



Development cooperation priorities of the Presidencies of the Council of the European Union, 2006-2009. Conclusions for Poland.

Poland's first-ever presidency term in the Council of the European Union, in the second half of 2011, will present quite a challenge to the entire government administration. Beyond the sheer extent of the tasks concerned with the effective functioning of the Council in its various compositions in terms of logistics and organization, a primary need will be to ensure the substantive coordination of many complex issues that are the focus of the Council's work. The presidency must possess a fundamental grasp of the core facts of every issue debated by the Council, and must be able to assess the positions taken by each Member State as well as by (in the case of foreign relations, for example) non-Union countries and international institutions, in order to facilitate the elaboration of compromise solutions and, when necessary, conduct negotiations with various partners on behalf of all 27 member countries. Over and above these responsibilities, there is also the additional need to consider Poland's own priorities and to skilfully weave them into broader EU policies.

The issues are particularly important in the case of those EU policies that until now have not been viewed as important for Poland as a whole and by the same token were not the focus of sustained interest on the part of administrative organs of government. Development cooperation has undoubtedly belonged to this category. It is fairly certain that in Poland only a handful of specialists are familiar with issues of EU development policy, which suggests that preparations to direct the entirety of the Union's activities in this field are sorely inadequate. The goal of the present paper therefore is to discuss several fundamental questions linked to recent EU presidencies, and to initiate a debate on the substantive breadth of our presidency's activity in the field of development cooperation.

Even a cursory overview of the priorities set out and conclusions published by the last seven EU

presidencies in terms of aid for less developed countries, offers material for reflection and allows for the formulation of some general conclusions that can help our preparations to lead the Union on these issues. The presented overview analyses the presidencies of Austria (1st half of 2006), Finland (2nd half of 2006), Germany (1st half of 2007), Portugal (2nd half of 2007), Slovenia (1st half of 2008), France (2nd half of 2008) and the Czech Republic (1st half of 2009). This selection provides quite a representative sample since the list includes large and small countries, older and newer members, as well as former colonial metropolises and countries without particular historic ties with the global South. An additional factor that separates certain presidencies from others is that some completed their term in arguably normal circumstances, while others needed to make decisions largely dictated by the various effects of the most serious global financial crisis of the last decades.

What does the analysis tell us?

First, none of the examined presidencies included the issue of development cooperation (and even more broadly: EU foreign relations, in general) among the priorities of the Council's work, consigning it to the margins of EU leadership plans. In the joint program of the Austrian and Finnish presidencies (for 2006) the subject „Foreign Relations” appeared in the 14th and penultimate position, while the issue of development cooperation received half a page of attention, and only in the context of multilateral cooperation. The situation was similar in the German presidency's program: the promotion of sustainable development occupied the last position. Portugal's program concluded with a short section titled „Europe and the world”, which contained no direct references to development aid or development policy,

although the subject did crop up in the context of general EU values, trade issues, and cooperation with Africa and Latin America. In the Slovenian presidency's program, the section titled „Increasing the EU's external role in the area of peace, development, and economic relations“, issues of development cooperation were discussed on a par with issues of cooperation with distinct regions of the world, trade cooperation, and the European Security and Defence Policy. Comparatively, France's presidency program contained the most information about intended development cooperation measures. The third section of France's program, devoted to strengthening the EU's role in the international arena, was divided among six points, one of which was the „elaboration of an agenda for mutual development“. In the Czech presidency's program development and humanitarian aid issues were treated as one of nine areas of EU foreign relations. **Obviously, the relative importance accorded to development cooperation in the different programs does not result solely from the subjective perception of the issue by each presidency, but also from the importance of the issue for the Union as a whole, and the need for a prioritisation of Council activities, which means that issues considered less important for the EU are either not included in the programs, or treated laconically at the tail-end of planned activities.**

Second, it must be noted that the resolutions in the field of development cooperation outlined in the programs of successive presidencies were all relatively similar and quite general in content. Overall they repeated certain watchwords meant to serve as general guidelines for EU activities in the field of global development.

These watchwords included: accomplishment of EU activities linked to the Millennium Development Goals, increased cooperation with ACP countries, improving aid effectiveness and integrating development policy with other EU policies, implementation of the EU-Africa Strategy, and continued trade negotiations within the WTO Doha Development Agenda. This situation partly results from a need for conciseness in the presidency programs, but also because, to an important degree, development cooperation ties together some long-term, overlapping processes that are not wholly within the EU's control and are at least equally affected by partner countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Third, contrary to what may be expected, the programs accorded relatively little space to issues that were of particular significance for the country beginning their presidential term. Generally, the presiding countries „weaved“ one or two of their priorities into the overall

action plan, which was broadly tailored to the contemporary state of European development policy and overall EU priorities. Among such „national“ priorities, we can name Germany's promotion of a strengthened role for women in the development process, Portugal's push to expand EU cooperation with Latin America, Brazil, and MERCOSUL, Slovenia's assurance of protection and assistance for women and children in the midst of armed conflict, France's advocacy of the involvement of local government in development processes, and the Czech program's increased support for South Eastern and Eastern Europe, including the Eastern Partnership. **Thus, the influence that the country carrying out the presidency has on the EU's action plan on development cooperation is severely circumscribed and is limited essentially to shifting relative weights of importance from the causes favoured by one's predecessors to one's own. One country – even the largest of aid donors – cannot conduct a „revolution“ in the council's work plan upon taking over the Presidency.**

Why is this case? Among other factors, because – contrary to recurring portrayals in the media (e.g. the supposed conflict between the south and east of Europe on whether to support the poorest countries or those in the midst of transformation) – there are, in fact, no significant divergences in EU Member States' approaches to questions of global development. While it is true that EU members can be on diametrically opposite ends of the spectrum of foreign aid contributions, they nevertheless have relatively similar views on many of the technical aspects of aid delivery mechanisms, and it is precisely these aspects that form the bulk of the work of the EU Council and its subsidiary bodies. Additionally, program continuity is of great importance to development cooperation, as it is in many other areas of EU activity, especially when it comes to key issues. It is for these reasons that issues such as the EU's contribution to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals, improving aid effectiveness, and closer cooperation for development with African countries, although set in motion under one presidency, have subsequently remained among the elements of the biannual Council work programs, independent of which country carries out the presidency.

Fourth, the conclusions published by each presidency at the end of its term make evident that the achievements of presiding countries and the legacy they leave for their successors differ significantly from the goals announced in their initial

presidency programs. Indeed the work reports published at the end of each EU Council presidency are decidedly more detailed – at least in the area of development – and thus constitute a far better source of information on the real state of EU activities in the field during a given six-month period. To an important extent the discrepancies result from the dynamics of various world events, whether they involve the economy, development, or humanitarian action. Such events as the tsunami catastrophe, the food and financial crises, or internal institutional issues within the EU, can „sidetrack” the planned program and divert the attention of the country carrying out the presidency (and of the Union as a whole) onto unexpected issues. Unsurprising, but worth noting, is that each country ending its presidency attempts to highlight its achievements or initiatives by providing detailed information, which contrasts with the laconic and very general nature of the initial programs.

A reading of the presidency reports, especially those of several successive presidencies, offers a perspective onto the evolutionary stages of European development policy, as well as the factors that are likely to shape the agendas of subsequent presidencies. This is however made difficult by the fact that development policy, just as many other EU policies, does not have clearly defined boundaries, while aid issues intertwine with ecological concerns, trade, and EU cooperation with distinct regions of world. In the period 2006-2009 we can nevertheless identify certain unbroken continuities throughout the successive presidencies. Two such significant elements are to be found in EU cooperation with developing countries on migration and climate change. We may thus conclude that **insofar as the issues of development cooperation and aid are not priorities for the EU collectivity, EU members treat as priorities those topics linked with development or South countries which are important for the EU societies.**

Fifth, it is high time to do away with the myth that countries without a colonial past and those that do not have close ties with developing countries cannot contribute any innovations to the EU agenda, even during their presidency. Such conceptions are incongruent with reality. The EU balance sheet of action for development varies widely and reflects the effects of many factors, both internal and external to the EU, but has little to do with the aid contributions of the country fulfilling the presidency. For example, the report on Austria’s presidency in 2006 makes hardly any mention

of European development policy *sensu stricto*, while France’s report glosses over development issues with a few references. On the other hand, development issues are widely discussed in Slovenia’s report on its presidency. The apparent incongruities are largely the effect of the collective elaboration of EU development policy by all 27 member countries (and the European Commission), not by the presidential country on its own. No less important are the current dynamics of global development cooperation. Slovenia’s presidency coincided with a period of preparations for major global conferences on development, which to a great degree contributed to the topic’s unusually frequent mention in EU Council meetings and resolutions, which was then strongly reflected in Slovenia’s presidency report. Conversely, the beginning of the world financial crisis in September 2008 and the resulting need to adopt extraordinary measures to counteract its debilitating effects on the global and European economies took development issues out of the aims of the EU’s French presidency, even though France is heavily involved in global development.

What are the conclusions to be drawn for the Polish EU presidency in the second half of 2011 in the field of development cooperation? The analysis carried out above leads to the following conclusions:

1. It is highly probable that, just as has been the case for the presidencies mentioned above, issues tied to development cooperation will assume a marginal position during Poland’s presidency of the Council of the European Union – if they are accorded a place within the presidency’s program at all. The program’s contents will be a reflection of the current EU development agenda and, in particular, of the legacy of the outgoing Hungarian presidency. Poland will be able to add its priorities to the set of primary issues, but will not have the opportunity to substantially change the process-driven EU development agenda, especially in the case of issues that the Union is committed to resolving because of international treaties, undertaken political responsibilities, the necessity to conduct particular activities in view of major international conferences and negotiations, or because of sudden, unforeseen events (e.g. armed conflicts, humanitarian disasters, economic crises).
2. It is highly probable that during the second half of 2011 EU attention to matters of development cooperation will focus on such issues as the effectiveness of development assistance (Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Seoul, 2011), repairing

the damages caused by the world economic crisis in Southern countries, saving the Millennium Development Goals (particularly in Africa) and discussions surrounding the goals to adopt after 2015, as well as policy coherence for development. There will also be inevitable debate and, perhaps, new responsibilities related to aid volume, particularly relative to the debate on the EU's future financial perspective and structural support for member countries. It is therefore essential to carefully follow evolving discussions in these areas, recognise the individual positions taken by EU members, and identify potential alliances. While carrying out our term, it will be purposeful, and even desirable, that we demonstrate innovation on the issues outlined above, in the form of successive, highly detailed, concrete solutions. This risks being difficult, since – as mentioned at the outset – Poland does not have a circle of specialists on European development cooperation. For these reasons, it is indispensable to rapidly initiate a far-reaching debate and thorough studies on the current EU development agenda and its foreseeable changes. At issue is a fundamental grasp of the key challenges materialising for 2011 in the areas under discussion and the solutions that we, as the EU presidency, are able to propose; but we must also be able to reasonably predict how our propositions will be received by other EU donors and external states, especially the beneficiaries of development aid.

3. Although the greater part of the Polish presidency's term will be taken up with work on the matters discussed above and conducting negotiations on issues that are central to international and European development cooperation, it will nevertheless present a singular opportunity to make an original contribution to European development policy, although it will certainly be limited to one or two distinct issues. Therefore, it is necessary to rapidly initiate discussions and prepare analyses of the proposals that Poland can bring to the table during its presidency and the probabilities of the realisation of our initiatives. Today, we can see several priorities on the horizon (the Eastern Partnership, democracy promotion, reconstruction of post-conflict countries, climate change, as well as migration and development issues). We will, however, have to move beyond general concepts if we are to aptly integrate our projects into the EU development policy infrastructure.

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