



Belgium's Council Presidency: Reviewing a remarkably stimulating six months

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Belgium's Presidency of the Council of the EU (from January to June 2024) was widely perceived as a great success. Despite challenges such as domestic elections and the pressure of the upcoming Hungarian presidency, the Belgians pushed through many important legislative files, including the AI Act and the Pact on Asylum and Migration. Belgium once more justified its reputation as an honest broker by being able to reach agreements – even on politically difficult measures – for the national interest. However, Belgium was less successful in leaving its mark on preparing the new Strategic Agenda and the roadmap guiding the enlargement process, writes Jean-Louis de Brouwer, Director of the European Affairs Programme at the Egmont Institute, in the latest EPIN Council Presidency Report.



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From the outset, the context was clear for Belgium: **a double end of term, national and European**. Whilst possibly a bad omen, by the end of these six months, the facts were clear – far from weakening Belgium's presidency, these deadlines stimulated it remarkably.

The **national election campaign**, dominated by predictions of worrying upheavals in the domestic political landscape, in no way disrupted the presidency's work schedule. The complex structure of Belgian federalism didn't interfere with the implementation of the European agenda.

Whereas the previous Belgian presidency had been overseen by a caretaker government during one of those interminable political crises that this country is so famous for, it wouldn't be out of place to assume that this time round federal, regional and community ministers used their initiatives and successes at the European level as fuel for their domestic campaigns. And above all, the administrative machinery – perfectly coordinated by the Permanent Representation – operated at full speed, focusing without qualms on achieving European objectives well integrated into its DNA.

As for the **EU's schedule**, it had been perfectly integrated into the six-month political calendar. Structured around three concepts (protect, strengthen, prepare), the Belgian presidency's programme was broken down into six priorities: defending the rule of law, democracy and unity; strengthening competitiveness; pursuing a green and just transition; reinforcing the social and health agenda; protecting people and borders; and promoting a global Europe.

But in fact, in the minds of those in charge, the presidency was in fact **divided into two periods**. In the wake of a very dynamic Spanish presidency, the first half was dedicated exclusively to **finishing the legislative agenda** up to the European Parliament's dissolution in April, with the second being more 'forward-looking', **devoted to preparing the June European Council's two major deliverables** – the new strategic agenda and the roadmap designed to guide both an enlargement process, the geopolitical urgency of which had been reaffirmed, and the reforms needed to make it possible. More generally, the underlying ambition was to influence the future just as the seminal '[Laeken Declaration](#)' did in 2001.

Brilliant on the first part, the results are more relative on the second.

The figures speak for themselves – the Belgian presidency reached 74 agreements and achieved 57 Council-level negotiating mandates, with legislative work continuing relentlessly well beyond the dissolution deadline, paving the way for the Hungarian Presidency. But beyond the figures, it's the

political profile of the agreements reached – both within and outside the legislative process – that merit attention.

At the risk of forgetting some, the most noteworthy of the Presidency's achievements include the final adoption of the European Media Freedom Act and the Anti-SLAPP Directive, the Net-Zero Industry Act and the AI Act, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) policy framework, the agreement on working conditions for online platform workers and corporate due diligence requirements for companies, the introduction of the European Disability Card and the conclusions on the Future of the European Health Union, and the finalisation of the Pact on Asylum and Migration and the adoption of the new Schengen Border Code.

But nobody's perfect and there was some dissatisfaction with the lack of progress on deepening the Capital Market Union and on own resources, as well as the failure to reach agreement on the fight against online child pornography and the single permit for managing regular migration.

More than once, Belgium fully justified its reputation as an **honest broker** by managing to reach agreement on measures that were politically difficult for national interests, whether it be the new macro-economic governance structure (an excessive deficit procedure being the immediate consequence), the nature restoration law (Belgium having to abstain from the final vote because of internal disagreements), the agreement on how to use the proceeds of frozen Russian assets (a significant amount of them in Belgium) or the gradual extension of sanctions against Russia in successive packages (affecting Belgium's diamond industry and LNG deliveries).

However, the final assessment must be **more nuanced regarding Belgium's overall influence on the strategic choices** being made by the EU at this pivotal moment in its development. There are several reasons for this.

In terms of content, preparing for the **strategic agenda** began at the informal Heads of State and Government meetings in Versailles and Granada, where the EU's ambitions in terms of defence, strategic autonomy, economic security and competitiveness were outlined. In terms of process, preparing this agenda fell within the remit of the President of the European Council, who, in 2023, launched a procedure in which the rotating presidency had no particular role to play. Belgium, however, did not remain inactive and endeavoured not only to follow but put its own stamp onto it.

This was reflected in various formal and informal initiatives, such as the signing of the Tripartite Declaration for a Thriving European Social Dialogue, promoting the Letta report on the future of the Single Market at an informal meeting of the European Council, the Antwerp Declaration (a call from 73 business leaders



representing 17 sectors for a European Industrial Deal to complement the Green Deal and safeguard quality jobs) and the La Hulpe Declaration on the Future of Social Europe (which was not, however, endorsed by all 27 Member States). Insiders pointed out that this activism on Belgium's part helped to reintroduce green and social dimensions into the agenda, which had been previously lacking.

Several concrete steps have been taken with a view to **future enlargement**, in particular the mid-term review of the multi-annual financial framework, the adoption of the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility, as well as the Ukraine Plan designed to implement it. The 'momentum' on the was confirmed, on top of the strengthening of sanctions and the renewal of temporary protection, by the approval of the negotiating framework for Ukraine and Moldova, and the subsequent organisation of intergovernmental conferences, along with Montenegro.

Active on the '**widening**' side of the classic diptych, Belgium has surreptitiously moved the cursor to the '**deepening**' dimension. The starting point was obvious – most Member States have no appetite whatsoever for a new institutional adventure, despite the expectations of the [European Parliament](#) and the September 2023 report published by the [Franco-German Working Group](#) on EU Institutional Reform not being instrumental in unblocking very entrenched positions. It was therefore important to broaden the perspective by decoupling the institutional debate from enlargement, otherwise the latter would also come to a standstill.

The message was conveyed in the **Presidency's progress report**, in line with the European Commission's March communication, namely that reforms are needed not only to prepare for enlargement but also to safeguard and improve the EU's internal functioning and the capacity to act, as well as to adapt to a new geopolitical environment in a rapidly changing world. The process should unfold through successive waves, **from values** (but ending the procedure against Poland, accompanied by the prospect of increased participation in the European Public Prosecutor's Office, did not yet translate into a different approach to the procedure under Article 7 TEU) **to policies** (pending the policy reviews announced by the Commission for the first half of 2025), **then to the budget** (with the major challenge of the next MFF in sight, where a business-as-usual approach will not be appropriate), **before opening the institutional governance chapter** (even if the failure thus far of timid attempts to suggest reforms on a constant treaty basis through the use of bridging clauses, calls for cautious realism).

This report is referred to in the roadmap adopted by the European Council. But the feeling of unease remains: **when it comes to enlargement, the EU is sleepwalking.**

This brings us to two final thoughts

The first one concerns the **profile of rotating presidencies**. The common wisdom is to stress that, with the Lisbon Treaty, their influence has become (even more) negligible, their main interest ultimately being to raise the profile of European issues with national public opinion at increasingly remote intervals. So how can we interpret the strong feelings inspired by the successive presidencies of Belgium and Hungary?

One thing is certain – even within the framework of a trio, a Member State doesn't have the capacity to influence a common agenda where the foundations have been laid at the highest level. But it can play an important role in implementing it. Is there a secret to Belgium's success, the model honest broker? It's that inclusivity and modesty are key, constantly seeking dialogue with all players, multiplying bilateral contacts and being able to forget domestic sensitivities for a while.

In short, it's about putting policies above politics, while accepting that the latter is inevitably part of any democratic decision-making process. And this is probably also the best way to ensure that the soft voice of national priorities is heard.

The second final thought refers to the **state of the Union**, in the primary sense of the term. This author's predecessor in this series, Hector Sanchez Margalef, concluded his analysis of the Spanish presidency by noting that more should be done in terms of leadership and reflecting on where the EU is going and what the next steps are for it to become a true shaper of global politics rather than a follower. He stressed that finding answers to these questions is becoming more vital than ever as the EU's future remains deeply uncertain. Six months on, we're still in the same place, but neither the Spanish nor the Belgian presidencies should be blamed.

The strategic agenda is more 'agenda' than 'strategy'. The roadmap is meaningless, as has been pointed out. The guidelines presented by the Commission President on the eve of her appointment for a second five-year term appear to be a more pragmatic work programme for the next 24 months. Some are resigned to the 'fatalism of the crisis', reminding us, as Jean Monnet did, that Europe has always emerged stronger after having to confront various shocks head on – all we have to do is wait for the next one to happen, and hope it's not too violent to refute this fine optimism.



Others are calling for a surge of voluntarism and clear-sightedness that would finally lead decision-makers to question several comfortable certainties and engage in a process of reflection that 'should take place with the strategic long-term objectives for the next institutional cycle as well as other challenges and trends with a longer perspective in mind', in the words of the Presidency report.

Perhaps Belgium, once it has emerged from the inevitable 'post-presidency depression', could, along with others, contribute to such an awakening.

