



Partnership for the Presidency?

Cooperation between the government administration and the non-governmental sector during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union – lessons for Poland

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- *The Czechs have considerable experience in cooperation between the government administration and the third sector. Poland, while preparing for its Presidency of the EU Council, should use the cooperation mechanisms developed by them.*
- *The third sector should be included in the process of consulting the Polish Presidency priorities as well as informing the Polish public about the Presidency itself.*
- *In the Czech Republic, contacts between government officials and representatives of the non-governmental sector are open and based on mutual trust. Polish administration should build a network of informal contacts which could be used to obtain advice and improve communication with the society.*
- *Grant competitions organised in the Czech Republic, for NGO projects, have not always produced the expected results. Such competitions should be announced early enough and should be governed by clearly defined procedures.*
- *An effective way to promote the priorities of the Presidency abroad is for the government administration to organise, in cooperation with the third sector, an international conference on one of the leading themes of the Presidency. Such a gathering should be attended by officials from other member states and the European Commission, experts and representatives of non-governmental organisations.*

The approaching Polish Presidency of the EU Council in 2011 provokes reflection on what action should be taken in order to meet the challenge of leading the EU not only in the political and organisational sense, but also on how to use that time to bring the Community closer to people in Poland. In spite of the strong support of the Polish society for the process of European integration, Poles do not see the need for active involvement or even participating in making decisions about its future by e.g. voting in elections. They do not know this entity very well, either. The institution of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union may seem particularly vague as it cannot be compared to any national body and it will be for the first time that Poland will hold it. It is for those reasons that the time of the Presidency should be used to promote the idea of integration among Poles more intensively than ever. It is also necessary to carry out an effective information campaign concerning the goals, the powers and the course of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council. Non-governmental organisations should be partners in those activities, as they have repeatedly proved to know the needs of Poles and can effectively reach the public with their message. Besides, for the administration they are a valuable source of knowledge and information about public feeling¹.

While analysing the Czech activities and their effects from the point of view of the approaching Polish Presidency of the EU Council, attention should be paid to some fundamental differences between the two countries, which make some of the solutions developed and applied by the Czechs impossible to implement in Poland. The main difference is the size of the country and its population. Among the ten million Czech citizens, there is a smaller number of experts, non-governmental organisations, journalists and officials than in the, four times bigger, population of Poland. Therefore in Poland it is much more difficult to secure the cooperation of all the interested and competent people and organisations. There will always be competition between them and personal contacts will not be as well developed as it is the case in the Czech Republic. It will not be possible for consultations and information sharing to take place face to face, as in Prague. Another important difference will be the manner of holding the Presidency – in case of Poland it will be under the rule of the Lisbon Treaty. Because of the less significant role of the rotating Presidency in the EU foreign policy, the involvement of non-governmental organisations in this area, and especially of think tanks, will have to be smaller than it was in the case of the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, it is worth following the Czech examples and considering how they could be adapted to the Polish reality.

The Czech government administration and the third sector

Contacts between the Czech government administration and the third sector have been very good for many years – there has been cooperation, exchange of views and mutual openness. The period of the Presidency has not brought about any significant changes – they have been evident over the last few years and should not be attributed only to the EU Presidency.

The most praise for contacts with non-governmental organisations has been given to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the most important areas of cooperation between the Czech MFA and the third

¹ The text is an outcome of the project: “Cooperation between the government administration and the non-governmental sector during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union – lessons for Poland” carried out in cooperation with a Czech think tank EUROPEUM thanks to the support of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Polish-Czech Forum. It has been produced on the basis of in-depth interviews carried out in Prague in September and November 2009. The interviewees included Czech government administration officials, representatives of the third sector, experts and journalists (22 in total). The full results of the study are available in the report in the Polish language: A. Łada, „Partnerstwo dla Prezydencji? Współpraca administracji z sektorem pozarządowym podczas czeskiej prezydencji w Radzie UE – wnioski dla Polski”. [“Partnership for the Presidency? Cooperation between the government administration and the non-governmental sector during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union – lessons for Poland”], Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2009.

sector is the field of human rights and development aid. During the Presidency, those themes were particularly important and therefore a number of cooperation mechanisms were developed. However, the department responsible for those issues had distinguished itself positively among other MFA departments and government agencies even before the Presidency. This is an area where reliable and detailed information is often lacking and such information may sometimes only be supplied by various NGOs present in different parts of the world. Hence the advice and expertise of independent entities is very useful for government officials.

Therefore, the Department of Human Rights and Transformation Policy has developed various forms of cooperation with the third sector. They award grants for NGO activities abroad, consult government proposals and legislative initiatives and request information on the current processes going on in the countries receiving development aid. For instance, NGOs are invited to the Ministry for talks concerning Belarus, Cuba or Russia. Together with government officials, they think how democracy can be promoted in these countries. The government cannot reveal all the information, but it tries to listen and share the knowledge that can be disclosed. Most contacts have a very informal nature.

In order to improve the cooperation with numerous organisations involved in development assistance, MFA has actively supported the formation of a network of such entities. After a series of consultations, in 2008, the organisations formed DEMAS – Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights. Uniting a number of entities in one network has been in the interest of the Ministry as it has made the process of consultation and the whole cooperation much easier. Now, the government officials hope that the network will develop and will become even more efficient. DEMAS receives institutional support from the Ministry (awarded as a result of a competition). The organisation has played an important role in organising one of the key events, prepared jointly by the government and the third sector during the Presidency – the conference on Building Consensus about EU Policies on Democracy Support.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stands out as a model example of cooperation with third sector organisations. Other ministries or the Prime Minister's Chancellery have not been so active. That is, however, partly a result of the nature of their activity. Ministries award grants in competitions related to specific topics, relevant for them in a given year. Some of them also carry out consultations and have contacts with non-governmental organisations. Competitions for various activities involving dissemination of information are regularly organised by the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. Every year, it announces a topic around which the subsidised activities should concentrate. This mechanism has also been used during the Presidency.

The state has, for years, been the biggest source of funding for the Czech non-governmental organisations. In comparison to other countries of the former Soviet bloc, Czech organisations active in the area of culture, social work and sports receive substantial support from business and private sponsors. It results from the fact that most Czechs perceive non-governmental organisations as influential entities which help to solve social problems and contribute to the proper functioning of democracy.

Numerous meetings, initiatives and consultations as well as the size of the country are the reasons why contacts between the two sides – the governmental and non-governmental – are very frequent. A relatively small number of industry-specific non-governmental organisations and experts² is the reason why in a given field everyone knows each other and it is something obvious that they all have each other's mobile numbers.

It is not insignificant that quite a few government officials have the third sector background. That applies particularly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including Tomas Pojar, the deputy Foreign Minister during

² A small number when compared to Poland – the Czech Republic is a much smaller country and therefore there is not so much competition between organisations and experts.

the Presidency and the officials surrounding deputy Prime Minister Alexander Vondra. Some high rank officials, at the same time have their responsibilities in organisations and continue to provide advice to the government. That is helpful in maintaining good relations, facilitates better understanding and more intensive contacts. The period of the Presidency has made this particular group more numerous as the government administration, at the time, needed competent people and could find them in non-governmental organisations. Some of them have remained at their ministries after 30 June 2009.

Consulting the priorities

Close contacts, already existing between the government officials and non-governmental organisations definitely helped the Czechs develop an efficient model for consulting the priorities with the third sector. Organisations could comment on the outline prepared by the government by sending in their remarks. In some selected areas, experts were asked for opinion. They gathered a few times on *working breakfast* meetings where, together with government officials, they talked in working groups about the topics that should be raised under a given priority. They also communicated with the government by e-mail, receiving the necessary, confidential information. There had been no problem in selecting the experts to participate in the consultations as all the most distinguished experts in a given field would be invited. In Poland, where because of the very size of the country the number of specialists is much higher, it would be difficult to organise exactly the same type of meetings. Notwithstanding that difficulty, depending on the subject matter, the number of participants involved and the time available, some opinions should be gathered during **face-to-face meetings** with the third sector and not only in writing. This will provide an opportunity for discussions and direct exchange of information. Definitely, **the process of consultation** started by the Polish government in 2009 in the form of meetings with selected representatives of the third sector and experts **should be continued**. It would also be desirable to use the advice of Czech officials who realise how important for the mutual communication and understanding were **the signals that the government administration was treating the involvement of the third sector seriously**. Replying to questions or providing information are simple, yet necessary, ways to maintain contact with the third sector representatives. Friendly response and creating an atmosphere of trust and common interests are the basis for successful cooperation. Such a signal, as the Czechs emphasise, is also **providing** the experts **with feedback**, telling them to what extent their guidance and assessment has been used. That will give them motivation for further work and will let them improve the proposals they prepare. Such feedback may be placed on a website, sent as a newsletter or directly by e-mail only to the interested parties.

The Czech officials admitted that during the Presidency they had been too busy to use all the recommendations and regularly follow the experts' comments. If they needed their advice, they had to get it immediately, without convening large meetings or commissioning expert analyses. That is why it is necessary for the officials to create, a few months before the Presidency, **a database of private contact details** of experts, journalists, members of the European Parliament and representatives of non-governmental organisations. It will enable them, during the Presidency, to quickly obtain information, guidance and comments on the proposals they will be working on. On the other hand, experts should formulate their recommendations for the government administration before the Presidency begins. During its course, they need to focus on bringing the results of government actions closer to the public, by cooperating with the media and preparing texts understandable for an average citizen. At the same time, representatives of the third sector should be aware that at none of those stages – the preparation and the Presidency itself – the government will be able to disclose all the information. However, it is still necessary to encourage the officials to be open and **strive for building as much trust as possible**.

Grant competitions for the third sector

NGOs will join the Presidency information activities if they have appropriate funding. In the Czech Republic, a pool of resources allocated every year for projects related to communication with the public has been assigned for that purpose. In 2009 one of such themes was the Presidency itself. The Office of the Government selected 22 initiatives of which only 6 concerned the Presidency. The government, however, was not satisfied with the effects of the competition. The reason for that was the relatively low quality of the proposals. That, in turn, resulted probably, as the government officials assessed, from a small number of organisations active in the area of European issues, from the limited knowledge of the competition among potential beneficiaries and competition guidelines that were too complicated. The competition had been launched too late and the information did not reach some of the stakeholders in time.

It is necessary to hold a similar competition, however, it should be devoted solely to the Presidency – a competition **for projects of non-governmental organisations aiming at informing the public about the Presidency, its role and priorities**. Learning from the Czech mistakes, in Poland the intention to launch such a competition should be made public early enough (even a few months before its launch) so that organisations could prepare interesting proposals. Since the priorities will be set rather late, it is obvious that not all subjects on which the information activities will focus may be announced at the outset. However, some areas as well as the preferred target groups or tools are fixed and certain and therefore the potential beneficiaries should be given that information early on.

Descriptions and announcements of all the events to be organised as part of the subsidised projects should appear, following the Czech model, on the official website of the Presidency. Only some selected events should take place under the official auspices of the Presidency, as it was the case in the Czech Republic.

International conferences as a way to promote the priorities internationally

Such events should be international conferences devoted to topics closely linked to the Presidency priorities. In the Czech Republic, in cooperation between the government administration and the third sector, two such meetings have been organised: a conference *Building Consensus about EU Policies on Democracy Support* in March and *Eastern Partnership: Towards Civil Society Forum* in May 2009. Both have been prepared by non-governmental organisations in close cooperation with the Czech government and the European Commission and they gathered representatives of the third sector, officials and experts from a number of EU member states. A factor important for their success was the fact that they were close in time to the political summits covering the same issues. The March conference was held just before the meeting of COHOM – Working Party on Human Rights³. Its participants could therefore relay the conclusions from the debate directly to the interested officials. The Eastern Partnership Forum directly preceded the EU summit initiating the EaP project. Recommendations produced by the third sector could be immediately presented to the politicians. Careful timing is vital in such situations as it provides for appropriate publicity and ensures that the conclusions reach the decision-makers.

³ COHOM is a group responsible for creating the EU human rights policy in external relations. It regularly monitors how human rights are respected all over the world and prepares the EU position concerning particular topics and events in this area. The Czech Presidency set itself a goal to become involved in those issues and to push forward the work of this group on the European Consensus on Democracy.

The above mentioned events have thus played a double role – they promoted the priorities of the Czech Presidency abroad and engaged non-governmental organisations in working out the decisions related to those goals. That was their significant added value. Until today, when, for instance, the autumn Civic Society Forum is discussed, organised by the European Commission in Brussels within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, the event of May 2009 is always mentioned, its conclusions are invoked and it is given as an example of the way to proceed and lead a discussion with the participation of representatives of EU member states and EaP countries.

The organisation of those conferences also shows a trend that is important for the cooperation of the government administration and the third sector. They focused mainly on the areas related to the priorities of the Presidency. That seems to be the right solution. The government has set forth the areas for which it has allocated more resources and in which it wished to involve as many people as possible, both in the country and abroad. The assistance of non-governmental organisations has helped them to achieve those goals. With limited financial resources and human and organisational potential it would not be possible to have effective cooperation in additional areas, less relevant to the six months Presidency. As the example of the French Presidency shows, where too many events were organised in too many areas, such course of action leads to chaos and lack of a clear message to the public⁴.

The Czech example is worth following in case of Poland. In order to reach the civil society in other countries with the message of any specific priority and to work out a truly European position it is worthwhile **to organise international conferences during the Presidency in cooperation with the third sector**, conferences that would bring together non-governmental organisations, experts and both national and EU officials. Such events should end with producing a set of specific recommendations. It is also important that there are not too many such events as it is the quality and not the quantity that matters for achieving the desired range of influence. The topic of one of the events could be, taking into account the probable goals of the Polish Presidency, the Eastern Partnership. Additional arguments for such a choice are the involvement of Poland in the programme, our geographical location (facilitating the presence of the Eastern partners, necessary for discussion of issues concerning them) and, *last but not least*, considerable experience of Polish non-governmental organisations in cooperating with entities from EaP countries.

Why is it worthwhile to cooperate?

As the Czech example shows, good cooperation between the government administration and the third sector, not only during the Presidency, brings **specific benefits** to both parties. In summary, it may be worth listing those benefits. From **the point of view of the Czech officials they include:**

- Creating an effective channel for communication with the public, for presenting the arguments, providing information
- Obtaining support in promotion of the activities and intentions of the government
- Acquiring important information, not available from other sources. For instance, only non-governmental organisations can get certain information in countries engulfed in conflict and have very specific knowledge about the real situation of the societies in developing countries.
- An opportunity to consult plans, receive comments and expert analysis

⁴ L. Kolarska-Bobińska, J. Kucharczyk, A. Łada, E. Kaca, A. Sobańska: „Polska prezydencja w Radzie Unii Europejskiej: współpraca administracji publicznej z sektorem pozarządowym”. “Polish presidency of the EU Council: cooperation between public administration and the non-governmental sector. [“Expert opinion commissioned by the Office of the Committee for European Integration”], http://prezydencjaue.gov.pl/files/pliki/dopobrania/isp18_03_09.pdf, s. 82.

■ Learning about innovative, original ideas. Not all of them can be implemented but they help develop the strategy

The **third sector** can also gain a lot by actively cooperating with public administration during the Presidency. That is especially so in Poland, where this cooperation is not well developed yet, working together during the Presidency offers an opportunity to improve the situation. The Czech **representatives of the third sector list the following benefits of such cooperation:**

- An opportunity to present their point of view to the government
- The establishment of a communication channel – for exchange of information and opinions
- An opportunity to suggest what action on the part of the government would be most useful for the development of the third sector (rules for grant competitions, legal regulations)
- Promoting their activities among the public
- Institutional development through gaining valuable experience

It would be good if Polish government administration and the third sector were aware of those benefits and were open to cooperation. The Presidency can provide a good opportunity to intensify common work and develop new mechanisms that will not only help government officials in their duties and strengthen non-governmental organisations but will also have positive impact on the activity of the Polish civil society in general and its interest in the European Union, which is the primary goal of both partners.

How the Czech example can be used in Poland?

The experience gained from the cooperation between the government administration and the third sector during the Czech Presidency may be used during the Polish preparations to taking over that role. A similar level of development of the democratic society and the history of the recent years make it advisable, in many cases, to follow the example of our neighbours, especially wherever their actions have been successful. Not all solutions, however, will be possible to apply. Apart from the differences mentioned above, which make it impossible to copy the Czech examples exactly, there are a few more. An important difference, which may be made less acute in Poland by the very timing of the Presidency, is the fact that in the Czech Republic, the relations between the government and the third sector had been very good even before the Presidency, unlike in Poland where a lot still has to be done. Therefore the six-month period did not bring any significant changes in this area. Either with respect to the contacts network developed both by government officials and NGO workers, or with regard to broadly understood cooperation of the two partners – the state and the non-governmental entities – not much has changed. The only evident effect, often mentioned, has been greater experience gained by individual organisations in cooperation and preparation of big important events, which also improved their standing with government officials. However, in the Czech Republic the latter are aware of the role of the third sector anyway, because that is where they have come from. The merging of those two worlds has a positive influence on their cooperation and is something that should be desired in Poland. People with NGO background bring to government administration environment a fresh outlook, understanding of the citizens' needs and experience in reaching the public. Therefore, while making plans for the Polish Presidency, it is worthwhile reaching for people with experience in working for non-governmental organisations.

Even though the Czechs have been used to good cooperation between the government and the third sector, it has been emphasised that consulting the Presidency priorities and strategy with non-governmental organisations has been the right thing to do, has been desirable and appreciated by both parties. Every such event brings some new knowledge. However, as the Czechs have warned, the organizations should not have

too many expectations. It will not be possible to take into consideration all their ideas and even those that will eventually find their way into the agenda, will not necessarily bring about significant changes in a given area. Polish experts should also bear that in mind.

The new experience gained by the Czech organisations – holding big international events – can be used in future. Apart from some organisational lessons that have been learnt, the European aspect has also been important for the third sector – its representatives would contact not only their own government but also the European Commission and other officials in Brussels. They now have a better understanding of how the European bureaucracy works, have more contacts, are members of a greater number of networks, which helps them in practical operation on the European scene. Polish organisations should therefore be aware that for six months the state holding the Presidency will be in the spotlight, and various organisations from different countries will try to make contact. That is why non-governmental organisations should use the time of the Presidency for **building a network of international links with their partners** in Brussels and in other member states. At the same time, when planning their involvement in the Presidency information campaigns, consultations with the government and making new contacts, the organisations should also **take into account the time after the Presidency**. After the six months, the Presidency will end and it will be necessary to go back to everyday work. Therefore, on the one hand it is advisable to start, early enough, cooperation with organisations and the embassy of the country which will take over the Presidency and, on the other hand, to think about a general strategy for the further development of the activities, regardless of the European policy, considering the experience gained during the Presidency.

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