



BULLETIN

No. 1 (1) • January 8, 2009 • © PISM

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The Presidency of the Czech Republic in the European Union

by Rafał Morawiec

On 1 January 2009, the Czech Republic took over the chairmanship of the European Union Council from France. The program of the Czech presidency is focused on three issues: economy, energy policy, and external relations. The probability that the Czech Republic will succeed in reaching all the goals it has set out for itself are slight given the complicated international situation and the country's internal political setting. Success of the Czech presidency is in Poland's interest, especially in areas such as the EU's Eastern dimension and energy policy.

Background. The program of each presidency is subject to confirmation by the European Council and is usually a function of the chairing country's long-term orientation as well as of trends and events within the EU. The impasse of the Lisbon Treaty ratification process, the financial crisis and the Russian-Georgian conflict have meant that the Czech Republic has had to reassess the preliminary premises of its program as presented in October 2007. It was also necessary to take into account the achievements of the French presidency, and especially the decisions of the European Council summit of 11–12 December 2008 that wrapped it up. Reaching the goals set out by the Czech presidency will constitute a serious challenge, and so will the necessity to react effectively to day-to-day events, such as the Russian–Ukrainian dispute over gas supplies and the conflict in Gaza. The need to establish, in the name of the EU, a dialogue with the new American administration will also put the Czechs' abilities to the test.

In addition to international factors, the Czech presidency will also be affected by domestic considerations. Limitations proper to smaller EU member states, such as a shortage of adequately prepared cadres as well as the fact that the Czech Republic has taken over the chairmanship of the European Council for the first time could make the attainment of its goals more difficult. The weakness of Mirek Topolánek's government, which lost its parliamentary majority in 2008, and the lack of agreement on EU matters between the Czech government and its increasingly strong opposition, could prove to be additional sources of problems. The reaching of agreement during the course of the Czech presidency is not very probable given the electoral campaign for the June elections to the European Parliament. Moreover, the still unresolved issue of the Czech Republic's ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is a factor negatively affecting the way in which the Czech presidency is perceived in some other EU member states.

Priorities. The ultimate version of the program of the Czech presidency was published on 6 January 2008. It differs significantly from the contents of the document presented at the end of 2007. While the motto 'Europe Without Barriers' has been maintained, the number of thematic areas on which the Czech Republic is to concentrate was reduced from five to three, namely: economy, energy policy, and external relations.

Economy. In this area, the most important task for the Czech presidency is to contribute to the limitation of the effects of the financial crisis and, at the same time, to the creation of conditions leading to the stimulation of the EU economies. The basis for the common efforts of the EU and of its members will be the European plan for economic renewal adopted by the European Council in December 2008. The position of the Czech Republic is that steps of member states should be

consistent with the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact and free market principles. The Czechs don't want the struggle against the effects of the crisis to lead to the slowing down of the world trade liberalization process and to the emergence of new barriers and limitations in the use of the four freedoms of the common market.

In spite of the crisis, the Czech presidency would like to continue the discussion on the restructuring of EU budget expenditures, a process that should lead to the earmarking of greater funds for research and development. From the Polish viewpoint, it is worthwhile to note that the initial postulate to limit funds earmarked for the Common Agricultural Policy has not been included in the final version of the program. Presently, the Czechs are merely stressing the need to make use of them more effectively.

Energy Policy. The consensus achieved on the matter of the energy and climate package will allow the Czech presidency to concentrate on the creation of the bases for EU energy security. In the view of the Czech government, the key to achieving this aim is primarily a greater diversification of sources of supply of energy resources and of the type of energy in the structure of consumption, as well as the creation of a unified energy market within the EU. As part of the internal EU debate on this issue, the Czechs would like to address the issue of Russia's dependability as a supplier of energy resources and, at the same time, to encourage other EU member states to support the establishment of ties with other suppliers, especially with countries of the Caspian Sea region.

European Union and the World. In the sphere of external relations, the program of the Czech presidency devotes most attention to the deepening of relations between the EU and the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Reaching this aim would serve the purpose of developing Eastern Partnership initiative. Czechs believe that such efforts should counterbalance the measures taken by the UE in a southerly direction within the context of the Mediterranean Union and, at the same time, constitute a complement of the new EU strategy with regard to Russia, one that would take the lessons of the Georgian crisis into consideration. In this context, it should be emphasized that the stress on developing comprehensive relations with the EU's Eastern partners constitutes quite a novelty in the Czech foreign policy, which for a long time concentrated on the Western Balkans. Of course, the Czech Republic will continue to support the European aspirations of countries in that region, especially those of Croatia, which stands a significant chance of admission to the EU in a relatively short period of time.

One of the priorities of the Czech presidency is the reinforcement of transatlantic relations; a goal that is expected to be much furthered by the swearing in of Barack Obama as the next president of the United States. The Czechs would also desire for the EU to become more actively involved in the building of a lasting peace in the Middle East, something that should be served, in their opinion, by a greater balance in the member countries' perception of the interests of both sides of the conflict (in this context it should be stressed that the Czech Republic always favored Israel's policies).

Prospects. Given the external setting and the complicated internal situation, the Czechs will rather concentrate on the effective management of the agenda taken over from its predecessors, than the pursuit of its own interests at all costs. Adoption of such a concept by the Czech presidency was announced by Prime Minister Topolánek as early as 2007, when he stated that the Czech Republic would primarily strive to demonstrate that it is able to manage the functioning of EU institutions while, at the same time, realizing at least some of its national priorities. Such an approach limits the risk of significant errors and, at the same time, reduces the probability of setbacks in areas in which success would not be very likely in any case. Progressing in this way, the Czech Republic will be able to concentrate on chosen areas in which it will be able to meet its intended goals. Presumably, these will include questions connected with energy security, the development of relations with the EU's Eastern neighbors, and the continuation of the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans.

Such an approach is beneficial from a Polish standpoint. The Czech presidency's declared aims in connection with the Eastern Partnership are fully convergent with the interests of Poland, which should, therefore, support the steps taken by the Czechs in this area. This support should also be lent by Poland taking into consideration its own chairmanship of the EU Council, scheduled for the second half of 2011, one of whose priorities will most probably be the deepening of the EU's partnership with countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. It is also in Poland's interest that the Czech presidency succeeds in creating the bases for EU energy security and a common energy policy as well as in steps taken on behalf of the integration of Western Balkan states with the EU. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Czechs have assumed the chairmanship of the EU Council in very difficult circumstances and due allowance should be made for the possibility that they may not be successful in achieving a breakthrough in the above-mentioned areas.