

The Hungarian Council Presidency of the European Union (January 2011 – June 2011)

As the end of the year is slowly approaching a new Council Presidency of the European Union will soon take its place for the next six months. It will be the third time after the first big enlargement to the east that one of the ‘new’ member states will take over the Presidency. After the Slovenian and the Czech Council Presidencies, Hungary is the next of this enlargement group to take the position. It is arguable what can, or should, be the main task of the presidencies be. Right now EU is facing a difficult time in adjusting to the institutional changes the Lisbon Treaty has brought to the table. Before that, the roles and tasks of the Presidencies were clearer. According to Daniela Kietz (SWP Berlin), those are:

- managing the affairs of the Council;
- acting as a “broker of compromises” and as a “neutral mediator”;
- offering “Strategic Guidance”;
- providing initiatives and impulses;
- representing the EU in the international community.

One of the main issues that each Presidency faces is the setting of the agenda for half a year which affects the work of the Union. Leaving certain topics out and stressing the importance of others which are in the field of national interest for a presidency-holder Member State can cause whirls. It should be mentioned that the vast majority of the topics the presidency has to deal with are administrative ones; those that are seen as national priorities can expand up to approximately 5% of the presidential program.

During the presidential term, the Presidency has to chair meetings of council formations, organize an intergovernmental summit and work closely with the EU institutions. This is a tremendous task on the national administration and the public service—but fortunately, the Presidency can rely on both the institution and practice that are sometimes forgotten. The Council has a Secretariat that can provide additional help in organizing the meetings of the Council formations. Also, there is a practice that, *upon request*, other MSs can lend some of their

diplomats, members of their public service to work as a so-called *secondée* for the Presidency in a given policy area, making their work easier. Regarding its budget, the Presidency is only responsible for events that are organized outside of Brussels (besides the budget for souvenirs and similar). What can be gained from holding the position besides interpersonal connections between diplomats is a more deepened knowledge on both the work of the institutions and the EU. Also, if the presidential term runs smoothly and without any serious problems, the fame gained might be used as a bargaining chip later on during internal EU debates.

The Lisbon Treaty and the introduction of the two new top positions of the President of the European Council and the High Representative (HR) did affect the area that a former presidency-holder MS occupied. Fame and attention to the presidency holder usually was a result of its role in external representation, a task that is now fulfilled by the HR. The former General Affairs and External Relations Council was split in two: the Foreign Affairs Council (chaired by the HR) and the General Affairs Council that is the sole responsibility of the Presidency. Although the split took place, there are still areas where close cooperation is essential between the two council formations—one of them is the field of enlargement.

There is however a new presidential structure, which is build upon the closer cooperation of the three states that are holding their presidencies one after the other. Therefore, the so-called trios can work with a longer program that lasts for 18 months. The Trio-concept has been created for the first time in the history of the EU, consisting of Spain, Belgium and Hungary (SBH Trio). As a result of intensive cooperation and coordination between the Trio members, an overall framework program has been created before the Spanish presidency. Thus, policy areas have been secured that have the stamp of “crucial importance”, while also creating a stronger link between the existing individual presidential programs. This structure underpins that the representation of national interests is not the most important element of the programs. Right now the SBH Trio faces two issues: first they need to secure the new positions in the system and second, they need to adjust themselves to the new role of the Presidency.