

The Polish EU Presidency: Opportunity knocks

Having joined the European Union family six years ago, for the first time Poland is now gearing up for six months of heady influence over EU policies.

It is remarkable how diligent and conscientious Poland has been in its preparation for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Both the national government and leading NGOs are heavily engaged in thinking up a constructive policy agenda. Such is their impatience that the Polish Presidency of the EU Council website even features a countdown of how many days are left till the country takes on this starring role on July 1, 2011.

No matter that the powers of the Presidency have been reduced by the Lisbon Treaty, so that the country in this post presides over neither the European Council nor the Council of Foreign Ministers. In the new institutional set-up, there are enough heavyweights in the Union to bicker over spheres of influence, so the ephemeral rotating presidencies are being pushed increasingly off the policy-making agenda.

Still, Poland is bent on using the opportunity to the full, not as a competitor to the rest of the EU leaders, but as an experienced partner. At the latest event organized by Heinrich Böll Stiftung Warsaw, Polish Minister for EU Affairs Mikolaj Dowgielewicz pledged that the Polish Presidency would only be realized in close cooperation with High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission in general.

Three-way division of labor

Given that Poland has decided upon the Eastern dimension as the priority for its Presidency, a collaborative approach might well stand a chance. Hardly anyone in the European Union has invested as much effort in this vector of policy development. The Polish and Czech embassies in Spain even organized and financed a high-profile conference on the Eastern Partnership in Madrid, which is currently in the rotating Presidency.

Still, the rules of the game require that the Presidential agenda of one Member State comply with the priorities of all the members of a trio presidency. In Poland's case, its partners, who take over the Presidency in the subsequent semesters, are Denmark and Cyprus. Both countries have relatively low profiles in the European Union. Proactive Poland could turn this to its advantage, setting the tone for the rest of the troika. It would not be difficult to share the Eastern agenda with Denmark, which is known as a friend of Ukraine. Cyprus could, in turn, be charged with the completion of the initiatives started by the other two.

The rules also do not prevent Poland from seeking friends outside the trio, and Hungary, which will hold the Presidency in the first half of 2011, fits the bill. The countries will preside over the meetings of the EU Ministers of Economy and Finance during the elaboration of the next EU financial framework. This will give the partners an opportunity to influence allocations to their preferred dimensions—Europe's external policy, among others.

Fighting fatigue

So, the good news is that, despite the much quoted "fatigue" the world supposedly feels towards this country, Poland has not given up on Ukraine. Polish officials and analysts are open to hear Ukraine's priorities and are ready to cooperate. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership remains the apple of the Polish eye and the Poles are looking for some added value for the EaP during their Presidency.

However, the initiative should not be overestimated. The Program is yet to start operating and shortcomings are already apparent. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum has so far made its contributions to key events, like the EaP Ministerial meeting in December 2009, only after official decisions were already taken. Moreover, two components of the Eastern Partnership Program—Comprehensive Institution-Building and Pilot Regional Development—are all financed under the ENPI¹ National Indicative Programs for 2011-2013, diminishing the added value of the Eastern Partnership *per se*.

Remaining on the agenda

The fact that Eastern Policy will be the priority for the Polish Presidency has been decided. It is now important to ensure that it is supported by specific results-oriented steps. In this regard, two recommendations can be offered.

For starters, the best added value to the Eastern Partnership would be setting it in motion in the first place. The implementation of the Comprehensive Institution Building programs is expected to start in Q1 of 2011, while Pilot Regional Development programs are to be agreed by mid-2012. This means that Poland will have to oversee the actual implementation and effectiveness of the Eastern Partnership. It is particularly relevant in the case of Ukraine, whose institutions are in dire need of reform with the upcoming implementation of an Association Agreement.

Secondly, Poland should use its timely responsibilities to influence the development of the next EU multi-annual financial framework, making sure that the EU's external policy is still a priority. A good idea would be to consult preliminarily with the EaP governments about their national development priorities, which would support the planning with specific and realistic estimates.

Carrot and stick

But these efforts will prove futile if conditionality is absent. For the time being, the Ukrainian government remains cold to reforms. The reform matrix, presented to the Ukrainian officials by the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Füle, has failed to be reflected in the State Program for Social and Economic Development and the State Budget. Also, since the new President in Ukraine took office, there have been no high profile bilateral meetings between Ukraine and Poland and no explicit interest in cooperation expressed by the government.

The most likely scenario is that the Ukrainian authorities will not be active in using the Polish Presidency as an opportunity to pursue Ukraine's interests. This means that if Poland is a true strategic partner of Ukraine, it should take the initiative and push for stronger incentives for much-desired reforms in the EaP. Be it conditionality of aid (e.g. like that for the pre-accession countries) or of a good relationship, losing rapprochement with the EU would be too high a price for non-compliance with the commitments.

In short, Poland should use what is already there rather than think up something new. The added value of the Polish Presidency would be cost-free toughness towards Ukraine. If even its best friends switch from carrots to sticks, the government of Ukraine might just change its ways.

For all intents and purposes, the timing of the Presidency of Poland in the EU Council couldn't be better.

¹ ENPI is the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument