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# **The Czech EU Presidency and the World: Chronicle of a Failure Foretold?**

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## The Czech EU Presidency and the World: Chronicle of a Failure Foretold?

Bonn / Prague, 29 June 2009. After the 'hyperactive' and much applauded French presidency of the EU in the second half of 2008, many had cast serious doubts about the ability of its Czech successor to represent the Union at home and abroad in the time of global financial and economic crisis. The Czech government, critics said, would be hampered by the pending ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the stubborn euroscepticism of President Václav Klaus.

The fall of the Czech government in late March 2009 seemed to seal the fate of their EU-presidency. The failure to provide stable leadership for 500 million EU citizens has somehow obscured its capacity to cope with unexpected events and to promote the 'three E' priorities of the original programme: *Economy*, *Energy* and the *EU in the World*, including global development.

### E for East Europe

Throughout the conduct of the presidency, the third 'E' became to stand for *East Europe*, a priority of the Czech foreign policy. The January gas crisis strongly affected many Eastern members of the EU and the presidency mediated an agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Later it attempted at resuscitating the Nabucco gas pipeline, which would reduce energy dependence on both countries. Both interventions may be seen as moderately successful.

The Eastern Partnership, concluded in May to deepen the relations between the EU and six of its Eastern neighbours, also serves as a counter-balance to the Union for the Mediterranean, launched under the French presidency. In other regions of the world, however, the presidency was less active and visible. In the case of the conflict between Israel and Gaza, the Czech government mistook its pro-Israeli attitude for the EU position, which challenged its legitimacy in negotiating the end of the war.

### Mitigated success of the Czech development initiatives

Bluntly put, development of the South is an insignificant issue for the Czech government. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is aware of the importance of development issues for the EU and it seeks to promote its territorial priorities and transition experience at the EU level. The European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, was eventually "impressed by the high level of ambition" of the presidency programme.

Council conclusions have confirmed the success of the main priority: *Access to sustainable sources of energy at local level in developing countries*. The Czech presidency found a consensus on the need to redirect a part of the large infrastructure projects to local and off-grid pro-poor solutions. The second initiative, *Support of democratic governance*, reflects the Czech conviction that economic development goes hand in hand with democratisation. However, the support of the Governance Initiative concerns only African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. The presidency has underestimated the compartmentalisation of the European Commission and failed in mainstreaming its third priority *Eastern Dimension* in the EU development policy.

### Lack of real commitment to development

But issues which are more urgent for the EU development policy were absent from the presidency programme. Although the Council "strongly reaffirmed its commitment to achieve its ODA targets", the preceding Czech position was much less eager. But commitment does not



mean delivery: most EU countries were already off-track to meet the targets before the finance crisis.

Aid effectiveness and coordination was yet another non-issue. However, the Czech support of a Finnish initiative to include development cooperation in the transatlantic dialogue may benefit from the openness of President Obama's administration and help to reinforce EU's coordination and complementarity with the second biggest world donor in a long run.

Crucial policy coherence issues were not put on the agenda either. On the one hand, the Czechs hailed a resolution of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development for not engaging the Union in cutting down agricultural subsidies that were harmful to the producers from the South. On the other hand, the Czech presidency successfully negotiated with major actors from the North and South in preparing the forthcoming Copenhagen summit on climate change. Even so, the prospects for an efficient post-Kyoto agreement are not positive.

Alongside climate change, the global finance and economic crisis remains the most urgent challenge for both North and South. If the Czech government has underestimated its effects at home, it has done so with respect to developing countries as well. One reason may be an excessive belief in markets based on the positive experience of the economic transition: the presidency strived for pushing the Doha Development Round and the Economic Partnership Agreements further without success.

### **More realism than magic**

As far as the promotion of national priorities is concerned, the Czech presidency was more or less successful: it managed to mainstream the Eastern dimension in the EU external relations, but not in the EU's development policy. According to the Czech diplomats, the day-to-day administration of the Council in the EU development policy and EU-Africa relations was a pleasant surprise for other member states. However, the presidency did not manage to hide the low global awareness among the Czech political elites and it failed in delivering a strong message on the crisis.

Hopefully, the Lisbon Treaty will put an end to the system of rotating presidencies and it will reduce the risk of weak leadership and unbalanced expertise. The Czech presidency succeeded in facilitating its final adoption at the recent European Council, especially with regards to the Irish case. This last step will probably help to strengthen the EU external and development policy in the future and the Czech presidency will not be remembered as a nightmare. With the media circus and awkward declarations put aside, the Czech EU presidency was rather a case of realism than one of magic.

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