

Poland can focus Europe's attention on itself in a positive sense

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Abstract

1 January 2025 is a beginning of Polish six-month Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It starts during a period full of challenges, but Poland is wiser because of the experience of the first Presidency in 2011. The aim of this text is to familiarise readers with the essence of exercising the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The genesis of the Presidency, its principles and benefits for the state that exercises it are explained, as well as how national institutions are involved in it. Poland's priorities are also presented and placed in an international context. The text includes the commentary of prof. Marta Witkowska.

Keywords: European Union, Poland, Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Council of the European Union

Polska może skoncentrować uwagę Europy na sobie w sensie pozytywnym

Streszczenie

1 stycznia 2025 roku Polska rozpoczyna półroczną prezydencję w Radzie Unii Europejskiej. Zaczęła się ona w okresie pełnym wyzwań, ale Polska jest mądrzejsza dzięki doświadczeniu pierwszej prezydencji z 2011 roku. Celem tekstu jest zapoznanie czytelników z istotą sprawowania prezydencji w Radzie Unii Europejskiej. Wyjaśniono genezę prezydencji, jej zasady i korzyści dla państwa, które ją sprawuje, a także sposób, w jaki zaangażowane są w nią krajowe instytucje. Przedstawiono również priorytety Polski i umieszczono je w międzynarodowym kontekście. W tekście wykorzystano komentarz prof. Marty Witkowskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, Polska, prezydencja w Radzie Unii Europejskiej, Rada Unii Europejskiej

What is the Presidency of the Council of the European Union?

The Presidency of the European Council is a simplified term referring to the periodic presidency of a Member State in the Council of the EU, which is one of the main decision-making bodies (along with the European Parliament), composed of ministers from the Member States. The Council, depending on the matters under consideration, consists of the heads of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (then it is the so-called General Affairs Council) or ministers from another ministries (Sectoral Council). The Presidency lasts six months and is held on a rotational basis. All Member States take the Presidency of the Council according to a previously established schedule.

The history and evolution of the EU Presidency are closely linked to the development of the European Union and its earlier organisational forms since the 1950s. Initially, it was relatively modest and focused on organising meetings and coordinating legislative work between the Member States, with the main emphasis being placed on consensus among the six founders of the European Communities (Wallace, Edwards 1976). The growing number of members increased the importance of the Presidency as a mediator between the diverse interests of the Member States. The establishment of the European Union as a result of the provisions of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 broadened the scope of the Presidency's activities, including issues related to foreign and security policy (Treaty on European Union 1992). The Treaty of Lisbon introduced a system of Presidency trios from 2007, in which three successive countries cooperate for 18 months, ensuring continuity of activities (Treaty of Lisbon 2007). Poland forms a trio with Denmark (July–December 2025) and Cyprus (January–June 2026).

The rotating Presidency guarantees that each state has an equal influence on the organisation's actions and decisions. It can be seen that from a simple organiser of meetings, the state holding the Presidency has evolved into a mediator and, to some extent, a creator of policies. Currently, the state presiding over the EU Council:

- organises and leads meetings of the EU Council and its working groups by setting and preparing their agenda,
- mediates negotiations between Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission,
- strives to achieve consensus on legislative and political issues (TEU: declarations 8 and 9).

The state which takes the Presidency of the European Council also has a unique opportunity to promote its image, history and culture. Each Presidency creates its own logo and slogan, which is linked to both national culture and symbolism and expresses established priorities. Information brochures, banners and advertising spots are prepared, articles presenting the history, culture and achievements of a given country are created. Exhibitions, concerts and film screenings related to the history, culture and achievements of a given country are organised. Dishes originating from the cuisine of a given country are served during official events.

"The state which takes the Presidency of the Council hosts many summits and meetings, sometimes extended ones, e.g. EU–USA summits, which usually generate

high financial and administrative costs. The EU has responded to this and offers the entire Brussels corps, which helps prepare meetings at the highest level, especially with smaller countries in mind, which need to be relieved", – says prof. Marta Witkowska from the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies of the University of Warsaw, an expert of *Team Europe Direct*.

Institutions participating in the Presidency. The strategic role of the Permanent Representation in Brussels

The exercise of the Presidency by a Member State requires the involvement of many bodies and structures at the national level and cooperation with EU institutions. The main coordinating and executive role is played by the government. Its head is responsible for the overall political representation of the state at the highest level. The key role is played by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but we cannot forget the role of sectoral ministries (e.g. of agriculture or health). Individual regions (in case of Poland – voivodeships) also have their representatives at meetings and in the organisational process. Many countries appoint a special coordinator (e.g. government plenipotentiary for the Presidency), who is responsible for preparing the programme for these six months, coordinating activities between ministries and national institutions, cooperating with EU bodies and ensuring the coherence of activities.

Prof. Marta Witkowska emphasises that the most sensitive institution for the Presidency is the Permanent Representation (PR) of Poland to the EU, where staffing levels were increased a few months before taking the Presidency. The expert explains: "Working meetings are held in the Permanent Representation before thematic meetings of the EU Council. If the Council meets in a given week, for example, with the ministers of education, and the head of the Ministry of Education comes to Brussels, the Polish delegation first meets in the PR to agree on actions, and then the minister goes to the Council meeting accompanied by people from the Permanent Representation who deal with education issues. This institution has its departments related to the EU directorates-general and reports daily to the relevant sectoral ministries, so that Poland knows what is happening. Later, it receives a return message, i.e. a position from Poland with instructions on whether action needs to be taken. In the legislative process, as part of the negotiations, it participates in the work of working groups. During the Presidency, PR conducts legislative negotiations, so it can introduce to the agenda the legislation that is a priority for the state, as well as priorities from the agenda of the entire Presidency trio."

Prof. Witkowska also emphasises the importance of the participation of national parliaments in exercising the Presidency. The scholar says: "There is a rich programme of meetings, which is very important for the legislative process. Parliaments are the main legislative bodies in the Member States, so agreements at the Council level in Brussels are not as important as the subsequent implementation of the adopted EU law at the

national level, especially in the context of possible complaints and judgments of the ECJ on incorrect implementation or lack of implementation."

The EU specialist, recalling that this is already the second Polish Presidency of the Council, draws attention to the generational change of staff employed in the Permanent Representation. Recalling her last expert visit to Brussels, she says that in 2011, most of the people currently working in the Permanent Representation studied at universities. This does not mean a lack of experience and hardening. This should be seen as an open-mindedness and a different perspective on European affairs from the perspective of people who grew up and matured after Poland's accession to the EU. Professor Witkowska explains: "During the Presidency, the Permanent Representation increases employment. Normally there are about 100 people employed there in various departments. During the first Presidency in 2011, the increase in employment reached the level of about 150 people. In connection with the Presidency, which Poland begins on 1 January 2025, the Permanent Representation currently employs about 300 people."

This generational "rejuvenation" and the involvement of young people is also visible within the group of one hundred so-called liaison officers, who were recruited from among the last year students of European studies from several Polish universities. As prof. Witkowska notes, they are to take care of almost 700 delegations that would come to Poland during the Presidency, providing support from the "local" perspective and logistics, and serving as the first point of contact in case of any problems or the need to change the previously agreed plan.

Priorities of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council

During the Presidency, Poland will focus on three areas: maximising support for Ukraine, maintaining the current policy towards Russia and Belarus, and strengthening the security and resilience of the EU and its partners. The motto of these six months is "Security, Europe!", and security is understood very broadly, as for: military, information, economy, energy, food, or health. However, there will be no shortage of space for "soft" accents. Poland has prepared a rich cultural programme inaugurated on 3 January 2025 at the Grand Theatre – Polish National Opera in Warsaw. The ceremonial gala opening the Polish Presidency was held there (*Opening ceremony...* 2025).

The declared priorities of the Polish Presidency include:

- political, military and financial support for Ukraine,
- EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus,
- EU enlargement to the East and South,
- revitalising the Eastern Partnership,
- strengthening the security and resilience of the EU,
- intensifying EU–NATO cooperation and countering disinformation,
- cooperation between the European Union and global partners,
- actions to uphold international law and respect for human rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).

Prof. Witkowska emphasises: "Poland starts the Presidency in a trio with Denmark and Cyprus. The basis for the coherence of actions was the agreement on common priorities within the trio, which are: hybrid threats, illegal migration, situation in Ukraine. Poland is taking over the Presidency after Hungary, and these priorities remain relevant, we will continue everything that was well started by the Hungarians. I see that Poland will care about the following issues: the defence aspect, border control, regaining the competitiveness of the Union and protection of various groups of EU citizens. The first two are obvious, because we are a country with an external EU border and we have a problem with immigration to the EU".

"Regaining competitiveness from the EU is a difficult goal for Poland to achieve, but it is one of the priorities of the entire Union. We are all facing a crisis of competitiveness of two powers – the USA and China. After Donald Trump's re-election, it became even more important, but even before his presidency, the American fight against the inflow of goods from China began. The U.S. authorities began to subsidise the American technology industry. Subsidised production is, for obvious reasons, more competitive. In this way, the U.S. authorities wanted to strengthen their own potential, competitiveness and innovation of their own economy, while blocking China. In addition, the EU economy is very "expensive", including through social security, which we as Europeans will not give up. This means that our economy is not competitive with the Chinese or American one. In order to maintain it, the Competitiveness Fund was established as a response to the predatory ideas of the USA and China. Therefore, the Polish Presidency faces a very difficult legislative path in this area", – the expert explains.

Other challenges that Poland will face include the upcoming parliamentary elections in Germany, Donald Trump's return to the White House and the situation in the Middle East. However, prof. Marta Witkowska is optimistic and points to Poland's experience gained during its first Presidency in 2011 and the fact that Donald Tusk is once again the head of the government (he also has five years of experience in negotiations as President of the European Council), and Radosław Sikorski is the Minister of Foreign Affairs – as during the previous Presidency.

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