



## EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

# The Next Presidency of the Council of the EU: what to expect when Sweden takes over

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### Summary

On 1 January Sweden takes over the presidency of the Council of the EU for the third time since joining in 1995. While the institutional importance of the rotating presidency has declined since the Lisbon Treaty, it remains a significant responsibility.

Sweden takes on the role in a time of war and economic turmoil and will face a heavy legislative agenda as the EU is nearing the end of its legislative cycle.

This analysis outlines the institutional conditions of the upcoming Swedish presidency, the domestic and European political context, and the preparations so far. Despite the recent change of government and the challenge of uniting the member states, we find that Sweden is likely to succeed in its ambition to be a professional and effective chair, not least given the early, cross-party preparations and its experienced and well-resourced civil service.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the authors.

## 1. Introduction

On 1 January 2023 Sweden takes over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU, the last country in the current Trio, preceded by the Czech Republic and before that France. Sweden's six-month tenure will coincide not only with the final negotiations on a range of legislative files, but also a need for European collective decision-making in relation to unprecedented instability and economic challenges which are the consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, Sweden has a new coalition government, led by the centre-right Moderates but dependent on support from the traditionally Eurosceptic Sweden Democrats, who had a strong electoral performance. Sweden is also preparing for a historic shift in its security and defense policy; having applied for NATO membership it is likely to become a member of the military alliance soon.

This paper first presents the domestic, external and institutional conditions in which the presidency will be held: the broader European context; the institutional role of the rotating chair; Sweden's historic trajectory as a member state, and the current domestic political context. It then outlines the preparations so far, before moving on to a discussion of the focus areas as presented by the former government and some possible issues that may pose challenges. Our hope is that the paper will cast light on Sweden's positions on European integration thus far, and how these might play out against the ambition to pursue an effective and neutral presidency in a time of uncertainty and war in the EU's neighbourhood.

## 2. A tumultuous European context

Sweden will take over the reins of the Council at a moment of deep economic uncertainty, energy crisis, and open war in the EU's neighbourhood. In recent months, spiraling food, electricity and fuel prices have caused global political unrest and fears of a looming recession. The EU has in a short period of time taken measures to address these matters with remarkable unity, though not without strenuous effort to overcome disagreements regarding, for example, sanctions and energy-related measures.

Not long ago, the COVID-19 pandemic also led to far-reaching joint initiatives well beyond the health field, including the launch of an unprecedented recovery fund (Next Generation EU, NGEU) financed partly through issuance of common debt. In this context, Sweden sought, as a member of the 'frugal four' (together with Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark) to limit the instrument's scope and ensure conditionality. Steps towards further integration are now likely to continue, as the war in Ukraine is pushing Europe into what might turn into an acute energy crisis. The general direction of this deepened integration – pooling of costs, capacities and responsibilities – will not come without divisions in an EU context.

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Among the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been a range of indirect effects on European integration. The EU has already taken steps to address the most concrete issues related to the war: comprehensive sanctions packages, humanitarian and financial support to Ukraine, and increased measures to reduce energy costs. The war has produced new incentives to speed up the climate transition and reach a deal on joint migration and asylum policy, and processes relating to enlargement and institutional reform have likewise been accelerated or intensified since February 24<sup>th</sup>. The recent EU membership applications by Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – and the candidate status accorded to the latter two – have given these questions new impetus. Traditionally, Swedish governments support EU enlargement as a foreign policy tool. However, like many other member states, Sweden has been highly concerned about corruption and the quality of governance in EU member states and candidate countries alike.

In addition, the undermining of democracy and the rule of law in various member states also

overlaps with a debate on the need for a more capable EU, able to protect its common interests and fundamental values, internally and externally.<sup>1</sup> The most recent outcome of this discussion – in its external aspect – was the French President Emmanuel Macron’s proposal, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for a European Political Community, to serve as a new platform for strategic discussions with countries in the EU’s neighbourhood. Since an initial meeting has now been held in this format under the Czech presidency, there may also be a push for follow up during the Swedish presidency, although the spring summit is now set to take place in Moldova.

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In her State of the Union speech in September, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced various measures for the near future.<sup>2</sup> In particular, she endorsed plans to launch a convention to open the EU treaties for modification. Together with 12 other countries, Sweden signed a letter in June 2022 which argued against the idea of a convention and a subsequent intergovernmental conference to revise the treaties and defended, in particular, the existing balance of competences.<sup>3</sup> However, when it comes to proposals relating to reforms that would not require treaty change (e.g. further restricting unanimity voting in the Council), Sweden has thus far been more supportive. Pending the Commission’s official proposal, the process for institutional reform may have to be handled during the Swedish presidency.

Another measure presented in von der Leyen’s speech was the planned launch of a European Critical Raw Materials Act along with a future

European Sovereignty Fund. These proposals, meant to strengthen security of supply chains and to foster a more resilient European industrial base, may conflict with some member state’s positions as defenders of open markets and stance in relation to state aid.

The speech also asserted the need for more flexibility on debt reduction in the stability and growth pact, proposing more ownership and freedom for member states, along with tighter scrutiny. Sweden and other member states may object and prefer adherence to budgetary discipline in an EU context.

Beyond the proposals announced in the State of the Union speech, the Swedish presidency already faces a heavy legislative agenda in Brussels since the cycle is approaching its end, before a new Commission takes over in 2024. Many legislative acts will have to be finalized, which means the possibility of extensive ‘trilogue’ negotiations in which Sweden will act as representative of the Council.

**3. The changing institutional role of the rotating presidency**

Since Sweden’s previous presidencies in 2001 and 2009, the institutional set up has changed due to the Lisbon Treaty. Above all, the European Council was formalized as a separate institution, with the permanent president shaping the overarching agenda and taking over representational roles in the field of ‘high politics’. In addition, the treaty entrusts the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP) with chairing the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) as well as external representation, while the External Action Service (EEAS) now has the right of initiative and chairmanship of most Council formations in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) matters. In this sense, the Swedish Presidency in the autumn of 2009 was the last ‘real’ member state presidency of the EU, as the Lisbon Treaty entered into force in December. Since then, the

<sup>1</sup> According to a 2022 report by the ‘Varieties of Democracy’ project, Hungary and Poland feature among the top backsliding countries over the past decade and Hungary turned into an electoral autocracy in 2018. See [https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr\\_2022.pdf](https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 2022 State of the Union address by President von der Leyen.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Non-paper by Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden on the outcome of and follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe’, 9 May 2022.

Council Secretariat has also increased its support to the rotating presidencies, the role of the so-called Trio Programme – by means of which three consecutive presidencies coordinate their individual programmes – has become more important, and the norm that the member state holding the presidency should be an efficient and ‘honest broker’ has grown stronger. Moreover, the agenda is in many ways ‘inherited’ in the sense that the dossiers on the table depend not only on progress under previous presidencies but also the Commission’s planning cycle. Post-Lisbon, the rotating presidency is thus above all expected to play a central role as a neutral mediator liaising between the member states but also vis-à-vis the Parliament and the Commission, not least during final negotiations in trilogues.

In terms of agenda management power, Jonas Tallberg identified three roles for the rotating presidency before the Lisbon Treaty: agenda setting (adding new issues to the agenda), agenda structuring (adapting the frequency and scheduling informal meetings on a certain topic) and agenda exclusion (remaining silent or refraining from scheduling time for certain files).<sup>4</sup> Due to the permanent president of the European Council and the role of trio programming, Austė Vaznonytė has argued that it is mainly agenda structuring and agenda exclusion which remain for the rotating presidency after Lisbon; agenda setting is now more uncommon. Possibilities for policy ‘entrepreneurship’ now mainly arise due to external shocks, Vaznonytė argues, especially if they affect member states in a similar way.<sup>5</sup>

Others, however, have argued that under certain conditions national governments retain some ability to set the agenda while holding the rotating presidency, even after Lisbon. Drawing on examples from the field of environmental and climate policy, Mats Engström argues that introducing a presidency-holder’s own initiatives requires that the rotating presidency overall is carried out in

an efficient and neutral way and that new ideas are formulated in the interest of the Union as a whole. Proposals also need to be prepared early, and in close contact with other actors, the European Commission in particular, though in general the possibility to feed into the agenda setting is also more limited towards the end of the Commission’s mandate.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, when it comes to the EU’s global role, member states do have some limited ability to exercise leadership, despite the role of the HRVP and the European Council.<sup>7</sup> Notably, member states still have a formal position as rotating chair in the Foreign Affairs Council when trade issues are discussed, as well as in Coreper II and the Antici preparations, the Working Party of Foreign Relations Counsellors (RELEX) and a range of other working groups in the Council, in particular those related to trade, development, terrorism and international law.

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In general, allocating sufficient resources and staff is crucial to fulfill the expectation that the rotating presidency holder will act in a flexible way that furthers the general interest. Over the past decade, the management of disruptive crises has become a normal feature of the rotating presidency. This requires resources to handle processes at multiple speeds and with sufficient political flexibility on the part of the presiding member state. The capacity of the forthcoming Swedish government to face a potential crisis – regardless of whether it derives from the war in Ukraine – will be an important factor for the functioning of the presidency.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The agenda-shaping powers of the EU Council Presidency’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 10.1 (2003) 1–19.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Entrepreneurs of Compromise: The Rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU after Lisbon’, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (2022).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Så kan det roterande ordförandeskapet påverka dagordningen: exemplet miljö’, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (2022).

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55 (2017) 1203–20.

To sum up, the role of the rotating presidency has in many ways changed over the past two decades both in terms of the diminished role in external representation, increased coordination with the Trio and less room for agenda setting especially when it comes to ‘high politics’ and common foreign and security policy. At home, the presidency is of course an occasion to highlight Sweden’s membership and to some extent emphasize certain issues through informal meetings and conferences. However, the main expectation on the upcoming Swedish presidency, from a Brussels perspective, will be to reach agreements between the member states and represent the Council in the subsequent negotiations with the other institutions. In the event of a crisis, Sweden will also be expected to take a central role in shaping the EU’s joint response. Ultimately, Sweden’s performance in these respects will determine the ‘success’ of its presidency.

#### 4. Sweden in the EU – a brief historic outlook

##### 4.1 Enters the Union, but still not convinced

Sweden joined the EU in 1995 together with Finland and Austria. Before accession, EU membership had been a divisive issue in the Swedish politics – notably opposed by the Social Democrats who had seen EU integration as incompatible with the ‘Swedish model’ of active labour market policies and universal welfare services combined with an economic policy oriented towards openness and stability. Furthermore, integrating with Europe was perceived as something that could potentially be at odds with Sweden’s policy of neutrality. Then, the context changed: the fall of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact weakened the rationale for neutrality and non-alignment, and, shortly thereafter, a national financial crisis and recession affected Sweden’s economy severely. These factors caused the official turn towards the ambition of EU membership in 1991, despite strong divisions, especially within the Social Democrats.<sup>8</sup>

Sweden’s motivations for joining the EU were primarily economic and related to the furthering of free trade and market access for a small and export-oriented nation. After a referendum in 1994, resulting in 52.3% in favour and 46.8% against (0.9% were blank votes), Sweden applied to become a member. However, support for EU membership rapidly declined upon joining and was not a majority position in Sweden until 2002. In 2003, Sweden voted against the Euro in a non-binding referendum with 55.9% against.

##### 4.2 EU opinion changes – Swedish preferences in Brussels unaltered

Following Sweden’s first presidency in 2001, public opinion in favour of EU membership turned positive and has grown steadily since then. From being among the least supportive member state publics in the 1990s, Swedes are now among the most supportive of EU membership. After the UK’s decision to leave the Union, pro-EU opinion saw an additional upswing and support for EU membership peaked at 59% in 2018. While Swedish voters overall now have a positive opinion of the EU, opinion polls also indicate that the Swedish public remains opposed to further transfer of competence to supranational institutions.<sup>9</sup>

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While skepticism towards EU-membership was previously associated with groups on the left of the political spectrum in Sweden, it is now mainly found on the far right.<sup>10</sup> However, Sweden’s EU policy has generally been characterized by broad consensus among the mainstream parties. Successive governments – centre-right and centre-left – have all championed the integrity of the single market, strict competition rules, open and free trade, budgetary discipline, and subsidiarity. In fields such

<sup>8</sup> J. Tallberg and G. von Sydow, ‘EU-medlemskapet och EU:s framtid’, in U. Holgersson and L. Wängnerud (eds.) *Rösträttens århundrade* (Gothenburg: Makadam, 2018), 394.

<sup>9</sup> U. Andersson and M. Weissenbilder. ‘Politiska skiljelinjer i stöder för EU’, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (2022).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

as environmental regulation and climate policies, Sweden has generally been a forerunner and pushed EU integration to more ambitious standards. As regards enlargement and the EU's foreign policy, Sweden has also played a leading role.<sup>11</sup> The country has continuously supported enlargement and the fostering of stronger ties to the EU's 'Eastern neighbourhood' and played a leading role in the establishment of the Eastern Partnership in 2009.

### 4.3 Sweden's past presidencies

Sweden has held the rotating presidency twice before, in 2001 and 2009. 2001 presented an opportunity for Sweden under the Social Democratic government of Göran Persson to showcase itself to the Union and build bridges. A European summit was held in Gothenburg and informal ministerial meetings took place all over the country, together with cultural initiatives intended to cast light on Sweden in various ways. The three 'E's – employment, environment, and enlargement – became the brand of what was perceived domestically as a successful flagship initiative.<sup>12</sup> The overall success of the presidency most likely contributed to the upswing in public opinion in favour of EU membership after 2001.

In 2009, the centre-right coalition under Fredrik Reinfeldt intentionally 'played down' expectations ahead of the Swedish presidency, fearing it would be more difficult to gain domestic political points especially given the context of the financial crisis and economic downturn as well as the timing in the mandate with a new European parliament and an incoming Commission.<sup>13</sup> Sweden also presided over the final months of Council work before the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty, which significantly reduced the role of the rotating presidency. Beyond the handling of the treaty transition, Sweden had several focus areas for its presidency programme, including justice and home

affairs and migration (the 'Stockholm programme'), the Baltic Sea strategy, and enlargement. An important challenge was also to manage the run up and negotiations in view of the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, which was held during Sweden's tenure.<sup>14</sup> During both of its previous presidencies, Sweden was generally considered successful as an efficient honest broker seeking consensus and reaching agreements on key files.<sup>15</sup>

'[...] even though public opinion has grown strongly in favour of EU-membership, a certain reluctance towards further deepening still persists.'

### 4.4 A 'reluctant' European cherishing the Single Market?

As highlighted by Jonas Tallberg and Göran von Sydow, Sweden was sometimes labelled a 'reluctant European' or a 'steadfast nation state' by political scientists and historians during the decades before joining the EU.<sup>16</sup> Although this is generally a less accurate description today, Swedish governments have taken a cautious approach when it comes to future institutional reform of the EU.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, even though public opinion has grown strongly in favour of EU-membership, a certain reluctance towards further deepening still persists.<sup>18</sup> Yet Sweden has been a fervent champion in policy areas such as the functioning and the integrity of the Single Market, ambitious environmental and climate policies, as well as effective enlargement and neighbourhood policy. Sweden's motivations for ultimately joining the EU in 1995 were primarily economic and related to the furthering of free trade and market access for a small and export-oriented nation.

<sup>11</sup> Tallberg and von Sydow, 'EU-medlemskapet och EU:s framtid', 394.

<sup>12</sup> Bengtsson *et al.* 'Silencer or Amplifier – The European Union Presidency and the Nordic Countries', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 27.3 (2004) 311–34.

<sup>13</sup> C. M. Johansson, F. Langdal and G. von Sydow, 'Mellan konflikt och samförstånd: ordförandeskapet i svensk politisk och ledning', in Rikard Bengtsson (ed), *I Europas tjänst: Sveriges ordförandeskap i EU 2009*. SNS Förlag (2010) 230.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> R. Bengtsson *et al.* 'Silencer or Amplifier'.

<sup>16</sup> Tallberg and von Sydow, 'EU-medlemskapet och EU:s framtid'.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Andersson and Weissenbilder, 'Politiska skiljelinjer i stöder för EU'.

When it comes to climate and environmental policy, Sweden understands itself as a pioneer and has worked actively for ambitious international agreements including through the EU. However, in relation to biodiversity, EU rules have sometimes clashed with Swedish national interests related to forestry and rural policy. A longstanding conflict with the Commission, which is the subject of an infringement case, relates to the protection (or hunting) of wolves. New tensions have also arisen due to the EU's new Forest and Biodiversity Strategies (see section 7).<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Sweden is among the highest per capita net-contributors to the EU budget, a non-euro country, and often voices opposition to pooling responsibilities and debts.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally a close political ally of the UK, Sweden used to share a corner with the British in EU affairs. Therefore, the UK's exit from the Union was a heavy blow and a wake up-call for Sweden, and part of the reason for which it formed the alliance of 'frugals'. As a member of this group, Sweden advocated a restrictive approach to the Next Generation EU recovery package (NGEU). Despite some success in his regard, the final design of the NGEU sparked parliamentary resistance in Stockholm on the grounds of subsidiarity, financial profligacy, and power transfer to Brussels on economic and financial policies.

## 5. The current domestic political context

The Swedish national elections in September resulted in narrow parliamentary majority for the right-wing opposition bloc (176 seats to 173) and a new government coalition composed of the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the strongly pro-European Liberal Party, the latter now weakened by the electoral results. The bloc also includes the far-right Sweden Democrats, on which the government will depend for support in the Swedish parliament. While Sweden has a tradition

of minority governments dependent on support parties in parliament, the change of government of course means some degree of uncertainty until more detailed positions in EU affairs are announced. Notably, the traditionally Eurosceptic Sweden Democrats are now the largest party in this bloc, and the second largest party overall. The parties of the governing bloc also belong to different party groups in the European Parliament: the Moderate Party and the Christian Democrats are part of the European People's Party (EPP) group, the Liberals belong to RENEW and the Sweden Democrats are members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group.

**'[...] the traditionally Eurosceptic Sweden Democrats are now the largest party in this bloc, and the second largest party overall.'**

Moreover, the new composition of the parliament also means that the EU Affairs Committee – in which the government has to anchor its positions before decisions in Brussels – is now composed of predominantly new members in a different constellation. According to the governing agreement, positions in EU affairs will be anchored with the Sweden Democrats before the government presents its line for approval by the EU Affairs committee.<sup>21</sup> If the opposition decides so, they could in theory, with the help of the Sweden Democrats, block the government's position. The Sweden Democrats, however, have so far focused on securing detailed promises in domestic policy areas related to migration and asylum matters, and no specific commitments altering positions in EU affairs were included in the agreement in terms of deliverables.

Regarding the presidency preparations, the former Social Democratic government, under Magdalena Andersson, announced a general orientation with

<sup>19</sup> This looming conflict is the topic of a contribution in forthcoming paper, by M. Johansson, 'Att vara ordförande med starka intressen: exemplet biologisk mångfald', Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.

<sup>20</sup> Sweden has a history of securing temporary rebates through lump-sum reduction to the GNI-based EU membership contribution. For the period 2021–2027 the Swedish correction amounts to €1,069 million per year. See European Commission, 'Rebates: correction mechanisms', 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Moderaterna *et al.* 'Tidöavtalet'.

five focus areas for the Swedish presidency in May, following consultations in parliament.<sup>22</sup> In the government declaration on 18 October, the new Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson made reference to the cross-party presidency preparations and indicated continuity. In particular, he highlighted matters relating to the security of EU citizens and joint support for Ukraine, energy security, the climate transition, and the need to strengthen competitiveness.<sup>23</sup> The government will present its final presidency programme in December, including the scheduling of files in the Council. The topics of the informal ministerial meetings and other events taking place in Sweden, in particular, may be subject to fine-tuning at that point. In general, the incoming government will also need to move quickly to ensure that new ministers are prepared for their task as lead negotiators under the presidency.

The Swedish government may not be able to count on the party political consensus ('borgfred') in EU affairs that prevailed during Sweden's first presidency in 2001 and to some extent during its second in 2009.<sup>24</sup> The general trend in the EU Affairs Committee of the Swedish Parliament seems to point to higher contestation as ministers have increasingly seen their positions called into question and rejected.<sup>25</sup> Yet the upcoming presidency is unlikely to become the stage for high profile domestic divisions for several reasons. In general, the salience of EU affairs during the September elections was notably low and European integration has not featured as a contested matter in the government negotiations. Moreover, the Brussels-based nature of the presidency means that the main work will be carried out by Swedish civil service and its diplomats, who are by now experienced in terms of EU presidencies and have prepared in order to train new political representatives for their roles during the presidency in terms of finding consensus and representing other member states.

## 6. The preparations for the Swedish presidency

### 6.1 General and organizational preparations

The general orientation for the presidency – developed by the previous government in consultation with most opposition parties – was that Sweden should be a professional and effective chair, acting in line with the interest of the EU as a whole, while emphasizing five focus areas:

- security for EU citizens and EU in the world
- organized crime
- climate change
- competitiveness
- fundamental values

This broad stance was subject to common agreement among the main opposition parties as early as spring 2022. Andersson's government also communicated its intention to hold a 'climate smart, digitalized, cost effective, communicative, and transparent presidency.'<sup>26</sup> The commitment to transparency and external communication is partly a product of Swedish political traditions but also relates to the Swedish understanding of the role of the honest broker, which includes giving a voice to all member states no matter their size.<sup>27</sup> An underlying intention here may be to balance the influence of larger member states and the Franco-German axis.

As the country is about to hold its third Council presidency, the Swedish civil service is experienced and well prepared for the consequences of a presidency which occurs in this phase of the legislative cycle, with many dossiers up for final negotiation. The planning started well ahead of time and the budget is, according to civil servants, in line with 'what they asked for'.<sup>28</sup> The total amount allocated for the presidency over 2021–2023 is SEK 1 250 million (around €114 million).

<sup>22</sup> The Sweden Democrats did not participate in the consultations.

<sup>23</sup> 'Regeringsförklaringen', 18 October 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with senior civil servant in the Prime Minister's Office, 23 June 2022.

<sup>25</sup> A. Wetter Ryde and G. von Sydow (eds). 'EU i Riksdagen', Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (2019).

<sup>26</sup> 'Arbetet inför Sveriges ordförandeskap 2023', 13 September 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with civil servant at Sweden's Permanent Representation to the EU, 15 June 2022.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

The Swedish representation in Brussels has been reinforced with approximately 80 additional staff, bringing the total number of employees to around 200. This bodes well for the presidency, since the main condition for success is a well-functioning cadre at the permanent representation. The reinforcement is larger than under Sweden's 2009 presidency and in line with the degree to which the Czech Republic boosted its permanent representation ahead of their presidency. By the middle of August 2022, all new employees had started their positions in Brussels and those chairing working parties and key staff at the ministries in Stockholm received extra training as early as January 2022.<sup>29</sup> Training sessions have also been arranged for staff in state agencies.

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Apart from the around 2 000 formal meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg, 150 or so meetings will be organized in Sweden. These include 11 informal ministerial meetings but also attaché trips and conferences organized by a range of government agencies. The Swedish parliament is planning to host seven conferences of between 150 and 300 participants, in its role as 'presidency parliament'.<sup>30</sup> This is many fewer events than were held during the French presidency, during which over 400 meetings and events were organised around France, and more comparable to the Czech presidency which hosted around 150 accompanying events.<sup>31</sup> In general, social media and online content has been highlighted as being key for the Swedish presidency

and the ambitions for the digital visual identity are high, as less meetings and activities are taking place around Sweden compared to in 2001 and 2009.<sup>32</sup> As the new government takes office, the character and themes of some of the informal meetings and conferences held in Sweden, including at ministerial level, may still be subject to change.

Civil servants interviewed state that a restrictive and efficient approach to meetings will be adopted: meetings will 'not be held for the sake of holding a meeting'.<sup>33</sup> The fact that all major gatherings and informal ministerial meetings will be held at a congress centre close to the Stockholm airport in Arlanda is also highlighted as an efficiency move.<sup>34</sup> An exception will be the traditional visit of the College of Commissioners, which will take place on 12–13 January. On this occasion, the College has been invited to the northern city of Kiruna, and the visit has been framed as an opportunity to showcase the 'new industrialization' and opportunities to drive the green transition that the region has to offer in the context of the European Green Deal.<sup>35</sup> The potential of this region was highlighted by Ursula von der Leyen in her 2020 State of the Union address, which the local authorities in Sweden were quick to pick up on.<sup>36</sup>

The final, full version of the presidency programme, including the agendas of the working groups, will be presented by the new Prime Minister to the Swedish Parliament in December. This gives the new government a possibility to fine-tune or even alter some aspects of what has been planned so far. In the sections below, the five focus areas for the presidency as presented and anchored by the previous government in parliament are outlined in more detail.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Interview with civil servant from the secretariat of the Committee on EU Affairs of the Swedish Parliament, 1 July 2022.

<sup>31</sup> French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 'Event locations in France' (2022). Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 'Cultural and accompanying programme' (2022).

<sup>32</sup> Presentation by civil servants at the Communications Secretariat of Sweden's Presidency of the Council of the EU, 27 September 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with civil servant at Sweden's Permanent Representation to the EU, 15 June 2022

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, 'Första mötet i Kiruna när Sverige tar över ordförandeskapet i EU 2023', 7 May 2021.

<sup>36</sup> State of the Union address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament plenary, 2020.

## 6.2 The general orientation and focus areas of the Swedish presidency

In his speech to parliament on the occasion of his government's formation, the new Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson made reference to cross-party agreement on key focus areas, mentioning in particular security and the EU's role in the world not least in relation to Ukraine, the climate transition and competitiveness.<sup>37</sup> The appointment of recently deputy chair of the EU affairs committee as Minister for EU affairs presages continuity, although that will only be finally confirmed with their official presentation of the full presidency programme in December.<sup>38</sup>

**Ensuring security for EU citizens and strengthening the EU's role in the world.** This is a natural focus for the Swedish presidency programme given the war in Ukraine, the vast needs in terms of support for rebuilding that country and the related implications for the EU's common foreign and security policy. Success in handling the situation in the Council will most likely be a major determinant for how Sweden is perceived to have performed as president.

The focus area is also in line with the traditional Swedish emphasis on the EU as Sweden's most important arena for foreign and security policy cooperation and Sweden's national profile in terms of promoting sustainable peace, democracy and development. In the Trio Programme, related issues occupy an important place in terms of a 'Global Europe' defending multilateralism and renewing its international partnerships. The introduction also highlights the need for a strengthened Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and for a shared vision on external threats, for example through the Strategic Compass which was adopted in March 2022.

Notably, the Andersson government's focus areas, as presented in May 2022, also put a particular emphasis on migration under this heading. The migration and asylum pact, with several of its texts currently being negotiated, will be an interesting exercise for Sweden as an honest broker, given the unusual situation of a Swedish Commissioner (Ylva Johansson), a Swedish MEP as rapporteur for one

of the main files within the pact (Tomas Tobé) and a Swedish Council presidency negotiating in trilogues.

**Fighting organized crime.** In the run up to Sweden's national elections in September, the fight against organized crime was one of the main topics of the campaign and understood across party lines as a major societal challenge for Sweden. This focus area is also mentioned in the Commission's Political Guidelines for the 2019–2024 period under the banner of 'Protecting our European way of life'. It is featured in the Trio Programme under the heading 'Migration, Schengen, police and judicial cooperation'.

According to the Trio Programme, action at EU level should include strengthened cooperation between law enforcement and judicial authorities in the member states, including in terms of exchanging data. The Trio also asserted the need for EU support for research and innovation to provide law enforcement with tools to efficiently fight organized crime.

**Speeding up the climate transition.** In this field, the flagship 'Fit for 55' package of measures seeking to engender a green transition is in line with the Swedish ambition to further climate action at EU level and an important part of the Trio Programme. The package is extensive, containing 13 legal acts. Significant progress was achieved under the French presidency and the Czech presidency is now working intensely to find political agreement between the Council and the Parliament on the main dossiers. Sweden's role will depend on progress in this as well as the time dedicated to negotiations in the Council. Formal agreements on many of the legal texts are likely to be expected as a task for the Swedish presidency.

**Strengthening EU competitiveness and creating jobs for the future.** This focus area reflects one of the cornerstones of the Swedish approach to European integration since joining the EU – safeguarding and strengthening the internal market. In the Trio Programme, Sweden's hand can be recognised in the section 'Strengthening the single market and developing an assertive,

<sup>37</sup> Government of Sweden, 'Regeringsförklaringen', 18 October 2022.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

comprehensive and coordinated industrial policy to foster growth and innovation’ which tries to strike a balance between market interventions to ensure resilience and reduced dependencies and a more free market-oriented approach. To further this agenda, the Andersson government approached the Commission to highlight the continued need for openness, fair competition and innovation.<sup>39</sup>

**Safeguarding the fundamental values of the Union.** Democracy, rule of law and the fundamental values of the EU are longstanding matters of importance for Sweden, perceived as particularly important given recent developments within certain member states. During the negotiations on the NGEU recovery package, Sweden advocated strongly in favour of the conditionality mechanism to prevent funds being channeled to member states that violate the rule of law principles enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Democracy, rule of law and the fundamental values of the EU also feature extensively in the Trio Programme.

To sum up, the five focus areas as presented by the previous government reflect an inherited agenda from processes already ongoing at EU level, but also Sweden’s traditional positions in EU affairs. They are also in line with the Trio Programme, with some differences regarding emphasis in particular as regards the internal market and competitiveness. In terms of power over the agenda, the role of the Swedish presidency will above all be to decide how much time and effort is dedicated to each dossier as well as which themes to highlight, for example through informal meetings in Sweden during the spring.

## 7. What could complicate things during the Swedish presidency?

At the time of writing, many unknown factors could still further complicate the status quo. World events with broad disruptive impact – such as further effects of Russia’s war in Ukraine and the sabotaged Nordstream gas pipelines – are matters that can call for immediate action and unity by the Council. Moreover, other politically divisive issues may emerge that complicate negotiations

between member states. In domestic politics, some uncertainties remain about how the new governing coalition will go about European Affairs in general, although the time of the presidency is unlikely to become the stage for party political disturbance.

When it comes to extraordinary events which demand a response from the EU, action needs to be swift. Responding to a Commission proposal from September 14<sup>th</sup> the Czech presidency managed to reach an agreement on emergency measures reducing energy costs on September 30<sup>th</sup>. It is not unlikely that continuing escalation of the war in Ukraine and the related effects of the soaring energy crisis brings additional measures to the fore, including support measures and further sanctions which may create divisions. Given that the rotating presidency chairs Coreper II and its preparatory work in the Antici group as well as the RELEX working party dealing with legal, financial, and institutional aspects of foreign policy matters, Sweden will have a certain role to play on issues such as sanctions. Given the expectation to work towards consensus as an honest broker, bringing the member states and domestic support together in these situations will be a crucial task. In this regard, building consensus in the Council is likely to be easier if disruptive events strike member states in similar ways. However, if such effects impact Europe asymmetrically, division is more of a risk.<sup>40</sup> The ongoing shifts in terms of alliances and the possibility of a less pronounced Franco-German axis will also have an impact on Sweden’s performance in this regard.

Several politically divisive issues that may come up during the Swedish presidency could prove difficult in terms of reaching an agreement between member states. Depending on the context, various initiatives or processes may lead to internal difficulties for the Council, especially if they imply additional steps toward further integration or increased financial contributions. These include the discussions about next steps for possible treaty reform, as the conclusions from the Conference on the Future of Europe set out an ambitious agenda for institutional reform and deeper integration. Pending a Commission proposal, these matters may play out later in the spring. The Conference

<sup>39</sup> ‘Pressbriefing med EU-minister Hans Dahlgren’, 25 August 2022.

<sup>40</sup> See Vaznonyté, ‘Entrepreneurs of Compromise’.

conclusions call not only for more generalized use of qualified majority voting in the Council, but also for the frontrunner (*Spitzenkandidat*) system for choosing Commission president to become obligatory, and for the Parliament to be granted the right of legislative initiative.<sup>41</sup> Recommendations to make additional policy areas shared competences were also included.

Other divisive issues for Sweden to handle may be ambitious joint programmes to support investments in strategic industries, reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, more ‘solidarity’ and further common obligations in the field of migration policy, the Green Deal (given the context of energy prices and economic downturn) as well as a common approach to energy security. Sweden would not be alone among member states in finding these negotiations potentially difficult to navigate.

**‘And both the Brussels-based nature of the rotating presidency and the low saliency of EU-related debates in Sweden make it unlikely that the presidency becomes a stage for such party-political conflict.’**

Regarding domestic uncertainties, it should be noted that Sweden has a tradition of minority governments (Reinfeldt’s first government 2006–2010, which coincided with Sweden’s 2009 presidency, was an exception). The positioning of the Sweden Democrats as well as the Social Democrats and other parties now in opposition remains to be seen. As already mentioned, however, the overall direction for the presidency has been broadly anchored in parliament and communicated externally by the outgoing government, including the intention to fulfill expectations in Brussels as a neutral and efficient mediator. And both the Brussels-based nature of the rotating presidency and the low saliency of EU-related debates in Sweden make it unlikely that the presidency becomes a stage for such party-political conflict.

Some concrete policies with the potential to stir political conflict in Stockholm could find their way onto the EU agenda during the presidency. While the minimum wage directive (which Sweden voted against in the Council) was conveniently finalized under the Czech presidency, a salient issue that touches upon core Swedish industrial interests is forestry management. Sweden has vast forest lands (two thirds of its territory) and the industry counts for 9–12% of Sweden’s total industrial output, according to industry data.<sup>42</sup> The role of sustainable forestry in both mitigating climate change and preventing loss of biodiversity is increasingly highlighted in political debate, and several recent EU initiatives either already affect the Swedish forest industry or have the potential to do so. They range from the EU’s Forest Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy to several legal acts including the revised Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry regulation (LULUCF) and how forestry was classified in the Climate Change Delegated Act of the Taxonomy Directive. Here, the Swedish parliament has argued against what it sees as EU interference on grounds of subsidiarity. During the presidency, the new government may experience domestic challenges especially in relation to the new regulation on nature restoration.

On a final note, it is of course difficult to predict the unexpected, both internationally and domestically. But health crises, war, financial turmoil and dramatic political events such as the UK’s decision to leave the Union have heavily shaped the agendas of recent presidencies. We should therefore not be surprised if crisis also shapes Sweden’s. However, extensive cross-party preparations and administrative experience and capacity bode well for the Swedish presidency in this regard.

## 8. Conclusion

Sweden takes over as president of the Council during a war of aggression against an associated country, now also a candidate for EU membership. The repercussions of this war affect a range of policy areas but also transcend regular policy making, as they touch upon the very essence of the Union: the promise of peace, democracy and

<sup>41</sup> Conference on the Future of Europe, ‘Report on the final outcome’, May 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Skogsindustrierna [Swedish Forestry Industries] ‘Skogsnäringens betydelse för ekonomi och välfärd’ (2022).

prosperity through cooperation and political reciprocity. For many, the war is also yet another reminder of the need for a more geopolitical and ‘Global Europe’ that can act swiftly and with greater strength to pursue its interests and protect its fundamental values.

After the institutional reforms of the Lisbon treaty in 2009, the main aspects that will determine the perceived success of the rotating presidency are its ability to reach agreements in the Council and with the other institutions, as well as its capacity and flexibility as crisis manager. As outlined in this policy brief, there is a strong possibility that the upcoming Swedish presidency will have to focus on immediate crisis management in relation to both direct and indirect aspects of the ongoing war in Ukraine. Uniting member states in this regard may become its most important legacy, aside from reaching agreement on the many ongoing dossiers in Brussels.

This policy brief has also outlined the general preparations and orientation of the upcoming Swedish presidency. The focus areas presented so far are in line with Sweden’s traditional positions in EU affairs, especially when it comes to themes such as the EU in the world, the integrity of the internal market and the climate transition. As the main task of the presidency is to further a mainly inherited

agenda in Brussels, the change of government is not expected to have a major effect. However, some of the informal events planned in Sweden may be subject to some fine-tuning or change.

**‘Despite the looming domestic and external challenges, Sweden can be expected to carry out an efficient Council presidency that lives up to the expectations among its European partners [...]’**

The role of the rotating presidency post-Lisbon is mainly to seek compromise and make progress on files on the table, in line with the general interest. This requires hard work to gather political support both in Brussels and in Stockholm. Despite the looming domestic and external challenges, Sweden can be expected to carry out an efficient Council presidency that lives up to the expectations among its European partners, not least due to previous experience, administrative capacity and early preparations. Doing so should not be underestimated as an aspiration, as the long term benefits in terms of networks, know-how and goodwill that follow a successful presidency tend to transcend the six months as Chair.

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## Interviews

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