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The EU Presidencies of Central Eastern European Members: a Framework for Mutual Socialisation and Normative Influence on the EU's Agenda? ¹

Summary

Studies on the Eastward enlargement of the European Union have mainly looked at Europeanisation as a process going from the EU and its member states to the candidate countries. There are, however, some policy fields, like foreign policy, where there is almost no *acquis*. One can thus notice during the first years of EU presidencies a “Europeanisation” of the foreign policy structures of the newer member states, but also a parallel cognitive influence of these countries on the external policies of the EU. In order to show the role played by the EU on the Central Eastern European countries (CEEC) as well as their play on the EU, the paper concentrates on a case which has so far been neglected by the literature, the one of the EU Council presidencies, in looking at the impact of CEECs on the European foreign policy agenda during their respective EU presidencies since 2004, and into more detail at the cases of Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Policies developed for potential candidates and previous communist countries – the countries of the Western Balkans and those of the Eastern Partnership – represent most interesting cases in order to detail how social norms, which are part of CEECs traditional foreign policies, have been transferred and adapted to EUs foreign policy. The chapter concludes that, even in still apparent asymmetrical situations – as it is said that EU’s agenda is set in advance – there is always some leeway for negotiations and discussion, especially on social norms.

Introduction

The literature on the enlargement of the European Union (EU) to the East has tended to see the phenomenon of Europeanisation as moving from the EU or its member states to the candidate countries. While some of them have tried to show that, despite the asymmetry that characterised accession, there were real interactions between EU and Central and Eastern European actors (cf. Tulmets, 2005; Neumayer, Dakowska, 2008), post-accession work has tended to focus on the limits of Europeanisation, both in terms of resistance to the *acquis* and of non-implementation of the *acquis* (Epstein, Sedelmeier, 2008; Coman, Tulmets, 2020). There are, however, areas, such as foreign policy, where there is not much *acquis* as such and where Europeanisation has taken place later, in a concomitant movement of involvement in

¹ This chapter is a reworked and actualised version of a book chapter, already published in Tulmets (2014, chap. 5). I thank Palgrave for the authorization to published a reworked version of this chapter. It was also presented as a paper in French in 2015 at the AFSP congress in Aix-en-Provence. I thank Prof. Carolina Ban for her excellent comments on this older previous version of the article. I thank the coordinators of the GACR project Šárka Kolmašová and Ricardo Reboredo, as well as the participants of the online meetings for their excellent comments on this actualized version.

the European sphere by candidate actors. One can therefore observe both a Europeanisation of the foreign policy structures of the member states, which acceded the EU from 2004 on, and a cognitive influence of these states on the EU's external policies, sometimes even before formal accession.

In order to show the role played by the EU on the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), as well as by the CEECs on the EU, I will focus on a case that is little covered in the literature and even less in a comparative perspective, that of the EU Council presidencies (Rupel, 2007; Kajnič, 2009; Romsics, 2011; Gostyńska, 2011; Kucharczyk, Łada, 2012; Tulmets, 2014; Sus, 2015; Havelka, 2021). The rotating presidencies of the EU have indeed required a large process of institutional learning, norms and practices on the part of the "newer" member states, which can be identified as resulting from a Europeanisation phenomenon. However, in practice, each state has adopted its own style of managing the presidencies, whether they were managed before or after the signing of the Lisbon Treaty. Although the agenda of the presidencies is generally imposed by Brussels, the area of foreign policy has remained an area where the Council presidency can still exert a real cognitive influence, therefore leaving an imprint on EU's agenda. I will show that EU presidencies represent specific context for (mutual) socialization around social norms or values like solidarity and responsibility, which are enshrined into EU's treaties.

Empirically, I will present the impact of CEECs on the European foreign policy agenda during their respective EU presidencies. I will show that the priorities in this field were shaped according to the new foreign policy priorities defined by these states. In particular, policies towards potential candidates and former communist countries – the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries – are particular cases to study. Interestingly, these priorities have been kept over time, despite the fact that some countries have experienced a populist turn, like in Hungary, Poland and, to some extent in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia (Cadier, Szulecki, 2020; Havelka, 2021).

The study first presents the EU presidency priorities of CEECs which acceded the EU since 2004. It then compares the EU presidencies held by Slovenia (2007, 2021) and the Czech Republic (2009, 2022) in a diachronic and deeper approach in comparing two periods, with information gathered from 2010 to 2012 on the presidencies of 2007 and 2009, and information recently gathered for the years 2021-22. Original material was collected on the preparation and conduct of the presidencies through semi-structured interviews with diplomats, officials and staff in office. The analysis was complemented by a systematic study of primary documents and political speeches. The diachronic approach used by historians, complemented with discourse/content analysis allows for a check of continuities and discontinuities in the definition of EU priorities.

This approach checking the impact the CEE countries on the EU after enlargement, assumes that this impact is possible as long as the priorities set are in line with the political and historical aspects of the foreign policy identity of the EU presiding countries. The political identity can be defined as the foreign policy outlines, norms and values of the organisations that the CEE countries joined in the 1990s and 2000s, i.e. the EU and NATO (but also the Council of Europe, OSCE...). Historical identity allows for inflections within these policy priorities according to interpretations of the historical relationship between the CEE countries and the recipient countries of the foreign policies studied. It is there that the political party at power plays a role in the inflections given to the priorities.

This analytical approach shows that the influence of the CEECs on the EU's foreign policy started before the formal enlargement and continued in those areas where these states found a field of specialization, leeways and were able to define their own means of action. Building on the results of previous work (Tulmets, 2014, chap. 5), this chapter intends to shed a sociological light on the networks of actors and their interactions with European structures and 'older' member states during the preparation of the presidencies and the definition of the European foreign policy agenda.

1. Influencing EU's agenda: the specific field of foreign policy

Prior to the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the academic literature showed that it was generally difficult for a member state to influence the agenda of EU presidencies (cf. Elgström, 2003, Tallberg, 2006). The creation of the trio presidency – combining two 'older' member states with a 'newer' member – under the Nice Treaty of 2000 was meant to prepare EU's Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007, and thus allowed agendas to be better coordinated. One area, foreign and security policy, kept some leeway to EU's Member States during their EU Council presidency as it relates to inter-governmental policies. When the Lisbon Treaty came into force, the Member State holding the presidency no longer formally had the capacity to set the foreign policy agenda, as this competence falls to the High Representative for External Affairs and Security Policy. In practice, however, the presidency was further able to influence the European agenda, especially when the priorities put forward remain consistent with its own foreign policy priorities.

The policies towards the Western Balkans (and Turkey), as well as the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood Policy (launched in 2003), became an important part of European policy. They are both mentioned in the EU Security Strategy of 2003 and in the programmes of the EU Council presidencies. This is one of the reasons why the following analysis focuses in particular on these policies, which play a major role in the foreign policy of the EU, but also of the CEECs.

Before the enlargement to the East, the Finnish Presidency of the EU in 1999 had launched the Nordic Dimension to strengthen cooperation in the Baltic Sea, which it complemented during its presidency in 2006. The German Presidency in 2007 had to leave its Eastern "ENP plus" strategy emphasizing relations to Russia in order to concentrate on the launch of the Black Sea strategy supported by Romania and Bulgaria. The EU presidencies of the southern countries, on the other hand, have tipped the balance towards the South. The French (2008) and Spanish (2010) presidencies have focused on cooperation with North African countries, notably with the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in July 2008, a project that was also intended to take a stand in the debate on Turkey's accession to the EU.

With the enlargement to the East, European policy towards the East took on a different legitimacy. The Czech (2009), Polish (2011), Lithuanian (2013), Latvian (2015), Slovak (2016) and Estonian (2017) presidencies have thus emphasised the eastern dimension of the EU's neighbourhood policy, while the Slovenian (2007), Hungarian (2010), Bulgaria (2018), Romanian (2019) and Croatian (2020) presidencies rather focused on issues related to the Western Balkan countries, while having the support of the other CEECs. This commitment reflected the willingness to propose their experience of EU accession to further (possible) candidates and to reflect historical relations with these regions. The theme of a European policy towards the East (and towards Ukraine in particular) had, for example, already been

strongly suggested by Poland even before its official accession to the EU, although the Council formally rejected concrete suggestions, which nevertheless inspired the Commission (see Natorski, 2008; interviews, European Commission, Brussels, 2010).

In this respect, geographical priorities remain consistent with the political and historical dimensions of the foreign policy identity of the EU presiding countries, which allow for the expression of both solidarity and responsibility towards these geographical areas or countries. The political identity of foreign policy, which implies the promotion of the norms and values to which the CEECs have adhered, mainly those of the EU and NATO (but also those of the Council of Europe and the OSCE), allow the expression of political solidarity towards countries showing the will to move closer to the Euro-Atlantic structures, in particular Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. Historical identity, on the other hand, allows for the expression of a moral responsibility towards countries with which some CEE countries have long-standing relations, such as Lithuania with Belarus, Poland with Ukraine or Romania with Moldova. Interpretations of the past can thus lead to important shifts in policy priorities depending on the political coalitions in power (Tulmets, 2014, p. 15). Solidarity and responsibility are understood here as social norms, which occasion (mutual) socialization, therefore a better understanding of the foreign policy priorities of other EU Member States within the EU. The trio presidency developed with the Nice Treaty in view of EU's enlargement largely contributed to enhance this process of common understanding of each others' approaches.

A short look at the foreign policy priorities of the CEECS under their EU presidency indicates that supporting countries of the Western Balkans on their way to the EU and NATO, as well as those of the Eastern European neighbourhood in coming closer to the EU remains a constant priority of these countries. For some of them, it represents a real foreign policy "niche" or domain of specialization.

Table 1 – CEEC EU presidencies and their priorities in the field of foreign policy

Country	Period	Priorities	Website
Slovenia	January-June 2008	Western Balkans, ENP South	eu2008.si
Czech Republic	January-June 2009	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2009.cz
Hungary	January-June 2011	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2011.hu
Poland	July-December 2011	Western Balkans, ENP East	pl2011.eu
Lithuania	July-December 2013	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2013.lt
Latvia	January-June 2015	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2015.lv
Slovakia	July-December 2016	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2016.sk
Estonia	June-December 2017	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2017.ee
Bulgaria	January-June 2018	Western Balkans, ENP East/South	eu2018bg.bg
Romania	July-December 2019	Western Balkans, ENP East/South	romania2019.eu

Croatia	January-June 2020	Western Balkans, ENP South	eu2020.hr
Slovenia	July-December 2021	Western Balkans, ENP South	si2021.eu
Czech Republic	July-December 2022	Western Balkans, ENP East	eu2022.cz
Hungary	July-December 2024		eu2024.hu
Poland	January-June 2025		eu2025.pl

Sources: Council of the European Union, Council Decision of 1 December 2009 laying down measures for the implementation of the European Council Decision on the exercise of the Presidency of the Council, and on the chairmanship of preparatory bodies of the Council, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009D0908&from=EN>; Council decision (EU) 2016/1316 of 26 July 2016, Official Journal of the EU, 2.8.2016. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016D1316&from=EN>

However, in order for the presidencies to be conducted properly, the CEECs that had just joined the EU had to go through a process of learning how the institutional and procedural structures of the EU presidency work. Moreover, the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 has in the meantime led to changes in competences in the field of foreign policy and required readjustments in the management of the presidencies. In this sense, it is possible to speak of "Europeanisation" (cf. Radaelli, 2000; Caporaso et al., 2001), and above all, after Lisbon, of "socialisation" (Schimmelfennig, 2000; Alderson, 2001) in the foreign policy structures of the CEECs. The literature, however, speaks of asymmetries in this process of Europeanisation and of socialisation. I argue, that even within asymmetries and socialization processes, the governments of candidates, then EU Members were able to propose their own foreign policy priorities at the EU level (Tulmets, 2014).

In fact, the results of fieldwork in four CEE EU presidencies even suggested that the more successful the socialisation into the European institutions was, the more persuasively and sustainably these states were able to influence the European foreign policy agenda in return. For this reason, I prefer to speak of 'mutual socialisation', which I define as the dynamic process by which actors in a society, community or polity internalise the paradigms, values and norms of that society, community or polity, while at the same time participating in the dissemination and redefinition of the formal and informal rules (sectoral frames of reference) that make up these paradigms, values and norms (Tulmets, 2005: 57). I argue that presidencies represent moments that are conducive to the development of this mutual socialization (cf. point 2). A common feature of the EU presidencies of the CEE countries is that they had to be prepared longer in advance than those of the older EU countries in order to give officials and staff time to become familiar with internal EU procedures and norms and thus to socialize into the EU presidency's rules, but also in order to define the priorities of their presidency (Tulmets, 2014: 199-218). The result is both a Europeanisation of the foreign policy structures and administrations of the CEECs and an attempt by the member states to put their imprint on the European agenda (cf. 3).

2. (Mutual) socialisation into the Council presidency's rules and foreign policy approaches

All CEECs that held the EU presidency since 2008 had to go through a process of intense preparation to the presidency, which rendered a sort of Europeanisation of foreign policy structures, sometimes several years in advance. This preparation included the training of staff and officials responsible for managing the dossiers during the six months of the presidency, at procedural, institutional and linguistic levels. The programme of each presidency was also worked on in advance and adapted shortly before each presidency to take account of international events. In a concomitant movement, it appears that foreign policy represents an area where the CEECs have tried to influence and thus mark their imprint on the European agenda. At this level, the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty has clearly led to a redefinition of competences which some CEECs have skillfully used to their advantage.

The Slovenian experience

The preparation for the first Slovenian presidency started rather fast after the EU presidency of the Netherlands, where it was decided that Slovenia would be the first CEEC to hold an EU presidency. Already in 2004, the Slovenian government started to work out the priorities of the presidency. Slovenia held many consultations and meetings with other member states (though mainly with the other two countries of the trio presidency) to exchange knowledge on the organisational and political management of an EU presidency (Tulmets, 2014, p. 199). Trainings were organised to prepare civil servants for their new tasks. These trainings included language trainings (mainly English and French), but also trainings in knowledge of EU institutions and the functioning of the EU and thematic and sectoral issues. Slovenia also worked closely with the other two countries of the troika, Germany and Portugal, in the framework of the consultations and trainings. As Slovenia is a small country, it was decided that the key political lines would be defined in Ljubljana, and the management of the presidency would be done in Brussels. The preparation in Brussels started already one year before the date of the start of the presidency: in the middle of 2006, it was already decided who would be in Brussels and who would stay in Ljubljana, and the core people at the Permanent Representation were already posted there 6–12 months in advance. The person in charge of the Political and Security Council (PSC) and COPS reports that personal contacts with the peers were important for the Slovenians to ‘learn how to [do] this or that’, especially ‘given the long legacy of the PSC on which to build’ (interview, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010). Therefore, it took several months until each person came to understand the future tasks very well. Internships or temporary jobs of two weeks to one month were organised at the various EU institutions for the civil servants so that they could understand their internal functioning.

Interactions with the other member states were taking place all the time during formal and less formal meetings, which were often organised at the initiative of the Slovenian representative. Two months before the presidency, bilateral meetings were organised very regularly by the members of the Slovenian Permanent Representation to Brussels so as to present the priorities of the presidency and get some feedback and support. In general, as a diplomat reports, ‘people were informed that [Slovenia had] been well prepared, [and] there was a good will to help from their side, but no patronage: this greatly helped to build confidence’ (interview, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010). Another diplomat said, ‘...it was good that the presidency was so [soon] after our EU accession; it helped us to integrate

[ourselves] much [more quickly] into the EU institutions' functioning; it helped us to build self-confidence; it was awareness raising' (interview, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010).

In addition to the secondment from the other EU member states, around 90–100 people have been hired to help out during the time of the six-month presidency. Only 20 of them were kept at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, mainly due to the change of government at the end of the presidency (interview, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010). Consultations have been organised with Czech politicians, diplomats and higher civil servants immediately after the end of the Slovene presidency to present a part of this fresh experience with the EU institutions to the Czech Republic. Seminars related to the Slovenian presidency also took place in Budapest and Warsaw under the request of the Hungarian and Polish governments (interviews, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010).

In order to make sure that the presidency would be correctly managed, the government at power concluded an agreement with the opposition which stated that there would be cooperation during this six months exercise, which did not hinder criticism from political parties in the opposition (Tulmets, 2014, pp. 200, 201).

The Czech experience

The first Czech EU presidency took place from 1 January to 30 June 2009. Compared to the Slovenian presidency, the Czech one did not start to be prepared so far in advance. At the institutional level, a specific office was created in 2006–2007 at the level of the Prime Minister to coordinate EU-related issues. The Office of the Vice-Prime Minister for European Affairs, then held by Alexandr Vondra, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs thus started to work out the priorities only in 2007. While several of these priorities were inherited from the EU agenda, some leeway was left in the fields of energy policy and external affairs (Tulmets, 2014, p. 203). Their formulation has since evolved according to events on the international stage, mainly during the French EU presidency with the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean and the war between Georgia and Russia. While there were five priorities in 2007, the presidency ended up with three main topics, the three 'Es': Economy, Energy and Europe in the world. Under 'Europe in the world', the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe represent two of the three key sub-priorities, the other geographical sub-priority being transatlantic relations (Czech Government 2007a, b).

The Czech Republic benefited from the help of the two other countries of the trio presidency, France and Sweden, in the preparation of its six-month marathon. Several meetings and consultations have been organised at all political and administrative levels with these countries and also with other EU countries. This contributed, on the one hand, to better socialising the Czech part into EU-related issues and, on the other hand, to allowing for the presentation of Czech positions on specific issues. Some events that happened under the French presidency have made the Czechs aware of the necessity to think more about ways of managing crisis situations.

Many trainings have been organised to prepare civil servants for their new tasks, like language trainings (mainly in English and French), but also trainings related to EU institutions and the functioning of the EU, and thematic and sectoral issues. About 2000 Czech diplomats and civil

servants have followed courses on the French language and the French coordination of EU issues, with the support of the International Organisation of Francophonía (OIF) (interviews, Prague, 2009). During the EU presidency, secondment from several EU member states and the participation of Czech EU civil servants in the MFA's activities have greatly contributed to assisting the presidency in its tasks. However, the presidency's work was undermined by a serious political crisis which saw the fall of the government of M. Topolánek in March 2009 and its replacement by a transitory government made up of higher civil servants led by the new Prime Minister Jan Fischer (Tulmets, 2014, p. 204).

3. The impact of the CEECs on the EU: evolvement of the European policy towards post-communist countries (Western Balkans and Eastern neighbourhood)

The policy towards the candidate countries and the EU's neighbours represent recurrent foreign policy topics promoted by the CEECs. It is quite clear that these countries have exerted, contrary to the classical analysis of Europeanisation, an important impact on the EU's foreign policy agenda. They had a different legitimacy than countries like Germany to continue to define European policy towards the East and towards the post-communist countries. In order to better understand what efforts each country has made to shape the European agenda according to their own foreign policy priorities, I will look back at how each presidency has dealt with the two issues of enlargement and neighbourhood. Furthermore, I show on the example of the more detailed Slovene and Czech presidencies that these priorities are still present in the subsequent EU presidencies of these two countries, independently from the political parties at power.

A strong support to the Western Balkans

The Slovenian EU presidencies

The Western Balkans were identified as one of the key priorities of both Slovenian EU presidencies in 2007 and 2021. Officially, there have been five priorities, the fifth being "bringing the countries of the Western Balkans one step closer to the EU" (Kajnc, 2009, p. 89). While the first three items on the agenda of 2007 had clearly been inherited from the European agenda, intercultural dialogue was considered to be of a symbolic nature and engagement with the Western Balkans was seen as Slovenia's real priority (ibid). Slovenian commitment to managing and resolving Western Balkan issues was relatively sustained before and throughout the presidency. Slovenia started working on the issue already in mid-2005. In the face of general enlargement fatigue and the rejection of the Ahtisaari plan on Kosovo in December 2007, the aim of the presidency was to bring the region back to the top of the European agenda and to conclude the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) package for the countries of the former Yugoslavia. With regard to Kosovo, Slovenia was keen to avoid a situation it had already experienced, i.e. when the EU was unable to speak with one voice in case a European country declared independence (ibid, p. 95). However, during its EU presidency it became clear that this goal would be difficult to achieve and the Slovenian government had to be satisfied with the Council's conclusion of February 2008 that it was up

to each member state to decide on this issue in accordance with international law (Interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ljubljana, September 2010).

The presidency was particularly involved in the deployment of the EULEX mission, which was launched on 16 February 2008 before Kosovo's official declaration of independence, following the closure of the UNMIK mission. The signing of the Stability and Association Agreement with Serbia was another sensitive issue of the Slovenian presidency. The Netherlands and Belgium had voted against signing the Agreement in January 2008. The Netherlands and the UK then tried to work out a political compromise, which was rejected by the Serbs. Finally, Slovenia found a way to unite the member states on this issue and the agreement was signed in April 2008 (Fink-Hafner and Lajh, 2008, pp. 51-52). Other issues discussed during the Slovenian EU presidency were the opening of four additional chapters of negotiations for Croatia's accession to the EU, Bosnia and Herzegovina's adoption of political reforms linked to the signing of the SAA, and Macedonia's fulfilment of the conditions necessary for the opening of accession negotiations (Kajnč, 2009, p. 96; Inotai, 2008, p. 10). While the debate on the recognition of Kosovo's independence remained open at the end of the presidency, the other goals related to the signing of the SAA, and keeping the Western Balkans high on the EU agenda were finally achieved.

For its EU presidency during the second half of 2021, Slovenia has defined 4 priorities, the fourth one being "A credible and secure European Union, capable of ensuring security and stability in its neighbourhood" (Slovenian government, 2021, p. 15). This detailed text of this priority highlights the fact that the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood still represent key priorities of the Slovenian foreign policy, but they have been put in the meantime into a common denomination under EU's "neighbourhood". The programme states that "Slovenia will devote special attention to the Western Balkans, (...) organise the EU-Western Balkans summit in Brdo in October (... and), make every effort to ensure continuation of the enlargement process with the Western Balkan countries in accordance with the revised enlargement methodology" (ibid, p. 16). The Slovenian programme further explains that "Enlargement is one of the fundamental levers for reform processes in the Western Balkan countries" and that Slovenia "will support progress in the resolution of open security and political issues in the region, such as the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (...and) and include the region's partner countries in the initiatives of the common security and defence policy" (ibid). In addition to that, the priorities consider the reinforcement of the Schengen area as a key priority around issues related to migration as well as the launch of the Strategic compass launched under the German presidency and finalized under the French one in the first half of 2022.

However, the Covid-19 context has strongly impacted the second Slovenian EU presidency, as the strategy of the trio-presidency with Germany and Portugal states:

« The Trio welcomes the decision to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia and reaffirms the EU-perspective of the Western Balkans and its objective to proceed with the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans based on the recent Commission communication on the enhanced enlargement methodology, where relevant, and deepen cooperation, including as agreed at the Zagreb Summit. In this context, the Trio will pay particular attention to tackling the significant socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis in the Western Balkans countries and the recovery of its economies, including creating positive perspective for the young. The Trio will support the connectivity in all its dimensions and thus narrowing the developmental gap between the EU

and the region. Promoting democracy, the rule of law, and media freedom represent our joint EU narrative, which should be addressed through effective strategic communication. Emphasis should also be given to addressing outstanding issues, strengthening resilience against hybrid threats and disinformation through closer cooperation in the areas of CSFP, among others, tackling disruptive influences in the region » (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 24).

The Czech EU presidency

The Czech Presidency focused in 2009 on three issues in the Western Balkans: EU enlargement, the Kosovo issue and an integrative approach to the region. On the first point, the Czech Republic wanted to see Croatia's progress in accession negotiations accelerated, relations with Macedonia (FYROM) improved, and other countries in the region, such as Serbia, prepared for formal candidate status. On the second point, the Czech Republic has tried to involve Kosovo in the Stability and Association Process, but also to normalise relations between Serbia and Kosovo through, inter alia, their mutual participation in regional cooperation activities. With regard to the region as a whole, the Czech Presidency focused on support for civil society and people-to-people contacts, as well as on progress in meeting and assessing the criteria included in the roadmaps, with the idea of achieving a visa liberalisation regime and cooperation on terrorism and ESDP issues.

In general, the Presidency failed to resolve the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia over access to maritime waters, preferring to pass the matter on to the Commissioners responsible for Enlargement and Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. The main priorities were Croatia's progress in its EU accession process, to the detriment of other negotiating points relating to the region, such as the transition of the international administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the UN to the EU, or Kosovo's involvement in the Stability and Association Process. In the case of Serbia, the ratification of the Association Agreement has not progressed due to Dutch opposition (Tesař, 2010, p. 235).

However, on other, less political issues, the Presidency has made progress. It succeeded in obtaining a European agreement on Montenegro's application to open accession negotiations, which was forwarded to the Commission for evaluation, and the Albanian application was received. It prepared the dossier for the introduction of the visa liberalisation regime with Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, and Serbia, and helped Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to do the same. Overall, the Presidency did not succeed in achieving all its objectives, but it kept the Western Balkans high on the European agenda (ibid, p. 236).

The Czech EU presidency taking place in the second half of 2022 also defines the Western Balkan as a key priority. As the programme of the trio presidency states: "The trio will implement a strategic approach in relation to the Western Balkans. It will pay attention to the advancement of economic integration among the countries themselves, the recovery, as well as the continued provision of security by the EU. It will continue the accession process in accordance with the enhanced enlargement methodology by supporting deep and transformative reform in key areas such as the rule of law, democratic institutions, free media and economy. The trio will seek to reinvigorate and enhance the regular political dialogue with the region. An EU-Western Balkans summit will be held in 2022" (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 22).

The European neighbourhood policy as a further key priority

A Slovenian involvement towards the southern neighbourhood

Slovenia is traditionally not very involved in Eastern Europe. Defining itself by nature as a Mediterranean country, it decided to focus on the southern part of the ENP. However, the events in Kosovo forced the Council Committee for Eastern Europe (COEST) and thus the Slovenian Presidency to consider the consequences of the Kosovo issue on the relations between the EU and Russia, but also for Georgia and Moldova due to the presence of separatist entities in these countries (Interviews, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010). With regard to Eastern Europe, it seems that Slovenia's chairmanship of the OSCE in 2005 played a much more decisive role in attracting the attention of Slovenian politicians and officials towards this region (Bunič and Šabič, 2011). To a certain extent, this presidency helped Slovenes to prepare for their EU presidency by accumulating the necessary knowledge on different issues, also in terms of managing international issues (interviews, MFA, Ljubljana, September 2010). Slovenian interest was focused on the South Caucasus and Moldova in particular (also due to the country's inclusion in the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe), although this did not mean that "Slovenia suddenly discovered a region where it could be more active" (ibid).

The Slovenian Presidency's focus in the neighbourhood, however, was clearly southward. Diplomats showed real engagement on issues related to Palestine and the role of children in armed conflict, but also on the functioning of the EU missions in Rafah and Gaza (ibid). The key project of the Slovenian Presidency in the ENP to the South was the establishment of a Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) in Portorož, which was inaugurated on 9 June 2008, with the aim of strengthening cooperation with other universities and the advancement of education, science and research in this geographical area (ibid).

Concerning the ENP during the 2021 presidency, the programme indicates that "In addition to the Western Balkans, Slovenia will also promote a comprehensive debate on the European neighbourhood policy, with regard to both the southern and the eastern dimensions. We will promote the implementation of the EU's new Agenda for the Mediterranean, discussion of which is planned for the December European Council, and the setting of priority objectives for cooperation with the Eastern partners, which will be the central topic of the EU-Eastern Partnership summit to be held in Brussels in October" (Slovenian Government, 2021, p. 17). While the 2007 presidency had clearly concentrated on the Southern dimension of the ENP, the 2021 presidency takes both dimensions – the Eastern and the Southern one – into consideration. The programme of the Trio presidency also shows the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on relations with the neighbours and the importance given to the notion of resilience:

"Together with the High Representative and the Commission, the Trio will pursue an ambitious neighbourhood policy towards the East and the South. It especially seeks to help its immediate geographic partners successfully emerge from the COVID-19 crisis and to strengthen their overall resilience. Moreover, the Trio will put a strong emphasis on supporting the High Representative in contributing to addressing major conflicts in the Union's neighbourhood and beyond, such as in Libya, the Sahel region, Syria, and Eastern Ukraine. The Trio, in cooperation with the High Representative, will also contribute to the preparation and subsequent implementation of the commitments to be undertaken at the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit. Work will also continue on the implementation of the

June 2019 Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on EU's engagement to the Black Sea regional cooperation and the EU's Black Sea Synergy initiative" (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 25).

A Czech involvement towards the Eastern neighbourhood

In 2007, the Czech Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, Alexandr Vondra, indicated that one of the priorities of the Czech EU Presidency would be Eastern Europe. Czech politicians remained rather silent on this point until the Slovenian EU Presidency, after which the trio presidency was to define its agenda. The Slovenian experience highlighted the usefulness of defining an area of specialisation, and this is one of the reasons why the Czech Republic chose to focus on launching the 'Eastern Partnership', mainly under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Czech diplomacy has been particularly active in launching this policy towards six countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. Already in 2007 they had worked on a strategy that would be acceptable to Brussels, which took the form of a non-paper entitled "Time to act" presented in April 2008 at the Eastern Committee (COEST). The Czech diplomats interviewed had previously taken care to circulate the paper among the Visegrád Group countries at the time of its presidency of the group, as well as among the Baltic States and Sweden, and thus secure their support (interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, 2008-2010). The document, which was not made public but also circulated among experts, clearly mentions that one of its aims is to counterbalance the French proposal for a "Mediterranean Union" of 2007, which was accepted by the EU Council in March 2008 as the "Union for the Mediterranean".

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs conceived its proposal as a way to decouple the relations between the EU and the Eastern ENP partners from those between the EU and Russia, without excluding the possibility of cooperation including all of these countries in cases where this would be necessary, such as in the framework of the Black Sea Synergy (interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, May 2008). However, the Polish-Swedish proposal for an "Eastern Partnership" was presented at a higher political level, that of the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) at the end of May 2008, thus gaining visibility among European partners. The June 2008 European Council finally mandated the Commission to work on an "Eastern Partnership" proposal to be submitted by March 2009. After the crisis in Georgia in the summer of 2008, the Commission was asked to deliver its proposal earlier, which it did on 3 December 2008 (European Commission, 2008). The document proposed to create multilateral platforms, to launch a project-based approach with additional financial support and to move forward on visa liberalisation and the creation of a free trade area.

The beginning of the Czech Presidency was marked by a major crisis in the Eastern neighbourhood, which further justified the launch of the Eastern Partnership, when Russia decided to cut off its gas supply to Ukraine. This event had the effect of slowing down the negotiations on the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine. However, the most discussed issue in the run-up to the summit on 7 May 2009 was undoubtedly the participation of Belarus in the summit. The Czech Republic had for several years been highly critical of the regime in Belarus, but this time it committed itself to a constructive dialogue with the country. It is possible to interpret this turnaround as the result of a Europeanisation of the political personnel in power (interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, March 2008). In general, this position was in line with the European Commission's position at the time, which was to favour dialogue, even with non-democratic countries, rather than persisting with

counterproductive sanctions. In April 2009, Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg visited Minsk, the first trip by a Czech foreign minister to Belarus since the end of the Cold War. After heated debates in the country, it was decided that President Lukashenko would not be invited, but that Belarus could be represented at the summit.

The Eastern Partnership Summit was held in Prague on 7 May 2009. Despite the fact that several political figures, including the French and Italian presidents, declined to attend, the event gained the support of other countries such as Germany and Sweden and was considered one of the key summits of the Czech Presidency. At the end of the six-month exercise, public attention for Eastern Europe waned considerably, despite the government's attempts to maintain interest in the subject in political and administrative circles. A few more meetings were held after the end of the Presidency, including a Czech inter-ministerial meeting on 13 July 2009 to assess how to maintain a high level of involvement of Czech ministries in this policy, and a conference held with the Poles at the very beginning of the Spanish EU Presidency in January 2010 (interviews, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Prague, March 2010).

During the 2022 presidency, the Eastern neighbourhood still represents a key priority of the Czech government as stated here: "The trio will renew, reinforce and further develop the strategic partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. The trio will support implementation of the commitments taken at the Eastern Partnership Summit of 2021, and partner countries' reform agendas, as set out in their respective agreements with the EU" (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 23). The launch of the European Political Community (EPC) during the Prague Summit of 6th October 2022, which discussed the issues of the war in Ukraine and energy, can also be seen in continuity of this agenda (Council of the EU, 2022).

The role of social norms: Which impact on EU's agenda?

To sum up, *Slovenia* has succeeded, through its EU presidency of 2007, in projecting its foreign policy identity and interests at the European level, and in influencing the EU agenda by shifting the positions of some member states on foreign policy issues that were not unanimously supported. On the one hand, it played the role of a central European country showing political solidarity with the EU candidate countries by promoting European norms and values in the region. On the other hand, it has expressed a moral responsibility towards the Western Balkan region. In a way, *Slovenia* discovered during its OSCE and EU Presidencies that it could express political solidarity with countries with which it has no historical relations, such as *Moldova*. However, with regard to the ENP, it has mainly emphasised its commitment to cooperation towards the South. It has nowadays also included the East as an equal priority.

The *Czech Presidency* was marked by a certain consistency with the political and historical identity of the Czech Republic in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Due to historical ties to the Balkans, this region received more attention from the Czechs than Eastern Europe. Several international events, such as the war in Georgia in 2008 and the energy crisis in Ukraine in January 2009, have led the country to become more involved in this region. Looking into more detail, the Eastern Partnership has been defined as a 'default' policy, pushing the country to express political solidarity with a region where human rights need to be defended, and as a way to reinforce the Atlanticist sentiment of the Czech governing actors in the face of an unstable and unpredictable Russia (Tulmets, 2010). It is today still the case.

Conclusion

A summary of CEECs priorities for their EU Council Presidencies presented here show that despite the tendency to set the European agenda in advance, Member States retain a margin of manoeuvre over the content of this agenda, particularly in the field of foreign policy, where they try to influence its content in line with their own priorities. Two points need to be highlighted. The Europeanisation of CEE foreign policy has mainly taken place in those areas where the European agenda was already partly in line with CEE political identity, i.e. the promotion of EU (and NATO) norms and values through further enlargements. However, the geographical priorities were defined more in line with those reflecting historical relations with certain countries. While Slovenia, Hungary and the Czech Republic have focused strongly on the Western Balkans, Poland, and to a lesser extent the Czech Republic, have focused on strengthening relations with the Eastern Partnership countries. The fact that Hungary gave up in 2011 the organisation of the Eastern Partnership Summit in favour of Poland the same year also indicates a lack of historical reasons for the current government to engage further in this policy. For this reason, we can conclude that the social norms of solidarity and responsibility expressed by the individual CEE countries during their respective presidencies rather reflect their own foreign policy priorities, even if other priorities, such as the obligatory response to the Arab Spring, had to be taken into account.

Regarding the more general issue of the impact of Eastern enlargement on the EU, the case of the CEEC presidencies clearly indicates that, in addition to a Europeanisation of the CEEC foreign policy structures and the socialisation of CEEC officials and staff to the EU's internal procedures and norms, a process of "mutual socialisation" around the social norms of solidarity and responsibility has taken place, leading to an active participation of the CEECs in the definition of the European foreign policy agenda. This can thus be seen as a continuation of a process of mutual adaptation that had already been engendered by the accession negotiations and the observer status of the candidates before their formal accession to the EU (Tulmets, 2005). By putting the more recent EU member states in a position of taking up responsibilities for the whole EU, the exchanges generated both by the preparation of the presidencies and by the management of this six-month exercise therefore lead to changes both within the states and within European institutions and policies. The cases presented here therefore confirm that the integration process of the EU-27 is a process of mutual socialisation which reflects the constant negotiations that take place within the EU, but also with the candidate countries, and even with neighbouring countries, in order to find compromises that are compatible with both the political and historical identity of these countries.

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