
The Polish Presidency – pushing the agenda and shaping the Lisbon system

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BACKGROUND

The successful conduct of the Council's rotating presidency is a demanding task for any country. This has become even more so since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, as many issues surrounding the presidency's role in the new institutional architecture still need clarification. For Poland, a big and ambitious country taking over the presidency for the first time on 1 July 2011, this is a major and daunting challenge. At the same time, leading the Council of Ministers provides an opportunity to gain political influence and to create a positive image in the outside world, as well as developing a sense of EU-ownership at home.

The expectations concerning the Polish Presidency are high. A majority of experts holds that Warsaw

is a serious partner ready to assume leadership. Some even argue that Poland could set a precedent of what is involved when a big Member State holds the presidency in the new Lisbon system. However, this approach of providing leadership needs to acknowledge the spirit of the Treaty, which centralises policy-making in Brussels. Poland, as a country holding the presidency for the first time, must proceed carefully, as its actions (or passivity) will most probably be assessed particularly strictly.

During its semester Poland should concentrate on two main issues: pushing forward the current EU-agenda and shaping the 'after Lisbon' system.

STATE OF PLAY

The first two countries holding post-Lisbon presidencies, Spain and Belgium, did not work out a lasting model of cooperation between the rotating presidency and other EU institutions.

Spain tried to implement the new rules of the Lisbon Treaty in practice, but was hampered by the fact that the country found itself in a very bad economic situation in the first half of 2010 at the outbreak of the euro crisis, which limited its room for manoeuvre.

The Belgians, on the other hand, made it very clear from the beginning that their main aim would be empowerment of the High Representative (HR) and the President of the European Council. The fact that the latter is Belgian, only enhanced these plans. Without an established government Belgium perceived itself as a moderator and coordinator taking a low-level

approach. Overall, its performance is assessed as an effective, hardworking presidency and constructive moderator, running its business smoothly.

Its successor, the Hungarian Presidency is overshadowed by continuous debates about the country's new media law, and its position was further weakened by not joining the 'Euro Plus Pact'. It seems likely that the negative connotations will remain even if Budapest manages to be a good coordinator and make a footprint in certain fields.

And the perception that new Member States are not really mature enough to be at the EU helm will become even more entrenched, especially among the EU-15. Warsaw must be, and is, aware of these double standards that show 'first-timers' are observed and assessed more critically.

Challenges faced by Poland

At the same time, Warsaw is expected to provide leadership by coming up with new ideas and pushing things forward. As a big Member State with high ambitions and with an image of being an effective player after some successful diplomatic efforts in recent years, Poland could indeed present a political message and display leadership, doing more than simply being a good manager.

The Polish catalogue of priorities are summarised under three headings: "European integration as a source of growth", "secure Europe" and "Europe benefiting from its openness". In more concrete terms, these include strengthening the internal market and the EU's external energy policy, negotiations on the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF), and full utilisation of Europe's intellectual capital. The foreign policy priorities include developing the European Neighbourhood Policy with a particular focus on democracy support and contacts with Eastern Partnership countries, and enhancement of Common Security and Defence Policy.

Polish preparations for the presidency, which began in 2008, are running smoothly. Contacts

with all EU-institutions at different levels (for example ministers' visits to the EP and the Commission) have started well in advance. These arrangements could, however, be viewed as a double-edged sword as they increase expectations at national and EU level.

A second challenge relates to the fact that Poland is not in the euro zone, which somewhat limits its influence with regard to the reform of economic governance currently under way. However, having joined the 'Euro Plus Pact' is likely to guarantee future involvement.

Third, the overall role of the rotating presidency is limited by the fact that the EU-system is increasingly dominated by the European Council and its President.

Last but not least, during its presidency the Polish government will face national elections. This could not be avoided, as a decision to change the polling date would have required a decision supported by both the government and the opposition. The election campaign might distract the government's attention, but could also be an advantage, as the government will be anxious to present solid results at EU-level to the electorate.

PROSPECTS

The establishment of the new institutional architecture put in place by the Lisbon Treaty is still in a transitional phase. Even though the rotating presidency has lost many of its responsibilities and powers, such as chairing the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council as well as representing the EU abroad, it still plays a key role in EU-policy formulation, mainly through chairing the sectoral Councils and their preparatory bodies.

To make the institutional architecture work, and fulfil the high expectations and its own ambitions for the presidency, the Polish government should concentrate on three key objectives: matching the national and European agenda, finding a balance between top-down and bottom-up, and close coordination with the European Parliament (EP). These promise to influence the performance of its presidency and at the same time have a lasting effect on the future role of the rotating presidency.

Match the national and European agenda

Even though the role of the presidency has been reduced, there are still certain policy fields where its engagement is more than welcome. This is especially true where national capacities match current interests in the EU to push policies

forward. There are two fields where new ideas are particularly needed and where Poland could provide a strong impetus: the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Eastern Partnership. Poland should act as an honest broker and predictable player in these fields and others, seeking innovative solutions and addressing the issues from different angles.

Concerning the CSDP, Poland has come up with ideas that match the EU's current need for closer cooperation. The lack of unity between Member States concerning the response to the Libyan crisis, together with the clear signal from the US that Washington wants Europeans to take over more responsibility, shows that a common European policy and leadership in this field is more needed than ever.

Polish plans to support closer EU defence integration, develop its effectiveness, and strengthen defence ties between NATO and the EU meet these demands. The level of ambition might have to be lowered, however, due to the current disunity among key EU countries.

A focus on security and defence could allow Poland to establish a footprint in CSDP, since the High

Representative (HR) is not really promoting the field, which makes it something of an 'abandoned orphan'. Bringing fresh inspiration to this policy area could thus be more than welcome, and Foreign Minister Sikorski and Ms Ashton have already agreed that the Polish foreign minister will have a role to play in this field. But the Polish Presidency should be careful not to overstretch itself. Even though it will be in the driving seat at times during the second half of 2011, direction provided by the HR and the European External Action Service (EEAS) should function as an 'obligatory GPS'.

At the same time, strong Polish engagement should be in the interest of Ms Ashton as it provides her with more space to concentrate on EU-foreign relations in general without being criticised for passivity in the area of defence. However, Warsaw should make sure that, after 2011, the HR and the EEAS take ownership and push forward initiatives started by Poland, especially as the succeeding Presidencies of Denmark and Cyprus are much less likely to engage in this area.

The second field where Poland should and will focus is the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The initiative has lost momentum and Warsaw, as a main initiator of the EaP, is perceived to be the only one able to re-energise the process. But expectations may be too high here also. Success may not be easy to achieve, as the situation in North Africa overshadows the Eastern dimension, and much depends on political progress achieved by the Eastern partners.

However, the Polish Presidency does not have to reinvent the wheel. Many EaP projects are already on track, but they need further streamlining. Establishing the visa free regime or finalising free trade agreements are possible big steps forward.

In more concrete terms, Warsaw must be careful not to lose focus during the postponed EaP summit to be held in Poland shortly before Polish parliamentary elections. The final declaration must give partner countries a clear signal that the EU is ready to integrate closer with the 'best performers'; the principle 'more for more' needs to be underlined. However, one should not forget that Prime Minister Tusk will 'only' be the host of the meeting, with President Van Rompuy representing the EU. Finding an appropriate role for Poland will be especially challenging.

Although Warsaw is likely to concentrate on the East, the government seems to be aware that it is also crucial to engage in the South, where Poland plans to 'export' its experience in transformation to promote democracy in the EU's southern neighbourhood.

Balance top-down with bottom-up

The Lisbon Treaty does not clearly specify the role of the rotating presidency in the European Council or *vis-à-vis* its President. Since the entry into force of the new primary law, and in the course of the sovereign debt crisis, the European Council, dominated by Germany and France, and its President, has enhanced its role in the EU's institutional power architecture.

As a consequence, the Union is increasingly characterised by a top-down logic. On the one hand this provides continuity and delivers results, as the enhancement of European economic governance sealed at the 24-25 March Summit showed. On the other it disrupts the decision-making process as the European Council comes out with concrete policy proposals, and the Commission tends to present its proposals first to EU leaders, and only after their positive political response is the traditional legislative process involving the Council and the European Parliament set into motion. As a result, an increasing number of issues are 'politically transferred' to the European Council, which overburdens summits and limits the ability of EU leaders to concentrate on providing strategic orientation.

The increasing top-down logic could be balanced by the General Affairs Council (GAC), which is chaired by the rotating presidency. The coordinating role of the GAC should be enhanced to increase coherence between different policy areas. However, the GAC has hitherto undermined its potential, as foreign ministers do not often attend but send their deputies or Permanent Representatives.

The GAC is also weakened by the fact that foreign ministers have lost coordinating power on the national level and no longer participate in EU summits.

A re-balancing of the prevailing top-down approach would require a strengthening of the GAC without losing sight of the spirit of the Lisbon Treaty. The rotating presidency could achieve this objective by enhancing the engagement of the Prime Minister and of sectoral ministers.

At the national level, the Prime Minister's office should closely supervise the activities of ministries chairing specialised Council formations. Only the Prime Minister can mobilise his ministers to push for compromises among all 27 Member States in the Council. Polish ministers will have to actively participate in the process of consensus-building among EU partners, despite the fact that they will also run election campaigns in their constituencies during the presidency.

At EU level, the Prime Minister could in selective cases even chair the meeting of the GAC before an EU summit. This could motivate other heads of state or government to follow his example, especially as a number of EU governments do not seem to be satisfied with the prevailing top-down logic and are interested in balancing it.

A strengthened GAC could help prepare summits and coordinate with the President of the European Council, especially in those cases where the process of reaching consensus proves to be very difficult. However, this should only be done in exceptional cases, because the aim is not to 'substitute' the European Council but rather to unburden its agenda in order for it to concentrate on strategic decisions. In the end this will enhance the decision-making process.

By establishing such a model, Poland could portray itself as a country thinking ahead and trying to leave after its presidency some rules that enable the EU to act more smoothly – sticking to the letter of the Treaty, but, at the same time, re-energising the policy-making process.

Coordinate closely with the European Parliament

The Polish Presidency will have to coordinate very closely with the EP, whose powers have increased significantly following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. In this respect, Warsaw has a good starting position having EP President Jerzy Buzek at the top, especially as the Polish semester coincides with his last six months in office.

In addition, the priorities of the Polish Presidency and the Parliament's interests coincide with respect to support for democracy and the future of the EU budget. Concerning the former, Poland plans to use its own experience in transformation to democracy to support civil societies in countries in transition, in both Eastern Europe and the southern Mediterranean. MEPs' declarations and reports devoted to these issues could back Warsaw's activities in this field.

Concerning preparations for the EU's next MFF, the Polish Presidency should develop a consultation mechanism between the Council and the Parliament.

In budgetary issues the Lisbon Treaty does not fully clarify the competencies of the assembly.

Following the difficult negotiations over the 2011 budget, there was an agreement that the upcoming four presidencies, Hungary, Poland, Denmark, and Cyprus, would consult closely with the Parliament with respect to the next MFF. The main task for Poland will be to develop an effective consultation mechanism in order to prepare a good start for the Danish Presidency.

Cooperation between the Polish Presidency and the EP will only succeed if Warsaw takes the Parliament seriously and begins consultations on upcoming legislations at a very early stage. This means that Polish ministers (not their deputies) and other government officials need to engage very closely with MEPs.

Good for the post-Lisbon system, good for Poland

If the Polish Presidency follows this approach it will bring advantages both to the EU's new institutional system and to Poland. It will profit the system, while respecting the spirit of Lisbon, as it will help to clarify the role of the rotating presidency in the framework of the new Treaty, thus enabling the system to work more smoothly. In doing so, Poland will demonstrate itself to be an important and mature player on the EU-scene and increase its legitimacy as a key actor.

Furthermore, a successful presidency will secure support for Polish European policy-making among its own citizens, who, despite being one of the most EU enthusiastic nations according to Eurobarometer polls, are not really involved and interested in EU issues. The next possibility to take ownership of the EU agenda will not come for 13 years, if at all. So, Poland shouldn't miss the 2011 chance.



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These issues are discussed in the EPC's European Politics and Institutions programme.

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