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Presidency and State Administration in the Czech Republic: Planting a Seed or a Shattered Chance?

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Abstract

The EU Presidency has been so far studied especially in terms of its EU impact and influence while neglecting its potential impact at the domestic level. This article, dealing with the Czech EU Presidency of 2009, focuses on this domestic dimension. Based upon more than 30 elite interviews with civil servants and official documents, it analyses the possible impact of the EU Presidency on state administration and attempts to analyse such influence in the framework of Europeanisation. As a conclusion, the article proposes paying attention to coordination and the institutional structures processing EU affairs as the first possible indicator, and human resources as the second one. Concerning the particular Czech case, the assessed medium impact of the Presidency was affected by political instability in the country and the overall weak stability of the Czech state bureaucracy.

Keywords

Council Presidency; Czech Republic; Bureaucracy and EU affairs; Elite interview; Europeanisation

Research on the EU Council Presidency has become a familiar topic in European studies. During the 1990s, though, scholars were concerned with issues and problems unrelated to the Presidency. In the decades since, this previously neglected topic has gained a more prominent status. This shift can be explained not only by the substantial increase in research on primary EU institutions and policies, but also by institutional reforms where the Council Presidency played a key role. While there have been many descriptive case studies, the Presidency has been analysed theoretically as well (Niemann and Mak 2010; Alexandrova and Timmermans 2013; Bunse 2009; Verhoeff and Niemann 2011). However, despite increased research in this area (in recent years research on the 'Presidency Trio' should be noted, see Batory and Puetter 2013), there are still areas where questions persist. One such question is that of the domestic influence of the Presidency and its potential internal effects on the country holding office. In this regard, existing literature only intimates that the Presidency can be used by the Presidential government as a tool for communicating EU topics to its citizens (see Miles 2005: 201; Hayes-Renshaw and Galloway 2006: 155; Bunse 2009: 213) or that the Presidency can socialise both the political elite and state bureaucracy (Westlake and Galloway 2004: 335; Klemenčič, 2008: 17). While some research on Presidential communication potential already exists (Kaniok 2012), there are no specific studies that attempt to analyse its effect on state administration.

This article tries to fill this gap, and on the basis of analysis of the Czech EU Presidency of 2009 it takes the first steps toward addressing this topic. Taking into account both the nature of the data we have and the absence of previous research in this particular area, our article does not aspire to draw strong causal conclusions. Through an explanatory approach we focus rather on the categorisation of possible Presidential influence on state administration¹ in order to offer direction for further research. In so doing, we use the concept of Europeanisation as our framework.

First, this analysis outlines the main functions of the Presidency and identifies its position in the current EU decision-making system. Second, it summarises up-to-date research and briefly introduces the concept of Europeanization. In this context, we also build up an analytical framework for our analysis. Third, it presents the data as well as the methods used in the analysis. Fourth, the article briefly describes the Czech domestic political context prior to the EU Presidency. Fifth, we present the results and close on the discussion of the findings.

THE EU COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

The EU Council Presidency is one of the most fluid institutions or functions of the EU decision-making system. The Presidency as such was established at the beginning of European integration as a tool for managing the meetings of the Council of Ministers. In subsequent decades, this symbolic and organizational institution became more influential as the Presidency acquired other functions. By the late 1950s, it took on the role of spokesman for the Council in negotiations with the other European Community (EC) institutions. The Presidency then became responsible for finding and building consensus among the member states. In the 1970s it managed the emerging foreign policy of the EC and chaired European Council meetings. Simultaneously, it became expected for the Presidency to present its political programme and, through this, it started to be seen as a political leader of the Community. However, none of these changes were implemented via revisions of primary EC law – the strengthening of the Presidency, and its constant development, was derived from political practice. Thus, the changes in the nature of the Presidency did not follow any rational logic (that would have made its functioning more coherent), but rather responded to ongoing political needs (Héritier 2007: 121-138).

Hand in hand with the strengthening of the Presidency, it became a major topic for reports calling for institutional reform in the EC. For example, both the Tindemans Report of 1975 and the Three Wise Men Report of 1979 called for a precise and explicit definition of the Presidency's tasks and suggested limitations to its scope (Tallberg 2006: 60, 64). However, in the 1980s, when the first reforms of primary law were prepared, the layered shape of the Presidency was confirmed rather than being simplified. No substantial changes in the Presidency took place in the 1990s even as the EU prepared itself for major enlargement. The Presidency was still responsible for delivering a range of incompatible tasks. Essential reform of the Presidency thus had to wait until the Lisbon Treaty was adopted and implemented. The reforms brought by Lisbon rewrote the whole concept of the Presidency as it established two new permanent and personalised chairs – the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the EU for Common Foreign and Security Policy. The former body took from the Presidency power over the European Council, while the latter took over the chairing of the EU Council of Foreign ministers. The existing Council Presidency remained active in other aspects of the Council of the EU.

The Council Presidency can be seen as the main loser of the Lisbon Treaty as it lost its power in the European Council and in the area of EU foreign policy. These two major losses undoubtedly affected the visibility and media attractiveness of the Presidency. However, the majority of its functions and powers remained unchanged (Warntjen 2012: 121-124). The Presidency is still an important actor in the Council where it exercises its influence (Schalk et al. 2007; Warntjen 2008). It sets the political agenda, controls dossiers or represents the Council when negotiating its position with other EU institutions. From the point of view of small or medium size countries, the limitation of the Presidency's tasks only at the EU Council level could have paradoxically increased the Presidency's overall power. Pre-Lisbon, EU representation and bargaining at the European Council level were tasks that consumed a lot of the energy of small or medium size Presidencies without bringing adequate outcomes. Jettisoning these interesting but difficult duties could thus have enabled such countries to focus on the EU Council level where the size of the country does not matter so much. The role and influence of the state administration of the Presidency country thus has not changed when comparing the pre-Lisbon and post-Lisbon realities. Responsible civil servants exercise the same tasks in both periods as the role of the Presidency in the EU Council did not change. The Lisbon Treaty did not affect the lower levels of the Council (COREPER, working parties) where the role of the Presidency bureaucracy is most important.

RESEARCH TO DATE

It is very difficult to find appropriate theoretical research on the domestic influence of the Council Presidency as it barely represents an independent EU institution. The Presidency is a multi-tasking position primarily serving the EU Council needs but it overlaps with other EU institutions as well as the overall EU decision-making system, making it difficult to restrict the Presidency's operation only to the Council. Moreover, the essence of the Presidency lies on the boundary between the European and domestic arenas of politics. The former is caused by expected norms of impartiality and neutrality as well as by pressure from other member states and EU institutions (Elgström 2003), the latter by the simple fact that each Presidency is run by the national political and administrative apparatus. However, the prior training of the state administration in institutional, language and negotiation skills and techniques precedes many modern Council Presidencies. EU member states differ in the amount and degree of such training – usually, more attention is devoted to the preparatory phase in smaller and inexperienced countries than in older, bigger member states. Skilled and competent bureaucracy is recognised as a key precondition of success for each Presidency as Presidencies are to a large extent judged according to their administrative and negotiation performance (Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006: 140). The preparatory phase is seen as important not only by academic evaluators but also by direct participants in the Presidency (Kajň and Svetlič 2010).

Existing specific literature on the Council Presidency comments on its domestic potential only briefly and without any strong evidence. Most of such work uses only the descriptive approach, avoiding any theoretical or conceptual framework. When analysing the Slovenian Presidency of 2008, Manja Klemenčič (2008) claims that the Presidency was a powerful tool which affected all three domestic groups – politicians, the public and the administration. She points to the intensive training of a large numbers of officials to handle the substantial and procedural aspects of EU affairs pertaining to the Presidential tasks, leading to increased knowledge of EU affairs (Klemenčič 2008: 21-23). In the period from November 2006 to the end of April 2007, 3472 civil servants involved with the Presidential project participated in 144 seminars conducted centrally by the Government Academy (Klemenčič 2008: 23). For a country in which in June 2006 only approximately 40 governmental employees (Fink-Hafner, Lajh, 2008: 34) dealt with EU affairs it was a dramatic increase of focus and investment to reach the EU level. In accordance with this plan, 310 additional temporary posts were approved. In individual cases experts not working in the state administration were temporarily engaged on a full-time or part-time basis. Following the example of similar smaller member states (Ireland, the Netherlands or Austria), Slovenia decided that a strong team would work at the Permanent Representation (PR) in Brussels, where 170 civil servants were posted (including 121 additional posts for the Presidential term).

When Poland held the Presidency for the first time (2011) it also lacked experience; moreover, there was high turnover inside the Polish state administration – between August 2009 and August 2010, 27 percent of the “Presidency Corpus” rotated. Hence human resources planning included a wide spectrum of training activities, as well as actions targeted at retaining the public administrators who would serve the Presidency at least until the end of 2011. The “Presidency Corpus” had some 1200 people from all sectorial ministries. In the Foreign Ministry (MFA) there was additional activity to back up selected embassies because of the Presidency. Apart from various trainings, a number of stays and study visits in European institutions were also organized within the EU programmes. Between 2009 and July 2010 there were 14 stays/study visits in the European Commission and five in the General Secretariat of the Council. From the Polish Presidency resources, just one department working on the Presidential preparations organized 36 stays/study visits for its functionaries by June 2010 (Kaczynski 2011: 36-37). Extensive preparatory training for the administration was not the case just for Central and Eastern European (CEE) Presidencies. Sweden also invested time and energy into increasing knowledge and skills of its civil servants before its first Presidency in 2001 – Björn

Beckman mentions 7000 people taking part in general training and 5000 more who were prepared for specific Presidential tasks (2001: 62). In the case of the second Swedish EU Presidency of 2009, staff training began approximately one and half years before and involved 1815 people who took part in seminars, courses or study visits (Johansson et al. 2010).

Apart from the above-mentioned descriptive studies, it is almost impossible to find any study trying to generalise such findings or develop any theoretical concept. Anand Menon (2003) states that holding the Presidency represents by far the most effective way of ensuring the effective Europeanization of national administrations. According to Menon, the question is not of making national bureaucracy pro-European but rather of ensuring that it is adequately prepared for the onerous task of ensuring smooth administrative interaction between the EU and the national levels. Martin Westlake and David Galloway (2004: 335) highlight that a majority of member states perceive the Presidency as a period that provides substantial educational benefits for their administrations. Such an advantage of the Presidency is not limited only to new or inexperienced member states but is relevant also for routine Presidencies, as the EU political system is still evolving. Simone Bunsen (2009: 213) also credits these educational benefits to the EU Presidency, building on a general description of the Finnish, Belgian and Greek Presidencies. However, the assumption that the Presidency must have some domestic impact is backed rather by empirical facts (e. g. the impact of Presidency-related informational campaigns on the public, PR activities and propagation events that are organized by Presidency governments, and administrative seminars and trainings) than by any comprehensive research.

Europeanization concerns, at its most basic, a relationship between a cause located at the EU level and change at the domestic level (Radaelli 2012: 3). There are many more precise definitions, but their basic message is always close to Radaelli's standard. Europeanization changes in the state administration are traditionally perceived especially at the level of informal patterns and norms of behaviour, while formal structures remain relatively untouched (Laegreid et al. 2004: 361-362). The Europeanization of the state administration (dealing with EU affairs) has both divergent and convergent tendencies in different countries (Larsson and Trondal 2005; Knill and Lenschow 2005). Despite Danica Fink-Hafner's (2007) descriptions of some similar trends in Europeanization development in several former socialist states, it cannot easily be argued that countries participating in the so-called Eastern enlargement follow one pattern (Dimitrova and Toskov 2007).

On the basis of the above-quoted descriptive studies, we suggest that the possible Europeanization effect of the Presidency can be categorised as stated in Table 1 (next page). As an immediate effect, we understand the organizational and personal changes that were caused by the Presidency before its start. Such effects may be, at the organizational level, represented especially by the creation or modification of an EU affairs coordination institution (e. g. the establishment of a new unit within an existing ministry, the creation of a new ministry or governmental agency) and by substantial adjustment in EU affairs coordinating mechanism(s) (such as databases, registers etc.). At the personal level, an obvious immediate effect should involve the recruitment of new staff and institutional, language and soft-skills training programmes. Simultaneously, the Presidency should increase overall knowledge of EU affairs among civil servants and improve the country's reputation within the EU Council structure.

While immediate Europeanization effects of the Presidency seem to be easy to detect and identify, the medium term consequences are more challenging. As medium term effects we understand those which can be spotted at least one electoral term after the end of the Presidency. Based upon the immediate effects, both the institutional and coordination set-up should prevail after the Presidency, and there should also be perceived, substantial personal changes concerning the deployment of trained staff and an increase in soft-skills, as well as institutional and language competencies.

Table 1: Possible Europeanization effects of the Presidency (immediate and medium term effects)

Level/term	Immediate	Medium
Organizational and Institutional level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation/modification of EU affairs coordination institution • Creation/modification of EU affairs coordinating mechanism (databases, registers etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created or modified coordination institution prevails and manages EU affairs at the national level • Coordination mechanism (registers, mechanism) prevails
Personal level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruitment of new staff directly involved with the Presidency • Training programme(s) in languages, negotiation skills and techniques, EU knowledge • Improved knowledge of EU affairs, improved country reputation within the Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trained staff is used in adequate positions • Perceived improvement of negotiation, language and institutional skills

Source: authors

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

Our methodology consists of a combination of two techniques. The first is document analysis (Bowen 2009); we used official documents produced by the Czech governments, especially in parts analysing the possible immediate Europeanization effects of the Presidency. Document analysis reveals which institutions managing the Czech Presidency were established, which training programmes were run and which personal changes in the Czech state administration occurred. As our second tool we use elite interviews in the form of unstandardised interviews. Elite interviews, usually with respondents from the predefined elite, use open questions and expect extensive answers (Pierce 2008). In the case of the semi-structured interview, prepared questions are supplemented with additional questions. Although Dexter (2006: 18-19) emphasises that in the case of elite interviews the investigator is willing to let the respondent teach him what the problem/situation is (which differs from standardised interview techniques), most authors point out the necessity of precise preparation even before the elite interview. However, the semi-structured interview is most used in the case of elite interviews (Pierce 2008: 118-120).

The data that we analysed consist of various official documents (usually accessible from the official web portal of the Czech Governmental Office) and 36 elite interviews held with employees of the Czech state administration or the EU administration between summer 2012 and spring 2013. All respondents were engaged in the Czech Presidency. Table 2 presents the overview of their distribution (between the Czech and European administration). Respondents work either for Czech ministries, for the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic for the EU or for the EU institutions (European Parliament, European Commission, Council of the EU). Thus, all respondents were in day-to-day contact with the European agenda and they represent a narrow sample of state administration. In this sense they can be regarded as elite – their competence, erudition and usually long term engagement with EU affairs constitute such status. It would not make any sense to focus on broadly defined state administration, meaning overall state administration including also respondents who do not primarily deal with EU affairs. Such respondents concentrate on different

issues or topics and if they were somehow engaged in the Presidency, it was in a time-limited capacity. Another advantage of our data can be seen in the interval since the end of the Presidency. A quite long (but still reasonable) distance from its conclusion enabled respondents to soberly evaluate its influence (whereas if questioned straight after its conclusion they could have either exaggerated or underestimated its impact). Respondents were chosen by a combination of techniques. The first group of respondents was comprised on the basis of expert knowledge, and another wave was put together on the basis of the 'snowball' technique. Each interview usually lasted 45 to 60 minutes, and each respondent received a set of prepared questions focused on the usability of the Presidency experience for the Czech administration, the identification of key successes or failures and the development of Presidency potential. Then additional questions were usually asked.

Table 2: Overview of respondents

Level	Number
State administration (Ministries)	12
State administration (Perm Rep)	14
SUB-TOTAL	26
European institutions	10
TOTAL	36

Source: authors

The prepared questions were consciously constructed as quite open in order to minimise the risk of asking suggestive questions. Moreover, there were not so many previously known concrete findings that could have been verified. Risks connected to the interviewers' subjectivity were minimised by the presence of two investigators who controlled and confronted their perception of the answers and by the respondents' confirmation of those answers.

THE CZECH DOMESTIC CONTEXT

When taking the Presidency responsibility from France on the 1st January of 2009, the Czech Republic was in the fifth year of its EU membership. Both the Czech political and administrative context was not entirely unproblematic, and the political elite in particular could not have been feeling comfortable. Assessing the situation in the country's state administration, the Czech bureaucracy faced almost the same problems as faced by civil services in most CEE countries (Goetz 2001). Despite a democratic country for more than 17 years, Czech politicians were not able to adopt legislation on the state bureaucracy during this period. Due to the absence of such an elementary basis, the whole bureaucratic environment could be characterised in terms of a high degree of uncertainty, politicisation and overall low quality of staff (O'Dwyer 2002). EU accession in 2004 did not help a great deal – even after five years of EU membership the Czech state administration was described as a case of “destructive reform reversal”. While civil service institutions were eliminated following EU accession, a new framework was not established. In 2009 the Czech bureaucracy did not have an intermediate degree of compatibility with European standards of administration – and the Czech Republic shared this negative set-up with Poland and Slovakia (Meyer-Sahling 2009).

In addition, the domestic political set up prior to the Presidency could hardly be described as ideal. First, the European debate was being highly influenced by the Euro-sceptic president Václav Klaus. Second, the last parliamentary elections prior to the Presidency (in 2006) resulted in the situation where left-wing parties (the Czech Social Democratic Party - ČSSD and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia - KSČM) won the same number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies as the centre-right formations (the Civic Democratic Party - ODS, the Christian Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party - KDU-ČSL, and the Green Party). In January 2007 a coalition was formed between the ODS, KDU-ČSL, and the Greens, further relying on the support of two defectors from the ČSSD. This non-standard method in forming a government majority resulted in an atmosphere of deep antagonism between the ČSSD and ODS, which continued to dominate Czech politics throughout the period before the country assumed the Presidency. In the spring of 2008, ČSSD chairman Jiří Paroubek made it clear that during the EU Presidency the government would continue to be the target of attacks by the opposition. This was very much unlike the situation in Slovenia, where the government and the opposition made a “ceasefire” agreement for the duration of its Presidency (Kajnc 2009).

ANALYSIS: IMMEDIATE AND MEDIUM EFFECTS

The Council Presidency was mentioned for the first time in the official documentation of the Czech government in November 2004. Resolution No. 2299/2004 tasked the MFA to prepare basic material evaluating the possible costs and needs, as well as the administrative workload connected with the Presidency. The MFA report was approved in May 2005 (Resolution No. 523/2005), which was for a long time the last official government step as the same resolution tasked the MFA to submit additional material by the end of January 2006. Both government resolutions as well as political logic suggested that the main institution responsible for the Presidency would be the MFA (Král et al. 2009: 33; Tomalová 2008: 122). The precise form of the coordination institutional set up was not clear, but it was apparent that the Czech government would gain experience abroad, especially from countries with a similar scale of administrative capacity. Finally, the model combining both centralised and decentralised tendencies² found its inspiration in the Austrian Presidency of 2006. The Czech government initially considered its full implementation. If such had happened, the Presidency would have been coordinated by a government secretary (a political civil servant) with a General secretariat operating within the MFA.

However, the idea of implementing the Austrian model did not survive the consequences of the parliamentary election in June 2006. As already mentioned, the election led to a stalemate between left and right parties, and the ODS minority government, the winner of the election, was appointed in September 2006. Not surprisingly, the cabinet failed in a vote of confidence, but acted until January 2007 when a coalition government consisting of ODS, KDU-ČSL and the Greens was formed. This new cabinet, while not abandoning the idea of the combined model, decided to coordinate and organize the Presidency at the political level, established a new governmental post called Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs and shifted all of the preparatory work into the Office of Government. Alexandr Vondra (ODS) was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs. Thus, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister³, formally a part of the Office of Government, was responsible both for the organizational and political preparatory activities. Within the framework of this office, a coordination mechanism specifically designed for the Presidency was developed. Part of this involved the Database of Presidency agenda (DAP) where all ministries could download all important documents related to the executive and coordination tasks of the Czech Republic in the EU (minutes and reports from meetings, meeting documents, instructions, etc.). Moreover, Departmental Coordination Groups were established by individual ministries. These included the representatives of other ministries, offices and stakeholders in each of them. The

objective of these groups was to discuss and approve national positions reflecting Czech interests. The role of the Committee for the EU, which met both at ministerial and high official levels, was also reformulated.

Concerning training activities, the government consulted previous Presidencies, modelling itself particularly on Austria, Slovenia, Germany and Ireland. The so-called Central Register of Employees (CRZ) was created. This register contained information about all state employees who were involved in the training process. The register divided these civil servants into four categories determining the intensity and quality of training. Category 1 included civil servants allocated for chairing the Council's working groups – at this level the training was most intensive. Category 2 included national representatives in working groups and committees, Category 3 consisted of experts at the national level and Category 4 was devoted to general administrative staff (Ministerstvo vnitra 2008). The total amount of people enrolled into the CRZ increased from 1256 in 2006 to 3641 in 2008. The training programme targeted part of its activities at the ministerial level – specific ministries were responsible for training connected to the activities of concrete departments. General institutional training was conducted by the Institute for State Administration (ISS) whose activity was a two level e-learning course 'Minimum about the EU Presidency', and the subsequent course 'Negotiation Techniques and Skills'. ISS was also responsible for language courses which were primarily focused on skills in English and French. The total number of people who took part in Presidential training (either in person or through distance learning) was 4731. The preparation did not only involve existing personnel but also newly recruited staff. Altogether 338 positions intended only for the Presidency were established – all of them designed as temporary. However, 175 civil servants⁴ who had been initially recruited only for the period of the Presidency also continued after its immediate conclusion. This means that more than half of the people stayed, which was paradoxically presented by the government as a success (Úřad vlády 2010).

Almost all respondents clearly emphasised that the development of human resources and investments in this area were massively supported. Based on the interviews, this investment can be operationalised as development of contacts across EU member states, strengthening personal relations with the EU institutions, the development of negotiation skills, knowledge of informal rules and practices of the EU Council and the inter-institutional environment, improvement of language skills and knowledge of detailed content of EU policies and individual dossiers. To sum up, the Czech Presidency seemed to be well prepared as it did not underestimate any substantial part of the training activities. The government invested a substantial amount of money and had some expectations concerning both new cadres and trained staff (Švehla 2009)⁵. The quality and level of preparedness of civil servants was quite highly appreciated even during the first weeks of the Presidency (Král et al. 2009: 68-71) and was also confirmed by our interviews. As the respondents noted, the Czech Republic took on the task with responsibility – nobody in the interviews said that the Czech Republic had somehow underestimated the preparations. The Presidential preparatory teams focused on gaining experience from previous Presidencies and in particular on the preparation of high-quality human resources and the development of adequate coordination mechanisms. Human Resources, which are mentioned in all debates on the activities and negotiations of the Czech Republic in the EU, were one of the key pillars of the preparations. Great attention was paid to chairs of the committees and working group, who had extensive opportunities for attending preparatory courses, support in obtaining informal contacts and experience and also a solid basis of financial resources. A number of respondents⁶ also highlighted that the preparation phase entailed the arrival of dynamic people motivated to meet the challenges associated with the Presidency, and whose approach to work differed from long-serving officials.

I must say that nothing was neglected during the preparations. I travelled to countries that had their Presidency before us, and I saw other Czech colleagues gaining knowledge and information from them. The Presidency was well-prepared. The fact that the government fell

can happen only in a small country such as the Czech Republic... (interview with a Czech representative/employee, EU institution, April 2013).

There was a consensus among our respondents on the question of what the Czech Republic immediately acquired through the Presidency. Many of them mentioned in particular the establishment of contacts with member states and EU institutions, as well as with important stakeholders in the EU. Another positive outcome was obtaining important information and knowledge concerning not only policies and procedures, but also awareness of the means and tools which are used by the member states and the EU institutions. Understanding the informal rules of negotiation was emphasised as another benefit. All of these aspects helped to build better cooperation with the EU institutions – the European Commission and the European Parliament.

The Czech Republic also developed a constructive approach and the ability to find compromise, stemming from the role which the Presidency and the team had to play (to find a way out of various, often contradictory, positions or understand the breadth and complexity of the agenda). A number of respondents confirmed that thanks to the Presidency they began to play a more active role in the negotiations. Finally, the Presidency helped to gain some respect from other member states and/or the EU thanks to a number of successful negotiations and conclusions of different dossiers.

We managed the Presidency and rather pleasantly surprised the others. The fall of the government⁷ was really unfortunate but it did not significantly affect the outcome of the Presidency. To a large extent this is because of the standard practices in the EU. However, within the diplomatic offices and embassies it was obvious that the prestige of the Presidency fell. (Interview with a PR employee, April 2013).

Another positive aspect regarded the training of civil servants who were not responsible for the EU agenda, but had to cooperate with the relevant departments specialising in the agenda of the EU (they had to provide information, answer questions, etc.). Thanks to the Presidency this cooperation was intensified – a majority of employees had to at least understand the basic contours of the EU's role and processes.

The Presidency contributed to the understanding of the EU system at national level. (Interview with a civil servant, November 2012).

Based upon document analysis and interviews, it can be stated that all expected indicators suggesting the immediate Europeanization effect of the Presidency can be found in the Czech case. As a result of the Presidency the government adjusted and changed both the institutional set up as well as the coordination mechanism. The institutional level – a part of the political games before and after the parliamentary election of 2006 – was even changed twice. The same obvious influence of the Presidency is also discernible at the personal level. Due to the Presidency new staff were recruited and trained, and training programmes also applied to already employed civil servants. These training activities were perceived as an effective tool as they helped to increase both the institutional and, for example, the negotiating skills of civil servants during the Presidency.

Concerning the institutional set up, the effect of the Presidency vanished. The European agenda was removed from the ministerial level and just a few weeks after the parliamentary elections of 2010 competence quarrels between the Office of Government and MFA occurred. While the former insisted on not changing the Presidency and post-Presidency status quo where the Office of Government served as the main coordinator of EU affairs, the MFA demanded the return of this agenda within its framework. Debates lasting several months resulted in the parallel existence of two State Secretaries for European affairs – one situated within the Office of Government and subordinate to the prime minister, and the second being formally the Deputy Foreign Minister. As a result, this dual power complicating Czech EU policy⁸ prevailed up to 2013.

Table 3: Immediate Europeanization effects of the EU Presidency

Level	Expected indicator	EU Presidency of 2009
Organizational and Institutional level	Creation (or modification) of EU affairs coordination institution	Identified
	Creation (or modification) of EU affairs coordinating mechanism (databases, registers etc.)	Identified
Personal level	Recruitment of new staff directly involved to the Presidency	Identified
	Training programme(s) in languages, negotiation skills and techniques, EU knowledge	Identified
	Improved knowledge of EU affairs, improved country reputation within the Council	Identified

Source: authors

On the contrary, the development of the coordination mechanisms created for the purpose of the Presidency but that remained beyond it is seen as a positive legacy of the Presidency. We are referring especially to the electronic database DAP, the Departmental Coordination Groups and Committee for the EU⁹. These mechanisms established or developed for the Presidency have continued (with only a few modifications) to be cornerstones of EU coordination at the national level. Moreover, enhanced coordination mechanisms at individual ministries have also remained and have played an important role in developing national interests and opinions after the Presidency.

Thanks to the Presidency we have developed coordination structures which are still used now. A great shift has occurred in this regard. (Interview with a civil servant, June 2012.)

However, it is necessary to add that some respondents also raised a few complaints that the coordination failed, and is failing. They spoke particularly about policy areas with many overlaps, in which a specific topic belongs to the competence of two or more departments and each of them has its specific approach depending on objectives and on the "clients" of the ministry¹⁰. It is in these moments that effective mechanisms are crucial for ensuring the transparent and functional process of defining the national interest and consensus at the national level.

The coordination process has declined in the Czech Republic. It is about personalities. But unfortunately we put too much emphasis on political engagement. (Interview with a civil servant, August 2012.)

During the Presidency we developed necessary mechanisms and at the same time it was also the height of our membership. Afterwards it dropped, but still the level is different than before the Presidency. It has taught us especially the art of compromise. Today, you can feel a certain nostalgia for the period when everyone tried hard to succeed. (Interview with a PR employee, September 2012.)

Moving to the personal level of Europeanization, almost all of the positive effects that could have been identified initially disappeared. First of all, almost all respondents shared the same opinion concerning human resources – this potential was not maintained or further developed after the end

of the Presidency. Civil servants, who were widely supported before and during the Presidency and who were also motivated to work, were not offered an adequate position or were completely released after the next parliamentary election of 2010.

The teams are completely disintegrated at some ministries, and thus the quality of representatives of the Czech Republic has been reduced. (Interview with a PR employee, September 2012.)

People with Presidency experience were removed. We are not able to build high quality teams, which is also related to the question of Czech employees and representatives in the EU institutions. Almost all other countries are doing better. (Interview with a civil servant, June 2012.)

Table 4: Medium term Europeanization effects of the EU Presidency

Level	Expected indicator	Czech Republic after the Presidency
Organizational and Institutional level	Created or modified coordination institution prevails and manages EU affairs at the national level	Not identified, institutional set up changed
	Coordination mechanism (registers, mechanism) prevails	Not identified
Personal level	Trained staff is used in adequate positions	Not identified
	Perceived improvement of negotiation, language and institutional skills	Not identified

Source: authors

This was a bitter disappointment for many people because they were motivated to stay in the state administration; they expected that their experience and high level of commitment during the Presidency would be reflected in their careers. Interestingly, none of our respondents referred to low salaries or the pay gap between the public and private sectors as a reason explaining the outflow of personnel¹¹; the majority wanted to stay as they saw sense in their jobs and found the civil service an interesting career. Instead, however, they left or had to leave. Yet, the withdrawal of these people leads not only to a loss of know-how and contacts but also, according to some, to the instability of Czech goals in the EU agenda.

Where people have stayed after the Presidency, their experience could have been transformed in a new quality – an active approach, influencing things in time, etc. But this is the exception rather than the rule. (Interview with a civil servant, June 2012)

There are a few specific exceptions. These areas are mostly of a technical nature, where people from the Presidency team received opportunities for further careers in the state administration in corresponding positions. Not surprisingly, the same negative tendency can be found in acquired skills and techniques. The answer of most respondents is quite clear in this respect: the upward trend in negotiation style and activities of the Czech Republic in the EU, "crowned" by the Presidency itself, suffered a gradual decline after the end of the Presidency. The respondents differ in terms of how deep and how crucial this decline has been.

The Presidency has gone, we do not know where. In many areas, no one from the Presidency remains. Many people left and the current situation in the state administration, when new people are not hired, still prevents a return of these people from the Presidency period. In this respect we did fail. (Interview with a civil servant, July 2012).

The Czech state administration was not capable of cooperating with people who became familiar with the procedures and overall situation in Brussels. They expected that their experience and commitment from the Presidency would be reflected in their career in the state administration but it did not happen. Therefore they entered other institutions or sectors. But the majority of these people have lost contact with the relevant institutions. (Interview with a Czech representative/employee, EU institution, September 2012).

Overall, it seems that the question of human resources (and their poor use) affects the overall assessment of the impact of the Presidency. Respondents clearly saw the know-how acquired during the Presidency as unique and non-transferable. Similar opportunities (both in terms of the training of civil servants and in terms of the intensity of involvement in the European agenda) will not be repeated. The departure of dozens of employees, who became highly competent actors in the promotion of Czech interests in the EU, largely represents a lost opportunity.

CONCLUSION

The Council Presidency is perceived as a unique opportunity for the office-holding country. Research to date has concentrated particularly on possible political influence and promoting the Presidency's interest at the EU level. Our article focuses instead on the domestic impact of the Presidency and seeks to examine to what extent the Presidency can affect the state bureaucracy. We consider our research to be relevant due to the sketchy commentary on the domestic influence of the Presidency in the existing literature and due to the practical and political relevance of the topic. Almost every modern Presidency invests money and resources into pre-Presidency training of its state administration. In analysing this neglected dimension of the Presidency, we use the concept of Europeanization and on the basis of previous empirical studies offer an analytical model describing both the immediate and medium term possible effects of the Presidency.

Findings on the basis of document analysis and 36 elite interviews with respondents from the Czech bureaucracy and EU institutions offer several interesting results. First, one hypothesis claimed in the existing literature is that the EU Presidency is an opportunity to educate and refresh the state administration; this seems to be confirmed as most of the respondents perceived training and recruitment of both old and new employees as a positive. Human capital seems to be the most important pre-Presidential training as individuals gain concrete skills, subsequently use them, establish both formal and informal networks and personal connections and increase their overall ability to exercise influence in the Council and the EU decision-making process. As the Presidency can recruit or train hundreds or at least tens of persons, such impact is critical – obviously in the 'immediate' time perspective; it is, however, questionable whether such an effect can last and under which conditions.

The case of the Czech Presidency shows that if the political elite¹² is not interested in retaining these skilled personnel (and, on the contrary, lets them), several months after the Presidency these people inevitably disappear and melt into the private sector or move abroad. This means that if the Presidency is to have any longer lasting effect on the bureaucracy, the political elite must develop a vision of how to utilise such trained staff and place them in an appropriate and predictable environment. The absence of such a structure may be the most important problem in the Czech case. First, the government that prepared and commenced the Presidency was dominated by the 'soft'

Eurosceptic ODS party that was even in those times barely a strongly pro-European party. However, as many of our respondents stated, the situation started to change slowly during February and the beginning of March 2009 when many ODS ministers started to consider the Presidency to be a serious and important mission. However, following this the Topolánek government was voted out at the end of March and replaced by the problematic semi-caretaker government of Jan Fischer. The country and Czech politicians were looking for an early parliamentary election that had been initially scheduled for autumn 2009. Such an uncertain and turbulent atmosphere left no space for systematic work with the Presidency experience and the acquired skills – the political elites simply prioritised other goals, particularly the early election planned for October 2009¹³.

Further, as already mentioned, the Czech Republic has not been able to adopt legislation on state bureaucracy throughout the 20 years of its existence. The civil service as a whole is therefore very sensitive to each political change. At this level, our analysis confirms the findings of the existing literature on state bureaucracy and Europeanization in CEE countries. For example, Jan Meyer-Sahling, in his analysis of civil service development in eight CEE countries after joining the EU, confirms that diverse tendencies among these countries are caused by domestic circumstances (2009b). Concerning the degree of politicisation of the civil service in the region, the Czech Republic is one of the more politicised states compared, for example, to the Baltic countries (Meyer-Sahling and Veen 2012). The EU Presidency thus did not help to bring the Czech state bureaucracy closer to the ideal type that Scherpereel describes as the European administrative space and the civil service still continues to follow different patterns (2004).

In addition to human resources, the Presidency may also affect the handling of domestic infrastructure and the coordinating of European affairs. Preparation for the Presidency (despite not being part of the training) seems to have tested and subsequently adjusted the coordination mechanisms both at the general and department levels. Moreover, new additional mechanisms can be developed and then retained. Compared to the effect of human capital investment, this effect may independently impact political circumstances even after the Presidency has finished, as the coordination mechanism does not seem to be attractive for political quarrels. However, if taking into account the institutional set up, this may be more sensitive – again in accordance with the literature evaluating the politicisation of the civil service – to political changes. It would be very interesting to test our results on data from CEE countries whose civil service is seen as less politicised and thus more stable – typically the three Baltic States. Concerning the overall domestic impact of the Presidency, we suggest operationalising it as a combination of the impact of human resources and the impact of infrastructure processing EU affairs. In these two dimensions the Presidency may be a unique chance because the member state is forced to prepare itself. It seems to us that such an effect may be important especially for less experienced and smaller EU member states. For absolute newcomers, the Presidency offers a unique opportunity to substantially enhance both the quality of their European bureaucracy and their coordination mechanisms. However, as our analysis has shown, such an opportunity need not necessarily lead to “planting a seed” but may also turn into a missed opportunity.

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¹ When talking about state administration, we mean its components that deal with European affairs. We do not attempt to analyse state administration as a whole because the complexity and diversity of modern state bureaucratic apparatus prevents such an approach.

² Centralised and decentralised models of Presidency organisation refer to the degree of autonomy which, for example, the Permanent Representation or governmental departments receive.

³ In May 2009, the post of Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs was replaced by Minister for European Affairs, responsible for the same agenda.

⁴ This number refers to the end of 2009.

⁵ Czech journalist Marek Švehla refers to then Deputy Minister Jana Hendrichová stating that job calls for Presidency-related positions attracted ten times more applicants than normal.

⁶ Comments on the ineffective institutional setting of Czech EU policy were mentioned by almost every respondent. Most of them supported the idea of EU policy being coordinated by the Office of Government (as it is a domestic and overlapping policy) but at the same time criticised the Office of Government for being too ideological and incompetent. It is worth mentioning that the Office of Government (and the State Secretary for European affairs placed there) was controlled by the ODS.

⁷ The Presidency government of Mirek Topolánek was voted down at the end of March 2009 (serving until the 9th of May) and was replaced by the caretaker government of Jan Fischer.

⁸ Comments on the ineffective institutional setting of Czech EU policy were mentioned by almost every respondent. Most of them supported the idea of EU policy being coordinated by the Office of Government (as it is a domestic and overlapping policy) but at the same time criticised the Office of Government for being too ideological and incompetent. It is worth mentioning that the Office of Government (and the State Secretary for European affairs placed there) was controlled by the ODS.

⁹ The Committee chaired by the Office of Government, which meets every week in order to discuss and approve all important documents concerning the EU (especially instructions for COREPER, mandates for the ministerial Council, etc.). This committee can also meet at the level of ministers.

¹⁰ For example all areas where the EU budget is tackled and thus where the interests of different ministries are at stake. The Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Regional Development (because of structural funds) and the Ministry of Finance have many overlaps when it comes to the EU budget.

¹¹ The civil service ranks slightly above the average paid job categories in the Czech Republic. In mid 2009, the average salary in the civil service was CZK 25266, while the average salary across the whole country reached only CZK 23258. In the same period, the private sector offered slightly more generous wages (CZK 23758) than the non-private sector (CZK 21691). However, one has to bear in mind that, particularly in the private sector, salaries vary substantially across different categories – e. g. the banking sector reached, in the first half of 2009, an average salary of CZK 46831, while in the transport sector it was only CZK 23714 (Český statistický úřad 2009).

¹² By political elite we do not mean only the government, but the Czech political elite as a whole. Traditionally, European integration is not seen as an important issue by Czech politicians, regardless of whether they are from right or left wing political parties.

¹³ Paradoxically, the early election – as a consequence of the fall of Topolánek's Presidency government – was cancelled in September 2009 as the Constitutional Court annulled the dissolution of the House of Deputies. The election eventually took place in spring 2010 as a regular election.

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