

Author: Đorđe Dimitrov, Junior Researcher, European Policy Centre - CEP, Strahinja Subotić, Programme Manager and Senior Researcher, CEP

Belgian Presidency of The Council of the EU

Presidency Returns to the Heart of Europe

On 1 January 2024, Belgium, one of the European Union's founding members, will assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union. This will be Belgium's 13th presidency overall and its second since the Lisbon Treaty. The country finds itself at a critical juncture in the twilight of the current European institutional cycle and ahead of the European Parliament (EP) election, highlighting the utmost urgency to finish some pertinent pending issues. Moreover, the Belgian federal election will take place along with the EP election, thus further burdening the Presidency. Under the guiding principles of "protect our people," "strengthen our economy," and "prepare for our shared future," the Belgian presidency is poised to grapple with the multifaceted challenges confronting the EU. This insight seeks to unravel the strategies, policies, and diplomatic endeavours that Belgium will employ in leading Europe in the upcoming six months.

Unity in Jeopardy?

Considering the rising number of disagreements among EU members regarding aid to Ukraine, the Belgian Presidency will assume a pivotal role in advocating for a unified EU policy to support Ukraine financially and adopt further sanctions against Russia. Namely, Belgium has been one of the frontrunners in providing support to Ukraine, with assistance amounting to a total of 495.5 million euros so far. Yet, Hungary's persistent veto threats underscore the challenge of maintaining unity, particularly as the December 2023 European Council agreed to revert to the issue of providing 50 billion euros in financial assistance to Ukraine in early 2024. Overcoming this obstacle will be the key challenge of the Presidency, forming an integral part of the wider revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework. Other examples demonstrate that the potential ruptures go beyond



a single member state. For instance, Austria threatened to block the latest sanctions, only retracting its veto in the eleventh hour. Moreover, Slovakia's new government's decision to terminate military aid to Ukraine has further undermined unity and has the potential to weaken Ukraine's position. As the war will enter its third year during the Presidency, and with no potential for the conflict to end any time soon, the Belgian Presidency's adept navigation of internal discord will not only shape the EU's response to the crisis but also determine the bloc's credibility as a united force on the global stage in the long run.

Amidst Belgium's steadfast support for Ukraine's European integration, a pressing concern emerges in averting potential vetoes during its forthcoming accession process. This challenge was vividly illustrated by the fact Hungary's **opposition** to **opening** the accession negotiations with Ukraine persisted until the very end before ultimately changing their decision in December 2023. At that time, Austria's conditional stance to Ukraine's start of accession, tied to its **insistence** on the need to give concessions to Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, added to the complexity. With negotiations now underway, ensuring unanimity for the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), determining the negotiation framework, and facilitating the screening process become the next important tasks for the Presidency. Thus, the success of Belgium's Presidency, and of the EU in general *vis-à-vis* this issue will consist of managing to avoid delays that could impede progress, especially given the looming European Parliament elections and that there will be a considerable time gap before a new institutional cycle commences.

Preparing for the Future Ahead of the European Elections

The upcoming Belgian federal election, coinciding with the European election, has the potential to cast a shadow over the seamless execution of the presidency's responsibilities. There is a risk that the government's attention might be shifted towards the national election, thus potentially challenging the administration's capacity to effectively chair the EU during the presidency. The intricacies of the political landscape amplify this concern, with the incumbent government forming a coalition of seven parties - a staggering 500 days after the initial election. Adding to the complexity, internal challenges within the country have propelled the separatist-right wing Vlaams Belang from Dutch-speaking Flanders to the forefront, currently leading the **polls**. This mirrors a broader trend of far-right movements

in Europe, exemplified by the recent success of the far-right Party for Freedom (VVD) in the Netherlands' **November general elections**. Prime Minister De Croo's Flemish conservative liberal party, according to polls, is at a historic low, further intensifying the political complexities. Despite these challenges that might consume the administration's time and resources, the fact the elections will take place at the very end of the Presidency term will soften the electoral impact on Belgium's administration.

In addition, with the European Parliament elections looming in June, Belgium is poised to undertake a concerted effort to complete the European legislative agenda before the democratic process unfolds. The significance of the task is underscored by the fact that there are approximately 150 pending legislative acts, which will be diligently addressed in the run-up to the elections, with the **Right to Repair Directive** and the **Ambient Air Quality Directive** being some of the examples. The most difficult task will be to handle the meticulous review of the **Multiannual Financial Framework**, which is especially important in the context of approving aid for Ukraine. As Belgium's overarching objective is to facilitate a seamless transition between the current and upcoming political cycles, it will be of critical importance to successfully finalise the pending legislation and tasks, in order to avoid a hiatus that would extend until the new Commission assumes its duties in late 2024.

In addition, with the European Parliament elections looming in June, Belgium is poised to undertake a concerted effort to complete the European legislative agenda before the democratic process unfolds. The significance of the task is underscored by the fact that there are approximately 150 pending legislative acts, which will be diligently addressed in the run-up to the elections, with the Right to Repair Directive and the Ambient Air Quality Directive being some of the examples.

Finally, in the context of the ongoing discussions on strategies to make the EU more robust and globally competitive, Belgium is poised to emphasise the necessity to make advancements in the tech area. This gains paramount importance when taking into account that the EU is significantly trailing behind the US and China in crucial domains like artificial intelligence and advanced microchips. Namely, member states will be expected to agree on the **Strategic Agenda 2024-2029**, as well as the **European Economic Security Strategy**. In an attempt to shed light on the tech potential of the Union, Prime Minister De Croo's **tech-savvy reputation** adds a personal dimension to this, as he is known to be a technology enthusiast and currently oversees Belgium's cybersecurity centre. Moreover, the focus on tech policy would align with the imperative to finalise crucial legislative acts which have been on the EU's agenda for some time such as the **AI Act**, **Cybersecurity Act**, **Cyber Resilience Act**, and **Cyber Solidarity Act**. This approach could help the EU catch up with other tech competitors, meet its ambitious digital targets for 2030, and eventually position it as a tech leader as part of its efforts to secure European strategic autonomy.

In the context of the ongoing discussions on strategies to make the EU more robust and globally competitive, Belgium is poised to emphasise the necessity to make advancements in the tech area. This gains paramount importance when taking into account that the EU is significantly trailing behind the US and China in crucial domains like artificial intelligence and advanced microchips.



The Message is Clear – Enlargement is Back

Although not traditionally seen as an enlargement enthusiast, Belgium has sent clear signals that enlargement policy will be among its top priorities this time around. Such prioritisation emerges amidst the prevailing geopolitical momentum, bolstered by the EU's dedicated commitment to drive forward the enlargement process. In fact, building upon the December 2023 **European Council** and **the Council** conclusions, the Belgian Presidency will, as outlined in its **programme**, place a particular focus on the EU's capacity to integrate new members and drive internal reforms. Moreover, as **articulated** by the Belgium Ambassador to Serbia, Belgium aims at establishing a roadmap on enlargement and a draft calendar for working parties which will be working on enlargement. All these are essentially supposed to align with the commitment outlined in the **Brussels 2023 Declaration**, which acknowledges the EU's ongoing dedication to exploring additional measures to advance gradual integration. Although this matter have been a part of discussions in EU circles during the outgoing presidency, as indicated by the Spanish Ambassador to Serbia, the need for its operationalisation still largely lingers. Therefore, the litmus test of Belgium's overall success *vis-à-vis* enlargement will be determined by how effectively it will address proposals for gradual accession. The successful undertaking of such initiatives could serve as a crucial step in translating commitments into action, particularly as they are to set the course upon which the new institutional cycle of the EU can build in the next five years.

So far, the **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans** stands out as the most concerted effort to introduce a staged approach to accessing the enhanced benefits. Yet, despite its promising potential, its fate is still uncertain. Namely, conceived to infuse re-

newed vigour and predictability into the enlargement process by tying access to increased funds with the implementation of essential reforms, it essentially incorporates elements of the **Staged Accession Model**, as evidenced by the head of DG NEAR Gert Jan Koopman. However, as the Plan has been swiftly formulated by the Commission, without previously engaging in the necessary consultation procedure and without conducting an impact assessment, it is uncertain whether it will be endorsed by member states. This uncertainty underscores the heightened significance of forthcoming discussions on the revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework. At the moment, it is quite uncertain whether the member states will unanimously agree to reallocate part of the funds (i.e. €2 billion in grants) to the Western Balkans, given the prevailing focus on assisting Ukraine through the Ukraine Facility. Even if the funds are reallocated, the Council will need to subsequently give its take of the New Growth Plan, most likely by amending the Regulation to an extent. With time running short before the elections, Belgium is poised to play an important role in facilitating these discussions effectively. The attainment of the green light for the plan would signify a monumental stride toward operationalising gradual accession. Failure to do so, would undoubtedly cause serious harm to the EU's credibility and reputation in the region.

About European Policy Centre - CEP

European Policy Centre - CEP - is a nongovernmental, non-profit, independent think-tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

- 1) Good Governance
- 2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
- 3) Regional Policy, Networks and Energy
- 4) Our Europe

For more information, please visit www.cep.org.rs