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Poland at the helm:

A security-driven presidency in turbulent times

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After a divisive Hungarian presidency Poland was meant to make up for the wasted time. The circumstances were challenging – Trump's second term, beginning of the institutional cycle and the upcoming presidential elections in Poland. The main goals of the presidency focused on security in its various form: military, economic, energy, civil etc. One of key aspect was to increase European defence capabilities. Throughout the presidency Poland contributed to the quick adoption of the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030 initiative and developed negotiations on European Defence Industrial Programme. It also showed that the key to successfully combine European and national perspectives when holding the presidency is to find a common, European aspect to the topics of importance at national level.

Background: institutional, international and political

The Polish presidency of the Council of the EU (running from January to June 2025) coincided with the beginning of the new institutional cycle in the EU - while the elections for the European Parliament (EP) took place in June 2024, the new EP was constituted in July and the European Commission (EC) only came into office on 1 December. This had important implications for the Polish approach to the presidency.

First, this meant that there was not many legislative files under discussion (their successful negotiation is often considered a measure of success for a European presidency). Paradoxically, this scarcity, might be interpreted as beneficial for the Polish government, which wanted to have a 'frugal' attitude towards new EU legislation and not be viewed as the source of yet other legal norms coming from Brussels. Of course, some files were still processed (e.g. the digital euro) but their significance and media coverage were limited. An exception to this was European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP): the preparation of the Council's general approach to the negotiations was meant to be one of the presidency's key achievements.

Second, the beginning of the institutional cycle signified that more emphasis would be put on the reflections regarding strategic directions of the EU's development. Although it is harder to present to public opinion as a success because of their less tangible effects, these can be seen as having more far-reaching consequences. Poland wanted to influence the EU's strategic thinking and bring that closer to its own understanding of key challenges facing the Union, especially regarding the strengthening of its defence potential.

Domestic political considerations also have to be taken into account. The May 2025 Polish presidential elections could have politicised the EU presidency, a role usually considered technical. Additionally, at the end of the PiS government's term, a law was passed stipulating – among other things – that during the presidency 'the President of the Republic of Poland participates in meetings of the European Council (…), at which the presence of heads of state or government of the Member States is planned'. As the then Polish president (Andrzej Duda) and the Prime Minister (Donald Tusk) were from opposing political camps, this could have resulted in a heavy mediatised political dispute (Tusk claimed that the law – nicknamed the 'Competence Act' – violates the Polish constitution and refused to comply with it).

Another key factor that influenced the Polish presidency was the international landscape. The beginning of Poland's presidency almost corresponded to the beginning of Donald Trump's second term. His transactional policy, reluctance towards the EU, and preference for direct bilateral relationships with EU Member States boded for difficult negotiations. The personal relationship between the Polish Prime Minister and the US President was also difficult, as Tusk has often criticised Trump for his positions on Russia, Ukraine and the EU.

Finally, an important element that has influenced the perception of the Polish presidency was the one beforehand, held by Hungary. Viktor Orbán used it to push his own political agenda (the so called 'peace mission'), openly defying the political line towards Russia as recognised by an overwhelming majority of Member States and the EU institutions. This resulted in backlash from the EU institutions – the EC downgraded its diplomatic representation sent to meetings organised by Hungary and the EP blocked the progress of legislative acts pushed by the Hungarian presidency. Consequently, the Hungarian presidency's unfinished files were taken over by Poland, and many expected it to make up for the wasted time.

The seven security goals

To communicate the main goals of its presidency, Poland came out with a common denominator for main policy areas: security (the Polish presidency's official motto was 'Security, Europe!'). The seven dimensions were: military, economic, energy, civil (protection of people and borders), information, food, and health. Among those, the first two had the biggest potential to influence the EU's functioning.

Considering Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, increasing European defence capabilities became one of the key topics that Polish governments tried to promote among EU Member States. To foster these capabilities during its presidency, Poland wanted to advance negotiations regarding EDIP, which was meant to provide financial support (EUR 1.5 billion) from the EU budget over the period 2025-27. This file was left over from the Hungarian presidency and Poland's objective was to prepare the Council's general approach.

Another important goal was related to the reflection regarding the EU's strategic direction. Particularly, Poland wanted to influence the discussion regarding the financing of European defence capabilities. Its main

assumption was that the current debate ignores the key issue: the lack of funding to implement them.

According to Poland, such discussions took time and attention away from a more productive discussion on where to procure the necessary resources and how to allocate them. The Polish presidency also wanted to convince the EU's partners that the eastern border has a European dimension and it is in the Union's interest to strengthen it by financing defence infrastructure (e.g. the East Shield and the Baltic Defence Line). Another package of sanctions against Russia was also planned.

Migration was also an important topic for the Polish presidency. It tried to redirect the EU's attention from the Migration Pact to the externalisation of migration, which fitted into the new EC plan on returns. Poland wanted to facilitate the deportation of people who had committed crimes.

The Polish Presidency also wanted to support the enlargement process – in both the eastern and southern neighbourhoods. One of the key goals was to open the initial chapters in the negotiation process with Ukraine (the so-called cluster on fundamentals) and to speed up the process towards the Western Balkans (also opening further negotiating chapters in selected cases).

The presidency's economic programme was aligned with the second von der Leyen's Commission drive to deregulate European economy. One of the legislative goals was the reform of the 2013 Union Customs Code and to work on some financial services and tax issues (e.g. the regulation on cooperation in the field of taxation, known as the DAC9).

What was notably missing from the presidency's agenda was the Green Deal. While the second von der Leyen Commission reshaped its flagship policy in this field by renaming it the 'Clean Industrial Deal' to put more emphasis on its economic benefits, it still held a significant position in the EC's agenda. Poland decided not to prioritise green issues for several reasons. Firstly, the Polish ruling coalition's political programmes have never placed a great emphasis on ecological issues(with the exception of the social-democratic Left Party but its influence on the government's agenda is limited). Secondly, there is a growing conviction among European politicians that being associated with ambitious climate policy would render them 'unwinnable' in the next elections, because citizens are perceived to be growing weary of the costs, leading to the surge in support for the far right. Consequently, Poland decided to focus on less controversial files, like climate disinformation.

As this was Poland's second EU presidency, its profile was different from the one taking place in 2011. The main goal was no longer to show that Poland would be able manage to run it efficiently and to popularise the very idea of having presidency in the Council of the EU. It was eager to present itself as a mature member of the Union, who does not have to prove its organizational prowess. The announced budget (PLN 412,5 million, around EUR 96,5 million) was similar to the one from 2011, which meant that - when accounting for inflation - its real value was in fact lower than for the first presidency. This indicated morel limited ambitions in terms of promoting the presidency (regarding for instance cultural events) and more focus on its substantive aspect (negotiating legislative acts, organising ministerial meetings etc.).

Finally, aware of the possible challenges linked to Trump's second term, Poland aimed to prepare initiatives that would help win the favour of the US, including the proposition to buy more American LNG and showing that the EU is taking more responsibility by increasing its percentage of GDP allocated to defence.

Turbulent times: the course of the presidency and key political outcomes

The international situation during presidency was dynamic and Poland had to adjust its actions accordingly. One of the key influencing factors were Donald Trump's actions, especially his decision to freeze aid for Ukraine. This created additional pressure on European leaders to strengthen their own military capabilities and fill in the potential void that may result from US disengagement.

As such, strengthening the European defence industry became one of the key topics on the EU's agenda and the EC has proposed many substantial initiatives in this field. Although EDIP was meant to be the biggest tangible outcome of the Polish presidency, due to the new circumstances created by Trump's actions, the EC devised the ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030, a much bigger initiative. The programme contained several key measures, such as suspending EU budget rules to allow Member States to increase their defence spending, and a package of defence loans (SAFE) backed by the EU, with a budget of up to EUR 150 billion. This was the EC's initiative, but it was aligned with Polish priorities (Poland was estimated to be the programme's largest potential beneficiary). The swift adoption process was credited to the presidency. This issue – somewhat unexpectedly – became its most important success.

Another achievement in the area of defence was the adoption of the 16th and 17th sanctions packages against Russia– the former focused on export and import restrictions (including in the energy sector) and the latter increased the number of entities on the sanctions lists (including companies involved in Russian oil exports and port bans for 189 ships in the Russian shadow fleet). Under the Polish presidency, work on the 18th sanctions package (targeting the Russian energy and financial sectors) also began. Poland was successful in influencing the European debate on strategic issues, with the East Shield being included in the White Paper for European Defence.

Regarding enlargement, Poland managed to negotiate the adoption of the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova (financial support of up to EUR 1.9 billion) and to open negotiations over two clusters with Albania. However, it did not manage to open a cluster with Ukraine, due to Hungary wielding its veto.

Above all, the main economic output of the presidency are the five 'Omnibuses' presented by the EC as Poland sought to advance their negotiations. It also reached an agreement on simplifying obligations related to CBAM and fostered a debate on the ETS2 delay or its mitigation. On reforming the Union Customs Code, the presidency got to the next stage of the legislative process – the trilogue. Another important achievement was developing the Council's general approach to the 'pharma package', which aims to encourage innovation in the EU's pharmaceutical industry.

As for the Polish presidency's controversies, it is worth mentioning the lack of informal European Council (EUCO) meetings in Warsaw. Although it is a prerogative of the EUCO President to organise such summits, the EU presidency can easily advocate for organising them in their countries. Yet organising the meetings is not mandatory and some Member States decide not to organise them when holding the presidency. This was the case for Poland, which argued that the whole event is costly and cumbersome for the host city. More importantly, the Polish government wanted to avoid a serious conflict resulting from the 'Competence Act', which would have allowed the Polish President to participate even though the Prime Minister refused to recognise it.

Conclusions

When assessing Poland's actions while at the helm of the Council of the EU, it is important not to overestimate nor underestimate the presidency's

agency as such. Although presiding countries like to take the credit for some success in a given file, their role is mainly that of facilitators. This does not mean that the presidency is limited only to its technical aspects – there are other ways to influence the EU agenda. In Poland's case, there were several favourable factors contributing to it being able to achieve its goals, such as the importance of boosting the EU's defence and dealing with the pressure coming from the US. Other factors were less favourable, such as the reluctance of some Member States for joint debt for SAFE or President Trump's preference for bilateral contacts, which reduced the presidency's activities in some fields and encourage alternative formats of cooperation (such as the coalition of the willing). However, the presidency's final grade for should be considered positive.

Poland achieved most of its goals and made up (at least to some extent) on the time wasted by the Hungarian presidency. Even if EDIP was planned to be its most tangible success, the most notable achievement ended up being the ReArm Europe initiative, and especially how quickly it was adopted (credited to the presidency's efficiency). The adoption of two sanction packages, as well as the 'pharma package', are also among the presidency's biggest successes.

Some of Poland's goals were alas not achieved, for example its failure to open the first accession negotiation cluster with Ukraine due to Hungary's veto. The presidency was also silent on climate goals, which showed how the topic is increasingly considered burdensome. Criticism over the lack of European summits can be understandable– the potential political conflict between Poland's Prime Minister and its President would probably have been negatively perceived. Yet had this conflict been resolved early enough, Poland would have had the chance to present the EU as united in an unstable international landscape. It would also have avoided (at least to some degree) allegations made by the Polish opposition that the presidency was invisible (or 'asymptomatic' as some politicians put it).

Finally, although the country holding the EU presidency is meant to be an 'honest broker', there is always a desire to push for issues that are domestically popular. Poland's case showed once more that the key to successfully combine European and national perspectives when holding the presidency is to find a common, European aspect to the topics of importance at national level. Poland argued that strengthening the EU's defence capacity was is in the Union's best interest. The efficiency of this approach is especially visible when compared to the immediately preceding Hungarian presidency, which did not try to align its political objectives with the EU's priority list.