

The Czech Presidency

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Introduction

The Czech Presidency of the EU Council was not the subject of high expectations. Many observers across Europe were concerned about its possible negative consequences for the performance of the Union. First of all, the overall potential of the Czech Republic as a medium-sized and new Member State was limited. In addition, the government that prepared, and initially also executed the Presidency, was led by the centre-right Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS), which has been generally perceived as a Eurosceptic party. Moreover, Czech President Václav Klaus is regarded as a particularly Eurosceptic actor. When the government of Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek lost the vote of no-confidence in March 2009 and a caretaker government was established, the fears of a weak and unconstructive leadership were replaced by worries of no leadership at all. Yet the six months of the Czech chairmanship were also not short of serious challenges including, among others, the uncertain fate of the Lisbon Treaty, the global financial crisis and the gas crisis.

To what extent was the Czech Presidency effective? We consider an EU Presidency effective if it supplies the demand stemming from the existing policy issues and problems adequately (for a similar notion of effectiveness see Schout and Vanhoonacker, 2006). An effective Presidency, therefore, makes a suitable selection and application of its four main possible functions consisting of administration, agenda-management, mediation and representation.

We argue that the effectiveness of the Czech Presidency could be characterized as mixed. While it provided the EU with a useful service on a number of occasions, it also did not avoid wasting opportunities. In the following analysis we subsequently deal with the actions and performance of the Presidency in the most crucial areas. We will start our account with institutional issues and then proceed to the single market and the global financial crisis. Subsequently, we will concentrate on energy and environment and external relations.¹ The conclusion will reflect on some general implications of the Czech Presidency.

I. Set-Up of the Presidency: Programme and Domestic Context

The Topolánek government started with the preparation of Presidency priorities right after its formation in January 2007, perceiving the Presidency as a unique opportunity to shape the course of the EU and its policies.² At the same time, it was believed that the event would attract attention and (if successful) improve the image, reputation and influence of the Czech Republic in the EU. The overall co-ordination of the Presidency issues was vested in the deputy prime minister for European Affairs Alexander Vondra³ and his office, while the ultimate decision-making power was reserved for the governmental committee for the EU consisting of all the government ministers.

The bureaucratic apparatus devoted much energy to the process of the formulation of Czech priorities. This preparatory phase produced ambitious priorities (Lehtonen, 2009) covered by the motto 'Europe without Barriers', which indicated the Presidency's interest in removing obstacles of any kind between Member States and keeping Europe competitive and open to the world. It was received well since it fitted into the ethos of European integration generally and of the single market in particular. The main priority areas were formulated in the form of three 'Es': Economy, Energy and the European Union in the World, embodying a focus on the single market and the global financial crisis ('Economy'), external energy security ('Energy') and three external relations priorities: EU enlargement, the Eastern Partnership and transatlantic relations ('EU in the World'). The neo-liberal approach to economic issues and the concern with EU relations with eastern Europe coincided well with the preferences of Sweden as one of the other two

¹ Compared to other areas, justice and home affairs was marked by less dramatic developments in the first half of 2009 and the Czech Presidency also did not include this field among its most crucial priority areas. For a discussion of JHA developments see Monar's contribution to this volume.

² In contrast to President Klaus, who described the institution of the EU Presidency as unimportant.

³ Vondra was replaced in the caretaker government by Štefan Füle as minister for European Affairs who subsequently became Enlargement Commissioner.