

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Meitheamh 2022

Wednesday, 29 June 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Dara Calleary,	Lisa Chambers,
Seán Haughey,	Regina Doherty,
Brendan Howlin,	Sharon Keogan,
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	Michael McDowell.
Neale Richmond.	

Teachta/Deputy Joe McHugh sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session until 9.55 a.m.

Presidency of the Council of the European Union: Discussion

Chairman: Today we will engage with Mr. Filip Vurm, deputy head of mission at the embassy of the Czech Republic in Dublin, on the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Ar son an choiste, cuirim fáilte romhat, a Uasail Vurm, agus roimh do chomhghleacaithe go dtí an cruinniú inniu. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Vurm and his colleagues to the committee meeting today and we look forward to the dialogue on all things Europe, international and geopolitical in this challenging time. The most important thing for this committee, and it is certainly the focus of our committee, is to continue with engagement. Yesterday I met the Dutch ambassador and I met the Ukrainian ambassador at the weekend. This committee is very keen to keep all lines of communication open. We are absolutely delighted Mr. Vurm is here today to keep that conversation going.

Before we begin, I will read a note on privilege and housekeeping matters. All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I would also like to remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex in order to participate in public meetings. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I would ask any member partaking by Microsoft Teams, prior to making a contribution to the meeting, that they confirm they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

I on Mr. Filip Vurm to make his opening statement.

Mr. Filip Vurm: I thank the Chair. Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you very much for inviting me to this committee session. It is a great honour and pleasure for me to be here and to be able to present the priorities of the Czech Presidency for the second semester this year. I convey apologies on behalf of the ambassador, H.E. Petr Kynšetr, for not being able to attend this meeting due to urgent travel to the Czech Republic.

In 1996 when the Czech President, Václav Havel, considered the future of our Continent in his speech at the Charlemagne prize ceremonial entitled, “Europe as a Task”, he stressed that the tasks ahead of Europe deserved careful and thorough reflection. In the international context of the time, particularly favourable to western democracies, Havel called on Europeans to rediscover their conscience and to take responsibility for global environmental, social and economic challenges. He did not want Europe to reclaim the position of a “global head of orchestra” and to impose its cultural values on the rest of the world. What he had in mind was rather to inspire and to lead by example.

The brutal war and aggression beyond the eastern borders of our community has clearly shown us we will have to find the courage to re-evaluate many of our current approaches and

premises. We, therefore, perceive the Havel slogan “Europe as a Task”, chosen by the Czech Republic as the motto of its Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022, not only as an opportunity to reflect together, but above all, as a call for accountability and determined action based on our values. If we want to live up to the expectations of this historical moment, our triple challenge is to rethink, rebuild and repower Europe.

On 14 December 2021, the General Affairs Council endorsed the trio programme of three consecutive presidencies: France, Czech Republic and Sweden. The trio programme was developed at a time when the major challenge for the EU was the post-pandemic recovery. It has, therefore, been focused on protecting citizens and freedoms; developing the European economic model; building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; and promoting Europe’s interest and values in the world.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought forward the necessity of a fundamental reassessment of the EU priorities and significantly influenced the preparation of the Czech Presidency’s priorities. The Czech Presidency will address urgent security issues by carrying on with the originally identified files such as the green and digital transition of the EU economy.

The political priorities of the Czech Presidency are divided into five cross-sectoral flagship areas, aiming to respond to crime challenges as well as pursuing the EU’s long-term objectives. The first is to manage the refugee crisis and the post-war recovery of Ukraine. The Czech Presidency will support the EU’s efforts to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by using all instruments and programmes offered by the EU, including the strengthening of sanctions. It will also promote EU solidarity, efficiency and flexibility in managing the migration-related issues and it will support Ukraine on its European pass after receiving candidate status. It will also contribute to Ukraine’s economic recovery and stability. The second relates to energy security. The Czech Presidency will focus on reducing energy dependency on authoritarian regimes, such as Russia; diversifying resources through the REPowerEU energy plan; and mitigating the negative social and economic impacts on high energy prices. The third is the reinforcement of European defence capabilities, including cybersecurity. The Czech Presidency will promote the security and defence co-operation with NATO, implementing the strategic compass, enhancing better intra-EU co-operation and strengthening the EU’s industrial strategies in strategic areas. Strategic resilience of the European economy is the forth area of focus. The Czech Presidency will focus on reducing dependence on hostile regimes, strengthen self-sufficiency and deepen the internal market of democratic states. It will also focus on accelerating digitalisation and adapting free market rules to these developments. The fifth is the resilience of democratic institutions. The Czech Presidency will focus on safeguarding values of democracy and the rule of law, media freedom, transparency, open dialogue with citizens, including the follow up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, in online and offline spaces.

I thank the members for their attention and I am happy to take questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Vurm. I will take Deputy Brendan Howlin, followed by Deputy Seán Haughey.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I thank Mr. Vurm for his comprehensive opening statement. Obviously, in a presentation, you cannot touch on everything. There are two overarching issues that concern most European citizens right now. One is the changed security situation in Europe, with the unlawful and horrific invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The second issue is, in part a consequence of that, the cost-of-living crisis faced by European citizens. In terms

of the Czechian stewardship of the European Council for the next six months, what specific measures does Mr. Vurm see can be promoted or developed to address a common approach to reducing the cost of living for citizens? Are there any measures that would strengthen people's confidence in the European Union acting in consort, as it did so effectively on vaccines, for example? Are there any common measures that can be taken to reduce the cost of living in terms of energy, food security, or any other matter like that?

A further question is in relation to the security situation in Europe. Obviously, Ireland is a neutral country. There is a council meeting of NATO today and I understand all European Heads of State and Heads of State will be attending the fringes of that meeting, if not the formal part of it. How does Mr. Vurm see the security architecture of the European Union being impacted by the developments and will there be any particular initiatives in that regard during the Czech Presidency?

Mr. Filip Vurm: I thank the Deputy for his question. I will start with the first one. An appropriate mix of instruments which will reduce and mitigate the negative social and economic impact of high prices should be implemented. We have already developed some instruments during the pandemic. One of the ideas we would like to promote is to focus much more on joint purchases. This is something which was quite successful in the past in purchasing vaccines. This is one of the tools that can be used in dealing with the high energy prices. Obviously every crisis can also be a chance for the future, so we should focus much more on the competitiveness of the EU economy in general, on digitalisation, and on the implementation of new technologies.

Chairman: I will just come in on that question. We have a history of joint purchases of vaccines but do you have anything else in mind? Are we talking possible fuel joint purchasing or maybe just-----

Mr. Filip Vurm: Yes. I am sorry for not being specific. What I was referring to was joint purchases in the energy area and buying gas and oil from the countries which have these resources.

Chairman: Okay, thank you.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: Is the issue of common reserve be something that Czechia would advance?

Mr. Filip Vurm: Yes, definitely. It is another one of the ideas which we would like to focus on and to create a strategic reserve. Another priority should be the good regulation of this reserve. We believe we should try to create a gas reserve, especially in the run up to the winter. This is something which might help to mitigate the crisis.

In terms of security, as I mentioned in my speech, we will focus on enhanced co-operation between the EU and NATO. Most of the EU countries are members of NATO. There are also non-EU countries that are members of NATO and that share our values. In this area, we should focus much more on creating synergies and on what we call the concept of strategic unity with like-minded partners. We are already seeing the impacts of the Ukrainian invasion on the architecture of Europe. We are all aware of what happened yesterday at the NATO summit in Madrid when Turkey removed its objection to Sweden and Finland joining NATO. Also Denmark changed its position quite recently on the common security and defence policy. We are already seeing quite a significant shift in the architecture of European security or, I would even

say, in global security.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Vurm and now call Deputy Haughey.

Deputy Seán Haughey: I thank Mr. Vurm for his presentation. If I may so, the Czech Presidency has a hard act to follow because the French Presidency was certainly very busy. Under the French leadership we had the finalisation of the Conference on the Future of Europe; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; the post-Covid situation; and so on. I have no doubt that the Czech Presidency will rise to the challenge and that new challenges will arise during the course of the next six months, apart from the long list of challenges there at the moment.

I want to follow up on Deputy Howlin's question regarding priority number three, which was the strengthening of Europe's defence capabilities and cyberspace security, and to ask a little bit about the Czech Republic itself. Each nation state comes to the security and defence debate with its own tradition and history. Could Mr. Vurm briefly outline the position of the Czech Republic in relation to security and defence and say a little bit about the history of where it is coming from? I am interested to know the position of his nation state. Obviously, he appreciates the position of our nation state, being a militarily neutral country.

I have a second related question. How stands support for the EU generally in the Czech Republic?

Mr. Filip Vurm: The Czech Republic went through a transition during the 1990s after the fall of the communist regime and the establishment of democracy. We were very much focused on our foreign policy and joining the EU and NATO. From the very beginning, we believed this would be our most important security guarantee in the order created in the 1990s. Usually the foreign policy of a country is shaped by its direct experience and geographic position. This greatly influenced our decision to join NATO in 1999 and to join the EU in 2004.

In general, most of the Czech public supports the EU. I cannot give the Deputy an exact figure because I am not sure. Looking at the results of the election, most of the parties currently represented in the parliament are very pro-European. In this regard, the Czech Republic in general is very supportive of the EU.

Chairman: Thank you. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the witness. Mr. Vurm has dealt with what we would see as the major issues. Obviously, these are security concerns and the very much changed world following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We do not know how that is going to work out. All we know is that it is a much smaller and far more dangerous world. There was much talk even before it, throughout the pandemic, of European or EU strategic autonomy. We all saw the difficulties around semiconductors. While this is something we need and is required, we do not want the EU to become protectionist *per se*.

Mr. Vurm answered a question on what we all want to see as regards dealing with the cost-of-living crisis, particularly where it crosses over with the energy crisis, that is, the idea of the EU doing what Deputy Howlin said it did well during the pandemic which is to block buy and make sure we have the supply line of fuel and the storage. We need to emphasise that the European block needs to move to renewables as quickly as it can for multiple reasons. I ask Mr. Vurm's for his views on that.

We have been dealing with the issue of accession. We had a trip to Georgia in the last while.

It did not get great news from its point of view but it has a roadmap to follow no more than Ukraine and Moldova do. It is going to be a long and arduous road. Some of that is made long as well by the rule of law issues within Europe. I ask Mr. Vurm for his opinion on that. Where does he see these issues from the Presidency's point of view? We have to get our own house in order while maintaining the balance and co-operation that has been shown to be useful. Some of it is the outworkings of the Conference on the Future of Europe and the convention. Some of it has been caught up in the whole argument of qualified majority voting versus unanimity. To a degree, I think this is a wrong turn. We showed during the pandemic that we could co-operate when we all opted into something we could agree on. As difficult as it is, we showed we are able to come together on sanctions and so on.

Mr. Filip Vurm: I thank the Deputy for the question. One of our priorities is the resilience of democratic institutions. It subsumes all the topics mentioned by the Deputy. It is very much focused on the strengthening of democratic institutions, on promoting free media and on the rule of law in the EU. This will be the focus of our Presidency and the Czech foreign policy has quite a long history of promoting human rights both in the EU and abroad.

In terms of the Conference on the Future of Europe, it has created a unique space for citizens and especially for young people to debate the future of Europe and provide input into EU policies. In this regard, the Czech Presidency will work on making use of this idea and creating space for the continuation of the debate.

By implementing the European Year of Youth in 2022, the Presidency will work on improving dialogue, especially with young people, and promoting their participation in the political process.

Chairman: For the first time in a long time, we have an opportunity for supplementary questions. I am going to show a lot of latitude today.

Deputy Brendan Howlin: I want to pursue the rule of law issue a little more. It was a focus for all of us in advance of the invasion and it had an impact on our view of enlargement because there was a very strong belief that the core values of the Union, which obviously meant a free and unimpeded judiciary, press and academia, were somewhat challenged by one or two member states. We did not want to increase that divergence from core EU principles. The invasion of Ukraine has obviously had an impact in that there is a very strong wish now for the European family to be embraced but there will be outworkings in terms of enlargement to ensure those core values endure and are not undermined. I would be interested in hearing a perspective from the Czech Presidency on how those values will be maintained and its attitude to legal proceedings against member states which breach those values.

Mr. Filip Vurm: The rule of law is one of the constants of the Czech foreign policy. We definitely believe every EU country should comply with all EU standards in terms of the rule of law and human rights, including the freedom of press and all the areas the Deputy mentioned. All states which will become members of the EU in coming years should comply with all the high standards of the EU. This is to ensure there will not be any problem or backslide in future.

Chairman: I acknowledge our historic ties. There is a Franciscan monastery in Prague that goes back to 1607 and the Flight of the Earls from my county. I have read online that a new survey by The Good Information Project has found as a nation Ireland is largely supportive of the EU but is unsure how it works. Will Mr. Vurm enlighten us on the feelings of citizens in the Czech Republic towards the European Union as a project? His contribution was very much

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focused on Europe being a consensus-building community rather than being an orchestra for the rest of the world, which comes from Václav Havel's philosophy. Will Mr. Vurm elaborate on the attitude of Czech citizens towards the European Union and their participation in it?

Mr. Filip Vurm: As I have said, I believe the vast majority of Czech citizens support the European project. Since we joined the EU in 2004 the majority of civilians have supported European integration and the EU. I am not really able to give exact figures or percentages on Czech citizens who feel this way. If we look at the policies of Czech Governments over the past 20 years they have all been pro-European and reflect the genuine feeling of Czech society.

Chairman: Gabhaim buíochas le Filip Vurm agus leis an gcomhchoiste fosta fa choinne na díospóireachta inniu. Rachaidh mé ar ais go dtí an Teachta Calleary agus an Seanadóir Keogan anois and we are all good. I thank Mr. Vurm for his time. We appreciate him coming before the committee today.

Mr. Filip Vurm: I thank the Chair.

Chairman: Good luck with the Presidency and we look forward to future engagements.

The joint committee adjourned at 10.23 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 6 July 2022.