

‘AI, captain’ - Czechia’s approach to tech and energy during their EU presidency

Blog post by Analyst Alessandro Vecchi Marsh, 5 July 2022

The Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union has been dubbed ‘the Crisis presidency’ as it inherits the responsibility for coordinating the bloc’s response to the war in Ukraine and the resulting refugee crisis. They will simultaneously have to balance cutting down reliance on Russian oil and ensuring gas reserves are suitable for the winter, improving economic resilience, and continuing negotiations on the Fit for 55 package, as well as pushing forward tech policy. Focusing on the latter two, Czechia has often been seen as sceptical towards the EU’s climate goals and is sailing into the presidency with a Pirate tech minister. The next six months could prove to be interesting.

The Pirate in question is Ivan Bartoš, Czechia’s deputy prime minister for digitalisation, a dreadlocked accordion-playing Pirate Party leader who is sure to spice up the Council’s publicity photos. The Pirate Party, part of the international Pirate movement, was founded in 2009 on principles of copyright reform and digital rights, favouring the protection of citizens over government powers.

They entered Czech government for the first time in 2021 as part of a five-party coalition. They had already clashed with the EU on some issues - while in opposition, they supported the Reclaim Your Face movement against the use of mass biometric surveillance, and strongly protested the controversial Article 17 of the revised EU Directive on Copyright. Earlier this year, Bartoš expressed his disapproval of the European Commission’s proposal to combat online child sexual abuse which would allow snooping in on emails and private messaging systems.

An important piece of legislation that he will now have to co-ordinate member states’ positions on is the EU’s Artificial Intelligence Act, a commission proposal to create a classification for AI applications in order to more effectively regulate the technology. Currently there are three levels to this - unacceptable risk, which includes China-like government social scoring systems, high risk, such as CV scanning algorithms, which Pirates have spoken out against for its perceived discriminatory nature, and limited risk, i.e., chatbots, and minimal risk algorithms, left unregulated.

Bartoš has stressed that the high risk definitions should capture cases which could put civilians in danger from authorities but should not create an overly restrictive environment for businesses developing AI technology. The theme here is a push for more regulation on AI, but specifically on monitoring uses from authorities, and a pull back on cumbersome regulation for businesses.

Digital is not the only area where this push and pull dynamic is observed. The Czechs have said that furthering the EU’s Fit for 55 plans will be a priority during their presidency, despite often defending the activities of carbon-intensive industries. As a country that produces 36% of its energy

through nuclear plants, Czechia has fought for nuclear power to be considered as environmentally sustainable in the EU Taxonomy, and to allow for looser deadlines on investments into nuclear energy.

A promotion of this nuclear strategy is likely, as they have admitted to focusing primarily on reducing dependence on Russian oil, over decarbonisation. Perhaps this could allow for a promotion of nuclear energy as an alternative to Russian oil, though they will face opposition from many pro-green states who are committed to keeping nuclear power out of the taxonomy. A presidency can only work with what is already on the agenda, and the only explicit files supporting nuclear power relate to its financing. But the presidency can restrict time for discussions of files seen as unhelpful and give tacit support to blocking minorities in the Council's complex voting system. We would expect Council Conclusions and other policy statements to push forward the umbrella initiative of the green transition, while giving lower emphasis to renewables, indirectly providing an opportunity to keep nuclear power going for longer.

To be a credible presidency, Prague will have to project impartiality, floating compromises within 'the negotiating box' set by others' positions, but in a few cases the government will be able to exercise selective hearing for the positions of other member states, potentially towards looser regulations for businesses involved in AI, a more privacy-focused approach to the use of data, and a more favourable approach to nuclear energy while searching for alternative energy sources. While Heads of Government summits (not chaired by the presidency) will continue likely be dominated by the biggest issue of responding to the Ukraine war, Prague has assured that they would not let it distract from the rest of its goals and would commit to fulfilling its priorities.