

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

The Polish EU Council Presidency: Poland as a mediator

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- On July 1, 2011, Poland will assume the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union. As the largest of the new member states to assume the Presidency, Poland hopes its tenure will advance its regional leadership ambitions.
- The Polish Council presidency will face pressure from two directions, first from within the national political arena, fuelled by the upcoming electoral campaign, and second from its fellow EU member states, which will expect Poland to set aside its own interests and act as an »honest broker«.
- The Polish presidency will likely focus on finalizing negotiations with Croatia and negotiating with Moldova within the Eastern Partnership, since its remaining priorities can only be realised over the long term.
- The Council presidency can serve as an effective instrument to promote Poland as a major player within the EU and to enhance the country's image as an important and reliable partner.

Introduction

On July 1, 2011, Poland will assume the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months, taking over from Hungary. Following several less-than-successful Central and Eastern European EU Council presidencies (in particular, an erratic Czech presidency and the controversial current Hungarian presidency), expectations for the impending Polish presidency are running high. As the largest of the new member states to head the EU Council Presidency, Poland hopes its tenure will serve to advance its regional leadership ambitions. Furthermore, the Polish presidency will take place amidst the new EU financial framework 2014–2020 negotiations, which are of vital importance to the European Union. Among the issues at stake during the budget negotiations, for example, is the appropriation of billions of euros in EU structural aid. While the UK wishes to drastically reduce or even abolish cohesion funds, the former communist countries are determined to preserve them. The Council presidency thus offers Warsaw occasion to build upon its role as mediator between old and new member states as it seeks to become a major player in the EU. Despite the diminished role of the presidency since the Treaty of Lisbon, the upcoming presidency undoubtedly will constitute Poland's most significant opportunity to exert influence within the European Union in the coming years.

The maturity test

The rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union represents an enormous administrative undertaking, which includes chairing and managing some 250 working groups. During this time, nine out of the ten Council formations will be chaired by Polish ministers. The presidency will require strategic planning and meticulous political and organisational activity at the national and European level. As such, it will certainly be a test of the country's maturity as an EU member state.

To provide overall coordination for the presidential preparations, Secretary of State for European Affairs Mikołaj Dowgielewicz was appointed Government Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of Governmental Administrative Bodies and the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Benefitting from many years' experience in European poli-

tics and policy, Dowgielewicz is regarded as a capable »Eurocrat«. He has worked for the European Parliament, and has also served as head of Poland's influential governmental Committee for European Integration (UKIE). The success of the Polish presidency will largely depend on Dowgielewicz's expertise and negotiating skills, as well as the efforts of the approximately 1200 multilingual staff in his special Presidency Corps.

The limitations of the Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty diminished the role of the rotating EU Council presidency considerably. After the treaty took effect in December 2009, the duties of the national presidency became mainly managerial and logistical, as was evident during the subsequent Spanish and Belgian reigns. This shift in focus has introduced an element of structural tension into the Polish presidency. On the one hand, Poland must demonstrate an ability to head the EU Council presidency in a professional and efficient manner, while setting its own national interests aside. On the other hand, too much is at stake for Warsaw to ignore the opportunity to put its stamp on the political agenda. For example, while Warsaw has a definite interest in ensuring the smallest possible reduction of cohesion funds, as Council president, Poland must also carry out its duties behalf of the common will of the EU. While the »invisible« Belgian presidency might be a role model in terms of managerial efficiency, Warsaw will likely also wield its agenda-setting power in accordance with the earlier French example. Although Poland will not follow Sarkozy's activist footsteps, it is unlikely that the Polish Prime Minister will dismiss the opportunity to enhance his media visibility. Moreover, despite the diminished role of the Council presidency in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty, there is still some opportunity to exert influence and take action. This tension will assume an even greater relevance because Poland is scheduled to hold national parliamentary elections in October 2011, with the height of the election campaign taking place during the month of September. These elections will pose a twofold challenge to the Polish Council presidency. First, fuelled by the election campaign, the presidency will face pressure from within the national political arena to represent Polish interests. Issues involving sensitive matters—such as the EU budget, energy security and relations with Russia—will inevitably become subject to national politicisa-

tion. Second, its fellow EU member states will expect Poland to set aside its own interests and act as an »honest broker«. These pressures will be heightened by the fact that a number of the larger member states, including the UK and France, remain at odds with the new member states on issues including the EU budget, energy security, environmental policy and relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours. In the lead-up to the Polish presidency, criticisms already have been voiced regarding the proliferation of Polish appointees to top EU positions, including to the offices of President of the European Parliament and Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budget, which some have taken as a sign that Warsaw might be tempted to advance its own agenda during its six months at the helm.

Priorities

The Polish government initially formulated six priorities for its presidency: the further advancement of the European single market; intensification of relations with the Eastern neighbours of the EU; strengthening of EU external energy policy; the further development of European foreign and security policy; negotiations on the new financial framework; and full utilisation of Europe's intellectual capital. Recently, these six goals were bundled into three over-arching priorities: European integration as a source of economic growth, secure Europe, and Europe benefiting from openness. Nonetheless, some experts and observers have seen fit to criticise this proliferation of priorities, noting that the Polish presidency is likely to be judged on the basis of its unusually ambitious plans. Realising such a large number of challenging goals will be a daunting task, made all the more so since, with the summer holiday period taking place in July and August, Poland will effectively hold the reigns for just four months.

As a result, the Polish presidency will necessarily focus on a few key issues, while the remaining priorities will receive more symbolic consideration. Thus, it is likely that the focus will remain on issues that are nearing resolution, which provide greater opportunity for the Polish presidency to bolster its image. Finalising the negotiations on Croatia is one such issue. If the accession treaty accepting Croatia into the European Union is signed in Warsaw under the Polish presidency, this would enhance

Polish visibility and bolster its political capital within the EU. A second such pressing matter is likely to be the negotiations with Moldova within the Eastern Partnership programme (EaP). Because it is among the most reform-minded of the EU programme neighbours to the East, Moldova could serve to highlight the successes of the Eastern Partnership.

Many of the Polish presidency's remaining priorities include long-term efforts, over which Poland is unlikely to deliver any substantial contribution during its tenure. For example, it would be unrealistic to expect that the European Union will make progress on the development of the single market by the end of 2011, particularly since the EU is currently preoccupied with the deepening financial crisis in Greece, and potentially in other member states as well. Additionally, Warsaw's scope for action in the sphere of foreign policy is also constrained. Poland has been a key leader within the Eastern Partnership and hopes to continue to promote the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). However, the institutional changes enacted by the Lisbon Treaty also diminished the role of the rotating presidency in foreign policy matters, which since December 2009 have instead been the province of the permanent President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. As a result, Warsaw's ability to influence the foreign policy agenda during its presidency will be limited. Moreover, in light of recent developments in Northern Africa, there has been a noticeable shift of attention on the part of the EU towards the Southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. As a result, Warsaw is concerned that funding for the Eastern dimension of the ENP could languish and its relevance within EU foreign policy could decline. The current crisis within the Eastern Partnership will also hinder Warsaw in its efforts to direct greater EU attention to the programme. For many EU member states, the increasingly authoritarian drift in Belarus and Ukraine signals the failure of the Eastern Partnership, and suggests that the EU should shift its focus toward potentially more promising developments in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Cooperation as the key to success

The rotating presidency of the EU Council is a collaborative effort. To lead the European Union effectively, the

chairing country must cooperate with other institutions and member states. The Polish government gives every indication of appreciating the implications of this task.

Intensive efforts are underway as Poland endeavours to prepare itself for effective cooperation with other member states during the term of its presidency. Since 2009, with the goal of learning from its predecessors' experiences, as well as an eye toward discussing possible joint political projects, Polish representatives have met regularly with decision-makers from member states that have recently held the presidency. During this time, the Polish EU delegation has held particularly intensive talks with those new EU member states that have already held their term of presidency, including Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Cooperation has been particularly close between Poland and Hungary, from which Poland takes over the chair, especially on the issue of the Eastern Partnership, a high priority for both nations. The Eastern Partnership Summit, to be held in Warsaw in September, offers an important opportunity to advance this partnership by taking significant steps forward on a number of issues, including: visa liberalisation; the signing of association agreements; and the establishment of free trade areas with countries covered by the EaP—Ukraine and Moldova, in particular.

Since February 2008, Poland has cooperated very closely with its partners in the Trio Presidency—Denmark and Cyprus, the countries slated to hold the EU presidency during the first and the second halves of 2012, respectively. This cooperation involves skill-sharing, consultations on a plan of action, and development of the Joint 18-month Programme of the Trio, to be introduced at the end of June. As such, meetings have taken place among the Prime Ministers, foreign ministers and their plenipotentiaries, as well as among other key governmental entities. The most recent of these meetings took place in Warsaw on May 9, 2011. At that time, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, and Cyprus President Dimitris Christofias met to discuss the current situation in the European Union and their strategic plan of action for the upcoming presidencies.

Since January 2010, Prime Minister Tusk and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski have held talks with their counterparts in Holland, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Britain and Sweden, as well as with the heads of the most important

EU institutions, in an effort to gain support for the priorities of the Polish presidency and to explore the positions of the Member States with respect to the new financial framework 2014–2020. These talks also addressed current issues within the EU, such as the situation in North Africa and the issue of a Schengen free-travel zone.

Alongside the demonstration of high-level administrative skills and the successful implementation of the presidency's priorities, the image of the presidency is another key factor in its success. A vital and flourishing presidency must be seen as cooperating with other EU institutions and actors, including the European Parliament, the European Commission, and—perhaps most importantly—with President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton. To enhance the image of the presidency, this cooperation must be both harmonious and visible. Particularly in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Poland has an opportunity to play an important role. To that end, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski and Catherine Ashton have agreed that Sikorski may represent Ashton and the EU on issues related to democratisation in neighbouring countries, as well as in matters related to security and defence.

Conclusions

Beyond a doubt, nation-states remain the key actors within the politics of the European Union. The large states of the »old EU«, representing major economies such as Germany, Great Britain and France, are better-positioned than newer members to promote their national interests and to influence EU policy. However, a state's influence and status within the EU is not merely a reflection of its size or economic strength, but also of its ability to promote its legitimate interests and its capacity to advance innovative solutions to joint problems. The Polish Council presidency can serve as an important and effective instrument for elevating Poland's influence and status within the EU, and for improving Poland's credibility as an important and reliable partner. As such, the EU Council presidency provides Poland with a significant opportunity to enhance its European integration and confirm its status as a legitimate member of the »Big Six«.



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