

The Czech EU Presidency: Green Impulses and Visions for Europe¹

In January 2009 the Czech Republic will assume the Presidency of the Council of the EU. This will provide the Czech Republic with a unique opportunity to influence the agenda of the EU for six months. The Czech Republic, one of the youngest member states of the EU, a country which has not yet ratified the Lisbon Treaty and whose president is a well known eurosceptic, will take over the EU Presidency at a time when the EU has to address such major issues as the consequences of the financial crisis and the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian conflict. The Czech Green Party, as a government coalition partner, stresses the need to strengthen and deepen European Union integration in order to meet the global challenges of the future. Among other topics, not less salient for the EU, the agenda of the Czech EU Presidency will feature climate change, the future of the Lisbon Treaty, transatlantic relations under the new US administration and the future of EU foreign, security and enlargement policy. What are the priorities of the Czech Green Party in the field of EU foreign, security and enlargement policy? What should the future of the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy look like? What should an EU strategy for the Western Balkans focus on? What are the obstacles of intensified NATO-EU relations and can they be overcome? Which role does the missile defence shield play in this context?

The Czech EU presidency has been facing a series of internal and external problems from the very start. The internal problems are the result of the fragility of the government coalition which does not have a majority in the parliament and of the participating parties, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) and the Greens (SZ) as well as the attitude of eurosceptic president Václav Klaus (ODS) with whom it has been very difficult to reach a compromise on EU policies. After one year of negotiations it finally looks as if the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty will be only a question of time. The question has, however, caused a split in the liberal-conservative party ODS between a pro-European stream (Topolánek) and the Eurosceptics led by Klaus. External problems were added by the financial and economic crisis, the Gaza conflict, the crisis over the gas pipeline between the EU and Russia and the aftermath of the conflict between Georgia and Russia.

¹ Guest speaker was **Ondřej Liška**, Minister for Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, Vice Chair of the Czech Green Party (Strana zelených). Discussant was **Franziska Brantner**, Policy Analyst and Candidate for the European Parliament for the Metropolregion Rhein-Neckar (German Green party). The event took place under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

Priorities

The priorities of the Czech presidency that chose “A Europe without barriers” as its motto are: economy, energy and external relations.

Energy

The Czech presidency has expressed its obligations towards climate protection, energy efficiency, diversification of sources and the decrease of energy consumption. It will have to pave the way for the Copenhagen summit. The emphasis will, however, be on energy security, a policy area Topolánek would like to see dealt with on EU level, certainly amid an ongoing gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine. The Czech presidency wants to pursue greater territorial diversification of energy suppliers and a wider range of utilised sources, in order to reduce the EU’s energy dependence.

Economy

The motto *Europe Without Frontiers* has its origin in the liberalisation agenda. The Czech Greens have made it clear that there are not only economic frontiers. The drift of the Czech presidency towards liberalisation and deregulation of the market has been moderated by the Greens. But even 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall regulation and state intervention are still dirty words in the Czech Republic: it’s a mind set from the past. The financial crisis has helped to drive the point home that there are borders we need to get rid of.

Through the current investment programmes people are no longer aware of how many billions are spent and forget the reasons for the crisis. Important is not to lose the momentum and push for a solution which tackles the reasons of the financial crisis.

The Green Deal is not yet a concept. The EU plan, however, is not far from what the Greens have asked for since many years - this is a momentum the Greens have to use!

External Relations

The Czech presidency has placed three big issues on the external affairs agenda: *transatlantic relations*, the *Eastern partnership* and EU enlargement to the *Western Balkans*. Other important issues which emerged due to external developments are: the Gaza conflict and its aftermath and the new gas crisis between Ukraine and Russia. In connection with these priorities, the most important EU-third party summits during the Czech presidency will be: EU-Russia, EU-US and EU-West Balkans.

In the corridors there was much talk about a freezing of the upgrade of EU-Israel relations which was foreseen for the upcoming EU-Israel summit. It would be a huge step to bring human rights issues into the EU-Israel relations and even relate them to the peace process.

An EU-Russia summit will be held in May. Whether the Czech presidency will be able to conclude a new partnership agreement with Russia during the May summit is questionable.

The Czech government has a strong *transatlantic security agenda* for which Prime Minister Topolánek, Minister for Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg and Minister for EU affairs Vondra are responsible. In the context of EU-NATO relations, the missile defence issue plays a big role in the Czech Republic. But it has to be said that NATO –as it is still in search for a (new) identity- is no longer the only important embodiment of transatlantic relations. The focus these days should be on EU-US

relations. The time that Bush fulminated aggressively against the EU Constitution and the Lisbon Treaty is over. The US looks benevolently on further EU integration.

In the US-EU debate the focus lies on burden-sharing and often in this debate it is forgotten how much money the EU spends on post-conflict reconstruction: in many cases these costs go far beyond US military costs. The debate on burden sharing should not be reduced to a plea for an increasing of the military budget; it should also be about increasing the efficiency of resources the EU member states already have. The EU must improve its strategic capabilities to reach autonomy regarding US decision making. There is much talk about the need to avoid duplication, but we have to prevent a situation in which NATO is transformed into the world policeman with the EU taking over the post conflict rebuilding task. The EU has to develop robust institutions to become independent of NATO structures. The agendas of the US and the EU are not necessarily identical.

The EU has different options. As far as the missile defence issue is concerned: Obama's administration is only starting to send out signals on how this is going to develop. As to the ratification process: it is not easy in diplomatic terms to step into the middle of nowhere. Most Obama advisers are careful to give any signals at all, but the project will probably be halted, if not completely stopped, because there is simply not enough money. Czech society is deeply divided on this issue. It became a frozen conflict within society which can only be overcome by a coherent self-confident EU policy. The missile shield issue has not yet been discussed officially in any EU body, whereas NATO has incorporated the missile defence shield as its third pillar.

A part of the Czech Greens rejects this project generally, because - since the US missile shield project is not integrated into a multilateral security architecture - it brings more tension than security and has not been even proven to be operating and functional. So, there is not a sufficient reason to ratify the treaty. Part of the Greens just supports this project because they believe it is important to strengthen the security ties with the US. The Greens in the European Parliament reject the US missile shield altogether. The Czech Greens strive for a common position of EU member states on the issue. This could be a question the next European Parliament will have to deal with.

In a way, the NATO perspective is weakening the (security policy of the) EU: many countries are happy to have NATO because it means they don't have to invest more in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, there is the fear of a militarisation of the EU. The Greens do not have a coherent vision on that either: they do not like NATO and they do not want to militarise Europe either.

How transatlantic relations will develop depends on how the EU will engage Obama. It will depend on the Czech Presidency how the tone is set. Another priority is the democracy promotion. The fact that Obama has become president doesn't mean that the US are now suddenly perceived as a human rights power. There is a certain European reluctance to help Obama. The US has disengaged from human rights in the UN and it would be good for the US to re-engage.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) will be reviewed during this semester. Russia has formulated an integration project for the eastern European region and the EU's *Eastern Partnership (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia)* is seen as a rival project. It has to be prevented that the Eastern Europe space is used for cherry picking without the obligations that come with the Eastern

Partnership. There is still a lack of people to people contacts in this region, a lack of mobility of students and researchers. It is also important to make clear that the Eastern Partnership should not be viewed as alternative to EU membership. The Czech presidency wants to prevent that Belarusian president Lukashenka is invited to the summit unless there is proof for democratisation in Belarus. Without that proof, Lukashenka's participation would cast a shadow on the relations of the EU with the Belarusian civil society.

The Greens have always supported the integration of the *Western Balkans* into the EU. The key to the regional solution is Serbia. There should be no hastened EU decisions regarding Serbia's EU membership. However, a visa-free regime should be implemented as soon as possible. Only between 18 and 24% of Serbian students has travelled abroad! Another important task is to deal with corruption and law enforcement problems in the region. As soon as this is dealt with the countries should have access to the EU structural funds.

Green Impulses

Whether the fact that Greens are present in the Czech presidency can help other Greens in Europe is doubtful. Being part of a presidency freezes the domestic agenda. On the other hand, the role the Czech Greens play in the presidency gives them some space. Czech society is still developing: it will take at least another twenty years to reflect on what former generations have been doing. A positive signal is, however, that more and more young people are getting involved in politics.