

SWEDEN'S PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

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The Council of the European Union (EU) negotiates and shapes legislation proposed by the European Commission. The Council comprises ministers from all EU Member States and its presidency rotates among the member states every six months. The Council President leads the Council's work and represents all member states in dealings with other EU institutions.

From 1 January 2023, Sweden assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months until 30 June 2023, taking over from The Czech Republic.¹ This marked the third time that Sweden held the Council Presidency, with previous presidencies being in 2001 and 2009.

During the first tenure in 2001, the focus was on EU enlargement, employment and environment, while in 2009, the key issues included the financial crisis, economic recovery and climate change. Additionally, the Swedish Presidency played a significant role in implementing the Treaty of Lisbon, which brought about substantial changes across EU institutions. Sweden's then Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt was the last national representative to lead the European Council. Post that, the introduction of a permanent President aimed to ensure greater continuity in the Council's work.²

However, the world, including Europe, has faced paradigm shifts in recent years such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These inevitably have expanded the function of the Council. This was evident in the more than 2,300 formal meetings as part of Sweden's presidency.

Notably, Sweden, along with France and the Czech Republic, had jointly prepared a general programme called the Trio Programme. This endeavour spanned 18 months and set out the EU's shared priorities and goals.³ Following Sweden, a new trio comprising Spain, Belgium and Hungary will take over and develop a new programme for the subsequent period.

The Swedish Presidency focused on four key areas:

In addition to the above, the Swedish presidency also focussed on security, competitiveness, green and energy transitions and rule of law.⁴ Unsurprisingly, it prioritised the continuation of economic and military support to Ukraine, including Kiev's path towards EU integration. Notably, Ukraine's membership would require a concerted effort at both the national and EU levels, including dealing with tricky issues such as reconstruction and reforms.

Amidst the EU's hostile security environment, the Swedish presidency sought to build consensus and a plan of action to secure the Union's interests. Measures were taken to implement the Strategic Compass⁵ and other related initiatives. The European Peace Facility (EPF) was effectively utilised to provide military assistance to Ukraine. .

Meanwhile, given the setback suffered by the continent on account of weaponisation of energy during the war,⁶ Sweden had to channelise its presidency towards tackling high energy prices and implementing long-term energy market reforms.

The Swedish presidency concluded with a focus on achieving a “greener, safer and freer Europe”.[7](#)

Under the Swedish presidency, attempts were made at fast-tracking Europe’s green energy transition. This involved the climate package called ‘Fit for 55’, first agreed upon in July 2021, with the aim to make Europe the world’s first climate-neutral continent by 2050.[8](#) This package targeted sectors such as climate, environment, energy and transportation.

As part of implementing the ‘Fit for 55’, attempts were made to enhance and expand the EU’s emission trading system (ETS), emission caps for each sector were introduced, strict conditions were set for members to reduce emissions under the Effort-Sharing Regulation (ESR), and targets to increase carbon sinks through forests and soils/land were given.[9](#) The utilisation of renewable energy sources were sought to be expanded, while providing support for innovative green initiatives and robust energy policy was formulated. Together, these efforts were aimed at achieving sustainable and environmentally responsible transformation towards a greener future.

Unsurprisingly, amidst Europe’s energy boycott of Russia, the focus of the Swedish presidency was also on preparing for the upcoming winter in 2023 and addressing the high and fluctuating energy prices, as well as expediting investments in clean and renewable electricity generation. The Council, therefore, sought to prolong its own regulation on coordinated measures to reduce gas demand during the upcoming winter period. Additionally, it also chose to continue with the plan chartered for implementation of the Regulation on Energy Market Integrity and Transparency (REMIT),[10](#) which is a crucial element of the proposed EU electricity market redesign.

Supporting Ukraine was a priority for the Swedish presidency. Efforts were made to coordinate actions of member states as part of the need to put up a united European front, including imposing far-reaching sanctions on the Russian government.[11](#) Additionally, significant progress was made in agreeing on a new migration policy,[12](#) which aims to reduce immigration into Europe and combat cross-border crime through enhanced cross-border cooperation among judicial and law enforcement authorities.[13](#)

Sweden emphasised the importance of promoting freedom in Europe and strengthening the EU’s competitiveness.[14](#) Efforts were made to lay the foundation for a more ambitious EU, focusing on long-term competitiveness, growth and productivity until 2030 and beyond.

The war in Ukraine has threatened the democratic values on which the EU was founded, highlighting the need for the organisation to adapt to new geopolitical realities. Additionally, it has resulted in several economic challenges, such as rising energy prices and inflation amidst an economic slowdown. Sweden’s presidency contributed significantly to addressing these issues.

With the next trio having set up their 18-month agenda, the Council has its task cut out.[15](#) Delays in implementing judicial reforms and issues concerning transparency, values and justice remain a challenge, particularly *vis-à-vis* Poland and Hungary.[16](#) As such, only time will tell how these challenges are handled by the Council. It would continue to require unity and concerted efforts to meet emerging challenges while continuing the pursuit of a stronger and more prosperous European Union.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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