participative approach) from managing authority evaluators participating in a regularly organized working group for evaluations coordinated by the Ministry of Regional Development. The discussions revealed critical ethical issues and highlighted areas for improvement in evaluation practices.

A key theme was the tension between independence and integration. While collaboration with clients helps ensure actionable results, excessive closeness risks compromising independence and objectivity. Participants emphasized the need for a balance that preserves both relevance and ethical integrity.

Concerns about external suppliers were prominent. Participants reported that some suppliers still adjust findings to align with client expectations, although such practices have declined. Supplier reputation also heavily influences the acceptance of findings, raising concerns about fairness and objectivity in the evaluation process.

Data integrity and presentation were highlighted as significant ethical challenges. Evaluators reported pressures to frame findings in ways that align with political or organizational agendas, underscoring the importance of rigorous ethical standards in reporting and communication.

Specific ethical concerns included collecting sensitive data, such as on minority groups, and adhering to GDPR regulations. Participants also noted systemic barriers, including political pressures and selective use or dismissal of inconvenient findings, which undermine transparency and accountability in evaluations.

To address these issues, participants proposed strengthening ethical training for evaluators and management, fostering transparent communication, and establishing independent evaluation bodies to reduce political pressures. Improving data collection and reporting standards was also highlighted as critical to maintaining the credibility of evaluations. While ethical practices and data quality in evaluations have improved, significant challenges remain. A continued focus on ethics, transparency, and professional development is essential to ensure evaluations support evidence-based decision-making effectively.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews with both EU fund managing authorities and public sector evaluators was focused on identifying ethical challenges and systemic barriers in the evaluation processes, as experienced by key stakeholders in the Czech Republic.

A recurring theme was the tension between maintaining independence and ensuring the utility of evaluations. Managing authorities highlighted political pressures to align evaluation findings with pre-existing policy priorities or political narratives. This often led to

selective presentation of findings or "desk drawer" evaluations, where inconvenient results were shelved instead of acted upon. On the supplier side, evaluators reported instances where clients explicitly or implicitly expected results to support specific outcomes, undermining objectivity. The lack of clear ethical guidelines for such situations exacerbated these challenges.

Both managing authorities and suppliers pointed to issues surrounding data collection and interpretation. Suppliers noted instances where the data provided by clients was incomplete, biased, or outdated, creating difficulties in producing accurate and credible evaluations. Moreover, GDPR compliance and the handling of sensitive information emerged as critical concerns, particularly in evaluations involving vulnerable populations. Concerns about methodological rigor were also raised. Some evaluators observed that cost pressures and tight timelines often led to compromises in data quality, which, in turn, affected the reliability of findings. There were calls for better training and resources to ensure methodological integrity.

The dynamics between evaluators and their clients revealed additional ethical concerns. Suppliers expressed frustration over vague or poorly defined terms of reference, which often resulted in misaligned expectations and frequent revisions of deliverables. Managing authorities acknowledged that their own lack of clarity at the outset sometimes contributed to these issues. Reputation bias also emerged as a concern. Some evaluators noted that well-established suppliers often had their findings accepted without scrutiny, while newer or smaller firms faced higher barriers to credibility, regardless of the quality of their work.

A disparity in the use of evaluation findings was observed. While some managing authorities reported integrating evaluations into strategic planning, others treated them as formalities, with limited follow-through on recommendations. This inconsistent application reduced the perceived value of evaluations and highlighted a lack of systemic accountability.

A lack of formalized ethical training for both evaluators and managing authorities was identified as a gap. While there were some ad hoc efforts to improve ethical standards, these were neither systematic nor widespread. Participants suggested that targeted training could help address issues like data integrity, political pressures, and stakeholder engagement.

4. Discussion

The ethical challenges in EU fund evaluations have emerged as a focal point in research among managing authority and public sector evaluators in the Czech Republic. Using insights from a qualitative World Café approach/semi-structured in-depth interviews and a quantitative survey, this study highlights critical ethical dilemmas such as independence vs. integration, supplier-client dynamics, data integrity, systemic barriers, and professional principles, aligning with broader evaluation literature.

One of the most significant ethical dilemmas identified in the study was the tension between maintaining evaluator independence and fostering collaboration to ensure actionable results. Chelimsky (2006) highlights that evaluators often walk a fine line between independence and responsiveness to stakeholders, with evaluators needing to avoid becoming overly embedded in organizational interests. While collaboration addresses client

needs, excessive closeness risks objectivity. Hartlapp & Falkner (2009) and Leese et al. (2019) similarly highlight political pressures undermining independence. Supplier-client dynamics remain a concern, with occasional tailoring of findings to meet client expectations and reputation bias influencing credibility. Stufflebeam (2001) warns of client pressures compromising impartiality (Dvorak, 2014).

Next, evaluators in our study reported instances where incomplete, biased, or outdated data from clients hindered their ability to produce reliable evaluations. Political and organizational pressures further exacerbated these issues, leading to selective reporting ("desk drawer evaluations") and compromised methodological rigor due to tight budgets and timelines. The issue of data integrity and methodological rigor is widely acknowledged in evaluation research. Patton (2014) stresses methodological rigor for credible outcomes. The findings of another study (Salandra, 2018) reflect broader concerns about reporting (selectively) biases under external (institutional and contextual) pressures.

Managing sensitive data under GDPR remains challenging, particularly when working with vulnerable groups. Tikkinen-Piri et al. (2018) highlight the complexities of GDPR compliance and the need for clear protocols. The survey confirmed a strong commitment to ethical principles: 92% prioritized impartiality, 88% accuracy, and 84% transparency. These align with (Thomann & Sager, 2019), who emphasize ethical integrity as central to evaluation credibility.

Building an ethical evaluation culture is a multidimensional effort that requires institutional commitment and continuous education. EU initiatives, such as capacity-building programs and harmonized ethical standards, aim to create a shared understanding of ethical practices among evaluators. These programs align evaluation practices with broader goals of fairness, accountability, and transparency. Research suggests that such initiatives enhance evaluators' ethical decision-making capabilities and improve the overall quality and credibility of evaluations. However, ongoing efforts are necessary to adapt ethical standards to evolving contexts and address emerging challenge (Dvorak, 2014).

- Develop and disseminate comprehensive ethical guidelines to address issues like data integrity, independence, and reporting transparency.
- Implement regular training programs for both suppliers and managing authorities, focusing on ethical practices and methodological rigor.
- Streamline processes for sharing reliable data while ensuring compliance with data protection regulations.
- Establish independent evaluation units to mitigate political pressures and ensure objective evaluations.
- Improve the clarity and consistency of terms of reference to align client and supplier expectations.

In conclusion, the ethical practices of EU fund evaluators are indispensable for ensuring accountability, transparency, and fairness in public spending. By adhering to ethical frameworks, addressing challenges such as public procurement, data integrity, and

stakeholder pressures, evaluators play a critical role in upholding equity and trust in evaluation processes.

However, this study remains exploratory, with limitations related to the small sample size, and the reliance on snowball sampling, particularly among private-sector evaluators, which may influence the generalizability of findings.

Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples and consider longitudinal approaches to examine how ethical challenges evolve over time. Additionally, studies could explore the impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, on ethical decision-making in evaluations and assess the effectiveness of ethical training programs. Continued refinement of ethical frameworks, alongside sustained institutional support, will be essential to address these challenges and maintain public trust in EU funding mechanisms amidst increasingly complex evaluation environments.

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Conflict of interest: none

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