

POLICY PAPER

Czech EU presidency: Basis for a Successful Implementation

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Summary

- **Czech policy makers must not resort to a partisan programme of the Czech presidency. Strong antipathy between government and opposition might create a fragile political environment for the presidency**
- **Czech priorities must be thoroughly discussed with partners in trio, and the Czech Republic should closely coordinate its intentions with Sweden in order to counterbalance French influence**
- **Space of Czech initiatives will be limited due to the current phase of the EP legislative period, and the Czechs should thus focus only on particular issues that they consider vital – single market policies, environmental policies, and innovation.**
- **The EU presidency must be used for EU membership promotion in the Czech Republic. Importantly, there should take place high-level meetings in the Czech Republic and outside of Prague.**

Essentials to consider

The Czech Republic is scheduled to hold the rotating presidency of the EU council in the second half of 2022, making it already the second Czech presidency since its accession to the European Union in 2004. Czechs will want to improve their reputation from their last presidency, which was marked by the collapse of Mirek Topolánek's government in the middle of the Czech term.

As of December 2020, the preparatory works for the Czech presidency are underway. The Czech government allocated 1,24 billion CZK¹ for the presidency implementation, additional personnel was hired, and there are in motion regular consultations with stakeholders.² On the other hand, discussions about priorities on the political level are lagging behind, and much of the activity is conducted behind closed doors.

In order to shed light on what dilemmas await Czech public servants and politicians during preparatory works, the following article discusses three crucial aspects of the Czech presidency – limitations to agenda setting, cooperation with trio, and utilization of the presidency for EU membership promotion in the Czech Republic.

In general, it is important to stress that the organisational team and ruling politicians must find agreement with the opposition and other relevant actors for the presidency programme. It would be unwise to repeat the 2009 situation when the Czech presidency collapsed primarily due to personal aspirations of some national politicians. Secondly, the presidency of the EU Council is a once in a generation opportunity; thus, the Czech government should not excessively strangle the presidency budget despite the ongoing economic crisis. The presidency is a unique opportunity not only to present the Czech Republic abroad, but also the Czech EU membership at home.

Agenda setting limitations

Every presidency has the ambition to introduce its own agenda at the European level. It is obvious that the more influential a state is, the greater chance to leave marks on the European integration. There are, however, general restrictions that each state faces and which do not mirror their relative power. The Czech organisational team must keep them in mind while drafting the Presidency programme.

Firstly, every presidency takes place within certain pre-determined phase of the legislative period. Those states holding their presidency at the beginning of a legislative period have a greater chance to influence discussed files than those hosting the presidency in the middle of EP legislative period. The Czech Republic will have its presidency approximately in the middle of the 5 years EP term. This means that most of its agenda will derive from already existing legislative files, and that the room for its own legislative initiatives will be significantly constrained.

Secondly, the European Council has its own document – Strategic Agenda – outlining the Union's priorities until 2024. If there is no similar emergency to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to presume that the Czech presidency programme will remain closely aligned with the Strategic agenda.

On the other hand, these institutional constraints only limit the free space for the Czech Republic, but they do not prohibit the country to stress certain policy areas it considers vital. There are four main policy clusters listed in the Strategic agenda, and some are highly relevant for the Czech Republic. It could, for instance, invest political capital in economic agenda "Developing our economic base: the European model for the future." As a country favouring the four freedoms and heavily profiting from the single market, the Czech Republic could try to advance the digital union, or cohesion between member states. Similarly, the Strategic

¹ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ceske-predsednictvi-evropska-unie-rozpocet-vlada-andrej-babis-cssd_1910141701_dok

² E.g, in the framework of the „National Convention on EU affairs”. <https://www.narodnikonvent.cz/national-convention-open-debate-on-europe/>

agenda concerning EU Foreign Policy offers a lot of room for the Czech Republic. Czechs could strive for a deeper cooperation in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, as well as facilitate the advancement of the stagnated accession process of Western Balkan.

More concrete suggestions naturally require a more thorough analysis, which will be published by EUROPEUM next year. It is clear, however, that although the Czech Republic will face many institutional constraints limiting its ability to function as an agenda setter, there is still enough room for some partial initiative, provided it is closely tied to the Strategic agenda.

Cooperation with the trio

Another crucial aspect of the EU presidency preparatory work is the agreement with trio partners on their programme. The Czech Republic's partners will be Sweden and France, where the Czechs are going to be in the middle of the trio behind France and prior to Sweden. The programme agreement between all partners is important as it ensures a smooth transition of agenda from one presiding country to another, and it also limits potential contradicting proposals. Overall, the trio institution ensures a problem-free handing of the rotating presidencies.

In general, the Czech Republic will be in a difficult position to leave a significant trace on the trio programme for several reasons. Firstly, the French and Swedish political elites will be motivated to perform well as both countries will hold general elections during the trio term. Secondly, France is one of the most influential countries in Europe with an energetic President Macron, who will surely try to use the presidency not only in his presidential campaign, but he will also want to assertively enforce the French agenda.

In this sense, the Czech Republic will have a partner who has a very different idea about functioning of the single market, monetary union as well as the EU as such. Shortly after Macron took office, he tried to limit the freedom of labour by amending the Posted-Workers-Directive as well

as Mobility Package concerning lorry transport. France opinions about the Single Market significantly differ from the Czech ones. The Czech Republic has usually been known as a liberal country favouring unrestricted four freedoms. Furthermore, unlike France the Czech Republic is not a member of the Eurozone and objects to any deeper European integration.

On the other hand, Sweden could prove to be a good counterbalance to French influence. The country has very similar approach to the Single Market, it does not belong to the Eurozone, and to some extent it favours the current institutional setup of the EU rather than moving towards deeper cooperation. It seems that the Czech Republic could use the Swedish presence in the trio and coordinate closer its programme ideas with the Nordic country. It might help in countering the French influence.

In any case, it is necessary to thoroughly discuss programme and priorities with all partners in the trio. It will ensure a smooth agenda transition from one presidency to another. Furthermore, the actual programme will to a large extent depend on the opened files, and thus there will be only limited possibility to establish original initiatives.

EU promotion in the Czech Republic

The EU presidency has always proved as a good tool to promote EU membership in countries holding the presidency. Czech experience from 2009 clearly shows that the support to Czech membership in the EU gained a significant boost³. Simultaneously, the presidency can have a positive effect on the Czech perception of its ability to influence EU politics. In this sense, Czechs have traditionally been very sceptical and have not thought of the EU as an institution taking their opinion into account.

As a result, it is imperative to consider how to utilize the Czech presidency for propagation of its membership in the EU. Czechs are one of the most Eurosceptic nation in Europe,

³ See Brand EU:
<https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/3258/czechs-and->

[the-eu-brand-how-do-czechs-feel-about-the-eu-and-what-could-change-their-mind](https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/3258/czechs-and-)

in certain periods even exceeding British scepticism.⁴ Currently, the support to the Czech EU membership lies at 56%, which is a record high since pre-2008 numbers.⁵ The reason for that is that the COVID pandemic started being perceived as a national problem, rather than fault of the EU, and that the pandemic-induced economic crisis has not yet impacted the income of citizens. Although on record high, the support for EU membership still remains below EU average.

Simultaneously, the presidency preparatory team must take into consideration that in the Czech case, the attitudes towards the EU correlate with living standard and what the citizens think of post-1989 development. In general, this means that most Eurosceptic citizens live in Czech economic peripheries, not in large cities such as Prague or Brno.

Based on these presumptions, it is reasonable to suggest that Czech presidency should stage events not only in Brussels, but also in the Czech Republic. There should be a European Council meeting, and several high-level Council of the EU in an ideal scenario. The organisation team should concentrate meetings in regions, such as Brno and Ostrava. This might help the citizens realize that the presidency – and by extension EU membership – is not merely exclusive to Prague. One must obviously keep in mind logistical questions such as whether there is an international airport nearby, or whether a city can accommodate high demand during EU meetings, but it is still worth investigating how to involve Czech regions and give them feeling of visibility on the European political map.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

⁴ See Brand EU report:
<https://europeum.org/en/articles/detail/3257/cesi-a-znacka-eu-jak-se-citi-cesi-ohledne-eu-a-co-by-mohlo-zmenit-jejich-nazor>

⁵ Source: STEM, data gathered in October 2020