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Lessons from the Czech EU Presidency

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When the Czech Republic's Presidency of the EU came to an end on 30 June 2009, a deep, collective sigh of relief was breathed by many in the EU institutions in Brussels. While some of what went wrong in the first half of 2009 might be attributed to extenuating circumstances, it is still useful to examine the Czech experience to extract any lessons to be learned, especially for the sake of other small and new member states presidencies in the future.

We can identify at least five major mistakes or errors of judgement committed in the course of the Czech Presidency.

Firstly, perhaps the most damaging error was the inability of the Czech political system to put in place even a caretaker government for another 1.5 months following the parliamentary vote of no-confidence dealt the Topolánek government on March 24th, followed by its failure to select urgently needed new political leadership for the country. This development had the effect of politically (but not administratively) terminating the Czech Presidency. At the same time, Western Europe was (and still is) insufficiently knowledgeable about the domestic Czech political situation. And this ignorance exacerbated an already tense situation in which no one in Prague, or in Brussels for that matter, seemed to know what next steps needed to be taken. One can draw two lessons from this situation: one, to guard against improvisation in the event of a possible political earthquake, all domestic actors should have a plan B ready; and two, there needs to be much greater awareness among European decision-makers about the domestic political developments in the country holding the EU Presidency.

The second mistake – committed to a greater or lesser extent by all new member countries – was to neglect the so-called 'soft underbelly of the EU', a metaphor for the multitude of occasions and venues in Brussels where thousands of ideas are shared, hundreds of conferences are held and tens of thousands of lunches are consumed. Altogether these offer opportunities for off-the-record, unofficial lobbying, gossiping, opinion-formation, etc. Very few Central European actors move in this arena; there are not enough links between the people and their leaders (political, economic, societal, etc.) between old and new Europe. As a consequence, the very bad press coverage ahead of the Czech Presidency was in a way unavoidable. Officials of course spoke out as much as they could, but what was missing were the views of lobbyists, thinkers, party activists and social partners from the Czech Republic to provide an alternative to mainstream Western media. Another consequence of this situation of poor links between opinion-shakers and political leaders was that there – apparently – was no successful phone call or other form of communication from any of the European leaders to Mr. Paroubek, the leader of the opposition in the Czech House of Deputies, that afternoon of March 24th, or to any other personality in Czech politics who could make the Czech Social Democratic Party aware of the consequences of its actions. Such a discussion could have gone a long way towards

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defusing the tensions and anxiety over the country's ability to fulfil its responsibilities as the EU Presidency.

The third mistake on the part of the Czechs was to mix national politics with European politics. It is incumbent upon every EU Presidency to maintain domestic peace. A political class that is unable to deliver this peace is compromised in the eyes of its fellow European decision-makers and decision-shakers. In the Czech context, the fall of Mr. Topolanek's cabinet would not have been so dramatic if the issue of the Lisbon Treaty had been resolved beforehand. The Czech parliamentary ratification (at the end, successful) appeared uncertain, because in the eyes of Western Europeans, it was fully dependent on the weak agreement that Prime Minister Topolanek was able to make with his own party. And once he was gone, the deal seemed off. The result was simple: several leading European politicians mistakenly claimed that the Treaty's future in the Czech Senate was in danger.

The fourth mistake was to mix national and European policies. French commentators proudly point out that President Sarkozy never championed the French national position when speaking in public during the French EU Presidency. He always appeared to talk about 'Europe', although what the French President actually meant was a different issue. In the case of the Czech Republic, instead of defending the French auto industry's investments in the country, it would have made a difference if the Prime Minister, as head of the EU Presidency, had defended the single market rules against those governments that wanted to suspend some of the regulations for a period of time until economic recovery was achieved.

Finally, the Czechs erred in overestimating what official titles mean. Assuming the EU Presidency is like wearing a tuxedo, which is tailor-made for its owner. It is customised for each member state, as each one is unique. The French EU Presidency was one of a kind; a repetition of what happened in the second half of 2008 is impossible. In trying to act like the French, the Czechs were condemned to fail: they were ridiculed and laughed at or simply not understood. It is not enough to hold a Presidency; it also matters who holds it: Germany's Presidency differed from Slovenia's as much as Germany, as a country, differs from Slovenia. The Czech Republic's overconfidence in some respects was surprising, to say the least, and misplaced. For example, the comment by Prime Minister Topolanek that the US recovery package had set the country on "the road to hell" did not help matters, and the power-struggle over who should be the EU representative to the Gaza conflict early in the Presidency were counterproductive. This is not to suggest that the Czech leadership was wrong in their message: they might have been right, but the delivery was badly flawed.

Officially, of course, the Czech Presidency was a great success. All presidencies are. In reality, however, the experience was so painful for so many concerned that the Czech Republic's political standing in Europe is lower today than in December 2008. Therefore for some time to come, the primary job for the Czech political leadership is simple to repair the damage made to its reputation.

The Czech Presidency left a goldmine of lessons for future presidencies, including the following gems:

- ✓ invest in links between your national actors and fellow European actors;
- ✓ avoid radical ideas or those that could be perceived as such;
- ✓ test the feasibility of one's own ideas in Brussels via informal consultations before launching them publicly – and also listen to those ideas already floating around Europe's capital to choose the ones with highest potential to be accepted by other stakeholders and
- ✓ achieve and maintain domestic political peace for the six-month period.

Most importantly, all future presidencies, especially those held by smaller and newer member states, should aim at getting the fit of its tailor-made tuxedo just right from the very start. The country holding the EU Presidency needs to feel comfortable and confident in this demanding role. Learning from the experience of others can be useful, but the most crucial determinants of success lay within a country's own domestic bureaucratic and political structures.