

The Czech EU Presidency: Europe on Autopilot or Express Train Delivering on Time?*

The Czech EU presidency which had chosen “Europe without Barriers” as its motto stumbled over more barriers than it cared to find on its way. The Czechs found themselves in “interesting times” for both the EU and the Czech Republic itself. The ‘three Es’: Economy, Energy and the European Union in the World, they had chosen as their initial priorities were ambitious, the results in implementing them were - in spite of the frantic May and June summitry - not satisfying. The lack of success cannot all be blamed on external factors such as the global financial and economic crisis, the gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine or the outburst of the violent conflict in Gaza. The internal problems of the Czech administration, which resulted in the fall of the ruling coalition in March, kept it from running a successful presidency. The lack of consensus on significant EU issues within the government camp and the obstinacy of eurosceptic president Václav Klaus have made it practically impossible to press ahead with the assigned priorities and to steer the Union in a satisfactory way. The fall of the Czech government put Europe in the eyes of some analysts “on autopilot” even though Czech EU Affairs Minister Štefan Füle still speaks optimistically of an “(express) train reaching the end of the line on time with a maximum number of goals achieved.” What goals has the Czech presidency actually achieved? What tasks have not been fulfilled and will have to be handed over to the Swedes? How badly does Europe need the Lisbon treaty, and has the Czech presidency succeeded in drawing up a “roadmap to Lisbon”?

An EU presidency does not only present challenges but also opportunities to a country to become more visible within the EU framework. The motto of the Czech presidency was: Europe without barriers. With this the (former) Czech government referred to two historical milestones: the fall of the Iron Curtain 20 years ago and the “big bang” enlargement five years ago. That the presidency did not make much progress on its chosen priorities: economy, energy, and the role of Europe in the world, is not only to blame on the outbreak of international crises and conflicts, but also on the fact that the governing coalition was unstable from the very beginning of the presidency and fell after a no-confidence vote on 24 May. The Czech presidency succeeded in making the Czech Republic very visible in Europe, but unfortunately often not in a positive sense. The slogan “We will sweeten up Europe” turned rather sour after a while.

The Czech presidency started from an extremely weak position. The fragile Czech government was not able to come to a truce agreement with the opposition before the presidency started. The eurosceptic position of president Václav Klaus and even of the major coalition party, the Conservatives, was well known in advance. The Lisbon treaty was still not ratified. Finally, president Sarkozy’s reluctance to leave the stage triggered a wave of exaggerated and very critical French media attacks on the Czech

* Guest speakers were **Mats Braun**, research fellow Institute of International Relations, Prague and **Sadi Shanaah**, former adviser to former Czech Minister of Education, Youth and Sports Ondřej Liška. Discussant was **Ilana Betel**, writer, historian and political analyst, Brussels. The debate was chaired by **Eva van de Rakt**, director Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Prague. The debate took place under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

presidency even before it started. The Deputy Prime Minister Vondra recently blamed the Social Democrats for agreeing when they were in power to have the presidency after the French, even though they might have known it would be a difficult time. He called it “the first mistake of the presidency”. The expectations were generally so low that the Czechs could only surprise. The government, the conservatives opted for an extremely risky communication strategy that was aggressive, cheeky, crude and supposedly funny, be it not that some aspects of Czech humour are not transferable to other cultures. It looked as if they were making fun of their own position and ridiculed the importance of this historical moment. The main message of the PR campaign “We are going to sweeten up Europe” was a typical product of Czech anti-system humour concealing different meanings for different audiences. In the end the Czech presidency’s communication campaign failed miserably.

If a successful presidency is defined by positive media perception, then the Czech presidency cannot belong to that category. Looking back the main priorities became very real and almost prophetic. Their choice was justified although the Greens wanted to see the priorities with a slightly different content. The liberalisation agenda the Greens wanted to have less absolute and more careful, energy security they wanted to see less about the supply routes and more about climate change and external relations less about bilateral relations between the United States and the EU/Czech Republic and more about multi-lateralism.

At the beginning, the Czech presidency had to face two major crises: the Gaza conflict on which they could have anticipated better, as it actually started in November 2008 under the French presidency. The mission of foreign minister Schwarzenberg in the region was perceived very negatively in the Czech media which is slightly unfair because no major world power would have had achieved any more: Sarkozy’s plan for an armistice was rejected too by Israel. The gas crisis was initially regarded by the Czechs as a bilateral issue between Ukraine and Russia. The later shuttle diplomacy was praised in the Czech media. The solution of the crisis was an official success for the Czech presidency. The Czechs did not allow to be dragged into the blame game and stayed neutral; still the underlying problems have not been solved. The direct reaction of the presidency to the financial and economic crises is now universally praised both in the Czech republic and abroad. To the accusation that the Czech presidency remained mute, the response was – referring to Sarkozy- that if someone is not silent and passive it doesn’t automatically mean he is a blessing for his country and continent. The financial discipline of the Czechs was very forceful and in the end became European mainstream, but this was overshadowed by Czech Prime Minister Topolánek’s statement in the European Parliament that the US solution to the economic crisis is a “road to hell”. The attempts to soften this statement by explaining that the Czech original version was not so strong because the Czechs are not as religious as the Americans or that he attended a concert by AC/DC and got inspired by their song “Highway to Hell” didn’t make matters any better. The spring council was the biggest success for the Czech presidency even though it passed largely unnoticed. There were satisfactory conclusions concerning the finances for the Eastern Partnership and the climate negotiations. Also, Obama’s visit to Prague, the mere fact that he came to Prague first, was a success as such.

The first three months of the Czech presidency can be seen positively. Many critics started to review their initial positions, especially on Czech officials who turned out to be highly efficient. However, the moment was forever lost by the fall of the government in the middle of the presidency. Before that most Czechs believed that the presidency was doing quite well. The election results for the EP show that the parties who brought down the government were punished. The Social Democrats tried to explain that they brought down the government by saying that they did it in order to save the Lisbon treaty. That, if they hadn't brought down the government, some of the conservative senators could have blackmailed their own government.

After the fall of the government people feared that the Conservatives would take revenge by sabotaging the Lisbon treaty. That it was ratified by the Czech parliament is a success for the Czech presidency though technically it has not very much to do with it. After the fall of the government there was a lack of leadership even though the administration stayed the same. The June Council was more a media success than it showed results. The only real results were the guarantees for the Ireland which were mainly negotiated by Council administrators. Nothing was achieved on climate change.

To sum up: there have been some undeniable successes for the Czech presidency. Most visible were the solution of the gas crisis, the Osama visit to Prague and the Irish guarantees. Less visible were e.g. conclusion of a free trade agreement with Canada against the backdrop of the economic crisis and the achievement of easier access to the South Korean market, energy liberalisation and the various European environmental legislations (eco-labelling, ozone layer protection etc.) There was some progress on mercury trade and biodiversity some progress and in creating a European research area by removing barriers. In terms of human rights, the Council working group was successful in mainstreaming human rights into various policies, working out concrete implementations concerning the prevention of torture, focal points on human rights in European embassies and the EU election missions.

There were also failures: basically, the fall of the government killed the presidency. It can be discussed whether Entropa was a failure or not: it was positive because it caused interesting debates- in the context of a communication strategy it was a failure. The Czech presidency also failed to come to an agreement on the working time directive, and the summits with China and Russia achieved absolutely nothing. Its performance in the Gaza conflict is debatable. The Czechs were very forceful to upgrade the EU-Israeli ties. They were not willing to discuss any human rights aspect of this conflict. After the fall of the government the message basically was that there could be no upgrade until there is an improvement in the peace talks. The Czech presidency was very committed to enlargement and the Balkan countries, but these attempts were frustrated by Slovenia. Finally, there was no agreement on finance for adaptation of developing countries in the context of climate change. The Czech presidency made a strong case for the end of rotating presidencies. On the other hand it is questionable whether the efficient but rather pushy French presidency which tended to steamroll their partners can be considered so much more successful in that respect.