

# The 2022 Czech EU Council Presidency: Performance in the Fields of Security, Energy and Rule of Law

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ABSTRACT	<p>By the end of December 2002, the Czech EU Council presidency came to an end. Czechia was holding the rotating Council presidency for the second time and like in 2009 its presidency trio was rounded out by the preceding French presidency and the following Swedish one. The key difference between the two Czech presidencies was the changed institutional context. While the 2009 presidency took place on the verge of the entrance into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Treaty nevertheless only came into effect in December 2009, a couple months after the Czechs passed the presidency baton to the Swedes. The 2022 Czech presidency was thus the first that the country held under the Lisbon rules. These rules curtailed the role of the rotating presidency in terms of presiding over the European Council as well as the Foreign Affairs Council. Most importantly, the practicalities of the Czech presidency were affected by the suddenly changed international context following the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The Czech presidency as well as the presidency trio had to revise their priorities and the entire EU was primarily focused on the war in Ukraine and its consequences. This special forum containing seven articles provides an early analysis that engages the existing scholarly literature on the performance of Czechia at the helm of the EU.</p>
KEYWORDS	Czechia, Council of the EU, Rotating Presidency, assessment, security, energy, rule of law
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.241">https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.241</a>

## THE COUNCIL PRESIDENCY AND (SMALL) EU MEMBER STATES

The rotating Council presidency has always been the object of academic inquiry, political contestation, and journalistic scrutiny (BATORY – PUETTER 2013; METCALFE 1998; TALLBERG 2003, 2004). Yet, there is no common understanding of what a successful Council presidency looks like (VANDECASTEELE – BOSSUYT 2014). For a presidency official, the objective may be a conclusion of a difficult Council negotiation or achieving compromise in a trilogue. The presiding country's political elite may just wish for surviving the period without a major PR disaster and too many political costs. For the EU as a whole, a successful presidency provides for smooth policymaking. The presidency is responsible for setting the agenda, brokering a compromise among the member states, and negotiating with the European Parliament on behalf of the Council. Given the number of working groups, committees and ministerial sessions that take place every month, as well as the number of dossiers that are open in parallel, the presidency is an enormous task in terms of logistics and coordination that requires a lot of personnel, time, and effort.

The Council presidency is particularly important for smaller EU member states. It ensures a place for them in the spotlight that allows them to increase their profile domestically, at the EU level and beyond. And it places them right in the middle of the EU decision-making with a much better position to influence the final policy (BÁTORA 2017; BENGTSSON – ELGSTRÖM – TALLBERG 2004; WIVEL 2018). That is why the rotating presidency has been preserved in most Council settings (with the key exception of the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Council) despite its downsides, which include the constant handing over of the coordination and the lack of a consistent direction in EU policymaking. The presidency also allows for a broader and deeper Europeanisation of the member states' administrations, where a larger number of people need to be involved in European affairs, and their contacts become more intensive (JAMES 2010; PANKE 2010). This in turn helps member states to have a higher influence on decision-making (CF. WEISS 2017).

At the same time, the presidency puts an enormous strain on small states' administrations, which struggle to cover the vast EU agenda even in normal times (BUNSE 2009; KAJNČ – SVETLIČIČ 2010). Small states tend to remain

silent on issues of lesser importance because they do not have the capacities to closely follow all items on the agenda and have detailed positions on all of them (PANKE – GUROL 2018). When they hold the presidency, however, small states must chair all the meetings and perform the role of an honest broker on all files. That leads to a major mobilisation within the national administration, including giving up on many domestic issues that need to be put on the back burner.

## THE CZECH EXPERIENCE WITH THE COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

In 2022, Czechia held the office of the Council presidency for the second time during its almost 20 years of EU membership. This time, there were reasons to head toward the presidency period with less anxiety than before, with the main reason being that there already was some knowledge of the presidency business within the administration. At the same time, the first Czech presidency was generally considered a missed opportunity and a reputational failure which put additional pressure on the state to fare better this time.

The 2009 Czech Council presidency took place in a difficult context (CF. KRÁL – BARTOVIČ – ŘÍHÁČKOVÁ 2009). Externally, the presidency faced a gas crisis following a Russian-Ukrainian dispute, a violent conflict in the Gaza Strip, and the global financial crisis with its economic consequences. Internally, the European Union was heading into the election campaign before the EP elections in June 2009. The Czech tenure followed the very active French presidency, which was reluctant to hand over the presidency baton. Domestically, the Czech government struggled to maintain a majority in the parliament and clashed with the openly Eurosceptic president Václav Klaus. The domestic political disputes contributed to the fact that Czechia remained the last member state to ratify the Lisbon Treaty in November 2009, which had further undermined the starting position of the presidency.

Overall, the 2009 Czech presidency has been considered a debacle in the academic literature, even earning the label of the ‘worst ever presidency’ (LIŠOŇOVÁ 2009). Arguably it was the fall of the Topolánek government in the middle of the presidency that contributed to this judgment because the administrative and logistical side of the presidency was without major

problems. But there had been many mistakes made during the preparation and the conduct of the presidency that were caused by the country's general lack of experience with the office, lack of understanding of its tasks and (unwritten) rules, and domestic ignorance of European politics (KACZYŃSKI 2009). Domestically, the presidency was interpreted as a missed opportunity because the state failed to make extensive use of the human resources involved. Despite the high investment in the training and preparation for the presidency, the state failed in employing the new knowledge and skills over a longer term (KANIOK – GERGELOVÁ ŠTEIGROVÁ 2014).

## THE PREPARATIONS FOR THE 2022 PRESIDENCY

The aftertaste of the 2009 presidency fed into the anxieties and debates regarding to what extent Czech politics was mature enough to appreciate the presidency role and prepare accordingly. There were several main concerns related to politics and personnel.

In the political realm, Czechia had struggled to maintain a positive image at the EU level. Several factors played a role in this. Firstly, the Czech presidents of the last two decades never had a particularly positive reputation in European politics (CF. NOVOTNÝ 2020). Václav Klaus's effort to torpedo the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and his highly Eurosceptic position during the last years of his tenure remained on the minds of Czech and European actors. Despite Klaus being long out of active political life, his influence on ODS, the main governing party after the 2021 elections, remained significant. As for Miloš Zeman, the president in office, he became a toxic figure in European politics due to his populist turn and his openly pro-Russian position, which lasted until February 2022 (VĚRTEŠI – KOPEČEK 2021). Secondly, the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2021 made political leadership in the preparations of the presidency difficult. Even though the administration started discussing the content and the form of the presidency well in advance, political attention was driven away from it by the election campaign and also by the fact that the priorities had to be finalised by the incoming government.

When the new government took office in December 2021, it brought together five political parties with rather different views of European integration (HANČL 2022). On the one hand, the leading ODS, which nominated

the Prime Minister, remained a founding member of the soft Eurosceptic ECR Group in the European Parliament. On the other hand, the three junior parties in the government, including STAN, which nominated the Minister for European Affairs, who was responsible for the coordination of the presidency, were members of (or affiliated to) the EPP. Finally, the last member of the coalition, the Pirate Party, which nominated the Minister of Foreign Affairs, is a member of the Greens/EFA group. As a result, the final formulation of the presidency priorities avoided some politically disputed topics, such as the implementation of the EU Green Deal, even though it was clear that it would form a large part of the presidency's agenda (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A).

Administratively, the presidency preparations suffered from a long-term disregard on the part of the outgoing Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Babiš, who had started off eager to join the group of European leaders, gradually became at odds with the EU leadership due to his conflict of interest in the distribution of EU funds in Czechia. As a result, he and his party adopted an ever more critical position towards EU integration. Babiš publicly denounced the Council presidency as a 'talking shop with nibbles' (ŠAFARÍKOVÁ 2022A) and his government cut the presidency budget substantively. Despite the consecutive budget increases in 2021 and 2022, the final budget remained much lower than that in 2009. The administration had to reduce the number of officials hired to increase the personnel at the permanent representation in Brussels, and fill some of the empty places caused by this shortage with interns paid through the Erasmus+ programme (ZACHOVÁ 2022).

Paradoxically, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 helped with the Czech presidency preparations by diminishing the potential for domestic clashes. The government adjusted the presidency programme so that the EU's assistance to Ukraine and the EU's own resilience would be clear priorities. There was no difficulty in rallying all the governmental parties around these objectives, and the external shock provided for a higher willingness among the member states to support the common EU positions that the presidency mediated (ŠAFARÍKOVÁ 2022B).

## THE GLOBAL, REGIONAL, AND DOMESTIC CONTEXT OF THE CZECH EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

In 2014, the then Czech government established a permanent venue for debate on EU issues, the so-called National Convention on the European Union. One of its aims is to formulate expert recommendations and opinions regarding Czech EU policy. Well ahead of the Council presidency, it organised two roundtables, one in September 2020 and another in October 2021, to attempt to provide a strategic discussion of its priorities among policymakers and experts (*NÁRODNÍ KONVENT 2020, 2021*). While these roundtables forwarded several recommendations for presidency priorities that remained relevant,<sup>1</sup> they seemed to become partially void after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Czech government was arguably in a better position to update and revise its priorities for the upcoming presidency than the French government, whose presidency programme was abruptly interrupted by the Russian aggression against Ukraine less than two months since the French presidency began. Nonetheless, the Czech government had to revise and update the already prepared presidency programme to reflect the ongoing war against Ukraine and its many repercussions for the EU, its member states and the wider European continent.

In a sense, the 2022 Czech EU presidency may be seen as a *déjà vu*. In 2009, the Czech presidency faced an economic crisis in the eurozone and a conflict between Russia and Ukraine over natural gas. Soon after its start, the dispute between Russia and Ukraine turned into a full-blown crisis when all the Russian gas flows through Ukraine were halted on January 7. The first Czech presidency thus quickly took on a crisis-management character. Few would expect back then that the second Czech presidency more than 13 years later would take place amid another Russian fossil fuel crisis and in an era characterised by high inflation and low economic output in Europe. While the respective natures of the two sets of crises differ, one can easily see many similarities of the crises in the first and second Czech presidency, and in 2022, the presidency had to take on the role of a reactive crisis manager once again.<sup>2</sup> The energy crisis and the high inflation, both of which were caused or increased by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, required immediate solutions. After the endurance test of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine further exposed the vulnerabilities of European

societies, such as their high dependence on fossil fuels and the fragility of globalised supply chains. Moreover, the war in Ukraine led to an extraordinary humanitarian situation when over four million people fled Ukraine and sought shelter in the European Union (UNHCR 2023).

As a result of the systemic challenge to the regional and global (geo-) political, security, economic, energy, and migratory order following the invasion of Ukraine, the upcoming Czech presidency was to become primarily dominated by external events. The presidency policy agenda was likely to be radically securitised and geo-politics driven. Put differently, the Czech presidency's primary task was to guide the EU through the troubled waters of a 'Zeitenwende' by focusing on accelerating the development of policies that ensure peace and security, while promoting the achievement of the green and energy transformation and alleviating the current security, energy, and humanitarian crisis. At the same time, the Czech presidency still could not lose sight of the future institutional reform of the EU, the result of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and concerns about democratic values and rule of law in several member states.

Related to the last point, the new Czech government also engaged in a re-evaluation of its position in the Visegrád Group (V4). The government's programme stated that Czechia would continue in its close cooperation with its V4 allies, but some coalition parties and politicians, such as Prime Minister Petr Fiala and Minister for European Affairs Mikuláš Bek, made it clear that Czechia would look for other partners within the EU (URBANOVÁ – GRIM 2022). After the Hungarian elections of May 2022, which produced a constitutional majority for Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, and following the Hungarian reluctance to back up the sanctions against Russia, it became plainly visible that the V4 countries often promoted different interests in EU policies. While the V4 was not to collapse altogether, its profile within the scope of the Czech presidency did not feature very high. Despite established practice, the prime ministers of the V4 countries did not meet for a coordinating meeting before the last European Council summit, which took place before the beginning of the Czech presidency in June 2022.

## THE PRIORITIES OF THE 2022 CZECH PRESIDENCY: A SHORT OUTLINE AND THE EXPECTED FOCUS

The priorities of any single presidency are not constructed in a vacuum. The first point of departure for the Czech presidency was the programme of the presidency trio (France, Czechia, Sweden) for the period of January 2022 to June 2023. The programme of the trio outlined four overarching priorities: (1) protecting citizens and freedoms, (2) developing the economic base and promoting a new growth and investment model for Europe, (3) building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe, and (4) promoting Europe's interests and values in the world (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2021). While the joint programme of the trio is shared, it provides room for navigating different national sensitivities and prioritising certain files over others in the programmes of each of the three presidencies.

As argued above, Czechia had to revise its priorities a few months prior to the beginning of the presidency in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the resulting rapid and dramatic changes in the (geo-)political environment. The overall objective of the Czech presidency was to contribute to creating the conditions for the security and prosperity of the EU in the context of the European values of freedom, social justice, democracy and the rule of law and environmental responsibility. More specifically, against the backdrop of the ongoing fighting in Ukraine, the Czech government proposed five main topics to drive the presidency: (1) managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine's post-war recovery, (2) energy security, (3) strengthening Europe's defence capabilities and cyberspace security, (4) strategic resilience of the European economy, and (5) resilience of democratic institutions (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022B).

While the outgoing French presidency focused mostly on the ecological and digital transformation and the strengthening of the presence of the European Union as a sovereign actor on the world stage, including the adoption of the Strategic Compass (FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2021; MARTIN – DE LIEDEKERKE 2022), the Czech presidency was less likely to focus on grand plans for reforming and ascertaining the agency of the Union. Despite its motto 'Europe as a Task: Rethink, Rebuild, Repower', which was largely borrowed from Václav Havel's speech at the



Charlemagne Prize award ceremony in 1996, the Czech presidency was more likely to focus on short-term solutions to the current problems than on rebuilding and rethinking the foundations of the EU. Indeed, even a quick look at the priorities suggests that the leitmotif of the Czech presidency was the war in Ukraine and its impact on Europe. The programme of the Czech presidency largely aligned with the new initiatives of the European Commission and the member states since February 24 and further refined and developed them.

The changing global, regional, and domestic context described in the previous section was significant not only for the priorities and programme of the Czech presidency, but also for its day-to-day conduct. How would the Czech presidency deal with the enlargement file now that Ukraine asked for candidate status? What aspects of the European Green Deal (EGD) would it prioritise over others? How would it proceed with the reform of the agricultural policy amidst the food security concerns exposed by the war in Ukraine? Would the discussions of the follow up to the Conference on the Future of Europe be overshadowed by other agenda and priorities? The rest of this section will now try to elaborate on how the Czech presidency was likely to respond to these and similar questions, which specific files it was likely to prioritise within larger policy areas, such as the EGD, and which key, yet polarising files it was set not to be able to ignore.

Beginning with the EGD, one of the important tasks of the Czech presidency was to withstand the pressures that instrumentalised the war in Ukraine to undermine the whole initiative. The Russian invasion of Ukraine had immediate consequences for the wider EGD agenda. On one hand, it created a pressure for a long-term energy transition away from fossil fuels and a pressure to step up decarbonisation. On the other hand, it created a backlash against increasing the investment into climate change adaptation and mitigation due to soaring energy prices, and it led to a (short-term) shift towards more extensive use of local, non-imported fossil fuels. Some politicians immediately argued that it was not the time to burden the industry with new targets and regulations. Almost three-quarters of the experts approached by the Institute of European Environmental Policy believed that the war would have negative consequences for the Green Deal implementation in the short term (KOŽMÍNOVÁ ET AL. 2022). Similarly, six out of ten respondents in the same survey saw Czechia as not committed

to the implementation of the EGD. The ongoing crisis provided the Czech government with a handy excuse to hide its climate-scepticism behind immediate problem-solving efforts. Indeed, the five main priorities of the Czech presidency included energy security but not climate or environmental issues. Therefore, it was likely that the long-term EDG agenda, such as energy transition, decarbonisation of the economy, reduction of greenhouse gases and the carbon border adjustment mechanism, would give way to more short-term energy security agenda, such as the reduction of the EU's dependence on Russian fossil fuels and security of supply.

The Russian attack on Ukraine and the related disruption of grain markets also affected the debate about the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy. Food security, production and supply-focused concerns came to the fore at the expense of the environmental, sustainability, and biodiversity objectives of the strategy. In fact, the agricultural lobby seized the moment to undermine the F2F strategy, which they mostly disliked from the beginning. Given the long-term Czech call for flexibility of the F2F targets, the presidency was likely to invest much more time into safeguarding food security than into advancing environmental concerns (FOOTE 2022).

Unlike those in 2009, the 2022 presidency priorities do not mention the word “enlargement” even once. The absence of references to enlargement may be surprising given that enlargement (to the Western Balkans) is a long-term priority of the Czech EU policy that cuts across time and governments (KOVÁŘ – TICHÝ – KOVÁŘ 2013). The priorities just mentioned that Czechia would work towards the granting of candidate status to Ukraine but that already happened at the EU summit in June 2022 (where Ukraine received candidate status together with Moldova). The job of the presidency was then to organise the first steps in the accession process of both countries. Nonetheless, the situation opened a whole new discussion about the future of the EU enlargement policy *and inspired a lot of creative thinking*. The work of the Czech presidency was to navigate through that debate and move the accession process forward in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood. One may argue that making progress on the Western Balkans enlargement became even more important after the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, thus increasing the pressure to deliver on earlier promises. The Czech presidency was to steer between the fast-track and merits-based approaches to enlargement and

the danger that one approach may disappoint countries to the East and the other those in the Balkans.

The issue of enlargement was made even a bit more complicated for the Czech presidency when in May, French President Emmanuel Macron put forward the concept of the European Political Community (EPC), which could include countries both within the EU and outside it to create a community of shared values and a venue for discussing matters of common interest. The proposal was later supported by the European Council president Charles Michel as well as the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen. However, it immediately raised fear among the candidate and potential candidate countries for EU membership that it was an excuse for the EU not to deliver on its enlargement promise, and that it was either a stalling tactic or even a permanent alternative to EU membership. It was decided that the EPC would be formally launched in the margins of the informal European Council summit organised by the Czech presidency in October. The question of EU enlargement and cooperation with the Union's neighbours was likely to become a topic before and for the first summit of the EPC and this had a clear bearing on the Czech presidency and the Czech EU policy interests (STRATULAT 2022). Interestingly, in this respect, the Czech presidency could indirectly establish a link to its 2009 presidency, during which the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative was launched at the European Council summit in Prague. In addition, the Bulgarian veto on the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania was another sticking point that the Czech presidency was hoping to resolve. Similarly, it had to broker the accession of Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania to Schengen, which was likely to face opposition from several member states, particularly from the Netherlands and Austria.

The Czech presidency's prioritising of the resilience of democratic institutions, including an explicit reference to the rule of law, could have raised hopes in some circles that Czechia would take a strong stance on the rule of law issues and distance itself from countries having issues in the area (mostly its partners within the V4) (POVÝŠILOVÁ 2022). However, such a reading of the priorities of the Czech presidency would be an overstretch or at least wishful thinking. Czechia was never really posited to take a proactive role on rule of law and clash with the governments in Hungary and Poland, not least because of the close ideological ties between the largest

coalition partner in the Czech government, the Civic Democratic Party, and the ruling Law and Justice party in Poland. Within the priority of resilience of democratic institutions, the Czech presidency was more likely to focus on other issues, such as media freedom (through the European Media Freedom Act), dialogue with citizens and political party financing. Most importantly, the focus of the Czech presidency in this area was likely to be hybrid threats, particularly fighting disinformation in both online and offline environments, given the public administration's experience with the working of the Centre against Hybrid Threats within the Czech Ministry of Interior.

Finally, the Czech presidency was scheduled to move forward with the debate regarding the initial implementation of the recommendations of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). The European Parliament, later supported by Emmanuel Macron, proposed the establishment of a convention. Nonetheless, thirteen member states, including Czechia, clearly stated in a non-paper their opposition towards treaty reform <sup>(EURACTIV.COM WITH AFP 2022)</sup>. Moreover, the Czech government had been sceptical even toward institutional and procedural changes which do not require treaty amendments, such as the switch to qualified majority voting using the so-called passerelle clause <sup>(VLÁDA ČESKÉ REPUBLIKY 2022)</sup>. It was thus likely that the implementation of the CoFoE recommendations would be buried during the presidency, despite them being explicitly mentioned in the priorities.

In summary, the priorities prepared by the Czech presidency made much sense in the light of the changing global and regional (geo-)political environment even if many important issues were missing. At the end of the day, the perceived success of the Czech presidency was less about the programme and priorities, and more about how it would be able to navigate the EU through the 'Zeitenwende', and whether it would be able to continue to politically, economically, and militarily support Ukraine, coordinate a common EU response to the war, maintain European unity, and manage the internal repercussions of the Russian aggression. At the beginning of the presidency, it appeared that the upcoming six months may put Czechia into one of the most important leadership roles since its founding less than 30 years before.

## THE OUTLINE OF THE FORUM ON THE CZECH PRESIDENCY

The collection of contributions in this forum on the Czech presidency aims at providing an early scholarly reflection on and an evaluation of the presidency. The individual contributions build on the conceptual basis of the current scholarly debates in the field, provide a link to current policy debates, and offer the authors' subjective evaluations of the successes and failures of the presidency. They combine analytical rigour with crisp and incisive writing aimed at an audience of academics and practitioners alike.

Given that the scope of activities of any EU Council presidency is as wide as the policy agenda of the EU and too wide for one special forum to meaningfully cover (ALEXANDROVA ET AL. 2013), the editors of the forum decided to narrow down the focus of the forum to the evaluation of the Czech presidency in three selected policy areas: (1) external security with a particular focus on the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy, (2) energy, climate, and environmental policies, and (3) democratic institutions, including the rule of law. The editors of the forum selected these three policy areas for several reasons. First, all three areas belonged to the priorities of the Czech presidency (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022B). While the environment and climate, unlike the other two areas, were not explicitly mentioned, they were present implicitly through the issues of energy security and resilience of the European economy. All three areas have also been highly salient in Czech and European debates. The CFSP/CSDP was quickly developing since the adoption of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, particularly in the form of new institutions and instruments, such as the permanent structured cooperation in defence, the European Defence Fund, and the European Peace Facility established in 2021. The Russian invasion of Ukraine provided an additional impetus for more European activity in the area. Similarly, the energy crisis following the invasion further increased the urgency of the already existing debate about energy transition and the EGD. The issue of rule of law was also high on the EU political agenda with new procedures and regulations introduced between 2014 and 2021 to prevent abuse of EU funds and nudge member states to stick to EU values. At the same time, the Czech presidency found itself in a politically precarious position as the two ongoing procedures targeted its nominal close allies in the Visegrád Group, Poland and Hungary. Focusing

on these three presidency priorities provides ample space for the evaluation of the success or lack of thereof of Czechia when it was at the helm of the EU in areas which it had delimited as its major areas of focus.

The editors asked each of the contributors to answer three guiding questions: (a) What have been the most important achievements of the Czech Council presidency? (b) What have been the most important failures of the Czech Council presidency? (c) What are the legacy and left-overs of the Czech Council presidency? While the individual contributions do not have to be necessarily organised along the line of these three questions, each contribution attempts to provide an answer to the questions based on an evaluation of the activities of the Czech presidency. Finally, the editors invited one Czech (working at a Czech institution) and one non-Czech European scholar (coming from an institution outside of Czechia) to evaluate each of the policy areas. This dual viewpoint should limit the potential national bias and provide the readers with a more fine-grained and plastic perspective of the 2022 Czech Council presidency.

## **THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE FORUM ON THE CZECH PRESIDENCY**

All in all, the six contributions to this forum share a generally positive view of the Czech presidency. While any long-term considerations made way for the short-term reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the presidency managed to fulfil the most important role of them all – brokering EU unity and moving legislation forward. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there were not many leftovers or that the presidency was not able to insert its own national flavour into the management of the Council agenda.

In the first set of articles, Monika Sus<sup>(2023)</sup> and Oldřich Bureš<sup>(2023)</sup> focus on the Czech presidency's performance in the area of external security. They both agree that the presidency managed to maintain the EU's unity and move several important agenda items forward. Evaluating the presidency in terms of security policy is particularly difficult because there is a limited legislative agenda in the CFSP, and the presidency shares the role of the agenda-setter and broker with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the EEAS. The two contributions

also evidence how contested the understanding of security policy can be. The EU's reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a clear reaction to a "security" threat, but it has encompassed several issues, from the CFSP/CSDP through sanctions to the hybrid security toolbox.

The second pair of articles, by Izabela Surwillo <sup>(2023)</sup> and Martin Jirušek <sup>(2023)</sup>, cover the vast topic of energy and climate policies. Again, the presidency was hugely influenced by events, here in the form of the steep rise of energy prices and the effort to cut out Russian gas from the European energy mix. But there was also a lot of legislative agenda that had been scheduled and could be anticipated within the implementation of the Fit for 55 package. Both contributions agree that the presidency had to deal with the security of supply crisis, which has had an impact on what could be achieved elsewhere. But they also share the feeling that the presidency could have been more ambitious in the climate agenda.

Lastly, the contributions by Sonja Priebus <sup>(2023)</sup> and Ivo Šlosarčík <sup>(2023)</sup> tackle the controversial issue of the rule of law. Once again, they show that one can understand the rule of law agenda relatively narrowly by looking at the internal procedures to safeguard rule of law in EU member states, particularly the Article 7 procedure and the budgetary conditionality, or broadly by incorporating other agendas as well, such as the fight against disinformation, media freedom and international prosecution of crimes committed during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both contributions agree that the Czech presidency managed to score a political victory by concluding the procedure against Hungary in a manner that presented Czechia as committed to European values. At the same time, the presidency succeeded in stalling other points of the agenda that were considered politically inconvenient, which can be seen as a success for the Czechs, but less so for the EU as a whole.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The roundtables, for instance, recommended that the Czech government prioritise within its presidency the green recovery of the EU economy and energy transition.
- 2 In fact, the logo of the Czech EU presidency can be understood as suggesting that Czechia sees itself as a compass needle pointing in the direction Europe should take in the new global order (Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2022c).

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## NOTE

*Tomáš Weiss's work on this article was supported by Czech Science Foundation grant no. 23-04833S.*

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