

Lessons from the Czech EU Presidency

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When the Czech Republic's Presidency of the EU came to an end on 30 June 2009, a deep, collective sigh of relief was breathed by many in the EU institutions in Brussels. While some of what went wrong in the first half of 2009 might be attributed to extenuating circumstances, it is still useful to examine the Czech experience to extract any lessons to be learned, especially for the sake of other small and new member states presidencies in the future.

We can identify at least five major mistakes or errors of judgement committed in the course of the Czech Presidency.

Firstly, perhaps the most damaging error was the inability of the Czech political system to put in place even a caretaker government for another 1.5 months following the parliamentary vote of noconfidence dealt the Topolánek government on March 24th, followed by its failure to select urgently needed new political leadership for the country. This development had the effect of politically (but not

administratively) terminating the Czech Presidency. At the same time, Western Europe was (and still is) insufficiently knowledgeable about the domestic Czech political situation. And this ignorance exacerbated an already tense situation in which no one in Prague, or in Brussels for that matter, seemed to know what next steps needed to be taken. One can draw two lessons from this situation: one, to guard against improvisation in the event of a possible political earthquake, all domestic actors should have a plan B ready; and two, there needs to be much greater awareness among European decision-makers about the domestic political developments in the country holding the EU Presidency.

The second mistake – committed to a greater or lesser extent by all new member countries – was to neglect the so-called ‘soft underbelly of the EU’, a metaphor for the multitude of occasions and venues in Brussels where thousands of ideas are shared, hundreds of conferences are held and tens of thousands of lunches are consumed.

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