



## **The Czech Presidency, ESDP and Missed Opportunities**

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*Following the end of the Czech Republic Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is now time to assess Prague's work during the past six months in the area of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The results were neither positive nor negative. More pro-activity from the Czechs could have changed perception significantly more.*

The Czech EU Presidency of the Council of the European Union has been marked by two international crises – gas and the Middle East. The reactions of Prague led to different outcomes. The initiative to solve the Ukraine-Russia dispute over gas was deemed an approximate success, while the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip led to the first *faux pas* of the Czech EU Presidency. The Israeli offensive (which was marked by violations of human rights and humanitarian law) in Gaza was deemed “a defensive and not an offensive action”<sup>1</sup> by the Czech EU Presidency Spokesperson Jiri Potuznik. At the time when most EU Member States were condemning the attacks, the Czech statement was badly received and cast doubts on Prague's aptitude to develop a common EU response to the crisis. In addition, Prague's role as the voice on foreign relations of the EU was strongly put into question.

For the first time in EU Presidency history, the Presidency was significantly affected by quite severe internal political instability of the EU Member State. In March, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek lost a no-confidence vote leading to the fall of the government and plunging the country into crisis. This in turn also injured Prague's abilities as the EU incumbent as well as its image in Brussels.<sup>2</sup> The newly appointed Czech Prime Minister Jan Fisher managed to regain political composure in Prague and in Brussels but the fall of the Topolánek government is the first memory which comes to people's mind when thinking about the 2009 Czech Presidency. However, the Czechs can be thankful to their diplomatic corps who managed to keep the boat floating in Brussels through the storm occurring in Prague.<sup>3</sup>

The Presidency's role in the developments of ESDP can be qualified as “safe, discrete and cautious”<sup>4</sup>. Logistically, Prague could simply not keep up with the level of activity of French EU Presidency. Following Paris' exuberant activity vis-à-vis ESDP, it was never going to be an easy task to follow suit, especially for a new, small and rather euro-skeptic Member State.

Throughout the EU Presidency, the Czechs showed strong signs of theoretical realism, and they soon made it clear that ESDP was not their priority but that they would support on-going activities from the previous Presidencies. Prague's six months at the head of the Council was not marked by any major initiatives on ESDP. However, not completely complacent, Prague pushed for: the capability gap to be filled in Afghanistan; pushed for full operational capacity of EULEX Kosovo; engaged in debate on civilian capabilities; and emphasized the lessons learned from EUFOR Tchad/RCA. With the more difficult scenarios – such as viability of the ESDP SSR mission in Guinea-Bissau following the assassination of the President, the Czech's adopted a wait-and-see approach.

<sup>1</sup> Haaretz Service and Reuters 'EU presidency: Israel ground op in Gaza 'defensive not offensive' 04/01/2009. Available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1052315.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/news/zpravy/czech-eu-presidency-most-harmed-by-govt-fall-officials/383912>

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Kaczynski quoted in <http://praguemonitor.com/2009/06/22/czech-politicians-disappoint-diplomats-success-eu-presidency>

<sup>4</sup> Interviews in Brussels by authors, July 2009.

On the development of the Headline Goals 2010, Prague followed Paris' position in calling on EU Member States to provide more capabilities and resources. The Presidency understood fully that ESDP was facing quite a large barrier in terms of military and civilian resources. The Czechs pushed forward mostly on the objectives and policies set out by the Civilian Headline Goals 2010. However, Czech activity on this topic must be put into context: at the European Council of the 11 and 12 December 2008, Member States signed a declaration on strengthening military and civilian capabilities,<sup>5</sup> and a broad consensus on the matter was already present. Bringing Member States together to achieve these goals had been achieved before the Czech EU Presidency started. As a result, Prague was left with an item on the agenda that could be put forward without too much opposition, in other words an easy winnable trophy to show to everyone. On the other hand, activity around military capabilities was more limited than on the civilian aspects of ESDP, due in part to the pro-NATO stance of the Czech Republic. This is not to undermine the work done in this sphere by the Czech EU Presidency but more to underline that any advances made vis-à-vis the capability aspect of the military was clearly calculated to not spark NATO-EU institutional conflicts. On cross cutting themes, topics such as Security Sector Reform were only superficially approached while results in human rights and gender areas were not significant, with activists feeling that more could have been done.<sup>6</sup> Czech efforts should have been more present in that area especially after the Gaza faux pas.

There has been a feeling that the Czech EU Presidency wanted to keep a low profile on ESDP. Consultation and communication with the Council of the European Union Secretariat were limited. It seemed that the Czechs seemed to misunderstand the role of the Secretariat, which is to assist the Presidency in its work. Personnel within the Secretariat felt like the Secretariat expertise should have been better used. Even on the topic of civilian capabilities which was established as a priority of Czechs, the vast pool of knowledge that lies in DG IX (Civilian crisis management) within the Secretariat was only used very limitedly. The reverse situation is also true, when reaching the end of the Czech Presidency, instead of contacting the Czechs for certain initiatives, the Secretariat preferred to approach the Swedes which were felt would be significantly more involved in ESDP and more eager to consult and communicate than the Czechs.

It is acknowledged that small Member States cannot continue the impetus of work load left from bigger States and tend to be overwhelmed by the vast work that holding the EU Presidency requires. Limitation of human resources and knowledge are therefore the problem for small State EU Presidencies. There was however a different feeling when for example Slovenia held the Presidency, the Slovenes seemed better prepared as well as making good use of the Secretariat and other platforms for their work. In addition the Slovenes seemed more eager to take on a wider agenda rather than feeling oppressed by the workload.

There are no ways of assessing how the EU Presidency would have acted had the Topolánek Government not been voted out. On the other hand, mistakes had been made before the government's downfall in March. The merit however lies with the Czech diplomatic corps who were forced to deal with a national political disaster occurring at the time when stability was most needed. They held fast and enabled a continuation of developments on ESDP, if not realised, then at least to be passed over to the Swedes.

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<sup>5</sup> Brussels European Council 11 and 12 December 2008, Presidency Conclusion. Doc : 17271/1/08. Available at: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/104692.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Prague Monitor 'AI: Czech EU presidency results in human rights area mixed', 1/07/09. Available at: <http://praguemonitor.com/2009/07/01/ai-czech-eu-presidency-results-human-rights-area-mixed>