

The Czech EU Presidency: Strengthening Energy Security Amidst the Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The Czech Republic took over the presidency of the European Union Council from France during a deep crisis ignited by the aggressive Russian invasion of Ukraine. In fact, as a result of the invasion, the Czech presidency had to deal with a multitude of crises: not only the actual security crisis, that is, Russian forces attacking a country at the EU's border, but also an energy crisis manifested by price hikes and supply insufficiency, and an economic crisis caused by both of the above. As energy was among the priorities of the presidency, the article focuses on this area, assessing the presidency's performance in strengthening the bloc's energy security. The text focuses on electricity and natural gas markets, given the impact of the crisis on these areas and the fact that their functioning is communitarized. Retrospectively, it also takes on the topic of what the presidency's main message and legacy were when it passed the proverbial baton to Sweden at the end of 2022. The research found that the agreements reached under the Czech presidency can increase the Union's energy security, namely the availability and affordability of energy supplies. The presidency also showcased the Czech Republic's ability to achieve broad agreement even on controversial points.

KEYWORDS

European Union, Czech Republic, EU presidency, energy security, Russia

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.32422/mv-cjir.702>

INTRODUCTION

The second Czech presidency in the European Union Council took place against a backdrop seemingly similar to the one in 2009. The European Union (EU) was going through an energy crisis involving Russia and Ukraine. However, in almost all other aspects, the situation in 2022 was markedly different. Not only was the institute of the presidency formally different from the one the Czech Republic assumed in January 2009, but also, the crisis barely bore any resemblance to the 13-year-old one. First, European states were dealing with an all-out war on the continent, an unseen phenomenon since 1945. That itself would provide for a difficult presidency as Europe had to deal with heightened geopolitical tensions and Russian threats. On top of it, however, the energy crisis set in motion circa half a year before the presidency, drove natural gas and electricity prices high, putting pressure on the already strained European economies. It was clear right from the start that the Czech presidency had a lot on its plate with very little room for mistakes as an atmosphere of concerned expectations was lingering around. The presidency was originally prepared by the preceding government of Prime Minister (PM) Andrej Babiš, who had dedicated a very limited budget to the task. The slashed budget had thus prompted concerns about a potentially very limited presidency.

The following text assesses the Czech presidency of the EU Council with regard to the energy sector and energy security issues. It takes stock of the agreements sealed during the presidency and contrasts them against the general definition of energy security. It then proceeds to analyze whether these agreements result in increasing the energy security of the EU. To address the task, the following research question was formulated: *Did the EU's energy security increase due to the agreements sealed during the Czech presidency?* The text's primary focus is on natural gas and electricity as these are traded on the common market, and are thus within the EU's institutional reach. Crucially, these are also the energy sectors most influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

TAKING ON THE PRESIDENCY MANTLE

Even before July 1, the first day of the Czech presidency of the EU Council, it had been clear that the Czech representatives were not off to a smooth

start. The first and most obvious problem was the state Europe was in with the war ravaging Ukraine since February 24, 2022. Although to the surprise of many, Ukraine survived the first concentrated attack and was even retaking the initiative in some regions, the situation was still rather bleak. The second concern for the Czech presidency was that it had to deal with the limited resources assigned for the presidency by the previous government, which gravely underestimated the needed funds and staffing (ČEMUSOVÁ 2019). Although the new government of PM Petr Fiala made some last-minute adjustments to accommodate the expected high demands of the presidency during the trying times, the 6-month period tested the state's capacities extensively. The presidency even required some government staffers to change their assignments and work on EU matters for the time of the presidency (BOUBÍNOVÁ 2022).

Notably, the Czech Republic was simultaneously facing a refugee crisis at home, as it provided shelter to almost half a million refugees cumulatively, which was the highest number out of all the European countries, and it was by no means an easy task for a country of ten million (STATISTA 2022). At the same time, the country was dealing with high energy prices, a topic intensely politicized in domestic political battles. For this reason, energy market functioning and energy prices became the most closely observed issue of the Czech presidency. On the EU level, the energy-related agenda was also among the most followed topics, as energy prices and supply shortages were the main real-life war impacts in the EU countries. In fact, outside of the countries dealing with the influx of refugees, the energy price hikes were the only noticeable impact on everyday life. When the Czech Republic took on the mantle of the presiding country on July 1, electricity prices had already risen sharply, with the Czech Republic marking one of the steepest increases (EUROSTAT 2022A). Therefore, it was clear that something had to be done, and all eyes were on the Czech Minister of Industry and Trade, Josef Síkela, and the Council of Ministers he presided over. After all, energy security was the number 2 priority of the official Czech presidency program (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION N. D.: 4). Therefore, it was understandable that the presidency was expected to broker an EU-wide solution to this problem. The Czech presidency had a clear advantage over their French counterparts, who started their stint six months earlier during peacetime and had to abruptly accommodate to a new reality after the all-out war broke out less than two months

into their presidency. Unsurprisingly then, The Czech presidency focused heavily on the energy-related agenda. At the same time, it cannot be said that the energy crisis was anything new, as the prices of natural gas and electricity started to climb up in mid-2021; therefore, the time was ripe for thorough systemic adjustments ^(EUROSTAT 2022B).

ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

The commonly used definition of energy security is the one used by the International Energy Agency (IEA), which defines energy security as the *“uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price”* ^(IEA 2019). This definition corresponds with the officially stated priorities of the Czech presidency concerning energy security. These were:

- 1) Implementation of the REPower EU plan, including source diversification and new supply routes, energy savings, and a speeding up of the energy transition;
- 2) Replenishing natural gas storages and fostering joint purchases of natural gas;
- 3) Implementing measures to tackle high energy prices.

While the first two goals addressed the uninterrupted availability component of the abovementioned definition, the third one was meant to take on the remaining component, affordability. As the energy and economic crisis had already been in full swing by the summer when the Czech Republic took on the presidency, it was clear that it would need to deal with the gas and electricity prices. Simultaneously, as electricity and natural gas are traded on the common market, they are the energy sectors where the EU has the biggest say and where the presidency can help make a difference. Dealing with the supply security and energy market functioning thus became the biggest presidency task.

The most visible immediate measure addressing the first point, i.e., savings, was a voluntary gas consumption reduction of 15% in the 2022/2023 heating season ^(COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A). This measure can be attributed to the first defining factor of energy security – the availability of energy sources, which ultimately increases the overall available volume. Although the measure was received with criticism as it was not

made compulsory, with mandatory provisions available only under emergency conditions, the agreement sent out an important signal about the will to come to terms and find a common denominator in times of crisis.¹ Due to the combination of high commodity prices and consumer anxiety, the gas demand did eventually decrease. In fact, in the Q3 and Q4 of 2022, the demand decreased by more than 20% compared to the same period in 2021, thus even exceeding the 15% goal (EUROSTAT 2022C). Although the responsibility for this decrease cannot be clearly ascribed to the presidency, as the decline started even before the agreement in reaction to the high prices, and the reduction was not made compulsory, the presidency-facilitated agreement indeed helped to highlight the importance of the task. Additionally, the measure has the potential to increase the availability component by definition; plus, the savings can be made compulsory under emergency conditions, as noted above.

Addressing the second point, it was set out that gas storages had to be refilled before the upcoming winter (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A). Although in retrospect, the effort was successful, and the member states secured stable supplies for the 2022/2023 heating season (based on the situation at the time of writing in early March 2023), the hasty effort to replenish storages was likely among the reasons driving the gas spot price to an unprecedented height in August 2022 (EUenergy n.d.). Therefore, although meeting this priority increased the availability and stability components, it undermined the affordability component. The measures to aggregate the demand and procure joint gas purchases that were agreed on later that year should at least partly mitigate such an effect in the future, thus fostering affordability (see below).

Joint gas, LNG, and hydrogen purchases via the EU Energy Platform were agreed on towards the end of the presidency in November 2022. The presidency sealed the deal on establishing a joint platform for gas purchases at the fourth extraordinary meeting of EU energy ministers. The measure is based on aggregating gas demand and seeking the supply jointly so that the participating members do not compete with each other, which would undermine their respective positions. The idea is based on the assumption that the aggregated demand will provide greater leverage on the competitive market than the members acting individually. Taking part in the measure is voluntary except for the provision that the members

have to buy 15% of the storage levels of gas via this measure ^(COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022B). The next major achievement was the transborder solidarity measure, which, in fact, relied on the basic framework of energy solidarity, which had been already enshrined as early as in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union years earlier ^(EURLEX 2008). Both the solidarity measure and the demand aggregation will help increase the stability and availability component.

Council presidencies usually put the less conflictual points on the agenda before those with a higher potential for disputes, and the Czech presidency followed the same tactics. The common denominator was agreed on first, with the more complicated issues left for later. That way, the presidency was able to reach an agreement on transborder solidarity, demand aggregation, and consumption reduction before agreeing on the perhaps most controversial point – the gas price cap – just before the presidency ended ^(COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A; CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A; CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022B). In hindsight, the reaching of an agreement on these important yet less groundbreaking measures in the first place turned out well and perhaps gave the presidency the needed confidence before it took on the more difficult agenda.

PREOCCUPIED WITH THE PRICE CRISIS

To address the third point, high energy prices turned out to be a recurring topic throughout most of the presidency; hence, let us dedicate a separate section to it. As hinted above, addressing electricity and gas prices clearly falls under the affordability component. The severity of the situation in the electricity and gas markets was undisputed, given the potential impact of high prices on society. During the summer, and particularly in August, the presidency's main topics were the electricity and gas price caps, so much so that the climate issues were pushed back, as was actually stated in the original presidency goals ^(CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION N. D.: 47). Even though some of the implemented measures actually help foster the energy transition agenda as well, the emphasis was clearly on the energy and economic crisis the EU was going through. For instance, the gas consumption reduction measures could be ascribed to the decarbonization effort; however, the purpose of the measure was to alleviate the strain on

the supply chain in the first place ^(COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022A). Such a prioritization was unsurprising given the security situation at the time and the government's stance towards the Russia-inflicted war. Since the beginning, PM Fiala's government has been among Ukraine's most visible supporters and framed the whole issue from a geopolitical perspective, making clear that it sees Russian energy supplies as a dangerous weapon ^(FIALA 2022).³ Hence, securing energy supplies fits well into this narrative.

By August 2022, the high energy prices could no longer be ignored. The summer of 2022 caught Europe in what could legitimately be called the perfect storm. The combined effect of an unexpected production outage of nuclear sources in France, and severe droughts and thus a low hydropower output, required natural gas power plants to fill in the supply gap right at the time when the gas prices were high. Although this seemed to be temporary, as it was driven by the sudden surge in demand, the pressure from the civil society as well as the commercial sector prompted governments to act. Eventually, the discussion boiled down to two possible options. The first one was the so-called "Iberian exception", i.e., decoupling natural gas from price setting ^(PATEL 2022). However, the European Commission did not favor imposing this solution, which was viable in the rather specific conditions of the more-or-less isolated Iberian market. In fact, the Commission generally resisted any idea of gas price caps as it maintained that such a cap would inevitably increase demand while strengthening reliance on natural gas as a fuel. The Commission apparently did not favor tampering with the energy market functioning and feared that any such decoupling of commodity prices would be hard to reverse. Eventually, it was agreed upon to cap the "cheap" sources (i.e., those that profit the most from a price set by the expensive natural gas, i.e., renewables and nuclear sources) and use the outstanding profit to soften the impact of the electricity price on consumers ^(OFFICE OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2022). The Czech presidency was happy about the outcome despite the actual measure eventually having a rather dubious and indirect impact.⁴ Nevertheless, the agreed measure inherently impacts the electricity price, thus helping to improve the affordability component.

At the same time, a split emerged among the EU members, indicating what was to be a source of an argument also in the negotiations on the gas price cap later that year. As the year's end neared, the Czech representatives

pushed to reach an agreement, ideally, a unanimous one. Even though unanimity was not, *per se*, required, the Czech representatives wanted to get as many members on board as possible as Minister Síkela apparently wanted to make a name for himself and his team (SHIRYAEVSKAYA 2022; WILLOUGHBY 2022). Also, closing the presidency with a major agreement was crucial for the Czech government. The Czechs, along with other members who felt the price hikes the most (e.g., Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Poland), opposed the somewhat merely symbolic measures for dealing with them proposed by the Commission (LIBOREIRO 2022). On the other hand, they had to convince some of the EU's heavyweights, like Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and Denmark, who maintained that price caps would inflict higher consumption.

In order to reach an agreement, several snap councils were conveyed, highlighting the extensive amount of organizational work done by the presidency. Eventually, the agreement was reached in the eleventh hour on December 19 (CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION 2022B). Even though the deal set the price cap relatively high, it could be regarded as a success from the energy security perspective. Although the measure would serve as more of a “panic brake” than a precaution, it can positively affect the affordability component. Also, the message sent out by the presidency, that is, that it was able to strike a deal based on a wide, if not universal, agreement, should not be understated (ABNETT 2022). The table below summarizes the measures and their impact on the EU's energy security for an easier overview.

As a side note, it should be stated that as much as the government's performance at the EU level was generally praised, the communication of its successes at home was somewhat modest and left a lot to be desired. The opposition's criticism of the government for allegedly not doing enough to tackle the high energy bills was a staple throughout the presidency and was rarely met with a comprehensive response from the government. The government focused on the EU level, relying on a comfortable majority in the Chamber of Deputies. As a result, the opportunity to present the EU presidency to the public and improve the reputation of the Union was not fully used.

TABLE 1: AGREED MEASURES AND THEIR IMPACTS ON ENERGY SECURITY

Measure	Impact
Consumption reduction	Increased availability
Storage refilling	Increased availability
Transborder solidarity	Increased availability
Demand aggregation	Increased affordability
Electricity price cap	Increased affordability
Gas price cap	Increased affordability

Source: the author.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing war and the related crises in the energy and economic sectors heavily influenced the Czech presidency. Expectedly, strengthening the bloc's energy security was among the presidency's priorities. The article utilized the widely used definition of energy security to assess whether the measures agreed on during the presidency could increase the Union's energy security.

The research was based on the definition used by the International Energy Agency, which defines energy security as the uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price. Based on this definition, it was revealed that natural gas saving measures, storage refilling, and transborder solidarity would increase the availability component. The demand aggregation with electricity and gas price caps, on the other hand, would increase the affordability component.

The agreements reached during the 2022 Czech EU presidency should also be praised for their consensual nature and the presidency's effort to reach a wide agreement even when a qualified majority would suffice. Here, the presidency's ability to broker a collective agreement, especially in the face of the energy and economic crisis, should not be understated.

Besides, the Czech government's staffers gained valuable experience during the presidency and will thus likely bring a new quality to state institutions. However, the trying times stretched the human and institutional capacity of the government to its limits. The focus on EU matters may have even caused some domestic tasks to be put on the back burner for the time of the presidency. In any case, the government officials showcased their ability to work as honest brokers, a valued quality for the EU Council presidency.

Although the presidency focused mainly on mitigating the energy and economic crises, several of its measures also positively impacted the climate-related agenda, such as the energy savings measures. Despite being in the shadow of the energy crisis management, these achievements should be recognized. In the face of the potential supply crisis, the presidency also strengthened the role of transborder energy solidarity. Although the solidarity and the agreement on savings were presented as being among the undisputed achievements, they still earned some critique for the built-in exemptions and rather tame goals. Nevertheless, the political importance of the agreement and the joint commitment was significant.

In general, it could be said that the Czech presidency was a success and showcased the state apparatus's ability to broker deals under pressure, even in the sphere where the EU merely shares its powers with member states. Even though the issues highlighted some of the persisting cleavages among member states, the Czech presidency showed its ability to reach an agreement where possible by going the extra mile where needed. Given that the markets have calmed down since the heated moments in the summer of 2022, the most visible legacy of the presidency has remained the way the presidency managed its role in the trying times.

ENDNOTES

- 1 A similar, yet more modest, agreement was reached for electricity consumption (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic 2022).
- 2 Although only a minor part of the capacity was traded at that price and the hike was likely partly driven by speculative actions, it did draw the attention of the public and prompted governments to action.
- 3 The government has supplied military support to Ukraine since the war began, and PM Fiala was among the first visitors to Kiev after the war started.
- 4 The questionable effect of the price caps is given by their rather loose nature, as they set the mechanisms in motion too late for most of the consumers, like in the case of the gas price cap, or had only a very indirect effect, like in the electricity price case. While in the former case, the price cap is higher than the recent price hike, in electricity, the financial help is indirect, using money deducted from profits of the sources benefiting from the high price level.

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NOTE

The text was supported by the Masaryk University research grant "Perspectives of European Integration in the Context of Global Politics V (MUNI/A/1196/2022)".

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