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Prioritization of the Chairman's Roles in the European Union: A Comparison of  
the Behaviour of the 2022 French and Czech Presidencies in the Field of  
Environmental Policy

Master's thesis

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Year of the defence: 2023

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2023

Natálie Moserová

## References

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## Abstract

The roles played by Council presidencies are a pertinent area to study, yet it has been insufficiently explored. The Czech Republic has recently experienced its second presidency in the Council which ended in December 2022. It has followed the French presidency, the first state of the same trio. This gives us a unique occasion to study the prioritization of chairman's roles by comparing the behaviour of these two members of one trio presidency presidencies at all levels of the Council for Environment. The legislative files in environmental area were intensively negotiated during the French and Czech presidencies, especially the "Fit for 55" package. Based on the theories on specific activities connected to each role of presidency (political leader, mediator, manager and representant), we analyse these roles and *the way* by which the consecutive French and Czech presidencies have played them in environmental field. We compare the role prioritization of these chairmen based on the weight attached to individual roles (except for the representant role) by the presidencies. A complementary part of the thesis investigates diverse factors derived from the rationalist approach (the power of the country, the approach to environmental policy, French presidential elections) and sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies) which might have influenced the role prioritization of presidencies. We test whether our findings about the role prioritization of the French and Czech presidencies intersects with theoretical assumptions and whether we can confirm our hypotheses.

## Abstrakt

Role, které hrají předsednictví Rady, jsou vhodnou oblastí ke studiu, která však nebyla dosud dostatečně prozkoumána. Česká republika nedávno absolvovala své druhé předsednictví v Radě, které skončilo v prosinci 2022. Navázala tak na francouzské předsednictví, které bylo první z téhož tria. To nám dává jedinečnou příležitost studovat prioritizaci rolí předsedajících států srovnáním chování těchto dvou členů stejného tria na všech úrovních Rady pro životní prostředí. Legislativní spisy byly v environmentální oblasti během francouzského a českého předsednictví intenzivně projednávány, zejména pak balíček „Fit for 55“. Na základě teorií konkrétních aktivit spojených s každou rolí předsednictví (politický vůdce, mediátor, manažer a zástupce) analyzujeme tyto role a způsob, jakým je francouzské a české předsednictví vykonávalo v politice životního prostředí. Porovnááme prioritizaci rolí těchto předsedajících zemí na základě jejich přiřazené váhy rolím (kromě role reprezentanta). Doplňující částí práce

je prozkoumání různých faktorů odvozených od racionalistického přístupu (síla země, přístup k politice životního prostředí, francouzské prezidentské volby) a sociologického přístupu (zkušenosti z předchozích předsednictví), které mohly ovlivnit prioritizaci rolí francouzského a českého předsednictví. Testujeme, zda se naše poznatky o upřednostňování rolí francouzského a českého předsednictví prolínají s teoretickými předpoklady a zda můžeme potvrdit naše hypotézy.

## **Keywords**

European Union, Council Presidency, Environmental Policy, Chairman's roles, French presidency, Czech presidency

## **Klíčová slova**

Evropská unie, Předsednictví v Radě, politika životního prostředí, role předsedajícího státu, předsednictví Francie, předsednictví České republiky

## **Název práce**

Prioritizace rolí předsedajícího státu v Evropské unii: Komparace chování francouzského a českého předsednictví v roce 2022 v oblasti životního prostředí

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## Table of contents

List of abbreviations.....	3
Introduction.....	5
1. Presidency of the Council and Environmental Policy .....	9
1.1. Characteristics of the Council.....	9
1.2. The Presidency of the Council.....	11
1.2.1 Tasks of the Presidency .....	12
1.2.2. Historical Development .....	14
1.2.3. Cooperation with GSC and EU Institutions.....	15
1.3. Environmental Policy of the European Union.....	16
1.3.1. Key Moments of Development.....	16
1.3.2. Instruments and Actors .....	17
2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework .....	20
2.1. Theoretical Framework.....	20
2.1.1 The Prioritization of Chairman’s Roles .....	20
2.1.2. Factors explaining the Role Prioritization .....	25
2.2. Methodology.....	30
2.2.1. Analytical Technique and Selection of Cases.....	30
2.2.2. Empirical Data .....	31
3. The Roles and their Prioritization during the French and Czech Presidencies .....	35
3.1. The Context of the Presidencies .....	35
3.1.1. France .....	35
3.1.2. The Czech Republic .....	37
3.1.3. Trio Programme .....	39
3.1.4. The State of the EU Environmental Policy .....	39
3.2. Political Leader Role .....	42
3.2.1. France in the Role of Political Leader.....	42
3.2.2. The Czech Republic in the Role of Political Leader.....	48
3.2.3. Comparison of Political Leader Role Prioritization between Presidencies.....	53
3.3. Mediator role .....	55
3.3.1. France in the Mediator Role.....	55
3.3.2. The Czech Republic in the Mediator Role .....	58
3.3.3. Comparison of Mediator Role Prioritization between Presidencies .....	62

3.4. Manager .....	63
3.4.1. France in the Manager Role .....	64
3.4.2. Czech Republic in the Manager Role.....	65
3.4.3. Comparison of Manager Role Prioritization between Presidencies.....	66
3.5. Representant Role.....	67
3.5.1. France in the Role of External Representant.....	67
3.5.2. The Czech Republic in the Role of External Representant.....	69
3.6. Conclusion of the First Analytical Part .....	71
4. Factors influencing the Role Prioritization .....	74
4.1. The Power of Presidencies .....	74
4.2. Approach to Environmental Policy .....	77
4.3. Presidential Elections .....	81
4.4. Experiences of Previous Presidencies .....	83
4.4.1. First Hypothesis (H4a) .....	83
4.4.2. Second Hypothesis (H4b).....	85
4.5. Conclusion of the Second Analytical Part.....	88
Conclusion.....	91
References .....	95
Primary sources .....	95
Secondary sources .....	95
List of Appendices .....	108

## List of abbreviations

<b>AGRIFISH</b>	Council for Agriculture and Fisheries
<b>CBAM</b>	Carbon border adjustment mechanism
<b>CCPI</b>	Climate change Performance Index
<b>CITES</b>	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
<b>CBD</b>	Convention on Biological Diversity
<b>COP</b>	Conference of the Parties
<b>DG CLIMA</b>	The Directorate-General for Climate Action
<b>DG ENV</b>	The Directorate-General for Environment
<b>DPR</b>	Deputy Permanent Representative
<b>EAP</b>	Environment Action programme
<b>EEA</b>	European Environment Agency
<b>EEB</b>	European Environmental Bureau
<b>ENV</b>	Council for Environment
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>ESR</b>	Effort Sharing Regulation
<b>ETS</b>	Emissions trading system
<b>ETS BRT</b>	Emissions trading system for buildings and road transport
<b>FAC</b>	Council for Foreign Affairs
<b>FF 55</b>	“Fit For 55” package
<b>GSC</b>	General Secretariat of the Council
<b>IED</b>	Industrial Emissions Directive
<b>IPPC</b>	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
<b>LULUCF</b>	Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry
<b>MEP</b>	Member of the European Parliament
<b>MSR</b>	Market Stability Reserve
<b>POPs</b>	Persistent organic pollutants
<b>REACH</b>	Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals
<b>SCF</b>	Social Climate Fund
<b>SEA</b>	Single European Act
<b>TFEU</b>	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
<b>TTE</b>	Council for Transport and Telecommunications
<b>QMV</b>	Qualified majority voting

**UNCDD** United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

**UNEA** United Nations Environment Assembly

**UNECE** United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

**UNEP** United Nations Environment Programme

**UNFCCC** United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

## Introduction

The rotating 6-month presidency of the Council of the EU (the Council) constitutes an important period for each member state which requires extensive preparation. Especially for recent EU joiners, such as the Czech Republic, it represents a historical moment since it has been only once at the helm of the Council before the studied presidency. Member states play different presidency roles during their term (political leader, mediator, manager and representant). They may differ in *the way* they select to play these roles and prioritize certain roles over others during their mandate. The Czech Republic has experienced from July until December 2022 its second presidency in the Council of the EU following the French presidency which launched the trio presidency ending with Sweden. It is pertinent to study the presidencies behaviour at all levels of the Council for Environment given the current context of the EU effort to accelerate measures in the environmental field to mitigate consequences of the climate change. The Commission has issued many proposals in environmental policy, the most remarkable currently being the “Fit For 55” package following the objective to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% until 2030 compared to 1990 levels and decarbonise the EU economy by 2050 (Consilium, 2023). Hence, the diploma thesis will analyse the prioritization of the chairman’s roles by comparing the behaviour of consecutive French and Czech presidencies in environmental policy. The legislative files in this field were intensively negotiated during the French and Czech presidencies, especially the mentioned “Fit for 55” package. We should also highlight that in our thesis we do not aim to compare the effectiveness or success of the presidencies since this task is very complex and requires a large amount of data.

The focus of our research is concentrated on the *way* the presidencies selected to play the chairman’s roles (political leader, mediator, manager and representant) and their prioritization. Based on the specific activities connected to each presidency role, we will compare the *relative difference* between the intensity of the roles played during the Czech and French presidencies in the environmental area. To explain, it is difficult to conclusively say which roles are played more intensively than others since there might be minor differences between them. Yet, we will analyse which chairman role(s) (political leader, mediator, manager) were prioritized based on presidencies’ attached weight to these roles. In the case of the representant role, we will elaborate shortly on this role since it is acknowledged by scholars. However, we will not examine the prioritization of this role as states cannot choose it themselves since it is given by the agenda of international conferences. Furthermore, we are

aware of the factors which might have influenced the role prioritization of the chairman. Hence, the complementary part of our thesis constitutes a shorter outline of the possible impact of these factors (independent variables) on the role prioritization of presidencies (dependent variable). The factors are derived from the rationalist approach (the power of the country, the approach to environmental policy, French presidential elections) and the sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies). In this shorter chapter we will equally try to find why the presidencies prioritized some roles over others and why they played them in *a certain way*. We will apply a theory-testing method to assess whether the findings about the role prioritization of the chairman underpin or do not underpin our hypotheses constructed based on the theoretical assumptions about factors influencing the role prioritization.

Thus, research questions are as following:

- *In which way have the chairmen chosen to play the roles?*
- *Which role(s) did the presidencies prioritize to play?*
- *By which factors we can explain that France and the Czech Republic prioritized to play certain chairman's role over others?*
- *Why did the presidencies take specific approaches in playing the roles?*

Our project aims to enlarge knowledge about the role prioritization of the Council presidencies since this concrete issue is not sufficiently studied by scholars. We equally aim to offer insight to the factors influencing role prioritization. We have a particular source of data on the topic due to the conducted interviews with environmental representatives in Brussels during the author's internship in the environmental team at the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic in Brussels during the Czech presidency. We should equally mention that since we examine in-depth, also due to conducted interviews, our case studies (French and Czech presidencies in the environmental field) and besides the descriptive part, we equally provide the explication of the role prioritization of these presidencies, our thesis is quite long. The key theoretical framework for our research is represented by publication *European Union Council Presidencies: a comparative perspective* edited by Elgström (2003) where other authors equally contribute, mainly Bengtsson and Tallberg. As regards the last, its research *The power of the presidency: Brokerage, efficiency and distribution in EU negotiations* is also important for our thesis. Moreover, certain publications are pertinent since they analyse presidency roles directly in the environmental field, such as *The role of the EU Presidency in the environmental field: does it make a difference which member state runs the Presidency?* by

Wurzel (1996). Discrepancies between the roles are studied in *The Presidency as Juggler: Managing Conflicting Expectations* by Shout (1998) who deploys a triangle of conflicting tasks of the chairman. The individual Council presidencies were analysed by scholars (published for instance in the *Journal of Common Market Studies*). For our research, we found especially relevant the case studies *The Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU: From facts towards an evaluation* by Shikova et al. (2020) studying Bulgarian presidency by comparing in depth the function of political leader and mediator. Case study of Romanian presidency *The rotating presidency of the EU Council as a two-level game, or how the “Brussels model” neutralises domestic political factors* written by Coman (2020) is also relevant and emphasizes the importance of domestic factors in choosing the presidency roles. We should also highlight that case studies on the previous French presidencies are more represented in this area than in the case of the Czech Republic since before our studied presidencies, France has led already twelve presidencies compared to only one Czech presidency.

We have divided our thesis into four chapters. The first chapter, *Presidency of the Council and Environmental Policy*, represents a constructive background for our research and elaborates on the characteristics of the Council, the historical development and tasks of the presidency, and an overview of the environmental policy of the EU. The second chapter, *Theoretical and Methodological Framework*, is divided into theoretical and methodological parts. In the theoretical part, we will first present existing theories on the chairman roles and activities connected to them which constructs the starting point for our first analytical part where we compare the prioritization of these roles. Then, we will introduce theoretical assumptions derived from sociological and rationalist perspectives about factors that might have influenced the role prioritization of presidencies. Based on the theories, we will formulate hypotheses which we will test in our second analytical part. In our methodological part, we describe our analytical technique, selection of cases and empirical data used for our research. The third chapter, *The Roles and Their Prioritization during the French and Czech Presidencies* is the main analytical part of our research. We firstly analyse the state of environmental policy during the trio presidency and the context of both presidencies. A major part of this chapter is dedicated to the comparison of the way by which the two consecutive presidencies played the chairman’s roles (political leader, mediator, manager and representant) and the prioritization of these roles (except for the representant role). Finally, we have the second and shorter analytical part, *Factors influencing the Role Prioritization*, which constitutes an outline of diverse factors potentially influencing the role prioritization derived from the rationalist approach (the power

of the country, the approach to environmental policy, presidential elections in the case of France) and sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies). We test whether the theoretical assumptions about these factors are in line with the findings of role prioritization from our first analytical part and whether we can confirm our hypotheses.

## 1. Presidency of the Council and Environmental Policy

In this chapter, we will elaborate on the characteristics of the Council, its presidency, and overview of the environmental policy of the EU since it represents a constructive background for our further qualitative research. As regards the presidency of the Council, we will focus on its historical development, tasks of the presidency and cooperation with GSC and EU institutions. With reference to the EU environmental policy, key moments of its development, instruments and actors will be studied.

### 1.1. Characteristics of the Council

The Council is composed by ministers from EU member states government representing interests of EU member states. It is with the European Parliament the highest decision-making institution within the EU (Council of the European Union (Council), 2022b). Its main function is legislative, yet it has got equally extensive executive powers, mostly in foreign affairs (Šlosarčík et al. 2013, p. 75). Predominantly, it consults and approves legislative acts with the European Parliament under the ordinary legislative procedure, the so-called "co-decision" (Council, 2022b). The Council is composed of 10 configurations which correspond to a particular area.<sup>1</sup> The ministers of national governments regularly attend meetings of the Council's configuration which corresponds to their specific policy area to dispute and endorse EU legislation (Council, 2022b). The member states empower their ministers to accept commitments on behalf of their governments to implement measures approved during the negotiations. These ministerial meetings are held in Brussels except for few months (April, June, and October) when ministers meet in Luxembourg (EUR-LEX 2022). The Council's configurations are presided for 6 months by ministers of country which currently holds the presidency following the rotation principle except for the Council for foreign affairs which has got its permanent High Representative (Council, 2022b). Nevertheless, Knill & Liefferink (2007) highlight that decisions between member states are frequently made already at lower levels of the Council such as at working parties and Coreper meetings. In effect, legislative files are transferred to the Council only if a political consensus is needed. The Council follows the

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<sup>1</sup> These areas consist of Council for Agriculture and fisheries (AGRIFISH), Competitiveness (internal market, industry, research) (COMPET), Economic and financial affairs (ECOFIN), Environment (ENV), Employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs (EPSCO), Education, youth, culture, and sport (EYCS), Foreign affairs (FAC), General Affairs (GAC), Justice and home affairs (JHA), and finally Council for Transport, telecommunications and energy (TTE) (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

Council's Rules of Procedure (2009/937/EU) adopted by the Council on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009 (EUR-LEX 2022). The main tasks of the Council are to interpret opinions of member states, approve EU legislation, coordinate national policies, close accords within and outside the EU, adopt the EU budget with the European Parliament, and advance the EU's common foreign and security policy on behalf of instructions from European Council (Council of the European Union (Council), 2022a).

We will now briefly describe the decision-making procedure in the Council. Firstly, we will elaborate on the voting procedure which occurs only if the majority of member states attend the meeting. The presidency determines whether the Council takes the vote. Moreover, the chairman must initiate a voting process if it is anticipated by any member of the Commission or Council and the majority of the Council approves it (EUR-LEX 2022, Article 11). Standardly, for most EU legislation, qualified majority voting (QMV) is used for Council's decisions. The first type of QMV, the double majority rule, applies when the proposal on which the Council is acting comes from the High Representative of the EU or the Commission. The qualified majority is achieved when 55% of member states in the Council vote in favour of the proposal and they constitute at least 65% of the overall EU population (Council, 2022b).<sup>2</sup> To block a proposal, there should be a blocking minority in the Council of at least 4 states. The second type of QMV is called the "reinforced qualified majority" voting and takes place when the proposal does not arrive from the High Representative of the EU or Commission. The proposal is approved by this type of QMV when at least 72% of states in the Council vote for the proposal and they constitute at least 65% of the overall EU population (Council, 2022b). In other areas of EU legislation, the voting procedure occurs by unanimity (Consilium, 2016).<sup>3</sup> Finally, for procedural questions, a simple majority voting is used during which an act is adopted if at least 14 out of 27 states vote in favour (Consilium, 2016). Secondly, in case of an urgent situation, the Council adopts the legislation by two kinds of written procedure; ordinary and simplified written procedure. The use of the ordinary written procedure requires a forehead common accord during the meeting of Council or Coreper (Consilium, 2016). The presidency can suggest exceptionally its application. During the simplified written procedure, which is launched at the request of the presidency, the absence of a response from a member of the

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<sup>2</sup> The current rules apply since 1st November 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Such as some measures for the protection of the environment, flexibility provisions, social policy, harmonization of indirect taxes and in fields other than stated in Article 115 of TFEU (European Parliament, 2022).

Council signifies that he accepts the adoption of the act. It is called equally silence procedure since unlike the ordinary written procedure, explicit answers are not required from Council members (EUR-LEX 2022).

Each state of the European Union has its representation in Brussels, the so-called Permanent Representation. The Permanent Representation of the chairing country is crucial since it negotiates agreements between the supranational and national spheres (Coman, 2020, p.592). Individual representations are headed by Permanent Representatives who reflect views of their government and form together the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper). The last, which is more a political channel rather than an expert one, prepares duties delegated from the Council and arranges its meetings (EUR-LEX 2022, article 19). We can distinguish Coreper II (composed of Permanent Representatives of governments) dealing with justice and home affairs, foreign and general affairs, economic and financial affairs, and Coreper I (composed of deputy Permanent Representatives) managing other Council sections including environmental area. Both configurations of Coreper meet on weekly basis formations (Council, 2022a). Informal groups (Antici for Coreper II and Mertens for Coreper I) are responsible for the preparation of tasks of Coreper deciding which issues will be discussed during meetings formations (Council, 2022a). The main missions of Coreper are to secure unity of EU policies, discuss and reach agreements that are proceeded to the Council for adoption, harmonize tasks of Council's formations (Council, 2022a). The agreements are concluded at Coreper by A or B items (Kaniok, 2010, p.27).<sup>4</sup> Besides Coreper, the Council preparatory bodies assist the Council including specialised committees and working parties (Council, 2022b). The meetings of these preparatory bodies are more informal than Coreper and frequented by national diplomats negotiating on behalf of interests of their country (Council, 2022b). In some cases of legislation, a political agreement can be achieved already at this level. Referring to E. Fouilleux et al. (2005, p. 612-615), presidencies of small member states use negotiations more at the level of working groups compared to bigger member states. He explains this observation by reduced differences in political influence during the working groups compared to Coreper meetings.

## 1.2. The Presidency of the Council

In this section, we will elaborate on the functioning of the Council Presidency. We will

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<sup>4</sup> "A items" do not require a debate at ministerial level since they were terminated at lower levels of the Council. Contrarily, "B items" require discussion during ministerial meetings since despite being concluded at lower levels, they are politically sensitive (Kaniok, 2010, p.27).

concentrate on its principles, tasks, levels of its performance, and historical development with the Lisbon Treaty introducing key changes for the process. Finally, we will analyse chairman's relations with Council's General Secretariat and other institutions such as the EP and Commission.

### 1.2.1 Tasks of the Presidency

The Presidency of the Council is defined in the Council's Rules of Procedure (2009/937/EU), among others in article 20, *The Presidency and the smooth conduct of discussions* (EUR-LEX 2022). Its main functions are preparing the agenda, managing administrative tasks of the Council and scheduling its meetings, mediating agreements, representing the Council within the EU, in front of other states or international organisations (Karlás, 2008, p.19). The Presidency operates by the rotation principle where consecutive three member states constitute the so-called trio and preside the Council for 18 months in total (6 months for each country) except for the Council for Foreign Affairs (EUR-LEX 2022). The presiding country chairs the Council meetings on each of its levels such as ministerial meetings, Coreper or working parties, and represent the Council also within the EU institutions during negotiations with the European Parliament and the Commission such as informal technical meetings, political trilogues or Conciliation Committee meetings. Trilogues represent informal tripartite meetings among the Council, Parliament and Commission where institutions negotiate the adoption of legislative proposals of the EU (European Parliament, 2017). Firstly, during technical meetings, experts from all three institutions discuss and negotiate technicalities. Then, politically sensitive issues which were not solved at the technical level are discussed during political trilogues. The Commission operates mainly as an arbitrator between the two institutions, providing expertise and steering discussions in the necessary direction. Equally, the presidency works closely with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the President of the European Council (Consilium 2023).

The presidency prepares priorities for its term in close collaboration of domestic and international actors such as the Permanent Representation in Brussels, its government and relevant ministries, the European Commission, and other actors such as businesses, NGOs, academic or scientific sphere, in some cases even broad public (Coman, 2020, p.591). However, authors such as Elgström (2006, p.180), believe that the ability of the chairman to set its priorities is limited. He explains his theory by the fact that the priorities should be in line with

the priorities which are identified every 5 years by European Council in its strategic document and the Commission's annual work program (Maurice, 2022).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty which introduced the concept of trio presidencies, chairmen within one trio coordinate their objectives and prepare together their triennial working program setting priorities for all Council configurations which follows up the programme of the previous trio and they cooperate closely during these 18 months (Kaniok 2010, p. 35). Although each presidency can set its own goals in its presidency program, the establishment of trio presidencies diminished the influence of individuality of each presidency (Kaniok 2010, p. 35). The preparation of the trio programme is mostly important before the start of the trio presidency. The communication between the members of trio is crucial at this phase to keep the members of trio updated on the current agenda of the presidency. During the trio presidency, the communication between countries is less intense and more informal. Although it is less structured, open discussions to prepare the Council take place between DPR of presidency and attaches of the same trio. The members of the trio generally support each other and do not stand against the current presidency's position since they are aware that they will themselves chair the Council in the future (CZ, 2023).

The chairman has advantage of information over other states and control of procedure as it can build consensus by slowing down or accelerating negotiations and exert time coercion on states (Tallberg, 2003, p. 10). The presidency can also hierarchize some issues over others by determining the content, frequency, and format of meetings (Coman, 2020, p.591). During negotiations, chairmen conduct a structured meeting, ensure their smooth progress, form their agenda, give the right to express reservations to member states and indicate next steps at the end of the meeting. They also draft conclusions, documents and lead the voting process when it occurs (Tallberg, 2004, p. 1013). Moreover, the presidency is defined by the principle of impartiality which gained importance during the crisis of European Economic Community and in the 1980s (Kaniok, 2010, p.24). However, contrary to the principle of rotation, the principle of impartiality is not consolidated in any source of the EU law. Nevertheless, there has been a wide academic debate on this problem. As Kaniok (2010, p. 24) explains, there is a difference between impartiality and non-engagement since the former can be perceived positively as the presidency would not follow its national interests. However, the non-engagement might be not so well received as the presidency may not achieve a compromise solution following this

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<sup>5</sup> Current priorities were established in 2019 by European Council.

principle. We will elaborate more on the role of chairman's national interests in the following chapters.

### 1.2.2. Historical Development

Concerning the historical development, the presidency of the Council was firstly mentioned in the Treaty establishing The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) with the reference to the Council of ministers (Shout, 1998, p.3). We should highlight an important fact to understand the further role of the presidency that contrary to the European Parliament and Commission, the establishing treaties stated that the presidency shall be run alternately by member states and its task shall be to set meetings (Shout, 1998, p.3). Article 27 and 28 of the mentioned Treaty imposed the basis for its rotation principle which meant that member states should follow in alphabetic order after their 6 months period in the role of the chairman (Kaniok, 2010, p. 14). The presidency was more specifically defined by the provisional Rules of Procedure of the Council of Ministers in 1952. Mainly, these rules enabled the presidency to sign minutes from the Council's meetings together with the Council General Secretariat and set the obligation to prepare these negotiations and suggest their agenda (Shout, 1998, p.3). The Treaty of Rome (1957) assigned equally the alphabetic rule to the Presidency (Karlas, 2008, p.17). This order remained until the so-called Northern enlargement when the introduction of the rotation principle based on the alteration of small and big member states, old and new joiners occurred. Since the 1960s, the importance of the presidency has grown moderately. The reforms aiming to define more precisely the role of the presidency started in the 1970s with the Tindemans report (1975) (Kaniok, 2010, p.18).

The main reform of the presidency came with the Lisbon Treaty whose ground was established by the Nice Treaty. The last was based on the non-ratified Draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe (2004) (Kaniok, 2010, p.19).<sup>6</sup> The legal adjustment of the presidency was transferred unchanged from the non-ratified Treaty to Lisbon Treaty (Kaniok, 2010, p.19). Firstly, the effort of the EU to interconnect more with the single presidencies resulted in the fact that the Lisbon Treaty approved the trio (team) presidency of 18 months (Kaniok, 2010, p.19).<sup>7</sup> The team presidencies were inspired by the Eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007 and

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<sup>6</sup> The declaration of Leaken (2001) introduced the form of the negotiation of the Draft Treaty (convent instead of the international conference) (Kaniok, 2010, p.19).

<sup>7</sup> This concept of the team presidency was already partially exercised since 2006 based on the non-ratified Constitution of the European Union (2005) (Kaniok, 2010, p.19).

considered the countries' diversity for the alteration (size, geographical location, and time of the accession to the EU) (Kaniok, 2010, p.21). Secondly, the Lisbon Treaty ceased the rotating presidency of the European Council and introduced an elected permanent President by European Council for 2,5 years (Šlosarčík et al. 2013, p. 106). Moreover, the Treaty instituted a permanent High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy for the term of 5 years in the Council for Foreign Affairs, elected by the European Council and approved by the president of the Commission (Šlosarčík et al. 2013, p. 106). Finally, the Lisbon Treaty weakened the role of national interests of member states during their presidency and reduced its function of the representation of the EU while maintaining the representation of the Council (Kaniok, 2010, p.32).

### 1.2.3. Cooperation with GSC and EU Institutions

Finally, the presidency during its whole term cooperates closely within the Council with its General Secretariat which constitutes a „*bridge between various chairs*” (Vanhoonacker & Christiansen, 2008, p.757). The General Secretariat has a mainly administrative role in supporting the presidency since it prepares drafts of documents, write reports from the negotiations, and coordinate the Council meetings. Nevertheless, it can provide a valuable expertise to the presidency as well since officials from the GSC have experienced other presidencies and have acquired over time a deep knowledge about the functioning of the mediation process and available procedural tools to the presidency. They operate with the “*notes to the President*” to inform the chairman about legislative files and positions of member states (Tallberg, 2004, p.1003). Yet, it depends on each presidency how intensively it coordinates its agenda with the Secretariat. The presidency collaborates also with the Legal and Linguistic service of the Council. Together with the General Secretariat, the last participates actively in the internal Council meetings with the presidency discussing next steps and solutions. Moreover, the GSC and the Legal and Linguistic service of the Council develop together with the presidency strategies for technical meetings and political trilogues sitting next to the chairman and participating actively in the drafting of the legislation. Furthermore, the presidency cooperates with other EU institutions such as the European Parliament and the Commission. It tries to establish convenient relations with the Commission already before the presidency and discusses with the institution its forthcoming priorities since the Commission has the monopoly of initiation (Wurzel, 1996, p.277). The presidency meets regularly with the Commission since the last provides valuable expertise and acts as an arbiter between the

Council and the EP. The Commission is also present at all levels of the Council meetings such as ministerial meetings, Coreper and working parties. Concerning the European Parliament, the presidency aims to have good contacts with this institution mostly when the adoption of legislation is approaching since it is a Council's partner in co-decision. Frequent bilateral meetings of EP shadow rapporteurs with the presidency are not exceptional, the presidency must know the details of the EP position to develop possible concessions which are in line with the mandate from member states to reach a provisional agreement (Wurzel, 1996, p.279).

### 1.3. Environmental Policy of the European Union

The EU Environmental Policy is defined by Articles 11 and 191-193 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (European Parliament, 2022). It includes areas such as sustainable consumption and production, tackling climate change, chemicals and pesticides, resource efficiency and circular economy, water protection and management, biodiversity, land use and forestry, nature resources, air, and noise pollution (European Parliament, 2022).

#### 1.3.1. Key Moments of Development

Firstly, we will elaborate briefly on the key moments of its development. The EEC did not consider environmental policy as its priority until the 1970s. However, the first Environment Action Programme issued by the Commission in 1973 represented a shift in its development and imposed strategies of the environmental policy (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.66). Furthermore, the Single European Act (SEA) in 1986 constituted a shift in the environmental policy of the EU since it initiated the need to focus on the Community to avert the negative development of the policy (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.66). Moreover, the environmental policy started to be a separate policy and acquired an explicit legal basis including the protection of the environment. The decision-making procedure became more effective also in the environmental field. The Maastricht treaty (1993) established the environmental policy as an official European policy area and formulated it more clearly (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.66). Brosset & Maljean-Dubois et al (2020, p.419) consider the acceptance of the first European Climate Change Program (1999) as the real starting point of the climate change policy in the EU. The energy and climate package adopted in 2009 set goals until 2020 such as civil protection, protection of the marine environment, energy efficiency (Brosset & Maljean-Dubois et al., 2020, p.420). Since the Lisbon Treaty, member states share

competences in environmental policy with the EU. However, the Treaty did not introduce significant changes in the voting procedure since the qualified majority voting in the Council for the environment was initiated by the Maastricht Treaty and the co-decision by Amsterdam Treaty. In 2014, the EU climate goals and strategies were adjusted. The processes resulted in the Paris agreement (2015) which was intended to limit global warming below 2 degrees, aiming for the ambition of 1.5 degrees (MŽP 2022).<sup>8</sup> This global Treaty was of legislative nature as the EU member states committed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% compared to the levels in 1990 (MŽP 2022). On top of that, this Treaty signified a major change since the obligation to establish National Determinant Contributions (NDCs) was imposed on all states including the developing ones (MŽP 2022). In December 2019, the Commission introduced a plan to become climate neutral until 2050 in line with the commitments of the Paris agreement, the so-called Green Deal. Principally, it introduced the European Climate Law; a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to their levels in 1990 (Consilium, 2023). In addition, the Green Deal includes mainly the biodiversity strategy for 2030, Just transition mechanism, circular economy plan, industrial and forest strategy, Farm to Fork Strategy (Consilium, 2023). In July 2021, legislative proposals for ecological transformation, the so-called “Fit for 55” package, were introduced by the Commission aiming to reduce emissions in the sectors of transport, building, land use, revise the emission trading system (Consilium, 2023).<sup>9</sup> The whole package was approved by the EP and the Council during the Czech Presidency. We will elaborate more on this package at the beginning of the first analytical part (“current state of the environmental policy”).

### 1.3.2. Instruments and Actors

We will now discuss the instruments and actors of environmental policy. The EU has ordinary legislative instruments in environmental policy such as regulations, directives, in particular cases also recommendations and stances. Since 1973, the EU utilizes Environment Action programmes to impose objectives in the environmental field (Consilium, 2016).<sup>10</sup> In addition, it disposes of non-legislative, strategic tools and white and green books. Concerning the decision-making in environmental policy, the principle of subsidiarity and unanimity in the

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<sup>8</sup> After 2020, the Paris agreement replaced the Kyoto protocol which was valid until then (MŽP 2022).

<sup>9</sup> The Fit for 55 package includes legislative proposals such as the Carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), Emissions trading system (ETS), Social Climate Fund (SCF), Land use and forestry (LULUCF), Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of cars and vans, REfuelEU aviation and FuelEU maritime, Renewable energy and energy efficiency (Consilium, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Currently, the 8th EAP has been applied from 2021 until 2030.

Council limits the competences of the EU. Unanimity is required for areas such as the energy supply and sources, land use, country planning, water management (Consilium, 2016). Finally, we must mention that, especially with the Eastern enlargement, setting a compromise between the member states in the Council in the environmental policy has become more difficult (Kaniok 2010, p. 87).

The main actors of the EU environmental policy are the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Environment Agency and European Court of Justice. The Commission has a crucial role in this field since it holds the initiation function. However, its monopoly on agenda-setting has its limitations since the influence of EP and member states is increasing (Wurzel 1996, p.277). There are two Directorate-General that deal with the policy; Directorate-General for Climate Action (DG CLIMA) with executive vice-president Frans Timmermans and the Directorate-General for Environment (DG ENV) led by the Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius. The second actor, the European Parliament has its Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety which is led by Pascal Canfin from Renew Europe. It has been playing an active role in environmental policy and significantly influenced the proposals of the Commission (Wurzel 1996, p.277). Finally, the Parliament is often more ambitious than the Council and the Commission in environmental policy. However, as even the Commission admits, the Parliament's requests are not in some cases realistic. In the Council, the configuration for environment (ENV) holds the responsibility over the environmental and climate policy and meets 4 times a year. The rotating presidency chairs these ministerial meetings as well as negotiations at the lower levels in the Council (see previous sub-chapter). Besides, the consequences of the legislation adopted by the Council formations such as TTE, AGRIFISH often influence the environmental field. The European Court of Justice has a significant impact on environmental regulation and compliance with the legislation. However, it does not participate in environmental decision-making as the previous institutions (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.66). The European Environmental Agency established in 1994 and based in Copenhagen is responsible for monitoring and analysing the latest tendencies in environmental development and social pressures, collecting data and information about the environment. It is formally an independent agency; however, it develops tight connections with national governments (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.69). Furthermore, there are other groups in Brussels influencing the environmental policy of the EU such as interest groups, lobbyists, NGOs, agencies, and environmental associations (with the European Environmental Bureau being the largest one) (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p.70).

Finally, the European Union can be considered a global leader in environmental policy aiming to represent an example for other countries in the protection of the environment. It is part of the Kyoto protocol, Paris agreement and UNFCCC (Brosset & Maljean-Dubois, 2020, p.417). The EU is represented as a whole during the UN's Conferences of the Parties by the presiding country of the Council. In addition, the leadership of the EU is manifested in its close relations with developing states in the environmental field since the European Union provides them with significant financial support to assist them in tackling climate change. Nevertheless, the influence of the EU has been weakened since global powers such as the US or China, and also some emergent countries are unreliable partners as regards combatting climate change (Brosset & Maljean-Dubois, 2020, p.417).

## 2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This chapter is divided into theoretical and methodological parts. In the theoretical part, we will firstly present existing theories on the chairman roles (manager, political leader, mediator, representant) and specific activities connected to each role which constructs the starting point for our first analytical part which compares the way by which presidencies have played the roles and the prioritization of these roles. Then, we will present theoretical assumptions derived from sociological and rationalist perspective about factors which might have influenced the role prioritization of presidencies. Based on the theories, we will formulate hypotheses which we will test in our second analytical part. In our methodological part, we describe our analytical technique, selection of cases and empirical data used for our research.

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1.1 The Prioritization of Chairman's Roles

Most authors (Quaglia et al., 2006; Wurzel, 1996; Pitrová & Kaniok 2005; Tallberg 2004, Elgström 2006) acknowledge four roles which are played by presidencies; administration and management of the Council, mediation, political leadership, and internal and external representation. The presidency might play all these roles simultaneously since the role of fair mediator, skilful manager, political leader and representant can complement themselves (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2006, p. 1056). It is even expected that presidencies will perform each role except for the leadership role which might not be played by all presidencies (Elgström, 2003, p.14). However, depending on different factors on which we will elaborate in the next subchapter (*factors explaining the role prioritization*), presidencies differ in the relative prioritization of the roles they play; they are expected (despite small differences) to attach different weight to the chairman's roles (Elgström 2003, p.13). They may equally vary in the way they select to play these roles (Elgström 2003, p.13). We will now present the presidency roles based on the literature (political leader, mediator, manager, and representant) and describe which activities are related to them. The role prioritization will be then assessed by the relative difference of intensity in exercising these roles except for the representant role since presidencies cannot choose themselves how much weight they will attach to this role as it is given by the annual agenda of international conferences.

The weight attached to the **political leadership** role will be firstly studied by the

presidency's ambition to push forward the long-term goals of the European Union in environmental field. To explain, the chairman who selects to play this role, tries to lead the discussions during Council negotiations in a progressive direction and to further the processes of European integration (Schout & Vanhoonaeker, 2006, p.1055). This is reflected in the effort of the presidency to be an active leader and make as much progress in legislative files as possible. Moreover, the activity of the chairman during the Council meetings to push the long-term EU objectives is also relevant to this role. Secondly, the political leadership role will be analysed by the chairman's ability to promote its vision of the future of Europe in environmental area. This is materialized firstly by the following activity: besides the presidency's priorities which are given by the legislative cycle, the chairman playing the political leader role establishes new political initiatives that reflect its government's objectives and priorities of the EU (Elgström, 2006, p. 182). To explain, the presidency might set few priorities by itself which might be also connected to the international situation such as a conflict, economic or political crisis, climate change and reflects its adaptability to specific international circumstances (Pitrová & Kaniok, 2005, p. 14). Finally, the ability of chairman to put forward its innovative visions is reflected in organising events focused on specific issues in Brussels or in the capital and informal meetings of the Council where ministers discuss several initiatives of the presidency.

As we have mentioned above, presidencies might vary in the way they select to play the chairman roles (Elgström 2003, p.2). Thus, presidencies may take a different approach in exercising the role of the political leader and play it by a certain way. Firstly, the chairman might play this role by taking unilateral and coercive actions. This means that it strongly fosters its national interests and might apply a coercion strategy on member states to ensure his objectives (Elgström 2006, p.185). The chairman who chooses to play the leader by this manner may accentuate issues which are in line with its national position and introduce new discussions while focusing mainly on the promotion of its government's objectives (Bunse 2009, p. 32). Its aim is equally to close an agreement which would be in line with its national interests (Shikova et al. 2020). On the other hand, the chairman might select to play the leadership role by undertaking entrepreneurial activities contrary to unilateral or coercive actions. To explain, it would not promote forcefully its national goals or put pressure on member states to close an agreement but rather promote new initiatives and its innovative visions of the EU (Elgström 2003, p.14).

Secondly, the weight attached to **the mediator role** will be determined by the chairman's ability to accommodate interests of member states while balancing its national objectives. Concerning the first activity, accommodation of member states interests, presidencies in their mediation role should try to establish compromises among member states of the Council and provide balanced agreements acceptable to all or majority of parties<sup>11</sup> (Elgström et al. 2003, p.6). Hence, the presidency should try to communicate with as many states as possible to consider their requirements and red flags. It benefits from having relevant information about the position of member states due to the Council meetings at all levels, both formal and informal. On the informal level, it can organize the so-called "confessionals" which are bilateral meetings between the presidency and member states so that the first knew other countries red flags and space for manoeuvre (Tallberg 2004, p.1003). Moreover, attaches provide writing comments to the presidency. Thus, with all this important information, the presidency should be able to calculate based on the adaptability of member states how further it can go in setting compromises. Furthermore, brokering of consensus does not occur only between member states but also between other EU institutions. Hence, the intervention of national interests is also visible during the trilogue phase in terms of which issues the presidency should leave to the EP. During this period, the default approach is that the presidency should try to stick to the general approach as closely as possible and give to the EP as minimum concessions as possible. Nevertheless, the presidency might need to go slightly further than with what member states are comfortable to reach an agreement with the Parliament since the last has often a different position on issues (especially more ambitions in the environmental field) than the Council. Thereby, creating some room for manoeuvre for negotiations with the Parliament helps the presidency to manage trilogues effectively and avoid disappointments of member states. In effect, the presidency needs to be in close contact with states to calculate well which trade-offs it can give to the EP and contrarily, which issues it should try to enforce during trilogues as they are politically sensitive for member states. Equally, it should constantly reassure itself that member states are on board and can support the presidency compromise text (CZ 2023). We should highlight, that the chairman should be fair and trustful while playing the mediator role since member states rely on information provided by the presidency as the last has the advantage of information (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2006, p.1055). Finally, chairman playing actively the mediator role, should be able to balance its national interests. However,

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<sup>11</sup> Whether all states or only a majority must accept the proposal depends on the specific legislative file. The voting in Council occurs mostly by double majority rule, however, for some measures of environmental protection, it occurs by unanimity (Consilium 2023).

national objectives of the presidency cannot be completely overlooked as each presidency is unique and according to the negotiation theory, it is even anticipated that the chairman would not be completely neutral since complete impartiality would block or slow down a conclusion of an agreement. Nevertheless, when playing the mediator role, the presidency should try to balance between national objectives and put them aside in politically sensitive issues for member states (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2006, p.1055).

Thirdly, **the manager role** is a traditional and crucial function which entails the responsibility that the presidency runs smoothly. While being a manager, chairmen work on daily tasks of the Council such as preparing and sending documents on time, scheduling, and chairing meetings (at all levels including the informal ministerial meetings in the capital) and planning rooms for negotiations (Schout & Vanhoonacker, 2006, p.1055). The intensity by which chairmen played the manager role will be analysed by the cooperation between the capital and the Permanent Representation and the coordination of agenda with the GSC and other EU institutions such as the EP and the Commission. Concerning the first activity, the role of the manager implies close coordination between the capital and Permanent Representation in Brussels before and during the presidency (Druláková et al. 2020). Experts from the chairman's relevant ministries travel frequently to Brussels during these 6 months to participate in Council's meetings, working parties, Coreper, technical meetings and political trilogues. Officials from relevant ministries in capital and in Brussels prepare the meeting agenda together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or European Affairs. The liaison between the capital and Brussels is demonstrated by the regular weekly meetings (online during the Czech presidency) where the Permanent Representation informs the capital about occurred negotiations, and they coordinate next steps together. Additionally, the officials in the capital have access to the government's database (DAP for the Czech presidency) where diplomats put detailed reports from each meeting. Depending on from where the main expertise comes, the presidency can be Brussels or capital based. Moreover, within the Permanent Representation, there is a complex collaboration in Coreper between attaches, Mertens/Antici team and DPR (Deputy Permanent Representative) since attaches inform them about previous negotiations.

Secondly, the intensity of playing the manager role will be analysed by the level of coordination of agenda with the GSC and other EU institutions such as the EP and the Commission. First, the presidency is in close relationship with GSC. It is a valuable administrative support to the presidency and the communication between the GSC and the

Permanent Representation occurs daily. The GSC assists the chairman in the preparation of the meeting agenda, in the scheduling of the negotiations and preparation of their content (Elgström 2006). To illustrate, the presidency with GSC introduce monthly calendar meetings<sup>12</sup> which are the basis on which member states meet (NL 2022). The presidency benefits from the GSC officers' knowledge of files as they have experiences of past negotiations and have often participated in discussing same subjects with which is the presidency occupied. Finally, the chairman in its managerial role coordinates agendas with EU institutions as it works closely with European Parliament and Commission (Bunse 2009, p. 24). They organise together technical meetings and trilogues. The Commission is a key partner of the presidency as the chairman needs to discuss compromises with the Commission to advance it as the last has monopoly on initiation. The level of the communication with the Commission depends on the phase the proposal is currently in (FR, CZ 2023). The cooperation with the Parliament is intensified mostly during the trilogue phase. The presidency equally alters with the EP in chairing these meetings and giving the right to speak.

Concerning the last function, **the role of representant**, it can be divided into internal and external representation, however in our thesis, we will focus on the external part by analysing the occurrence of international conferences during the countries' term.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the external representation occurs on the international scene where the presidency represents the Council during international conferences (the main one being the Climate Change conference organised by UNFCCC) and coordinates the EU position for these events (Elgström et al. 2003, p.7). While playing the representant role, presidencies should equally prepare Council conclusions agreed by member states. These represent the common EU position which the chairman maintains during the COPs. Nevertheless, the role of representant has been diminished over time due to the increasing presence of other EU actors and mainly after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty which introduced The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Coman, 2020, p. 587). Finally, it is important to highlight that member states do not have a freedom to choose by which intensity they play this role since it is given by the agenda of international conferences as they occur only once in a year, so it is accidental which state holds the presidency. Moreover, the emphasis on the representant role might be influenced by international situation which can cause delay of

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<sup>12</sup> It is an official document; revised environmental work program in the environmental filed.

<sup>13</sup> The internal representation is reflected in the fact that the presidency represents the Council notably during inter-institutional negotiations with the Parliament and Commission (Elgström et al. 2003).

conferences (CZ 2023).

### 2.1.2. Factors explaining the Role Prioritization

In this section, we will introduce a theory for our independent variables which explains the differences in role prioritization of presidencies. The representant role is not studied in this section since states cannot really choose themselves the weight they will attach to this role as it is mostly given by the agenda of international conferences. Scholars interpret the variations in the role prioritization by two logics, the *logic of consequences* (rational perspective) and *logic of appropriateness* (sociological perspective) (Elgström 2003). The theory is dealing with many factors influencing the role prioritization of the chairman. However, we will test only these independent variables that are the most relevant for our research taking into consideration the differences between France and the Czech Republic in the environmental field. Thus, we conceptualize the theory by implementing 4 independent variables combined from the rationalist and sociological approach. From the rationalist one, we will test the power of the presidency, the approach to environmental policy and context of elections (the last only for the French term). From the sociological perspective, we will analyse experiences from previous presidencies. We will test if and how these factors can explain the differences between presidencies in the intensity and the way by which they have selected to play the chairman's roles.

**The rationalist approach**, which assumes that the presidencies calculate rationally possible gains and are guided by maximising their interests following *the logic of consequences* as they measure possible consequences of their actions, focuses on the behaviour of the chairman influenced by its power such as its size, economic and political weight (Quaglia et al. 2006; Elgström et al. 2003; Elgström 2003), the approach to environmental policy (Tallberg 2003, p.10) and by its national conditions such as elections (Elgström et al. 2003). In our thesis, the power of countries and the approach to environmental policy will be tested for both Czech and French presidencies, while the factor of elections will be assessed only in the case of France as it has experienced presidential elections during its term, and the elections could have influenced its behaviour since it is a semi-presidential Republic where the president plays a key role.

Firstly, we will elaborate on the factor of **power** of member states within the EU. The

power of countries is assessed by the qualitative difference between big member states and middle-sized/small member states based on their size (number of the population) and political and economic weight which in the case of our studied presidencies correlate. Although in reality, we have big, middle-sized and small member states in the EU, with reference to the theory the major difference lies between the behaviour of big ones and others. We consider France as a big member state due to its large population in the EU and significant political and economic power as well as strong negotiation position. In contrast, the Czech Republic as a middle-sized state with less political and economic weight and weaker negotiation position suits the other category, in our thesis referred to as a small/middle-sized state. With reference to the theory, big member states are expected to emphasize the leadership role more than the manager role since they often do not have too solid ties with GSC and Commission since they do not need to cooperate intensively with them because of their complex bureaucracies (Elgström et al. 2004, p.72). Moreover, it can be more difficult for them to manage these large administrations which can create tensions while managing the daily presidency tasks (Bunse 2009, p.32). They are also generally less involved in daily tasks of the presidency (Elgström et al. 2004, p. 127). Big member states, despite trying to play the mediator role, might exercise this role with less intensity than the leadership since they might promote their national objectives strongly. This is equally caused by the fact that they may lead capital-based presidencies, thus, more partial behaviour is expected (Elgström et al. 2004, p. 111). They might also communicate more with other big member states rather than smaller member states (Quaglia et al. 2006, p. 360). Hence, the theory predicts that big member states prioritize leadership role during their term while undertaking unilateral actions as they impose their national goals more forcefully than middle-sized/small member states and put pressure on other countries to broker an agreement, sometimes exercising mild coercion (Bengtsson 2003, p. 315). To explain, big member states can benefit from their power position due to their significant political and economic weight and available resources and impose on member states the promotion of their own interests. This strategy might be effective in advancing agreements and disrupt political deadlocks (Elgström et al. 2003, p.9). Moreover, the author argues that this behaviour is connected especially with France (Elgström et al. 2003, p. 49).

On the other hand, effective mediation may occur more actively regarding the middle-sized/small member states than in the case of big member states which are often biased as they have larger power resources. Hence, middle-sized/small member states might act in a more discreet manner and not force so vehemently their national interests as they are more vulnerable

than big member states and have generally less objectives to promote. They equally search for possible bargains and trade-offs while trying to communicate with all member states, including smaller member states (Quaglia et al. 2006, p. 360). They might also promote national interests less than big member states since their presidency is generally run from Brussels (Elgström et al. 2004, p. 50). They might also play the manager role more actively since because of their smaller political and economic weight, they might actively engage in running the presidency to compensate this lack of power by exercising thoroughly managerial tasks (Elgström et al. 2004, p. 127). It is awaited that it is less difficult for them to coordinate the presidency apparatus because of less complex bureaucracies. Moreover, their cooperation with GSC and other EU institutions such as Commission and EP which is important for the manager role is expected to be more intensive than in the case of big member states since middle-sized/small member states need to communicate more with them because of their reduced administrations. This tighter cooperation with GSC and other EU actors might be equally caused by the pressure imposed on them to create connections within the EU to establish coalitions (Quaglia et al. 2006, p. 353). Finally, middle-sized/small member states are also believed to exercise the leadership role but instead of taking unilateral and coercive actions as might do big member states and promoting their interests, middle-sized/small member states would play it by undertaking entrepreneurial activities such as encouraging new initiatives and visions (Bengtsson 2003, p. 314). Yet, the theory expects that although playing the leader role, they would prefer to emphasize the manager or mediator role (Bengtsson 2003, p. 315). Hence, we will test the following hypotheses.

H1: Big member states will prioritize leadership role while taking unilateral actions contrary to middle-sized/small member states which will play the leadership role by undertaking entrepreneurial tasks and emphasize mediator or manager role.

Secondly, Tallberg (2003, p.9) elaborates on the factor of specific socioeconomic priorities which consists of different approach to policy sectors such as economic, social, environmental policy. In our thesis, we will focus on the factor of presidency's **approach to environmental policy**. The author acknowledges that the level of importance the presidencies give to this area can vary. Indeed, he expects that if the environment policy is important for the chairing country, it would emphasize the political leader role (Tallberg, 2003, p.9). To explain, this country would actively try during its presidency to confirm the long-term environmental EU goals rather than pushing for its own objectives. On the other hand, the member state, for

which the environment area is not crucial since it prioritizes to focus on other policy fields during its term, could be less active than the first described type in promoting objectives of the EU in the environment field. During its presidency, although it can demonstrate some initiatives in this field, it might lead the discussions in all levels of the Council for Environment in other direction than expected by other EU actors (such as Commission, European Parliament). Thus, it would rather steer discussions in the way which suits its national interests. Therefore, it would accentuate less the leader role than in the case of the presidency for which the environment is important. We will test the following hypotheses:

H2: Countries, for which the environmental policy is important, might accentuate the leadership role more during their presidencies than states which rather prioritize other areas.

Thirdly, most scholars highlight the importance of national conditions in exercising presidential roles. They highlight many influencing factors such as expertise, networks, domestic public opinion, strong lobbying groups, and personal skills (Vandecasteele et al. 2014, p.241). In our thesis, we will elaborate on the factor of presidential **elections** taking place during the French term. For France as a semi-presidential republic with the president of the country being the crucial actor, presidential elections could have played an important role (Elgie, 2003). According to the theory, presidencies conducting elections during their term, might accentuate leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions because of the prospect of success in the domestic field (Niemann et al. 2010, p.734). Anticipation of approaching elections might cause omitting certain issues and not discussing them within the Council or slowing down proposals as the presidency would protect interests of some large group which could influence the re-election of the government (Elgström 2004, p.9). On the other hand, before elections take place, the presidency can accentuate some priorities, accelerate proposals or promote new initiatives if they are in line with the majoritarian domestic public opinion to obtain as much as votes as possible (Pitrová & Kaniok, 2005, p.15; Rozenberg, 2022). As regards the presidential elections which occurred during the French term, analysts assumed that elections might cause that France would put pressure on member states to follow their view because of domestic concerns (Chopin et al. 2022). Moreover, they have predicted that the presidential elections of France might have influenced the powerful rhetoric during their term to show their leadership in tackling climate change and protecting the environment (Chopin et al. 2022). Analysts similarly assumed that France would play the leader role on important EU challenges such as the climate change by less intensity around the period of elections than after

it (Wright et al. 2021).

We will test this hypothesis for the factor of presidential elections:

H3: France experiencing presidential elections during its term will accentuate leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions because of the prospect of success in the domestic field.

According to the **sociological approach**, presidencies, by following the *logic of appropriateness*, prioritize specific role(s) and play them in a certain way depending on what is considered as an appropriate behaviour in society or what others expect from them. Thus, they are guided by norms which over time construct their state identities which might be stereotypical as the state repeats similar features of its behaviour in chair and constructs its reputation (Elgström 2006). Authors such as Elgström (2006), Tallberg (2003), Niemann et al. (2010) elaborate on the element of experiences from previous presidencies. Hence, we will study in our thesis the impact of **experiences from previous presidencies** on the role prioritization of states and consider two hypotheses related to this factor. Firstly, if some state has recently joined the EU and has not any or only a few experiences with being at the helm of the Council, it can try to impress other countries and ameliorate its overall reputation in the EU. To explain, the domestic politics of recent EU joiners state can be characterized by high Eurosceptic tendencies since these are mainly the states in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus, holding a presidency might represent a historical moment for the new state which may even unify the opposition at home (Elgström, 2006, p. 200). Due to its reputational concerns, it might intensify the role of mediator since it would like to be seen by others as a fair and trustworthy negotiator and mediate consensus between member states (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003, p. 196). Consequently, with reference to recent joiners, the leadership role can be undermined as they are expected to lack ambitions in moving the EU objectives forward and promoting innovative ideas and focus rather on managerial daily tasks of the presidency (Tiilikainen, 2003, p.111). States which have encountered already several presidencies can benefit from experiences from previous presidencies. To explain, they have expertise of procedural tools available to the presidency and orientate themselves well in the decision-making process in the EU. Their officials gained valuable knowledge during previous presidencies and thus can share it with others. These states are familiar with the complex coordination mechanism during their chairing. Hence, they might emphasize the managerial role (Elgström, 2003, p.9). We have observed that scholars do not make any conclusions on the prioritization of mediator of political leader role by the states experiencing many presidencies since it varies more among these states

and it might rather depend on other factors.

We will test this hypothesis:

H4a: Countries having experienced only few presidencies will play actively mediator or manager role and undermine leadership role, member states that have participated already on many presidencies will accentuate manager role.

Secondly, scholars have argued that states that have already experienced some presidencies might prioritize same roles as during their precedent terms in chair. To explain, precedent presidencies might add to establish expectations of other member states and consolidate stereotypes which relate to the chairman's previous presidencies (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003, p.200). Thus, the state can attach similar weight to specific roles as he did during its precedent terms by reproducing similar features and strategies. Additionally, scholars have acknowledged that especially France will repeat its encroached behaviour in chair since it was one of the founders of the EU and has experienced already a lot of presidencies during which it has consolidated these stereotypes (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003, p.200). Thus, we will test the following hypotheses.

H4b: Member states will prioritize same roles as during their precedent presidencies as they repeat their rooted stereotypes.

## 2.2. Methodology

### 2.2.1. Analytical Technique and Selection of Cases

In our thesis, we will deploy qualitative comparative method. We will compare the role prioritization of the French and Czech presidencies in environmental policy which will be our dependent variable. Our independent variables, factors which might have influenced the role prioritization of the chairman, are derived from the rationalist and sociological approach. To understand the causal mechanism between dependent and independent variables, we will apply a theory-testing method to assess whether the findings about the role prioritization of the chairman underpin or do not underpin our hypotheses constructed based on the theoretical assumptions about factors influencing the role prioritization.

Regarding the selection of case studies, we have chosen the French and the successive Czech presidencies. Firstly, our aim was to preserve the representation of different types of

member states as it is well applicable for our research on role prioritization. In effect, we can find several differences between France and the Czech Republic, which we will test in our second analytical part, such as the power materialized by the size and economic and political weight, domestic politics, approach to environmental policy and experiences from previous presidencies. On the other hand, these countries have been in one trio presidency. Thus, they are marked by similarities such as the general priorities created for the whole trio and the external conditions in which their presidencies have occurred, especially the consequences of the war in Ukraine such as refugee and energy crises.

Secondly, we will explain practical reasons for this choice. The time slot of the presidencies is crucial since we have novel data gained especially from the interviews with environmental representatives of member states in Brussels. The inclusion of other states would not be informative due to poorer data availability. To explain, the interviews with members of environmental and climate working groups would not be conclusive due to the longer time horizon. The representatives of member states are sent from their governments to Brussels for a specific time. Thus, by choosing the consecutive French and Czech presidencies, there is a high probability that the attaches have been working in Brussels during both. Additionally, the selection of these cases is also relevant to the personal experience of the author since I had the opportunity to be part of the Czech Environmental team at Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic in Brussels during the Czech presidency. My focus was primarily to assist Czech environmental diplomats at the Permanent Representation in negotiating the climate package Fit For 55, which was finalised during the Czech Presidency. Hence, I attended regularly tripartite technical meetings and political dialogues between the Council, European Parliament, and Commission as well as working parties on the Environment, and weekly Coreper I meetings led by the Czech DPR Jaroslav Zajíček. Moreover, I assisted at the coordination sessions with the Council General Secretariat and the Commission as well as the informal attachés meetings. In effect, I have been working closely with French and Czech diplomats and attaches from other member states, policy advisors from European Parliament, experts from the Commission or officers from General Secretariat of the Council and its Legal and Linguistic service.

### 2.2.2. Empirical Data

The main source of data for our thesis are documents and interviews. As regards the former, to

analyse priorities and initiatives of the chairmen, we draw from the 18-month programme of the trio presidency as well as individual presidency programmes of France and the Czech Republic available at official websites of the presidencies or at the governments' portal. A particular source of data with reference to the priorities of the Czech Republic are personal observations from my experience in Brussels which include for instance general functioning of working parties, Coreper or tripartite sessions and the communication between the presidency and the GSC or Commission. A minute from the press conference of the Czech Minister of Environment Anna Hubáčková with members of the European Parliament at the beginning of the presidency in Brussels was also used. The statements of the representatives of the Czech and French government covered in media are equally included. Another important source are draft agendas for Council meetings issued by the General Secretariat of the Council. Concerning the analyses of mediation and representation, we have been working mainly with the official website of the Council or other EU institutions to study the approved legislation as well as official websites of international conferences taking place during the Czech and French term. Furthermore, we have been studying foreign media articles (e.g., Politico), political analysis by international institutes concentrating on European issues (Institut de Montaigne, EUROPEUM, Robert Shuman Foundation) or analysis of the environmental field during the French presidency by the European Environmental Bureau.

Secondly, we have examined the role prioritization of presidencies using semi-structured interviews with environmental representatives of member states. This type of the interview suited well the objectives of the research since the flexible structure let the respondent to have more space for polemics. The so-called peer group analysis was carried out, where the diplomats have expressed their experience from the French and Czech presidencies. The fact that we have conducted interviews with representatives of countries having different approach to environmental issues; three countries that are climate leaders based on CCPI Index having high rating index (Netherlands, Denmark, and Estonia) and three countries that are climate laggards (Bulgaria and Hungary with very low score and Belgium with low score) (CCPI 2023) have contributed to have more objective and informative sample. An interview with Slovakia having medium score was also conducted.<sup>14</sup> The geographical location of respondents and the economic and political weight of their countries was equally diverse which contributed to increased objectivity.

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<sup>14</sup> The scores are derived from the CCPI Climate change Performance Index (2023).

The framework for our interviews is attached in Appendix of our thesis. Besides the concrete list of questions, additional spontaneous questions were asked based on the responses of attaches. The questions were grouped into four categories. The first category aimed to get information on prioritization of political leader role. We have asked the environmental attaches whether the French and Czech presidencies promoted actively their priorities and initiatives to fulfil the long-term EU goals in environmental field. Another question consisted of their activity in pushing national objectives to study whether the presidencies have taken the approach of exercising the leadership role by undertaking coercive and unilateral actions. Secondly, as regards the mediator role, we have asked whether the presidencies tried to accommodate concerns of all member states and balanced their national interests since it is crucial in exercising mediator role. Moreover, we have queried how intense was the informal communication of the chairman with other member states since while being a mediator, he should keep contact with all countries to know positions of their governments. Additionally, the endeavour of the presidency to keep the general approach and give minimum concessions to the Parliament in politically sensitive issues was investigated. Thirdly, as for the manager role, representatives shared their observations of the manner of chairman's leading of environment working groups and the coordination between the capital and the Permanent Representation in environmental field. Fourthly, we have asked about the context of both presidencies. Moreover, we have interviewed French and Czech environmental diplomats which have been working on the recent French and Czech presidencies at the Permanent Representation of these countries in Brussels to investigate the role prioritization also from their perspective. Besides the same questions as posed to the diplomats from other member states, we have researched the intensity and format of chairmen's cooperation with the GSC and other EU institutions as they communicated closely with them (manager role). We have also asked about the coordination of the presidency and cooperation of presidencies within the trio. Finally, this method has some advantages but equally some weak points. Concerning the former, it is a pertinent method of interacting personally with the candidates which might be beneficial to get detailed information. This method is also quite flexible as it enables the interviewer to ask follow-up questions (others from the prepared list) to the respondents based on their responses. Nevertheless, this method has a disadvantage of dealing with smaller sample of respondents since the interviews might be time consuming. There is also a risk of limited objectivity since the candidates might be biased by several factors while answering the questions (Prasanna

2023). In our case, it might be by factors such as personal tights with the officials from the presidency, geographical location, similar interests in the EU and environmental policy. However, as described above, this weak point was at least a bit overshadowed by conducting a peer group interviews with representatives from EU countries with positive approach to deal with environmental issues as well as member states more reluctant to set policies to tackle the climate change.

### 3. The Roles and their Prioritization during the French and Czech Presidencies

In this chapter, we firstly analyse the state of environmental policy during the trio presidency and the context of both presidencies. We analyse *the way* by which the consecutive French and Czech presidencies have played the roles of political leader, mediator, manager and representant. We compare which roles were prioritized during their presidencies based on the relative difference of intensity of playing these roles. As regard the representant role, we will not compare its prioritization since presidencies cannot choose to attach specific weight to this role themselves as it is formed by agenda of international conferences.

#### 3.1. The Context of the Presidencies

##### 3.1.1. France

France, who was the first state of the trio presidency, followed by the Czech Republic and Sweden, overtook the chairman's role from Slovenia, the last member of the previous trio (Germany-Portugal-Slovenia). Its already 13<sup>th</sup> presidency was held from 1<sup>st</sup> January until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022. The General Secretariat for European Affairs which is a small administration depending on the French Prime minister has played an important role in the coordination and orientation of the presidency. Moreover, the Directorate of the EU within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the Minister of European Affairs at the helm has participated significantly on the coordination and worked on global visions of the presidency (FR 2023). We should also highlight the crucial role of the French president Emmanuel Macron during the presidency since France is a semi-presidential republic with the president being a key actor. Finally, the Permanent Representation of France has contributed remarkably to the process of negotiations within the Council during the French term (FR 2023). Nevertheless, its engagement might have been less pronounced than in the case of the Czech Republic since the French presidency was led mainly from the capital.

The priorities of the French presidency included in the French program with the motto *Relance, puissance, appartenance (Recovery, Strength, and a Sense of Belonging)* consisted firstly of the aim of a *more sovereign Europe* which was crucial for the presidency and permeated through all areas including ecological transformation (Ambassade de France 2022). The first priority was materialized by the objective of strengthening the defense system of the EU, establishing an efficient migration policy, control of borders and relationship with Balkans and Africa to have a sovereign Europe, able to determine its own path (Maurice 2022).

Secondly, digitalization and need for climate mitigation was included in the priority of *A new European model for growth*. Thirdly, by setting priority *A humane Europe*, France aimed to highlight the sense of belonging of the EU citizens by increasing education, fighting against discrimination, and engaging next generation into the EU affairs (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2021).

On the international scene, the presidency had to deal with unexpected circumstances that have changed the geopolitical order in Europe. After two months of being at the helm of the Council, Russia invaded Ukraine by attacking its largest cities Kyiv and Kharkiv. The war in Ukraine has caused significant issues such as the destabilization of Europe, massive refugee, and energy crisis. Moreover, France had to face the challenge of economic and social recovery caused by Covid-19 pandemics and high inflation in energy prices extending across the EU. The need for the reconstruction of market through investments in ecological transformation due to the climate change and the war in Ukraine became even more pressing. In effect, the package “Fit for 55” started to represent a strategical document to cease the dependence on Russian gas and oil and replace them by using renewable energy. In the context of the war, Commission has proposed a RepowerEU Plan on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2022, to terminate the dependence on oil and gas imported from Russia and to accelerate the green transition. The Brexit and the establishment of new German government played an important role as well (Wright et al. 2021). Furthermore, we should highlight the publication of the second part of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) report in March 2022 which embraced the urgent need to establish efficient measures for the climate change mitigation (Ministry for the Ecological Transition 2021). Domestically, France has experienced equally a particular situation since both presidential elections (10 and 24 April 2022) and parliamentary elections (12 and 19 June 2022) took place during its presidency. Principally, the presidential elections with the re-election of Emmanuel Macron for his second term played an important role in the behaviour of the presidency as it is a semi-presidential republic.<sup>15</sup> We will analyse the role of elections on the behaviour of France in-depth in the second analytical part. We should also mention that the Commission and European Parliament were during the French and Czech presidencies in the middle of their term. Thus, the acceleration of work and negotiations within the Commission and Parliament

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<sup>15</sup> French presidency has experienced the same circumstances in 1995, when during its mandate, Jacques Chirac was elected President, preceded by François Mitterrand who was leading France the first four months of the French presidency (Wright et al. 2021).

was expected to implement their program (Havelka 2022).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1.2. The Czech Republic

The Czech Republic took over its second presidency from France on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022 and conceded it to Sweden, the last member of the trio, on 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2022. It inherited advanced environmental legislative files from France who managed to conclude general approach on many proposals. The main coordinator of the presidency was the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic which has dealt with logistical, communicational, and organizational tasks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also involved in the preparation of the presidency. Finally, the Minister for EU Affairs Mikoláš Bek assisted in the integration of the Czech goals in connection to the EU. An important role has also played the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic in Brussels with ambassador Edita Hrdá at the helm. Furthermore, many Czech environmental diplomats have been working in Permanent Representation in Brussels already before the presidency, so they benefited from a good knowledge of environmental files and some of them have been working on the first Czech presidency in 2009 including the Czech DPR for Coreper I Jaroslav Zajíček.

The motto of the presidency “*Europe as a task: Rethink, Rebuild, Repower*” embraced the main priorities of the presidency. Firstly, The Czech presidency aimed to support the Ukraine both politically and military and protect its sovereignty by establishing the priority of *Managing the refugee crisis and post-war reconstruction of Ukraine*. The Czech Republic found equally crucial the post-war recovery of this country by rebuilding the infrastructure and restoring the Ukrainian damaged landscape by the war. Secondly, another major priority of the Czech presidency was the *Energy security* which aimed to cease dependence on fossil fuels imported from Russia by accelerating the use of renewable energies, implementing the Repower EU Plan and leaning on the nuclear energy to ensure the energy security. The need for decarbonization materialized by the Fit for 55 package was also briefly mentioned in the program. The country has equally intended to emphasize the green mobility and increased energy efficiency of building. Thirdly, the purpose of the priority *Strengthening European defense capabilities and cybersecurity* was to stress the partnership with NATO and highlight current issues in the Strategic Compass. The need for strengthening technological systems to fight against cyber threats and disinformation was also addressed. Fourthly, the presidency

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<sup>16</sup> The elections to the Parliament and for the President of the Commission occurred in 2019. Next elections will be held in 2024.

embraced the necessity of free trade and developing trade agreements with democratic partners by prioritizing the *Strategic resilience of the European economy and of democratic institutions*. It also emphasized advancing digitalisation process and strengthening the independence of the EU in raw materials (Programme of the Czech Presidency 2022).

The international context of the presidency was equally unfavorable because of the continuation of the Ukrainian war. The energy security remained the main European concern as the EU aimed to cease the dependence on the Russian gas and oil. Thus, the need for carbon neutrality by using renewables sources was even more accelerated. The Dutch, Hungarian, and Estonian attachés remarked that although the circumstances were similar for the Czech presidency as during the French one, it was even more difficult for the Czech Republic since it needed to deal with the increased impacts of the war in Ukraine such as the energy crisis and the need to outlast the winter heating season if the Russia had cut off the gas and oil (NL, HU, EE 2022). The consequences of the war were felt intensively domestically equally due to the large Ukrainian refugee wave to the Czech Republic. We should also mention that the UN Climate Change Conference COP 27 has took place during the Czech Republic in Sharm-El-Sheik. Thus, the Czech presidency has represented the EU and coordinated its position during this major international conference.

On the domestic scene, the country's government has faced some issues right before the start of the presidency such as the resignation of Education minister. Concerning the environmental field, the Czech Republic has experienced some unfavorable occurrences as well since Petr Hladík who was supposed to replace Minister for Environment Anna Hubáčková who had to resign because of health reasons, was suspected by public to be involved in a corruption scandal of inquiring apartments in Brno as the police was in his office. Thus, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Jurečka commissioned by KDU-ČSL took on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 2022 also the post of the Minister for Environment and participated on the last Council for Environment in December (ČT24 2022).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the country had to deal with the problem of a low budget for its presidency inherited from its previous government led by Andrej Babiš (ANO). However, even the current coalition government (composed by Pirates, conservatives, centrists) was often criticized that it focused more on the domestic level than the European one and did not highlight its presidency role enough (Bayer 2022). In effect, the

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<sup>17</sup> In March 2023 Petr Hladík became finally Minister for Environment since it was proven that he was not involved in the corruption affair (ČT24 2022).

Czech Republic was blamed that it has sent unpaid students to work in Brussels during the presidency who were supposed to substitute the position of junior diplomats as the country lacked personal capacities because of the financial shortage (Bayer 2022).

### 3.1.3. Trio Programme

Firstly, the trio presidency (France-the Czech Republic-Sweden) indicated in their common program that the areas of focus during their upcoming presidencies are mainly the digital and ecological transition, ensuring the EU resilience and competitiveness in all economic sectors and strengthening the EU including the single market and monetary union (Generální sekretariát Rady (GSR) 2021). The countries have prepared together a charged environmental programme, called “*Building a climate-neutral and ecological Europe*”, published on 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2021 in the context of the Europe’s commitment to increase climate targets by 2030 and reach decarbonisation and climate neutrality by 2050 (GSR 2021). The need for technological neutrality has been also addressed. Following the objectives of the Green Deal, Agenda for sustainable development 2030 and Paris agreement that aims to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C, the trio has intended to advance in environmental legislative files with the EP and close them during its 18-months term. The programme has explicitly mentioned the Fit for 55 package (including extension of EU ETS in buildings, road transport, maritime and aviation) and system of carbon offsets at borders, the so-called CBAM, which would be compatible with WTO rules (GSR 2021). Moreover, it has addressed measures in biodiversity while proceeding with the EU strategy on biodiversity to restore damaged ecosystems, circular economy, regulations on pesticides and toxics, and EU forest strategy including the preservation of forests outside the EU. Presidencies have also addressed the target to establish Social Climate Fund to reduce societal differences caused by the green transition and help vulnerable households (GSR 2021). Furthermore, the trio has highlighted the necessity for accelerating the clean mobility while incentivizing low and zero emission vehicles. Finally, the members of the trio communicated intensively to prepare their priorities before the beginning of the trio presidency. Several visits between experts from the Czech Republic, France and Sweden were materialized during this period (CZ 2023).

### 3.1.4. The State of the EU Environmental Policy

Firstly, as regards the climate, the first part of legislative proposals for ecological transformation, the so-called “Fit for 55” package, were introduced by the Commission in July

2021 aiming to reduce emissions in the sectors of transport, climate, buildings, energy, land use and forestry and help the reconstruction of the European economy after covid-19 pandemics (Secretary-General of the European Commission 2021). The package, which has been introduced under the Green Deal, has for the objective the decarbonization of European economy by 2050 and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (Consilium 2023). The European Commission published the second part of the package on gas, buildings, and methane in December 2021 (Wright 2021). The package has followed the EU objective to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by *at least* 55% until 2030 compared to their levels in 1990 and the legally binding commitment in the European Climate Law to fully decarbonize the economy by 2050 (Consilium 2023). The debate on the package within the member states in the Council was started by the Slovenian presidency to assemble positions of states for the discussion and finalisation of the files during the following trio. The Fit For 55 package contains 4 sectors: carbon pricing, support measures, rules (standards), and EU and national targets and has been worked in four Council's configuration (ECOFIN, ENVI, TTE) (Slovenian Presidency 2021). It includes 13 legislative proposals; in the environmental field, these are Emissions trading system (ETS) and its extensions to other sectors besides the industry, Social Climate Fund (SCF), Land use and forestry (LULUCF), Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR), CO2 emission standards on car and vans.<sup>18</sup> The ETS system, which entails the reduction of allowances in industries, is one of the most important files since it determines how much and how fast will be emissions reduced within the EU in upcoming years (Consilium 2023). The last has received a lot of public and media attention since it is a sensitive file for many EU countries with large automotive sector including France and the Czech Republic. However, it has not been the most complex file since the automotive industry has been preparing to accelerate the e-mobility (Český rozhlas 2022). Contrarily, the extension of ETS system to road transport and buildings, the so-called ETS BRT (ETS II) has been a quite delicate file since several member states have feared to risk possible upheavals in the society if prices for heating and transport would rise for EU citizens. To mitigate negative consequences of this file, a Social Climate Fund has been proposed by the Commission to help vulnerable households to overcome high energy prices and inflation. Member states have been questioning however the magnitude of the fund (Furlong 2022). The package also includes the revision of Regulation on Land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) which aims to increase the absorption

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<sup>18</sup> TTE configuration of the Council deals with Carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), Refuel EU aviation and Fuel EU maritime, Renewable energy and energy efficiency directive, energy taxation and methane emissions (Consilium 2023).

capacity of carbon dioxide emissions of EU forests by 15% until 2030. It deals with the carbon footprint of activities related mainly to the use and management of forests, agricultural land, burning of the biomass, pastures and wetlands (Secretary-General of the European Commission 2021). Finally, the package is composed by the revision of ESR (Effort Sharing regulation) which aspires to reduce the member states emissions by 40% until 2030 from sectors not contained in ETS system such as road transport, agriculture, waste, heating (European Commission 2021). The European Parliament has adopted its position on ESR, LULUCF and CO2 emissions standards for cars and vans on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2022. For the other environmental files in the package, ETS and SCF, Parliament reached a common position on 22<sup>nd</sup> June (European Parliament 2022). In the Council, the general approach on all 5 files was achieved on 29<sup>th</sup> June at the end of the French presidency. The following Czech presidency has finalised the concerned files during trilogues. Before entering into force, legislative proposals must be approved by the Council during Coreper meeting and by Envi Committee of European Parliament which is supposed to occur during the Swedish presidency.

Concerning other environmental files, in March 2020, a New Action plan for circular economy was initiated by the European Commission as part of the European Green Deal. It has also introduced legislation on sustainable product policy. The New Action plan contains legislative proposals which have been discussed before the French presidency in various levels such as electronic equipment, construction, end-of-life vehicles, batteries, packaging, textiles, microplastics, the RoHS regulation (restriction of hazardous substances in products), waste oils, cross-border transport of waste, foodstuffs, biowaste (Úřad vlády 2021). In May 2020, the European Commission presented its 2030 biodiversity strategy to protect nature and fight against ecosystem degradation. In May 2021, the Action plan for zero air, water and soil pollution plan was introduced by the Commission as part of the European Green Deal (Úřad vlády 2021). The proposal included the revision of the Industrial Emissions Directive (IED) which is a crucial tool to reduce emissions from the industry and invest in sustainable installations (European Commission 2023a). In October 2021, a revision of the regulation on persistent organic pollutants in waste (POPs) was initiated (Úřad vlády 2021). The general approach of the Council was reached by the French presidency on POPs in Coreper in March and then on batteries during the ENVI Council meeting the same month. Moreover, during the French and Czech presidencies, several proposals within the environmental field were issued by the Commission. By the end of the March, Commission has proposed a Circular Economy Package. In April 2022, Commission initiated a proposal to revise the F-gas regulation and

regulation on substances harming the ozone layer (Úřad vlády 2021). In June 2022, Commission has introduced a regulation on nature restoration to establish legally binding measure to protect the biodiversity (European Commission 2023a). During the Czech presidency, Commission presented a proposal on Directives on Ambient Air Quality. By the end of the year 2022, a revision on REACH regulation about authorization, registration, restriction, and assessment of chemical substances was issued (European Commission 2023b). Finally, there was a division in the Council for Environment between ambitious and less ambitious member states concerning sensitive environmental questions. However, even some states which are historically in the ambitious group, especially Northern countries, has defended their national interests and did not want to for instance strengthen carbon reduction measures in the forestry (Furlong 2022).

### 3.2. Political Leader Role

We will study the prioritization of political leader role by analysing the presidency's ambition to push forward the long-term goals of the European Union in environmental filed and by its ability to promote new environmental initiatives.

#### 3.2.1. France in the Role of Political Leader

##### **Ambitions to push the long-term goals of the EU**

Firstly, we need to study the activity of France during its presidency in pushing the long-term goals of the EU in environmental policy. To begin, France has addressed its ambitious environmental goals since many years. In May 2019, during the summit on Future of Europe in Sibiu, France has underpinned the target of carbon neutrality until 2050. President Macron has emphasized the goals of France to tackle climate change and realise ecological transformation of many sectors (industry, transport, housing) during several speeches. The major ones took place in 2017 at Sorbonne where he also encouraged states to set a high carbon price (Ouest France 2017), in Athens (2018), in Paris (2021) and in Strasbourg (2022) (Wright & Labastie 2022). Since the Sorbonne discourse, the climate change mitigation was one of the key objectives of France (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2022). This ambition was for instance proved with respect to CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction of cars and vans since France in 2017 has addressed its plan to decarbonize the automotive sector by 2040 (Ministry for the Ecological Transition 2021). During its presidency, France had on table many proposals from the Commission which were mainly in the phase of discussion to establish a general

approach of the Council. Although the climate change mitigation was not explicitly stated in the list of main priorities of France, the president Macron explained that the French long-term goal of economic growth enhances the ecologic ambitions of the country. He has also stressed that France will try to negotiate the proposals on the environment as quickly as possible (Moussu 2021). The most pressing proposals for Commission, Parliament and the Council were the files included in the Fit For 55 package. Citing a French attaché working at the Permanent Representation in Brussels on the French presidency, “*the Fit For 55 package was very high on the French agenda*” (FR 2023). France as its key priority set firstly the target of *climate neutrality by 2050*. To materialize this aim, France emphasized its objective to reach the general approach mainly on the CBAM which has been its priority since many years to conserve the competitiveness of the industry within the EU (Fondation Robert Schuman 2022). Secondly, their environmental priority was the *protection of biodiversity* manifested especially by the goal to establish a new tool to fight against deforestation (Pollet, Moussu 2021). Thirdly, they established the priority of *promoting more durable and circular economy* and finally *the reduction of impact of the pollution on the environment* (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2021).

## Environmental priorities of France

Priority field	Specific goals
The acceleration of the transition to a decarbonized economy to reach the climate neutrality in 2050	1. Discussion of legislative proposals of Fit For 55 package (settle general approach on ETS, LULUCF, ESR, SCF, CBAM and CO2 standards for cars and vans)
The strengthening of measures to preserve the biodiversity	2. Negotiate the proposal on imported deforestation and forest degradation and arrange general approach 3. Discuss the new directive on restoration of ecosystems
Promotion of a greener and more durable circular economy	4. Monitor the Commission's plan of Sustainable Textiles 5. Obtain general approach on the regulation on batteries 6. Revision of the regulation on cross-border transfer of waste 7. Launch negotiations on the "sustainable products" package (to reinforce eco-design of goods)
The transition to a healthier environment by reducing the impact of pollution on nature and health.	8. Reduce pollution in the framework of "zero pollution"-revision of regulation on F-gas (fluorinated gases) and on substances harming ozone layer 9. Arrange general approach on the regulation on persistent organic pollutants (POPs) 10. Launch debate on Commission's proposals of chemical products (pollutant emissions, waste management and urban waste) and advance in phasing-out the use of pesticides (Pesticide Action Network 2021)

Author based on the official programme of the French presidency (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2021).

All interviewed environmental attachés assumed that France tried to bring Green Deal forward and had a strong political will behind to reach the general approach on "Fit for 55" package during their presidency. The Hungarian attaché acknowledged that France tried to *put the package on all their agenda as much as possible*" (HU 2022). Attaches observed that France was mostly active in pushing the EU long-term goals after its domestic elections in April, during the second part of its mandate. For some representatives, it was a bit unclear during the Council meeting in March if they were really going to push for the general approach on some of the files or the whole package (NL, EE 2022). However, some attachés highlighted that before presidential elections, priorities of France were also ambitious, but it was not so clear what it meant in practice except for pushing for CBAM (SK, NL 2022). This file was one of their main goals and the French government put lot of political pressure since the beginning to have the consensus in the Council until the end of their term. Besides, since April, their ambitions and activity in negotiating an agreement within the Council grew steadily they covered lot of files

during the last two months of their presidency (EE, SK, NL 2022). Indeed, representatives assumed that despite the time they might have lost at the beginning because of these specific circumstances, they did the maximum possible to make the final push after elections (EE, NL 2022).

Representatives noticed that the political leadership is mostly manifested during the meetings of higher level, such as Coreper or ministerial meetings. There is more space to drive discussions forward and push for the political goals than during the lower level, working parties, where diplomats deal mostly with technicalities. Since France wanted to close the general approach, the negotiations took format of high level quite often because they wanted to put forward some political issues that they could not go across with during working parties (EE 2022). The Estonian representative noted that during Coreper meetings “*the French DPR enjoyed having more political discussions*” (EE 2022). The Bulgarian attaché added more explicitly that the “*French DPR was pushy as he had to ensure that the political goals are met*” (BG 2022). Finally, he observed that the tactic of coercion exercised by France on member states was not exceptional during their presidency as it wanted to close the general approach and the political pressure on French diplomats in Brussels was quite high from their capital. He noted that France has used the coercion tactic between member states by confronting them with the threat of not closing the deal if they not agreed with amendments the presidency proposed (BG 2022).

Besides the French leadership on Fit for 55 package described above, Estonian diplomat affirmed that member states appreciated their active leadership on plastics, biodiversity and chemical policy (EE 2022). The last was incorporated in the chairman’s priority *the transition to a healthier environment*. France has equally launched a debate on Commission’s proposals of chemical products (pollutant emissions, waste management and urban waste). However, in their priority field of zero pollution, the proposal of the regulation on F-gas which was initiated by the Commission during the French presidency in April 2022, was not discussed during their mandate (European Environmental Bureau 2022). Concerning the presidency priority of *promotion of a greener circular economy*, representatives affirmed that France was active in pushing for agreement in batteries. Moreover, it has discussed Waste Shipment Regulation and developed a progress report on the file. Finally, they forwarded their ambitions in the deforestation file and green measures in the trade outside the European Union within some of the EU business partners (Meunissier 2022).

## Council meeting

France has chaired two Environmental meetings of the Council. The first one took place on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2022. A general approach on batteries and persistent organic pollutants regulation was reached. The French presidency gave instructions to member states about the Coreper which occurred on 11<sup>th</sup> March. Finally, the ministers exchanged views on Commission's proposals of certain files of Fit For 55 package such as the ETS I, ETS BRT, SCF and regulation on deforestation and forest degradation. They also discussed the Greening the European Semester in which diverse EU policies of the EU are coordinated (Secrétariat général du Conseil, 2021). The second ENV Council meeting was conducted on 28<sup>th</sup> until morning hours of 29<sup>th</sup> June and despite these difficult and lengthy negotiations, France has obtained the qualified majority from member states and established a general approach on all environmental files of FF 55 package including CBAM, and on deforestation. Hence, the country has demonstrated that it is able to actually realize its ambitious goals in the environmental policy despite divergent objectives of member states in concerned files. Finally, as analyst stated, it has shown that France is a real leader in the climate change mitigation (Meunissier 2022).

## Initiatives of France

To study innovative visions of France during its presidency, we must analyse initiatives, informal meetings of the Council for Environment, and other activities such as conferences which occurred during the presidency. France has declared that apart from the agenda given by the legislative cycle, it aims to realise new initiatives (Wright et al. 2021). One of the most crucial events of France during its presidency was the Versailles Summit taking place from 10 to 11 March 2022. Its intention was to strengthen the sovereignty of the EU, including the ecological field, weakened by the pandemics, war in Ukraine, and energy crisis. The document, which was issued during the conference, the so-called Versailles Agenda included the topic of climate change, mainly the circular economy. During the Summit, the French presidency has highlighted the need to terminate the EU dependency on the Russian gas and implement climate measures while reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Présidence française du Conseil de l'Union Européenne 2022). Finally, France has intended to launch a debate on the so-called norm Euro-7 which aims to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides and particles emitted by vehicles (except for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) to ameliorate the air quality. However, France did not start discussions on this topic. since the Commission proposed these standards in November 2022 during the Czech presidency (European Commission 2022).

Furthermore, we will elaborate on the informal meeting of environmental ministers launched by the chairman in his country where ministers might discuss several environmental initiatives besides the legislative cycle. France has organised the informal meeting already at the beginning of its presidency; it was held between 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> January in Amiens. This meeting was particular as it reunited Environmental as well as Energy ministers. In the environmental field, the main topics were the decarbonization, European action regarding phytosanitary products, EU's chemicals strategy for sustainability (including REACH regulation), imported deforestation, CBAM, battery regulation, new hydrogen economy, and green transition for vulnerable households (Ministere de la transition écologique 2022a).

Finally, France has organised a lot of particular events in the environmental sector. These were happening mostly in France because of Covid-19 pandemics (EE 2022). Firstly, concerning the climate change issues, France has organised *Climate change Summit Europe* in March in Nantes with the topic: “*European Green Deal: local governments, businesses and citizens*” (Climate Chance 2022). Moreover, a Climate change and Water conference were organised at the end of May in Tours focusing on extreme events (CCW 2022). Secondly, as regards the biodiversity, we should stress the Ministerial conference in Strasbourg which celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Natura 2000 and was conducted in February (Ministere de la transition écologique 2022b). The outcome of this conference was the Strasbourg declaration signed by Ministers of the EU and the Commissioner for the Environment, oceans and fishing (Ministere de la transition écologique 2022c). They agreed on diminishing human activities harmful to the nature, strengthening the implementation of European legislation in enlarging the protected areas and preserving biodiversity. Additionally, Nature and Forest Directors discussed with several NGOs and broad public the urgency of the nature protection in June (European Environmental Bureau 2022). Thirdly, regarding the maritime sector, France addressed the importance of oceans in climate change mitigation also by the Ocean Summit (« un Océan ») in February in Brest and worked towards an international treaty on this topic (ENSTA 2022). In June, a reunion of EU Marine and Water Directors took place. The Directors debated on the adoption of marine legislation such as the Water Framework Directive (European Environmental Bureau 2022). Furthermore, the chairman's focus on circular economy was demonstrated by numerous seminars mainly in Paris related to this topic (AREC 2022). Finally, in the sphere of zero pollution, a high-level ministerial conference on sustainability of Chemical Products was held in France in May (European Environmental Bureau 2022).

### 3.2.2. The Czech Republic in the Role of Political Leader

#### **Ambitions to push the long-term goals of the EU**

The Czech Presidency inherited from the French presidency a busy agenda of advanced legislative files since the last concluded a general approach in all environmental files of the “Fit for 55” package (ETS and MSR, ESR, LULUCF, standards on cars and vans, SCF), as well as in batteries and waste batteries regulation and persistent organics pollutants (POPs). Equally, the European Parliament has achieved a consensus on several files of the package in June (European Parliament 2022). Thus, the Czech Republic had a clear task given by the legislative cycle to participate in trilogues with the Parliament and Commission and reach a provisional agreement on these files. As indicated in the document of the Office of the Czech Government, the presidency wanted to maintain the general approach as much as possible in concerned legislation (Úřad vlády 2021). One of the main priorities of the country was to close the file on the emissions standards on cars and vans. In effect, the document has stated that the Czech presidency would try to not increase the ambition level and keep the revision clause for the year 2026 (Úřad vlády 2021).

Although the environment field has not represented one of the four main priorities of the Czech presidency, the green transition was included in one of the principal priorities, the *Energy security*. In its presidency programme, the Czech Republic indicated that the “Fit for 55” package represents the groundwork for decarbonization, yet it will focus primarily, due to the special circumstances, on removing the EU’s dependence on fossil fuels imported from Russia (Programme of the Czech Presidency 2022). In effect, the country has faced criticism of some EU actors such as environmental NGOs and several MEPs that it has prioritized the energy security over the climate change mitigation and transition to sustainable energies. In response to these doubts, the Czech Minister for Environment answered to the actors that the disruption of dependence on Russian oil and gas leads automatically to increase in the use of renewable energy and further decarbonization of the industry and other sectors. Moreover, she declared that the Commission’s proposal of Repower EU should accelerate the implementation of the key files of the Fit For 55 package such as CBAM, ETS and SCF (Press conference of the Czech Minister 2022).

## Environmental priorities of the Czech Republic

Priority field	Specific goals
Climate protection and energy security	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Finalisation of the files of FF 55 package such as ETS, ESR, LULUCF, SCF, CO2 standards for cars and vans</li> <li>2. Revision of the Ambient Air Quality Directive (initiation)</li> <li>3. Revision of regulation on substances harming ozone layer (discussion)</li> </ol>
Adaptation to climate change (Nature and biodiversity conservation and restoration)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Commodities and products contributing to deforestation and forest degradation (finalisation)</li> <li>5. Ecosystem restoration (initiation)</li> <li>6. Soil conservation and restoration (discussion)</li> </ol>
Circular economy and pollution reduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Improving the EU's raw material security and energy independence</li> <li>8. Batteries and waste batteries (finalisation)</li> <li>9. Regulation on the shipment of waste (discussion)</li> <li>10. Draft revision of IED (industrial emissions directive), negotiating proposal</li> <li>11. Initiation of proposals in packaging waste and chemicals, water protection</li> </ol>
Light pollution and environmental impacts of Russian aggression in Ukraine	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Raise awareness of these problems at EU level</li> </ol>

Author based on the official program of the Czech presidency (Programme of the Czech Presidency 2022), Office of the Czech Government (Úřad vlády 2021) and press conference with Czech Ministry of Environment (Press conference of the Czech Minister 2022).

Several interviewed environmental representatives stated that there might have been some questions of ambitions of the Czech Republic regarding the climate files at the beginning of its presidency. It was not immediately visible if the presidency's ambition consists of finalising all the files of the package by the end of the year or only parts of it (NL, DK, SK 2022). Minister herself stated during the press conference in Brussels that *“the presidency is not sure if it will close the whole package or only individual files”* (Press conference of the Czech Minister 2022). According to the Belgian attaché, the Czech Republic was hesitating during the summer if the package Fit for 55 was the right approach to take due to the energy crises (BE 2022). It was also more careful in managing expectations of other countries. The presidency has organised its first political trilogue on EU ETS system on July 11<sup>th</sup> and has chaired several environmental groups during this month. In August, presidency did not organise

any technical or political trilogue and there was almost no working group on environment either. We can explain this political vacuum by the absence of key actors in Brussels since all institutions involved in trilogue sessions (Parliament, Commission and Council) left on holidays during this month. Additionally, Danish diplomat mentioned that there was a disproportionality of the ambitions at the beginning of their presidency since the majority of working parties concerned the environment and the files on climate issues (“FF 55” package) were less prioritized (DK 2022). Nevertheless, Dutch environmental attaché stressed that since the beginning of the presidency, member states were convinced that the Czech presidency “*would move a file forward if it was on table regardless of the priorities in the capital*” (NL 2022). Indeed, we can assume from this and equally from our personal observations during the presidency in the Czech environmental team in Brussels that Czech environmental diplomats in Brussels were eager to push EU goals in this field since the beginning of the presidency contrarily to the capital. The attaches assumed that there was a shift in September/October when it started to be clear that there is a strong will from the presidency side to finalise the whole package by the end of the year (SK, DK, NL, EE 2022). Additionally, attachés acknowledged that COP27 which took place at the end of October was a key political momentum for the presidency as it became priority for the presidency to have some finalized environmental files by this international conference to demonstrate to the rest of the world the effort of Europe in tackling the climate change and serve as an ambitious example for other states (SK 2022). We should highlight that Commission with executive vice president Timmermans and Parliament equally played an important role in this effort of the presidency to finalize some files before COP27 as they pushed the Czech Republic intensively to close them.

Finally, the Czech presidency exceeded its ambitions since it said at the start of the presidency that it expects to find a provisional agreement on around two files of the “FF 55” package by the end of the year if it is possible and the rest of the files will be forwarded to the Swedish presidency. However, the country concluded already at the beginning of November several legislative files such as CO2 emissions standards for cars and vans, LULUCF, ESR (SK 2022). The environmental diplomats assumed that the Czech presidency put lot of effort to have a compromise although the position of Parliament was much different. The new Director General of DG Clima Kurt Vandenberghe appreciated a lot the work of Czech presidency since nobody was expecting that the package will be closed during the Czech term. Although the executive vice president of the Commission Frans Timmermans who leads the Commission’s work on the Green Deal was putting pressure on the Czech presidency and the Parliament to

have some files of the Fit For 55 package concluded until COP27, the Commission was not expecting that the whole package will be closed by the end of the Czech mandate (CZ 2023).

#### Council meeting

The Czech Republic chaired two Environmental Council's meeting during its mandate. The first one was conducted on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October in Luxembourg. The presidency, according to Hungarian attaché, was focused especially on the approval of Council conclusions for COP 27 and COP 15. However, member states were lacking more climate issues on the agenda (HU 2022). Delegations exchanged views on the revision of industrial emissions Directive IED, adopted revision on persistent organic pollutants (POPs) regulation, adopted Directive on the landfill of waste and regulation on common charger (Council of the European Union 2022c). They equally delegated Commission to obtain an international agreement on the plastic pollution mitigation. The Council has additionally adopted key regulations on the Health Union of the EU such as the regulation on the medical countermeasures. Finally, ministers adopted a regulation for a single window for customs (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022). The second Council took place on 20<sup>th</sup> December in Brussels. The agenda included the exchange of views on the Review of the Urban Wastewater Treatment Directive, Regulation on nature restoration and on shipments of waste and on the Air quality. The ministers held a discussion on the Nature Restoration Law. The purpose was to hear the views of delegations and to get guidance for further work on this important legislation (General Secretariat of the Council, 2022). The presidency informed about the occurred international conferences such as COP 27, COP 15 with the adoption of the Global Biodiversity Framework and CITES Convention (COP 19) (Ministry of the Environment of the Czech Republic 2022).

#### **Initiatives of the Czech Republic**

One of the key visions of the Czech Republic during its presidency was the idea to raise awareness of the issue of light pollution at European level. The Czech Republic has underlined the importance of this problem by adding it directly on the list of the main environmental priorities for its presidency. In effect, besides the agenda set by legislative, it was a key topic addressed by the Czech Republic on its own. The initiative was materialized by a workshop in Brno during October which gained international attention. The event was attended by representatives from EU member states and Commission, scientific experts in the field, members of the EEA, NGOs and public administration. A statement was issued from the

conference, the so-called Brno Appeal to reunite efforts to reduce the excessive light pollution and deal legally with the issue at European level. The presidency presented the text to the Commission and EU ministers during the last presidency meeting of Council for Environment in December (Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2022). Secondly, another initiative of the Czech presidency was to launch a debate on preservation of forests. In effect, the Czech Minister of Environment Anna Hubáčková addressed the problem of bark beetle during the presentation of priorities to the Parliament in July in Brussels. This issue has been experienced strongly by Czech forests over many decades (Press conference of the Czech Minister 2022). Thirdly, the presidency has forwarded the topic of environmental impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This initiative was manifested especially during the informal Council meeting from 13th to 14th July in Prague. The Czech Minister for Environment stated that it is key to send expert associations after the war to Ukraine to map ecological damages caused to its landscape (Český rozhlas 2022). Among other themes figured the adaptation to climate change, notably the restoration and conservation of biodiversity, deforestation and soil restoration, preservation of water and land. Frameworks for UN conferences (COP15 and COP27) and preparation for Council conclusions were also discussed (Informal Meeting of Ministers 2022).

The Czech Republic has organised many events related to the environmental problems in its capital. Regarding the nature restoration, a European Congress of Conservation Biology was realised in August. The event, co-organised by the University of Life Sciences in Prague, included many panel discussions and workshops with expert speakers from EEA or Ukrainian Vice Minister of Environment (ECCB 2022). Moreover, Conference on Designing Climate Resilient Landscapes took place in September where participants discussed issues of forest degradation, regeneration of soil, restoration of ecosystems including topics of clear air, capture of water, biodiversity. The outcome of this congress was the *Prague Appeal* which was then presented to Ministers of Environment during the Council meeting in October in Luxembourg (Environment Council 2022). Finally, a Conference on nature restoration occurred in October. To point up the need of adaptation to climate change, presidency organised events based on the new EU Adaptation Strategy (2021) such as the Adaptation conference in September. The pollution of air was addressed during the Air Quality Conference in November in Prague which was followed by the event on reduction of air pollution in Teplice. In this context, member states held debates on the preservation of health by the Commission's proposed regulation on the air quality control and strengthening of rules for polluting particles (Environment Council

2022). Finally, Prague seminars in June again highlighted the need to restore the Ukrainian landscape after the war.

### 3.2.3. Comparison of Political Leader Role Prioritization between Presidencies

We will now compare the intensity of playing the political leader role and the approach taken by the French and Czech presidencies to this role. Regarding France, it did not exercise the political leadership by the same intensity for the whole presidency. During the first half of its presidency, France was sometimes careful to promote its environmental priorities. Nevertheless, the politics played an important role already since the beginning of their mandate and it was more visible than during the Czech presidency that France wants to be the leading country in the European effort to realise a complete decarbonisation of the European economy. Furthermore, during the second half of their presidency, mainly after the presidential elections in April, they accentuated the leadership role and compensated the time they might have lost at the beginning. To illustrate, the French presidency conducted a political leadership mainly in the climate field (“Fit For 55” package) as they wanted to obtain the general approach of the Council before the end of their presidency. As regards the leadership role of the Czech Republic, it was similarly to the French presidency cautious in promoting ambitious priorities at the beginning of their presidency as they protected themselves and were not giving to many expectations. In effect, the country did not send a clear message to the EU actors and member states that the environment will be their crucial target when communicating its priorities at the beginning of its presidency. It has expressed their focus on short-term EU goals such as energy security rather than the long-term objective of green transition. Then, during the summer, their ambition to deal with the climate change was also ambiguous since they did not focus plentifully on the implementation of “Fit For 55” package. Yet, there was a shift of their approach in September/October when it started to be clear that there is a strong political will from the presidency side to finalise the whole package by the end of the year which they did. The international conference COP 27 at the end of the October and the pressure from the EP and Commission played equally an important role in their determination to have some concluded files of the package to be considered (as an EU) a global environmental leader for rest of the world.

Moreover, the countries have taken a different approach to their leadership role in the sense that France has exercised the leadership role by undertaking unilateral and coercive actions which was manifested in promoting actively its national interests and pushing member

states to accept an agreement. The internal pressure from the capital to the French diplomats in Brussels was well manifested during the meetings of higher level (Coreper, ENVI Council) as the French DPR and environmental attaches tried to meet the domestic political goals as much as possible and even exercised coercion tactic on member states. Contrary to unilateral and coercive actions of France, the Czech Republic has selected to play the leadership role by exercising entrepreneurial activities since it did not promote its objectives so forcefully and took more a neutral approach in sensitive political issues. This manner of the leadership of the Czech Republic was reflected by promoting its innovative visions by introduction of extra priorities outside the scope of the legislative cycle and realization of several initiatives. In effect, they introduced two priorities which were not connected to the given legislative agenda: the environmental impact of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the issue of light pollution. The presidency has organised many events on its ground related to these topics and other issues such as the adaptation to climate change and nature restauration, air pollution or forest degradation. The French presidency did not decide as the Czech Republic to put on their priority list any particular topic besides the priorities related to the legislative cycle. However, the ambition of France to have Europe as a leader in environmental filed and serve as an example for other continents was manifested by their initiatives as the presidency organized important events such as the Versailles Summit which reflected the vision of France to highlight the need of European sovereignty in the environmental politics. Moreover, it assembled a ministerial conference in Strasbourg from which an official declaration was issued and the connection of the green transition with the economic growth manifested by the Climate Change Summit Europe.

To summarize, both presidencies have played the leadership role since they manifested the ambition to put forward long-term environmental goals of the EU and promoted their visions and initiatives. We can observe a similar shift in the intensity of leadership role during their term since both presidencies have taken a cautious position at the beginning of their chairing and did not push for the environmental objectives so vehemently. However, during their second part of being at the helm of the Council, they have intensified the political will to reach the general approach (France) or provisional agreement (Czech Republic) on key environmental files by the end of their term. Nevertheless, environmental attaches acknowledged that France was a bit louder in promoting EU environmental goals than the Czech Republic as the last was more careful about how it manages expectations of member states, and their ambitions was at the start ambiguous as it was not clear whether they aim to finalise all the files of the “FF 55” package by the end of the year or only parts of it.

### 3.3. Mediator role

The prioritization of the mediator role will be studied by the chairman's ability to accommodate interests of member states while balancing its national objectives.

#### 3.3.1. France in the Mediator Role

##### **Legislation**

During the French presidency, most of the environmental files were in the stage of discussion in the Council (after the first stage of initiation) when the chairmen negotiate the Council position (the general approach) to then forward the files for the finalization during trilogues with the Parliament. During the Environment Council meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> March, France reached the general approach on batteries and waste batteries regulation which enhanced the schemes on Extended Producer Responsibility and strengthen the liability of e-commerce in this field. Moreover, general approach was adopted on the persistent organic pollutants regulation (POPs). The French presidency has equally launched the first political trilogue on POPs on 11<sup>th</sup> May (Agence Europe 2022). During the second Council meeting on 28/29<sup>th</sup> of June, all environmental files and also some other files within the Fit for 55 package were adopted by the Council. It concerned the LULUCF regulation, CBAM, CO2 emissions standards on cars and vans, establishment of Social Climate Fund to support vulnerable households, Effort sharing regulation in non-ETS fields and ETS revision and its extension. Regarding the last file, environmental ministers agreed on the market stability reserve mechanism (MSR), extended the ETS to reduction of allowances in the aviation and maritime and established ETS for buildings, road transport (ETS BRT) with auctioning of allowances since 2027 (Council of the European Union 2022e). Finally, a consensus between member states was also reached on deforestation and forest degradation with the prospect of trilogues during the Czech presidency (Council of the European Union 2022f). France had to show a large effort to conclude the files of the package during the Council meeting and accommodate countries since there was no consensus between member states on several elements until an early moment before the start of negotiations (Meunissier 2022).

##### **Analysis of the mediator role**

Firstly, all delegations noticed that France did not sometimes choose to play the role of

a neutral mediator and was promoting its national interests in several files during their presidency (SK, NL, EE, BE, CZ, BG, HU 2022). An environmental representative observed that France was protecting national interests while trying to find a good balance, but they didn't hide what is their national position on some files. Furthermore, Belgian attaché observed that there was a disbalance between the French Permanent Representation and capital since the first despite the political requirements from the capital, tried not to enforce French interests too much. To illustrate, although the French administration did not want at first to close the general approach on CO2 standards of cars and vans as it was political sensitive issue, the French Permanent Representation though that it is not reasonable and wanted to make things more realistic (BE 2022). Consequently, despite it was a politically sensitive topic for France, they issued the compromise text which however incorporated almost all the Commission proposal and France has added only few elements (CZ 2023).

Promotion of national interests was manifested especially on CBAM as they wanted to close the file as soon as possible since it was the French's government old priority. France was partly criticized that it did not manage to mediate in this short time crucial decisions between member states such as the revenues allocations and conceded it to the Czech presidency to resolve it (Présidence française du Conseil de l'Union Européenne 2022). Equally, Slovenian attaché noticed that they were politically driven in this file and the role of mediator was bit compromised (SK 2022). Another attaché remarked that they were also quite reluctant during their term to further an agreement on ETS II (ETS BRT) because of the protection of their interests (HU 2022) and on files regarding nuclear issues (BE 2022). A representative stated that the "*delegations would like to have spent more time on some parts of proposals as ETS BRT*" (NL 2022). He assumed similarly as the Hungarian attaché that they did not spend enough time on the file especially during the early part of the French presidency since it was left more for the political level (NL 2022). Equally, the Czech attaché assumed that the Council was a bit paralysed since France did not want to put some proposals on table and did not give compromise text until elections although member states wanted to have them (CZ 2023). To explain the reluctance of France towards the implementation of ETS BRT, at the introduction of this mechanism by Commission in July 2021, France has expressed doubts about the impacts of the system on households since energy prices would significantly rise. To clarify, they feared some domestic social upheavals as they experienced them several times in past when proposing a fuel tax ("*Yellow vests movements*").

Furthermore, concerning the accommodation of interests of member states, an attaché from Denmark highlighted that her country lacked communication with France and that her country “*felt sometimes to not be on board*” (DK 2022). She explained that France did reach out mainly to larger countries but omitted often smaller ones such as Denmark although the last is one of the most ambitious leaders in climate action (DK 2022). Other diplomats acknowledged that France was communicating a lot and discussing the appropriate position on sensitive files mainly with bigger state such as Germany and expected that other countries will subordinate (BE 2022, CZ 2023). In addition, some delegations such as Hungary and Belgium pointed up that France was trying to give everyone something during their presidency but at the end of their term, when France was aiming to get the general approach of the whole package, they calculated the votes to have at least the qualified majority to secure the agreement and not each member state was on board. Indeed, their position on how much they were accommodating interests of member states changed a lot during the presidency (EE 2022). Additionally, the Bulgarian attaché complained that France was not taking some specificities of member states seriously (BG 2022). During last Environment Council, France negotiated a rapid agreement although many member states had different view on the issues and France did not have time to incorporate all their requirements into the Council position (Meunissier 2022). The attaché stated that the main goal of the presidency was to ensure the general approach on “FF 55” package, however many delegations did not like some aspects of files. He noticed that when France realised that it has a qualified majority, it has almost stopped the debate (BG 2022). The Denmark attaché acknowledged that there were some issues were delegations asked themselves if it is really what the majority of countries want (DK 2022). Finally, several member states materialized their frustration of France not considering their position by providing declarations reflexing their disaccords on certain French compromise texts (Meunissier 2022).

With reference to the informal communication, representatives acknowledged that France was more reserved in communicating informally than the Czech Republic and it was more difficult to consider who to contact to convey red flags of national governments of member states (DK, HU, SK, BE 2022). France also didn’t lead almost any informal meetings on attaché level, the discussions were held formally as official working parties. However, diplomats recognized that towards the end of their presidency, France moved a bit towards the informal sphere to know where the member states have some room for manoeuvre. For instance, one month before the Environmental Council in June, they had few one-to-one format sessions where they invited member states at DPR level, sometimes also with attaches, “*to get an*

*overview of what are the sticking points for member states and what is the room they can play with” (NL 2022).*

Finally, although France did not attach a significant weight to the mediator role during their presidency, attachés claimed that they tried overall to *build bridges* between member states by leading discussions with them during environmental working parties or having bilateral meetings (SK, DK 2022). Despite the files on ETS II, CBAM and cars and vans where they have political interests, they were trying to find space for compromise between the member states and Commission on the rest of files (SK 2022). Attachés assumed that there was quite a big room for in depth discussion on specific difficult and technical parts of ETS I (NL 2022). Moreover, they have demonstrated some impartiality during the negotiations for Social Climate Fund since *“it was also their interest to have the proper funding to elevate the social burden”* (HU 2022). Finally, they paradoxically established a consensus in the Council on ETS BRT at the end of their term although they were opposing the extension of ETS during their whole presidency (Meunissier 2022).

### 3.3.2. The Czech Republic in the Mediator Role

#### **The legislation**

During the Czech presidency, most of the environmental files (especially the “Fit for 55” package in the climate area) were in the final stage of the legislative cycle since they were forwarded from the French presidency which has negotiated a general approach on them. Thus, the Czech Republic had to take the approved files by the Council to the trilogues and get a provisional agreement on them. The country has achieved several provisional agreements with the Parliament. Firstly, on 27<sup>th</sup> October, the Council reached a provisional agreement with the Parliament on the regulation on CO<sub>2</sub> standards for cars and vans. On 8<sup>th</sup> November, they agreed on the ESR regulation and on 11<sup>th</sup> November, a final trilogue was conducted on LULUCF regulation (rising the forests’ absorption capacity of CO<sub>2</sub>) (Council of the European Union 2022d). The provisional agreement on ESR regulation was then adopted by the Council at Coreper on 21<sup>st</sup> December. On 9<sup>th</sup> December, Czech presidency achieved a compromise with the Parliament on the new regulation on batteries and waste batteries including all types of batteries such as industrial batteries, batteries in cars and phones. This agreement was key in ensuring the energy independence of the EU and competitiveness of its industry (Environment Council 2022). Finally, during the last political trilogue on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, last files of

the package Fit for 55 were adopted with the prospect of the formal approval by the Council and the Parliament during the Swedish presidency (MŽP 2022a). This contained gradually diminishing emissions allowances in sectors of EU ETS I mechanism with the extension to maritime. The extension of reduction of emissions of the aviation sector was finalised on 7<sup>th</sup> December. New mechanism for sectors outside the ETS I system such as building, road transport (ETS BRT) was adopted during the last trilogue. Finally, institutions also reached a provisional agreement on designing SCF and CBAM (MŽP 2022a).

### **Analysis of the mediator role**

Representatives affirmed that the Czech presidency was trying to seek compromise as much as possible within the mandate given (general approach) and trying to accommodate as many concerns delegations had. Attaches noted that the chairman had clear support of the majority in the Council for compromise texts in trilogues since he closed reasonable deals when considering Council position in key files (SK, EE 2022). Although during negotiations on ESR and LULUCF the presidency needed sometimes to go beyond the mandate for the sake of compromise, they maintained the general approach in the main political issues (DK, EE, SK, NL, BE 2022). Estonian attaché remarked that in the case Parliament was asking for more concessions, the presidency asked member states during Coreper for more flexibility during negotiations to equally express these deviations from the mandate and tried to stick to it. It was important for the delegations as they knew that the chairman is not changing the proposals easily (EE 2022). The Czech diplomat claimed that the Council represented by the Czech Republic had to be on alert all the time and defend everything in front of the Commission and Parliament during trilogue phase as despite having same objective (reaching an agreement), these three institutions aim to defend their own positions (CZ 2023). During trilogues, the Czech presidency, according to Belgian attaché, tried to defend the best solution that is in the general approach of the Council as manifested by the trilogue on batteries, ETS or regulation on CO2 standards for cars and vans (BE 2022). The last one was a real test of their level of impartiality (NL, EE 2022). Indeed, as one attaché observed, it was one of the most difficult and sensitive files to sell back home because the automobile sector is key for the Czech economy and local politicians and citizens are generally sceptical towards electric vehicles (NL 2022). It was not sure before the presidency how they will approach it and how much they will play the role of mediator (Havelka 2022), but they managed it anyway and even concluded it as the first file of the whole package. Concerning other files, such as ETS which is a very complex one, the attaché stated that presidency “*cannot afford to steer at the direction where it personally would*

go” (NL 2022). Another representative observed that in case of protecting Czech interests some things have gone much better than he expected since they were able to be more in the middle (EE 2022). He affirmed that Czech presidency despite their national interests managed to be a real mediator in the ETS file and on regulation on cars and vans (EE 2022). Finally, the Bulgarian attaché remarked that the presidency handled national interests well and did not force to reach a political target or enforce pushing files but rather move files forward in more realistic way (BG 2022).

Member states appraised that when the Czech presidency was giving trade-offs to the Parliament at the expense of the general approach, it was not inclined to some group of states over other, and the concessions were equally distributed (NL, DK, HU 2022). When it was necessary to subtract from the general approach, the presidency was trying to keep both sides on board and altered in subtracting once from ambitious group of states, another time from less ambitious, or from southern/northern states (CZ 2023). Thus, it was not calculating pragmatically and did not subtract from states that were against the compromise text to reach an agreement. To illustrate, the presidency was sometimes more open to listen to positions and proposals of countries in the Central and Eastern European as they are in the same interest group but at the meantime, it tried to accommodate more ambitious proposals (HU 2022). Belgian attaché assumed that there was a specific dynamic during the Czech presidency since it had to take more into account other states, mainly bigger states (BE 2022). Danish attaché affirmed that the presidency brokered the deal for the Council conclusions with them or with Germany which oversaw ambitious group and communicated informally a lot with them (DK 2022). Balancing between groups enabled presidency to have a compromise that everybody was slightly unhappy but at the same time the member states perceived that the presidency is not biased as they were taking something from each state (EE 2022). This brokering was manifested by the Council in December after the last trilogue where the qualified majority was strong since most states supported the provisional agreements with the Parliament and only individual countries voted against (Bulgaria, Poland) (CZ 2023). The presidency has lot of reactions of member states that it kept balance, they did not feel left behind as the chairman facilitated agreements that were in line with its main environmental priorities (CZ 2023).

Regarding the informal communication in the environmental policy, representatives acknowledged that the Czech Republic was more flexible and responsive on that level than France (BE, SK, NL, EE, DK, HU 2022). The presidency has organized frequent informal

attaché meetings and created groups on WhatsApp on each environmental file where member states could write their space for manoeuvre, demands or red flags (CZ 2023). Representatives claimed that besides the bilateral talks with like-minded groups<sup>19</sup>, the chairman was keeping contact with all countries to know the positions of their governments (HU, BE 2022). An environmental attaché acknowledged that the informal channels helped a lot during the debriefing on the technical meeting, trilogues or informing about upcoming Corepers because sometimes there is not enough space to communicate things in formalized manner (NL 2022). Furthermore, environmental attaches stated that searching compromise between ambitious and less ambitious states suited at the same time the goals of the Czech Republic because its position in the environmental field is generally in the middle. The presidency has lot of reactions from member states that it defended well interests of member states in the Council, states did not feel left behind as the chairman facilitated agreements which were in line with its main environmental priorities (CZ 2023). A Dutch attaché confirmed that the Czech presidency team had deep understanding both of positions of member states and how they can *build bridges* between them. He added that the fact that the country is in the middle of the EU both geographically and by its environmental policy, gives the presidency an advantage and “*makes it able to do things a bit faster than others might have been able to do*” (NL 2022).

A Czech attaché acknowledged that it was key that during the Czech presidency, there was not some big ideological clash in environmental policy, because if there was, the country would defend its position strongly due to its national goals, and the mediation would not be so intense (CZ 2022). To illustrate, as regards the file on the CO2 standards of cars and vans, although being a highly medialized and sensitive issue for the Czech citizens, domestic political opposition and also for some members of the leading coalition, the presidency did not slow down the negotiations on the file and mediated a provisional agreement already at the end of October. We can explain it by a leaked information from diplomatic *couloirs* that the leader of the automotive industry in the Czech Republic, Škoda, did not lobby for halting discussions as it was already prepared for electro mobility (Český rozhlas 2022).

Finally, member states underlined the sincere approach of the Czech DPR and environmental diplomats towards other countries in Council. One attaché recognized that during the Coreper meetings, delegations appreciated that the presidency was very honest with

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<sup>19</sup> These are concrete groups of member states for single files in the Council which have allied positions on specific issues.

the assessment of where it thought was necessary to move and when it needed that flexibility of states to reach a consensus with the Parliament. He said that Jaroslav Zajíček (DPR for Coreper I) has taken the right approach during Coreper being aware where the sensitivities of states are. Belgian attaché reflected that *“Czech diplomats were genuinely trying to reach agreement with EP, they were trustworthy, kept contact with all countries and provided confident information to member states”* (BE 2022). She added that presidency was very transparent in choosing carefully which issues it conceded to the Parliament. Dutch representative acknowledged that the Czech presidency shared trustful information with member states (NL 2022).

### 3.3.3. Comparison of Mediator Role Prioritization between Presidencies

We will now evaluate the prioritization of mediator role by the French and Czech presidencies. We have observed that both presidencies have played this role, however the intensity and applied strategies differed between the presidencies. In the case of France, we should highlight that prioritization of mediator’s role of France varied during their presidency. In the first half of its presidency, the country tried to find balance on environmental files between member states and concluded the general approach on certain files such as the regulation on POPs and batteries. However, their national interests were pronounced in politically driven files such as ETS BRT, CBAM, CO2 standards on cars and vans. During their second half of the term, mainly after the presidential elections in April, the country has reduced the intensity by which it played the mediator role. Despite the fact that at the end of their presidency, they mediated the Council position on main environmental files of “Fit for 55” package, the coherence of the consensus was questionable. To explain, there were many different requests from member states since France made the final compromise text in very short time (Meunissier 2022). Although they finally managed (despite the initial reluctance) the general approach on the ETS BRT during the last Council meeting, they added only few demands of member states to the Commission proposal text on the cars and vans file. The mediator role was equally jeopardized by the fact that they communicated mainly to larger countries, especially Germany, but often omitted requests of smaller states. Additionally, delegations pointed out that by the end of their term, when they wanted to ensure the general approach on the whole package, they calculated the votes to have at least the qualified majority to secure the agreement and did not consider hesitations of all member states.

When we compare the prioritization of mediator’s role of France with the Czech

presidency, there is a visible change in attitudes. The Czech Republic continued in negotiating files previously discussed by France and managed to finalise the environmental files of FF 55 package and regulation on batteries by the end of their presidency. However, contrarily to the French presidency, member states did not have impression that the Czech Republic is omitting the demands of member states when giving concessions to the Parliament at the expense of the general approach. Delegations assumed that the chairman was not inclined to some group of states over other, and the trade-offs were equally distributed. During the last trilogue in December, the qualified majority was strong since most states supported the provisional agreements with the Parliament and only individual countries voted against. The national interests of the Czech Republic were less promoted in politically sensitive issues that in the case of France. The Czech presidency was keeping contact with all countries and organized frequent informal meetings of attaches to know the positions of their governments. Moreover, member states were also supporting the provisional agreement on environmental files to have it as soon as possible and they did not have any major issues with the proposed concessions to the EP during the trilogue phase except for a few countries including Germany. This might have facilitated that the country was playing actively the mediator role. Thus, as one attaché stated, the Czech presidency “*was going with the flow*” as not any member states did not say that it does not want agreement (BE 2022). On the other hand, the French presidency was negotiating the general approach on main environmental files included in the “Fit For 55” package which might have made it more difficult for France to put emphasis on mediator role since member states had more diverse views on the issues when negotiating the position within Council than during the trilogues led by the Czech presidency with other EU institutions.

Finally, we conclude that although both presidencies have played the mediator role, the Czech Republic has chosen to play the role more intensively than France. Although the last tried to find some balance between member states during its term, most visibly at the first half of their term, the promotion of their national goals was more noticeable, and the mediator role was less pronounced (mainly by the end of their term) than during the Czech presidency.

#### 3.4. Manager

The intensity by which chairmen played the manager role will be analysed by the cooperation between the capital and the Permanent Representation and the coordination of agenda with the GSC and other EU institutions such as the EP and the Commission.

### 3.4.1. France in the Manager Role

The environmental representatives assumed that France played the manager role and chaired meetings in more traditional and formal way. One attaché noted that at the beginning they took more listening role since they gathered all the opinions of member states and replied only to the specific states which might have caused that states were asking the same thing (EE 2022). Attachés observed that the capital had a bigger role than the Permanent Representation during the French presidency (SK, NL, HU 2022). Consequently, this was reflected into its way of chairing. The Slovakian attaché remarked that France had a large support from experts in Paris since they had capital-based presidency and less experts in Brussels (SK 2022). Another representative acknowledged that France had the “*additional advantage of having a heavy involvement of colleagues from Paris as well to work on the technicalities*” (NL 2022). This can be helpful when the chairman is still developing positions and negotiating general approach dealing with technical issues since the capital-based coordination leads to heavier involvement of colleagues in Paris who are more in contact with the government than the French diplomats in Brussels (NL 2022). However, diplomats observed that France apparently lacked experts in Brussels dealing with the environmental field compared to the size of duties they had to manage (SK 2022). To illustrate, a Hungarian attaché claimed that “*It was technically one person being the head of all negotiations and one person co-chairing the meeting*” (HU 2022). Furthermore, attaches affirmed that since the French presidency was led from the capital, process of getting documents for the meetings approved by Paris was quite long. In effect, French diplomats had to wait often for instructions and the green light from Paris to move things forward or to change something. Decisions had to be made in the capital so the diplomats at the French Permanent representation in Brussels had much less options to decide things (EE 2022). In consequence, it sometimes created tensions between capital and Brussels since member states were not informed on the progress on certain files (NL 2022, CZ 2023).

As regards the cooperation with other institutions, France coordinated its policies on weekly basis with experts from the Commission (DG CLIMA) as the Commission has great knowledge of technicalities in concerned files. The contact was most intense by the end of the presidency since France wanted to agree with the Commission on strategy to get the general approach (FR 2023). The informal communication with the GSC was also key, they maintained very close contact during the whole presidency (HU 2022). The communication with the Parliament was not frequent and mostly only on informal basis since there were no trilogues in

environmental field apart from the POPs regulation during the French presidency (FR 2023). Finally, all interviewed environmental attachés stressed that they found inconvenient that the France was issuing documents for working parties only in French. Thus, member states had to wait for official translations into English and it was slowing down the negotiation process (HU, NL, EE, SK, DK, BE, BG 2022).

### 3.4.2. Czech Republic in the Manager Role

The chairing of meetings during the Czech presidency was different from the French one. Contrary to the formal way of chairing of the last, the Czech presidency emphasized the informal way. The Dutch diplomat affirmed that it was a very transparent way of chairing and highlighted the high level of personnel connection the Czech presidency has managed to make in the group (NL 2022). All interviewed diplomats including the Czech attaché confirmed that the Czech presidency was more coordinated from Brussels (HU, NL, EE, SK, DK, BE, BG 2022, CZ 2023). Only Czech environmental attaches based in Brussels were chairing the working party meetings contrary to France which had experts from capital for chairing. Experts from Prague were travelling to Brussels just to assist on trilogues, they were not participating on weekly technical meetings but rather on political trilogues which were much less frequent. Thus, the political trilogues were mostly led by the Czech diplomats based at the Permanent Representation in Brussels since they had wide expertise and knowledge of files. Consequently, it set a different dimension since the Czech diplomats had the ability to make decisions more quickly in contrast to French diplomats because they did not wait for the capital to give them an approval. The Dutch attaché stated that the *“Czech diplomats were more independent and could decide themselves how they want to proceed, Prague did not approve everything that went to working parties contrarily to France”* (NL 2022). He added that working from the perspective of the Permanent representation, it is always very efficient as the decisions are being taken in Brussels (NL 2022). As the Czech Republic led the presidency from the European metropole, it had more environmental diplomats in Brussels than France. A Belgian attaché assumed that while finalising files which was the case of the Czech Republic, more experts are needed in Brussels during trilogues as they need to negotiate a provisional agreement with the Parliament (BE 2022). In effect, the Czech diplomats could have a more reactive conversation with environmental representatives of other member states (EE, NL, BE 2022). A Dutch attaché acknowledged that the Czech team was quite compact and the communication with them was sometimes easier (NL 2022). Furthermore, a Hungarian diplomat noticed that the distribution

of files among Czech attaches was more proportionated than during the French presidency and Czechs were paying lot of attention to the details of certain files (HU 2022). Finally, representatives affirmed that the Czech Republic played intensively the role of manager as it had many experts based directly in Brussels during their presidency despite circumstances and the large amount of work (HU, NL, BE, EE 2022).

Regarding the cooperation with the GSC, presidency communicated with it intensively on a daily basis (CZ 2023). Concerning the other EU institutions, Czech Republic was mostly in contact with the Commission before, during and immediately after technical meetings or political trilogues to process information from the negotiations. When the presidency and the Commission had a similar position on some issues, they coordinated their strategy which they then took towards the European Parliament to set a compromise (CZ 2023). In effect, the Hungarian diplomat claimed that the presidency collaborated often with the Commission, involving them in drafting for compromises and in analysing different proposals of the Parliament (HU 2022). Generally, when the presidency chairs working parties, the Commission officially debriefs delegations just before the meeting. However, the Czech Republic did not chair many environmental working parties, but rather Coreper meetings. Thus, the contact with the Commission was mostly informal during the trilogue phase (CZ 2023). Regarding the contact with the European Parliament, the Czech Republic maintained a frequent informal communication with this institution manifested mostly before trilogues. During these meetings, the institutions maintained formal communication since a degree of discretion is required (CZ 2023).

### 3.4.3. Comparison of Manager Role Prioritization between Presidencies

The French and Czech presidencies played both the role of manager during their presidency as it is finally expected by the theory since the chairman needs to coordinate and chair the Council meetings and cooperate with the Council General Secretariat and other institutions such as European Commission and Parliament. Nevertheless, the difference between the countries lies in the manner and intensity they have exercised it. Based on the interviews with the environmental diplomats, we conclude that France, in the environmental filed, was playing the managerial role in more traditional way, emphasizing the formal side of chairing. Contrarily, the Czech Republic selected to chair meetings rather in informal way. Furthermore, the chairmen have differed in the place of coordination of their presidencies. The French presidency

was led more from the capital whereas the Czech one more from the Permanent Representation. Additionally, both presidencies cooperated frequently with the Council General Secretariat. They equally maintained close contact with the Commission. The communication with the Parliament was more intense in the case of the Czech presidency as it was holding dialogues during its term.

Nevertheless, we have observed that the managerial role of the Czech Republic was a bit more pronounced than in the case of France. To explain, attaches assumed that although France had a large support of environmental experts in its capital, it lacked experts in Brussels compared to the size of duties they had to manage. On the other hand, attaches observed that the distribution of files among Czech attaches was more proportionated and the Czech environmental team was more compact which made it simpler for the presidency to exercise the managerial tasks. Moreover, France has experienced some tensions between its Permanent Representation and Paris since the French environmental diplomats had to wait for approval of Paris to make decisions. On the other hand, the Czech representatives in Brussels were more flexible and led reactive communication with environmental representatives of other member states as they did not need to wait for instructions from Prague.

### 3.5. Representant Role

We will elaborate on the last role of the presidency, the representant role, while focusing on the external representation of the French and Czech presidencies. The activities connected to this role are to represent the EU and coordinate its position during international conferences. We will analyse only by which way the presidencies have played the role, not the prioritization of this role, since states cannot really choose themselves the intensity by which they will play it as it is given by the occurrence of international conferences during their term.

#### 3.5.1. France in the Role of External Representant

The French presidency represented the EU at several international conferences. Mainly, it participated on the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) which took place in May in Côte d'Ivoire. The conference focused on the land degradation and desertification in African continent which could lead to serious social and economic consequences. It could also have direct impacts on the European Union in form of massive

waves of migration from Africa to the EU due to extreme droughts and lack of water. France and several African states have introduced some plans to mitigate the desertification of Sahel as for instance the project of Great Green wall (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2022). Regarding the circular economy, France represented the EU during the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) co-organised by UNEP. The conference lasted from the end of February until the beginning of March. France maintained a strong ambition of the EU in this area. The outcome of the negotiations was the adoption of 14 resolutions on sustainability including global agreement to reduce plastic pollution, waste, and chemical (UN Environment programme 2022). Regarding the issue of water pollution and water scarcity, France was active in helping to arrange support documents and background for the UN Water Conference which was planned for March 2023 in the siege of the UN, New York. This global conference is organised in the middle of the UN Decade for Action on Water and Sanitation (2018-2028) and might include a broad range of participants such as experts, academic organisations, multinational companies, citizens, scientists, NGOs (United Nations 2022). Additionally, France has finalised the preparation of the Council Conclusions for the second segment of the UN Minamata Convention on Mercury (COP-4), they were approved by the Environmental ministers during the Council meeting in March 2022 (Council, 2022a). The presidency then coordinated the EU position and represented its ideas during the conference in Indonesia by the end of March. The main outcome of the conference was the Bali Declaration, however with no legally binding targets (Minamata Convention on Mercury 2021). Finally, the French presidency has led together with the Commission and Parliament the final sequence of the Conference on the Future of the EU which consisted of discussions realised by broad public who then edits recommendations for EU actors on pending issues such as climate change. The conference has lasted since April 2021 to May 2022 and one of the principal topics was the green transition and climate change mitigation (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022).

France started to initiate work on many international negotiations that were realized during the Czech presidency. It began with the preparation of Council conclusions of COP 27 in line with the commitments of the previous COP 26. In the field of biodiversity, one of the visions of France was to get Council conclusions for the UN Conference on biological diversity - COP15 (Wright & Labastie, 2021). However, this conference which was supposed to occur in April 2022 in China (Kunming) was postponed due to the covid pandemics to December 2022 and was held in Montreal (SDG 2022). France was chairing preparatory negotiations for this conference, but Council conclusions were not reached until 24<sup>th</sup> October 2022 by the Czech

presidency (Council, 2022b). Similarly, Conclusions of the Council for the EU Soil Strategy including the discussions on Soil Health Law proposal were not reached either. France also started the preparation of common EU approach for the conference on Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands which occurred by the end of 2022. The presidency was also preparing support materials for revision of environmental conventions for Conference of Parties on Basle (COP 16 on hazardous waste), Rotterdam (COP 11 on pesticides and chemical products) and Stockholm (COP 11 POPs) Conventions (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2021).

### 3.5.2. The Czech Republic in the Role of External Representant

The Czech Republic had a busy international agenda during its mandate partly because of the postponement of some events during the French presidency due to the pandemics (e.g., COP 15). It has represented the EU during several major international negotiations and coordinated the EU position. One of the main international events during which the Czech presidency represented the common EU position was the UN Climate change conference in Sharm El-Sheikh from 6 to 18 November 2022. Although the main goal of removing the dependence of fossil fuels to reduce emissions has not been achieved, a new fund to assist developing states in their green transition has been created (Úřad vlády 2021). The second major international negotiation was the successful UN Biodiversity conference COP 15 which took place by the end of the presidency from 7 to 19 December 2022 in Montreal. The outcome was a consensus on a new framework for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for which the EU has fought for a long time and has demonstrated an ambitious position during the conference including parallel meetings of the parties to the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols. The participants agreed on establishing a Global Biodiversity Facility to increase the speed of financial transaction to developing states and on a new Biodiversity Framework focused on the restoration of landscape, wildlife protection, rise of protected areas, and diminishing the use of pesticides (MŽP 2023b). Additionally, with reference to the biodiversity, the presidency coordinated the EU position in other international meetings such as conferences on the Standing Committee of the Berne Convention and on the International Whaling Commission. Thirdly, the Czech presidency represented the EU in November at the global summit COP CITES in Panama on Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The outcome of the conference was appreciated since the Czech Republic negotiated all priorities stated in the Council Conclusions

such as the augmentation of list of international trade regulation in fauna and flora (e. g. need of anticipation of trade in horns and ivory) (Environment Council 2022). Furthermore, the Czech Republic initiated discussions on global treaty to diminish the contamination of land and oceans by plastic particles. The negotiations were held in Uruguay between November and December 2022 by Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee under the framework of UNEP. By two years, a legal text might be issues from this meeting. Regarding emissions standards on cars and vans, we should emphasize the presidency work on Conventions for Transboundary Air Pollution and Convention on Effects of Industrial Accidents as well as Ministerial Environment Conference for Europe in October 2022 organised by United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (Úřad vlády 2021). With reference to chemicals, the presidency also prepared for conferences which would happen during the Swedish presidency such as the International Conference on the management of chemical substances (SAICM process) and the Meeting of the Parties to the Minamata Convention. Finally, the Czech Republic held preparatory meetings for the triple Conferences of Parties of the Rotterdam, Basel, and Stockholm Conventions which should be held during the Swedish presidency in May 2023 in Geneva (Úřad vlády 2021).

Finally given by the agenda of international conferences, the presidency had to negotiate the Council position for UN Climate change Conference COP 27 and UN Biodiversity Conference COP 15. Thus, the presidency held discussions to establish the Council conclusions almost each day at the lower level of the Council or by informal channels such as bilateral talks with member states (CZ 2023). However, as noticed by an environmental attaché who was having bilateral discussions quite regularly with the presidency, the Czech Republic was active but had sometimes some problems with Council conclusions for COP27 since it was dealing with many other things at the same time (mainly the “Fit For 55” package). She also mentioned that this coordination of conclusions was more capital based (DK 2022). The Council conclusions for COP 27 and COP 15 were approved by the Council by the end of October (Council, 2022b).

### 3.6. Conclusion of the First Analytical Part

We will now conclude on the approaches the Czech and French presidencies have taken to the chairman roles as well as to their prioritization. The **mediator** role was exercised by both presidencies. However, the intensity by which the chairmen have performed this role has varied. In effect, the mediator function was more pronounced during the Czech term. The country accommodated interests of majority of member states which was reflected by the strong qualified majority within the Council on several files of the “FF 55” package finalized during trilogues. The chairman was not aiming to have a consensus at the expense of member states goals but rather tried to be a trustworthy mediator and not promote its national position on politically sensitive issues. The Czech presidency also intensively communicated with member states and tried to ensure interests of all states regardless their ambitions in the environmental policy. In the case of France, although the country tried to ensure balance between member states (mainly in the general approach on batteries and POPs), it was pushing its political will strongly and its mediation was compromised on some politically driven files. This was mainly demonstrated during the last Council for Environment at the end of their presidency as France wanted to close the general approach on environmental files of “FF 55” package at all costs due to its political interests. Thus, the state did not consider how strong the agreement among the member states on the package was and did not want to forward the task of negotiating the Council position on the package to the following Czech presidency. Finally, they sometimes did not integrate objectives of all member states since they communicated more with larger countries such as Germany than with others, especially smaller states.

As regards the **political leader** role, both countries have executed this function. With reference to France, we have seen that it has prioritized to play the political leader over the mediator role. In effect, despite a bit unclear environmental objectives of France at the beginning of their presidency, they have pushed a lot for the long-term environmental EU goals during the second half of their term. Their ambitions to be a European political leader in climate change mitigation was remarkable, mostly towards the end of their term when they negotiated general approach on “FF 55” package. In effect, the country has demonstrated that it is able to realize its ambitious goals in the environmental policy despite divergent objectives of member states in concerned files. The Czech Republic has undergone a similar shift since during summer, its ambitions to conclude the package were ambiguous as it emphasized the energy security over the green transition. However, since autumn, the country has demonstrated a

political will to have provisional agreements on the environmental files until the end of their presidency. Finally, the countries have undertaken a different approach to their leadership role in the sense that France has exercised the leadership role by undertaking unilateral and coercive actions which was manifested in promoting actively its national interests and making pressure on member states. On the other hand, the Czech Republic did not promote its objectives so forcefully and took more a neutral approach in sensitive political issues. Thus, it selected to play the leadership role by exercising entrepreneurial activities which consisted of promoting its innovative visions of the EU as for instance introducing and discussing the issue of light pollution and restoration of Ukrainian landscape.

The role of **manager** was also performed by both presidencies. However, they have taken a different approach towards this role in environmental area. France has been chairing the Council meetings in more traditional way whereas Czech presidency have chosen the informal way. Their chairing also diverged in the center of coordination since French diplomats were more connected with their capital contrary to the Czech presidency led directly from Brussels. This had consequences to the role prioritization of presidencies as the manager role was in the case of the Czech Republic a bit more pronounced than during the French term. To explain, France has experienced tensions between the capital and Permanent Representation and French diplomats had to wait often for approval of meeting documents from Paris which has slowed down the process.

Both presidencies have exercised equally the role of **representant**. They have represented the EU and coordinated its position during several international conferences. In the case of France, it coordinated the EU position during for instance the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, UN Water Conference and UN Minamata Convention on Mercury (COP-4). The Czech Republic had a busier agenda than France due to the given agenda of international conferences and the delay of major events which were postponed for the Czech term because of Covid-19 pandemics. It had to represent the EU during the main international conference such as the UN Climate Conference (COP 27), UN Biodiversity conference (COP 15) or COP CITES. Additionally, the Czech Republic had to finalise the Council Conclusions for these principal events which was quite time demanding.

Concerning the role prioritization of the manager, political leader, and mediator role, we can summarize that both countries have played each of these chairman roles during their

presidencies in environmental policy. Yet, the relative weight attached to these roles varied among presidencies as well as *the way* by which they played them. In the case of the Czech Republic, it has played very actively the mediation role during its whole mandate. Despite the ambiguity of its environmental ambitions at the beginning of its presidency, it has equally chosen to accentuate leadership role during the second half of their term as manifested by their aim to finalize the whole “Fit for 55” package until the end of their presidency and promote new initiatives in environmental policy. They equally put emphasis on the manager role and engaged actively in daily coordination tasks of the presidency. Nevertheless, based on the interviews, we found that that the country played the mediation role with slightly more intensity than the leadership role since despite the country’s ambitions in the environmental field during the second half of their term, at the beginning of their presidency their objectives were unclear as well as the ambitions to promote actively environmental EU goals. As regards France, it has played actively the leadership role. It has equally chosen to play to a certain degree the role of mediator, however the intensity was reduced compared to the Czech presidency especially by the end of the French term. The role of manager was exercised as well, however there were some tensions between Paris and Permanent Representation of France. Despite playing all chairman’s roles, the country has prioritized to attach more weight to the leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions as they strongly promoted their political objectives. The emphasis on leadership role was especially observable during the second part of their term since they demonstrated a real ambition to negotiate general approach on concerned files.

## 4. Factors influencing the Role Prioritization

This complementary part of our thesis constitutes a shorter outline of the possible impact of different factors on the role prioritization of presidencies. The factors are derived from the rationalist approach (the power of the country, the approach to environmental policy and presidential elections in the case of France) and sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies). We will test whether the theoretical assumptions about these factors (elaborated in the theoretical chapter) are in line with the findings of role prioritization of France and the Czech Republic in our first analytical part and whether we can confirm our hypotheses.

### 4.1. The Power of Presidencies

Firstly, we will test whether the behaviour of the French and consecutive Czech presidencies in environmental policy was possibly affected by the power of these countries. Regarding big member states, we have discovered in our analytical part that France has experienced some tensions in environmental policy between its capital and Permanent Representation while chairing the Council meetings. The French environmental representatives in Brussels were not always reactive since the process of getting instructions and an approval from the colleagues in Paris to make decisions was lengthy. The presidency also did not manage some procedural tasks as it provided working documents only in French language. Hence, the manager role was a bit compromised which meets the theory. To clarify, the fact that although playing the manager role, it was not emphasized strongly during the French term, could be explained by the difficult coordination of the chairman's apparatus as they are the largest state in the EU and must deal with lot of bureaucratic issues which slow down the organizational and logistics tasks of the presidency. Additionally, we have learnt from the interviews with environmental representatives, that the power of the country might have influenced *the way* of playing the manager role. In effect, one attaché stated that big member states may tend to coordinate the chairing rather in formal way as they have generally capital-based presidency while middle-sized/small member states might accentuate the informal way as they tend to have the presidency driven from Brussels (EE 2022). Indeed, we have observed in our analytical part that in environmental policy, the Czech Republic emphasized the informal way of chairing being led from Brussels contrary to France which undertook a formal way of chairing and was led from Paris. To illustrate, a Dutch attaché stated: "*I think for France this kind of formal format and procedure is important as it is a big country*" (NL 2022).

With reference to the mediator role, we have observed that this role was less pronounced in environmental policy during the French term compared to the Czech presidency. The French presidency was calculating a lot if they already have a qualified majority for an agreement to be accepted within the Council mostly during the negotiations on “Fit for 55” package at the end of their term. Indeed, environmental attachés acknowledged that since they are the biggest and one of the most powerful countries in the EU, they act differently than middle-sized/small member states. The Czech attaché noted that *“as France is the EU major power, it communicated a lot with Germany, another EU great power. They expected that smaller countries would subordinate to their proposed solutions”* (CZ 2023). This meets our theoretical assumptions (Quaglia et al. 2006, p. 360). In effect, a Danish attaché assumed that the French presidency in the environmental field was sometimes interlaced with the *“large country syndrome”* (DK 2022) as it reached out to larger countries but omitted smaller ones including Denmark although it is one of the most ambitious leaders in environmental policy. Finally, Estonian attaché claimed that while mediating agreements, France sometimes protected its national interests and did not hide what is its national position since *“it is generally more complicated for bigger country how it operates than for smaller states”* (EE 2022). Hence, the theory intersects with our observations since despite trying to find balance agreements, France did not prioritize the mediator role during their term.

In our first analytical part, we have found that France during its presidency prioritized the leadership role as it demonstrated a real ambition to push forward the EU long-term goals. This behaviour was mainly manifested during the last Environmental Council meeting in June where France put a lot of effort to get the general approach on environmental files of “Fit for 55” package. Indeed, attaches have assumed that during the French presidency, the politics played a bigger role than that mediation or focus on managerial tasks. Additionally, we have previously seen that France has exercised coercion and unilateral strategy while playing the leader role as it pushed strongly for its interests and put pressure on member states to accept its compromise texts. Representatives acknowledged that the country was not always listening all member states and omitted often interests of smaller member states. To illustrate, one attaché noted with reference to the influence of the power on the behaviour of France that since France has a powerful voice within the EU, they are generally more political and highlight the leadership role. As noted by the Estonian attaché, *“it is obvious that as France is a great power pushes its political will strongly and has its own agenda”* (EE 2022). Additionally, a Czech attaché claimed that *“France is generally more political as it is a big country with important*

*political and economic power*” (CZ 2022). Hence, we assume that our observations meet the theory which predicted that big member states prioritize leadership role during their term while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions as they benefit from their power position (Bengtsson 2003, p. 315). Indeed, despite playing all roles, we have seen that during its presidency, France has chosen to attach more weight to the leadership role than other roles.

Secondly, as regards the manager role of middle-sized/small member states, we have found that the Czech Republic was managing actively the coordination of the presidency as there were no significant tensions between its Permanent Representation in Brussels and Prague and the division of tasks between the capital and Brussels was well balanced. We have discovered that the Czech Republic played actively the manager role as suggested by the theory exercising its daily managerial tasks. Hence, the less complex administration of the Czech Republic could have facilitated to the country to play the manager role intensively. Moreover, representatives acknowledged that the country equally maintained tight contact with GSC and other EU institutions which was also expected by the theory. As regard the mediation, we have found that they were listening to all member states to seek their possible red flags and trade-offs for the trilogues with the EP. In our analytical part, we discovered that the Czech Republic tried to be a trustful mediator and handled national interests in sensitive issues for member states which was manifested in their endeavor of sticking to the general approach as much as possible during the trilogue phase. Furthermore, it considered requirements of all groups of member states. An environmental Belgian attaché stated that in the case of the Czech Republic, due to its smaller size and less economic weight in the EU, the *“dynamic was different than during the French presidency, as it took more into account other states including smaller ones”* (BE 2022). In effect, our observations meet the theoretical assumptions in this aspect which expected that middle-sized/small member states tend to accentuate mediator role since they are expected to be less partial as they are more vulnerable than big member states, have less objectives to promote (Elgström et al. 2004, p. 50). Our findings are also in line with the theory suggesting that middle-sized/small member states would try to communicate with all member states, including smaller member states (Quaglia et al. 2006, p. 360).

Finally, in our analytical part we have detected that the Czech Republic played intensively the leadership role, except for the start of its presidency. It tried to push forward the objectives of the EU in environmental policy during the second half of their term as they aimed to finalise the Fit For 55 package until the end of their term. It equally promoted new initiatives

in environmental policy such as the light pollution and the restoration of landscape of Ukraine after the current war. Nevertheless, we have found that although the presidency played the leadership by undertaking entrepreneurial tasks during its presidency, the mediation role was overall a bit more pronounced than the leadership during their presidency since during the first half of the presidency, the ambitions of promoting environmental goals were quite ambiguous. Thus, our observations are in line with the theoretical assumptions in this aspect suggesting that middle-sized/small member states tend equally to play the leader role, but instead of undertaking coercive and unilateral actions as might do rather big member states, middle-sized/small member states would play it by undertaking entrepreneurial activities (Bengtsson 2003, p. 314).

To conclude, the hypothesis based on the power of member states can be confirmed. We found that France as a big member state, although playing all chairman roles, did prioritize the leadership role while undertaking coercive and unilateral action as indicated by the theory. Concerning middle-sized/small member states, our observations equally meet the theory since although the Czech Republic played actively the role of political leader by undertaking entrepreneurial tasks during its term, the mediator role was a bit more pronounced than the leadership as the theory expected.

#### 4.2. Approach to Environmental Policy

We will firstly analyse the importance of the environmental policy for the studied countries: France and the Czech Republic. With reference to France, it has addressed its ambitious environmental goals since many years.<sup>20</sup> It was even among the first states to establish the Ministry for Environment in 1971 (WHO 2015). In 2009, the importance of this Ministry raised significantly since it launched the Grenelle reform to deal with environmental issues and mitigate consequences of climate change in France (WHO 2015). Since this period, France has clearly demonstrated the aim to reduce the greenhouse gasses and focus on the water, air pollution, protection of biodiversity while increasing the potential of low carbon-economy (Egert 2012). In 2015, it was evaluated by OECD as a “proactive and ambitious” country in environmental field as materialized by the Green Growth Act, the Paris Agreement, and biodiversity law one year later (OECD 2016). Since the election of Macron in 2017, the

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<sup>20</sup> We should mention that we will not evaluate in this part the large use of nuclear energy by France since there are very diverse opinions within the EU if it is considered as a clean solution or not.

president has emphasized the goals of France to tackle climate change and realise ecological transformation of many sectors such as industry, transport, housing (Wright & Labastie 2022). Since his principal speech at Sorbonne, the climate change mitigation was one of the key objectives of France (French presidency of the Council of the European Union 2022). In the same year, France has announced its plan to decarbonize the automotive sector by 2040 (Ministry for the Ecological Transition 2021). Two years later, the Law on Energy and Climate was implemented in France to decarbonize the French economy until 2050 as it committed itself in Paris Agreement (CCAC 2021). In 2020, the first pillar of the framework *France Relance* programme, which consisted of investments to the green transformation of industry including housing sector and development of new technologies such as biofuels and hydrogen, was established (CCAC 2021). Nevertheless, the French government's focus on environmental issues is sometimes undermined by the strong lobbying industry as well as business and interest groups. Internationally, France has equally demonstrated that it emphasizes the environmental field. In 2012, it has become member of Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC 2021). Since 2018, it has provided a large amount of financial support for developing countries to tackle the climate change mitigation and invested in Green Climate fund (CCAC 2021). In 2019, France has equally created many environmental initiatives during its chairing of the group G7 and addressed the issue of cooling which has negative effects on environment (CCAC 2021). Moreover, it has highlighted the 2050 target of carbon neutrality during the summit on Future of Europe in 2019 (Wright & Labastie 2022). Furthermore, French diplomats cooperated actively with the Commission to establish the proposal on Green Deal and "FF 55" before it was launched (Trachtová et al. 2022). One of possible explications of the endeavor of France to prioritize environmental issues might be the fact that it wants to be the leader of the EU in all policies, including the environmental one and to serve as an example for other member states. We found that this ambition was remarkable during their presidency. Moreover, France wants the EU to be "*strategically autonomous*" and sovereign vis-à-vis the rest of the world (Barré 2023). In our analytical part, we have observed that the motive of sovereignty permeated through the motto of the presidency: *Recovery, Strength, and a Sense of Belonging* and the aim to have a more sovereign Europe was one of the main priorities of the presidency. Hence, the French presidency was characterized by the goal to have a sovereign Europe in many areas including the ecological transition.

We will now come back to our hypothesis, which suggests that countries which emphasize environmental issues (we have demonstrated that this is the case of France), will

accentuate leader role. We have seen that the environment was high on the French agenda since the start of their term. Although the climate change mitigation was not explicitly stated in the list of main priorities of France, the president Macron explained that the French long-term goal of economic growth enhances the ecologic ambitions of the country. He has also stressed that France will try to negotiate the proposals on the environment as quickly as possible (Moussu 2021). Indeed, France has focused on actively promoting the EU environmental agenda during its presidency; mainly the “Fit for 55” package, regulation on deforestation, batteries and POPs. This ambition was accentuated during the second half of their term culminating with the last Council meeting where the general approach was found after difficult negotiations among member states on all environmental files of “FF 55” package. However, we discovered that during the first half of its presidency before the presidential elections, the country was a bit more cautious than after. The environmental representatives have acknowledged that Council was sometimes paralyzed as France has slowed down the legislative process of some files because of their interests and did not give compromise text until elections. To illustrate, they were reluctant vis-a-vis ETS BRT mechanism at the beginning of their term since they feared the impacts of the system on households since energy prices would significantly rise. Yet, attaches assumed that despite this cautious start of their presidency, the ambitions of France to promote long-term EU objectives in environmental field were remarkable since the beginning of their term and they compensated the time they might have lost. Hence, we have found in analytical part that France has prioritized the leader role during their term which is in line with the theoretical assumptions.

Concerning the Czech Republic, we can observe a different attitude on environmental issues. The country, since its accession to the EU in 2004, has been blocking several proposals concerning environmental issues (SGI 2019). For its previous government led by Prime Minister Babiš from the “ANO” party, although finally supporting decarbonization until 2050 at COP26 in Glasgow, the mitigation of environmental problems including the Green Deal was not a priority. The ex-Minister wanted to suspend the proposal on 2035 prohibition of combusting engines (SGI 2019). Moreover, the Czech diplomats were clearly less engaged than French during discussions in Brussels with the Commission before the initiation of Green Deal and “Fit For 55” package (Trachtová et al. 2022). Moreover, during the previous government, many people connected closely to the Prime Minister and its company Agrofert, started to work at the Ministry for Environment (Pšenička 2021). Despite committing in 2018 to focus on the environmental policy, associations composed by Czech environmental NGOs assessed in 2021

that the previous government did not make progress in any of the laid-out aspects (Štěpán 2021). The president of the country Miloš Zeman, who held the post during the whole presidency, stated many times publicly that it might be necessary to retire from the Green Deal including the “Fit For 55” package. (Trachtová et al. 2022). Moreover, during the Czech presidency he openly assumed that he would like that the Czech Republic uses coal more due to energy crisis (ČTK 2022). As regards the current coalition government of right-wing centrist parties and pirates, there are also many political representatives reluctant to the EU effort to establish ambitious measures to tackle climate change. However, there is at least a little shift in the attitude since the current prime Minister Petr Fiala has emphasized since the beginning of his function the environmental issues more than his predecessors (Bartoniček 2019). However, the Ministry of Environment has not undergone any structural changes which would increase its power. To clarify, there is a disbalance of powers between the ministries, especially if we compare it to the Ministry for Industry and Transport. The last has stronger influence than the Ministry for Environment on key issues of the government. This was indeed manifested during the Czech presidency as the Ministry for Environment had to coordinate sensitive problems for the Czech government with this Ministry.

We will now return to our hypotheses. The theory says that the country which gives less importance to environmental problems (which we assume is the Czech Republic), will accentuate less the leader role than the country for which these issues are crucial. In our analytical part, we have seen that at the beginning of its presidency, the Czech Republic indicated that the “Fit for 55” package represents the groundwork for decarbonization, yet it will focus primarily on the short term-goal, due to the special circumstances, which is the removing the EU’s dependence on fossil fuels imported from Russia (Programme of the Czech Presidency 2022). Indeed, it seemed that the environment is not so important for the country as it rather prioritized other fields such as the energy security. Environmental representatives stated that there might have been some questions of ambitions of the country concerning the climate files at the start of its presidency. It was not immediately visible if the presidency’s ambition consists of finalising all the files of the package by the end of the year or only parts of it as the Minister of Environment stated herself. Hence, concerning the content of the agenda, the country was lacking during the summer the active push to promote long-term EU environmental goals. Rather, the presidency has focused on emphasizing its own initiatives such as the light pollution, restoration of landscape after the war in Ukraine or the local problem of the bark-beetle. We can see a correlation with the theory as the country might have wanted

to rather steer the direction of discussions somewhere else to hide their lack of activity in promoting the EU environmental goals. Yet, during the second half of their presidency (since autumn), the country has demonstrated a real ambition to finalise the whole package until the end of their term. The pressure of other institutions (Commission and EP) to have some concluded files for COP27 played a role in this increased leadership of the presidency.

To conclude, we have seen that this factor is quite complex, and the hypothesis can be confirmed only partly. Concerning France, the country which gives more importance to environmental issues domestically and internationally than the Czech Republic, it has promoted the EU long-term environmental goals during its presidency as the theory suggests. Despite a bit cautious start of their presidency, their ambitions to advance EU environmental agenda were present since the beginning. Their active leadership was materialized the most during their second half of their term after presidential elections and culminated by the last ENVI Council meeting. In the case of the Czech Republic, which generally prioritizes other areas than the environment (such as energy and industry), the theoretical assumptions about its behavior intersect with our observation only during the first half of its presidency. Indeed, at the beginning of its term, the Czech Ministry for Environment did not show enough endeavor to advance actively in the environmental files such as the “Fit for 55” package. It rather tried to steer the discussions somewhere else and instead, it has accentuated its initiatives as we have expected. However, the theory is not in line with the findings concerning the second half of their term as since October, the country demonstrated a real ambition to finalize all the files in the package until the end of the year. Hence, the Czech Republic contrarily of the theoretical expectations, played actively the leadership role during its second half of the presidency. Finally, we cannot completely confirm the hypothesis as we have studied. Although France might have addressed the EU environmental goals a bit more loudly than the Czech presidency, the last has shown equally to be an active political leader in environmental policy.

#### 4.3. Presidential Elections

We will now examine the potential impact of the presidential elections which took place during the French term on the state’s role prioritization. France has experienced presidential elections after the first half of their term; the first round on 10 and the second on 24 April 2022. Priorities of the French presidency were ambitious in environmental field as well as initiatives of the presidency as we have seen in previous part. We have found that after Macron’s re-election, ambition of France to put forward long-term EU goals in environmental policy and reach an

agreement within Council grew steadily. Attaches acknowledged that there was a visible shift in attitude and speed of discussing proposals after the French elections. A Dutch attaché has assumed that *“to get an agreement sometimes you need a political momentum such as elections to push something forward and to use the political level or at least the ambassador a bit more to drive the discussions forward. Otherwise, you get locked in technicalities”* (NL 2022). France has equally exercised unilateral and coercive tactic as it strongly pushed their political will because French diplomats had to make sure that political goals are met. The context of having a newly re-elected president who aimed to strengthen its position at the domestic level, might have had an impact on strong accentuation of leadership role of the French presidency at the end of their term while approving the Council position on “Fit for 55” package. To explain, president Macron might have wanted, after being re-elected, to get some recognition at domestic ground for its environmental actions to keep authority within the divided French society. Hence, this factor of the prospect of the success in the domestic field might have influenced the fact that Macron intended vehemently to approve the general approach on the package at the end of the French term to get credits for it on domestic level as assumed by the Bulgarian attaché. Moreover, the Slovakian attaché noted that *“even though the outcome of Fit for 55 negotiations wasn’t probably taken into consideration in France between the voters, politically elections were a major reason why the French presidency wanted to have the deal as soon as possible”* (SK 2022). Hence, France put strong emphasis on leadership role mainly after elections as for instance while closing the general approach at the end of their term on “Fit For 55” package. This observation intersects with the theory as it suggested that France will play actively leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions because of the prospect of success in the domestic field (Niemann et al. 2010, p.734).

We have equally observed that before presidential elections in April, despite the French ambitious priorities, it was not clear what it meant in practice and how their goals will be materialized. Dutch attaché claimed that it is very understandable *“because if you phase the possibility of significant change in political leadership, that has precautions for what you will have to be able to do in Brussels as well.”* (NL 2022) Furthermore, we have found that France was cautious with their ambitions and the leadership role was less pronounced in April during the two rounds of elections than after it as it was not clear who will be elected as a president. Hence, the suggestions of scholars that France would play the leader role on important EU challenges such as the climate change by less intensity around the period of elections than after it (Wright et al. 2021) intersects with our findings. Although the active part of French chairing

was reduced due to the elections, France compensated the time it might have lost due to domestic concerns before elections during the last two months of their presidency.

Finally, we have found that France was selecting for which environmental files it will push or conversely which it will rather slow down. The presidency has delayed the development of the file on ETS BRT during the first half of the presidency and did not provide compromise text although member states were waiting for it. We have seen that this behavior of the French government might have been caused by expected reluctance in the society towards this file as it has an impact on households. On the other hand, the French presidency tried to push actively forward the file on CBAM which relates to the environment as it was a very political file for the country and represented one of their main priorities among all fields. Hence, our findings are in line with theory which believed that the presidency would slow down or accelerate some files before elections based on the domestic opinion to have many votes (Rozenberg 2022). The Belgian attaché equally noted that the French presidential elections played an important role in terms of prioritization of files (BE 2022).

To conclude, the finding that the French presidential elections might have contributed to the chairman's prioritization of the leadership role (while taking unilateral and coercive actions) intersects with our hypothesis. The presidency also played the leadership role by less intensity around the period of elections than after it as the theory expected. Finally, the elections played a role in terms of prioritization of files of the presidency as the theory suggested.

#### 4.4. Experiences of Previous Presidencies

##### 4.4.1. First Hypothesis (H4a)

Thirdly, we will test the influence of the factor of experiences from previous presidencies analysed from the sociological perspective on the role prioritization of France and the Czech Republic during their presidencies. Regarding the first hypothesis, in the case of France, it was expected that as the country has experienced already its 13<sup>th</sup> presidency and its senior officials have expertise how to coordinate the presidency, the country will accentuate the manager role (Costa et al. 2003, p.127). However, we have found that although experiencing many presidencies and knowing the functioning of the decision-making process as well as tools available to the presidency, the country (although playing this role) did not put a significant weight to this role and put emphasis rather on the leader role. To explain, despite managing

daily coordination and organizational tasks of the presidency as it is expected by all presidencies, there were some tensions between the capital and its Permanent Representation in Brussels during its presidency. As France led the presidency from the capital, decisions had to be made in the capital so the diplomats at the French Permanent representation in Brussels had much less options to decide things. The coordination was sometimes complicated as the French environmental diplomats could not be so responsive because they had to wait for the approval from Paris to get documents for meeting. In effect, the green light from Paris was necessary to move things forward or to change something. Environmental diplomats have also observed that France apparently lacked experts in Brussels dealing with the environmental field compared to the size of duties they had to manage. Moreover, it was inconvenient for attachés that the country did not translate working documents into English and provided member states with only French versions which has slowed down the process. Thus, the theory in this aspect does not intersect with the findings in the analytical part since France, despite playing the manager role it, did not attach a particular weight to this role.

Secondly, concerning countries having experienced none or only a few presidencies, in our analytical part, we have learned that the Czech Republic (having experienced its 2<sup>nd</sup> presidency) played intensively the mediator role as it tried to communicate with all member states to know their demands and did not strongly promote its national interests in politically sensitive issues for member states. When negotiating provisional agreements with the Parliament during the trilogue phase, the presidency tried to know the position of member states to know how far it can go in negotiating with this institution. Hence, it also accentuated the informal communication with member states which is crucial for this role. Representatives acknowledged that they knew what is going on during the trilogues since the Czech presidency had a sincere approach towards the member states. The personal connections of Czech diplomats as well as the trust created by them were crucial for the mediator role. Therefore, our observations met the theory which suggested that states with experience of none or a few presidencies will play intensively due to their reputational concerns the role of mediator and cooperate more with member states since they try to impress other countries. Thus, the Czech Republic might have played actively the mediator role as it wanted to ameliorate its overall reputation in the EU as it is often seen by other countries as a state with high Eurosceptic tendencies similarly as other recent EU joiners from Central and Eastern Europe.

Concerning the leadership role, we have detected that the Czech presidency played the

manager role actively and was engaged in daily managerial tasks of the presidency. The presidency cooperated actively with the GSC and other institution such as the EP and Commission. Moreover, the coordination of the presidency went smoothly as the Czech environmental diplomats based temporarily in Brussels did not have to wait for the capital to give them approval to make decisions (except for the most sensitive ones). However, it is important to state that the emphasis on manager role was not to the detriment of reducing the leader role contrarily to the theory which suggested that the presidencies with only few experiences might undermine the leadership role as they are expected to lack innovative visions and ambitions in moving the EU objectives forward and promoting innovative ideas and focus rather on managerial daily tasks of the presidency (Tiilikainen, 2003, p.111). To clarify, we have found in previous chapter that although lacking some ambitions to advance EU agenda in environmental filed at the beginning of their term, the Czech Republic has proven to be an active leader mostly during the second half of their term as they have finalised many environmental files, mainly the environmental files from the “Fit For 55” package and concluded the new regulation on batteries and waste batteries.

Finally, concerning the countries that have experienced only few presidencies, the theory intersects with our findings only in the case of the active playing of the mediator and manager role of the Czech Republic. Yet, we did not detect in our analytical part understating of the leadership role of the Czech Republic as indicated by the theory since the country emphasized the leadership role as well (mostly during the second half of the presidency) by putting forward long-term EU goals of the EU by closing all environmental files from the “Fit For 55” package during their term. As regards the states that have experienced already many presidencies, the previous observations of France are not in line with the theory as although playing the manager role, the country did not select to attach an important weight to the manager role as expected by the theory. Hence, the hypothesis cannot be confirmed for these two presidencies.

#### 4.4.2. Second Hypothesis (H4b)

Scholars have argued that states that have already experienced presidencies might prioritize same roles as during their precedent presidencies as they might reproduce their constructed stereotypes over time. The scholars suggest that France often leaves during its Council presidencies some unresolved issues for following presidencies (Elgström & Tallberg,

2003, p.200) In our analytical part, we have found that France, in the environmental policy, negotiated the general approach during the last Council for Environment on all climate files of the “Fit For 55” package. We have observed that to obtain the general approach was a key target for the country during its presidency. As we have studied the independent variable of the French presidential elections above, this strong endeavour to approve the Council position on the package might have been caused by the fact that the re-elected president Macron was searching for some credits for his actions to have success at domestic field and re-build its authority within the divided French society. Hence, as France negotiated the general approach on all environmental files of the package which was not expected by other states since they had very diverse views on the files, some important issues were left for the following Czech presidency to deal with it. Thus, we can see that the theory intersects with our finding in this aspect since France negotiated the agreement to have some credits at the end of their presidency but did not resolve major discrepancies between member states which were left for the following Czech presidency.

Furthermore, France has a reputation gained from the previous presidencies of being arrogant, not taking requirements of some countries into account and promoting its national objectives while at the same time promoting the EU environmental agenda and having innovative ideas (Elgström & Tallberg, 2003, p.200). In effect, we have previously observed that during its recent presidency, France prioritized the leadership role while undertaking coercive and unilateral strategy. A Danish diplomat assumed that “*France wanted to run the work by their own way as they are used to it*“(DK 2022). The state did not listen and communicate with all states, excluding often the small ones and preferring to communicate mainly with Germany. Additionally, we have seen that the country promoted its national interests strongly in environmental policy, which was manifested mainly after the presidential elections in April. It also behaved sometimes in “pushy” manner, imposing its objectives to member states, and not offering alternative compromises. Yet, despite their quite arrogant manner, we have equally observed that France demonstrated a real ambition to advance the long-term EU goals in the environmental policy forward which was manifested mainly during its second half of the term culminating by the Council for Environment in June as we have previously described. It has equally realized several initiatives in environmental field during its presidency. Thus, the theory meets our observations in this aspect since France behaved as during its previous presidencies like an arrogant leader who, despite his unilateral behaviour, is active in promoting the EU environmental goals.

As regards the Czech Republic, it has experienced only one presidency before. Its first presidency in 2009 was characterized, in environmental policy, by undermining the need of environmental problems mitigation since the country rather prioritized the economic and energetic area during its first presidency (Kaniok 2014, p. 223). In our analytical part, we found that during the beginning of its recent presidency, its ambition to promote EU environmental goals was ambiguous. The Czech Republic did not emphasize the need to tackle environmental problems in its presidency programme either. It stated in its programme that it will concentrate rather on the short-term goals such as the energy security and the aim to cease dependence on Russian gas and oil rather than on the long-term goal of promoting climate goals (Programme of the Czech Presidency 2022). In effect, the country has faced criticism of some EU actors such as environmental NGOs and several MEPs that it has prioritized the energy security over the climate change mitigation and transition to sustainable energies. Yet, since autumn, the country manifested a real endeavour to finalise environmental files which were in the triilogue phase. We have observed from the interviews with environmental representatives that the pressure from Commission and EP might have played an important role in this regard as these institutions wanted to have some files concluded before the COP27 in Egypt to serve as the EU as an example for the rest of the world of being a leader in mitigation of consequences of climate change and environmental issues. The ambition of the country to advance the files was materialized since the country closed all these files regardless the expectations of other states and EU institutions. The Czech presidency was indeed several times assessed by EU actors that it was very active in pushing the legislation forward. Thus, we observe that the theoretical assumptions were not in line with our findings since during its recent presidency, the country played actively the leadership role in environmental field (except for the beginning of its term) contrary to its first presidency in 2009.

To conclude, we cannot confirm this hypothesis since it is only partly in line with our observations. For France, the theory meets the findings since the state behaved similarly to its precedent presidencies, embracing the stereotype of highlighting the leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive strategies in environmental field and at the same time advancing the EU agenda in environmental field. Moreover, it has repeated its rooted behaviour of not resolving some issues and forwarding them to the following presidency. On the other hand, in the case of the Czech Republic, the theory does not intersect with the observations. To explain, although the state deemphasized the mitigation of climate change at the expense of highlighting energy area as during its first presidency, it demonstrated a real ambition to

promote EU environmental goals and played actively the leadership role (except for the beginning) unlikely its first presidency.

#### 4.5. Conclusion of the Second Analytical Part

We have studied our 4 independent variables derived from rationalist and sociological perspective and tested 5 hypotheses (2 hypotheses for the factor of experiences of previous presidencies from the sociological approach). We will firstly summarize for which factors the hypotheses were confirmed. We have found that the theory intersects with our observations from the first analytical part in the case of the factor of presidential elections and power from the rationalist approach. With reference to the factor of power, the hypothesis can be confirmed. We found that France as a big state, although playing all chairman roles, did prioritize the leadership role while undertaking coercive and unilateral action as indicated by the theory. Concerning middle/small-sized states, our observations equally meet the theory since although the Czech Republic played actively the role of political leader by undertaking entrepreneurial tasks during its term, the mediator role was a bit more pronounced than the leadership as the theory expected. Concerning the presidential elections, the hypothesis was confirmed as well since French presidential elections have contributed to its prioritization of the leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive actions as suggested by the theory. The presidency also played the leadership role by less intensity around the period of elections than after it and the elections played a role in terms of prioritization of files as the theory suggested.

For the factor of approach to environmental policy of presidencies, the hypothesis cannot be completely confirmed since it is quite complex. Concerning France as a country which gives more importance to environmental issues domestically and internationally than the Czech Republic, it has promoted the EU long-term environmental goals during its presidency as the theory suggests. Despite a bit cautious start of their presidency, their ambitions to advance EU environmental agenda were present since the beginning. In the case of the Czech Republic, the state which generally prioritizes other areas than the environment (such as energy and industry), the theoretical assumptions about the behavior of state intersect with our observation only during the first half of its presidency as it did not show enough endeavor to advance actively in the environmental files and rather led discussions somewhere else and accentuated its initiatives as we have expected. However, the theory is not in line with the findings concerning the second half of their term as since October, the country demonstrated a real

ambition to finalize the whole package. Hence, the Czech Republic contrarily of the theoretical expectations, played actively the leadership role during its second half of the presidency. Although France might have addressed the EU environmental goals a bit more loudly than the Czech presidency, the last has shown to be an active political leader in environmental policy.

Concerning the remaining hypotheses from sociological perspective, the hypotheses were not confirmed. We considered two hypotheses on the factor of experiences from previous presidencies. Concerning the first hypotheses, it was not confirmed since the theory intersects only partly with our observations. Although the theory meets our observations in case of the Czech Republic as regards the active playing of mediator and manager role for countries that have experienced only few presidencies, we did not detect in our analytical part any understatement of the leadership role by the Czech Republic as was expected by the theory. Indeed, the country emphasized the leadership role during the second half of the presidency by putting forward long-term EU goals by closing all environmental files from the “Fit For 55” package during their term. In the case of states which have experienced many presidencies, the previous analysis of France is not in line either with the theory because although playing the manager role, the country did not select to attach an important weight to the manager role as expected by the theory. As regards the second hypothesis which assumed that states might prioritize same roles as during their present presidencies since they repeat their rooted stereotypes, it was not confirmed either since it converges only partly with our observations. In the case of France, the theory meets the analysis since the state prioritized the same role as during its precedent presidencies in environmental area; the leadership role while undertaking unilateral and coercive strategies and at the same time advancing the EU agenda in environmental field. Moreover, it has repeated its rooted behaviour of not resolving some issues and forwarding them to the following presidency. However, in the case of the Czech Republic, although the mitigation of climate change like during its first presidency was overshadowed by the focus on energy field at the beginning of its presidency, it played actively unlikely its first presidency the leadership role in environmental area after the summer while promoting EU environmental goals.

Finally, we should mention that we did not include into our analysis the factor of the influence of legislative stage of files negotiated by the presidency because it had only few theoretical grounds. However, polemics on this factor emerged from the interviews with environmental representatives. A Czech diplomat assumed that the prioritization of chairman’s

roles depends also on the legislative stage the files are currently in during the presidency (CZ 2022). She suggested that generally the presidency which has got most of the files (in a specific area, e.g., environment) in the first stage of the legislative cycle (initiation) and prepares the position of the Council, would accentuate manager role since managerial tasks are crucial for this stage. The presidency who is negotiating the general approach (discussion) might tend to prioritize the leadership role since the government of the chairman might aim to promote its national objectives while concluding the Council position on specific files which might be politically sensitive for him (HU 2022, CZ 2023). Finally, when finalising the files during trilogue phase (finalization), the prioritization of mediator role is facilitated since the chairman keeps certain detachment while negotiating with the Parliament, so it does not have to strongly promote its interests (BE 2022). In effect, the suggestions of representatives might be constructive since the “Fit For 55” package which includes several files dealt by the Council for Environment which were key for both presidencies as well as EP and Commission, was in a different stage during the French and the Czech presidencies. The first one negotiated the general approach of the package at the end of its term and emphasize the leader role while the Czech Republic was finalizing the package and accentuated mediator role as expected by environmental diplomats.

## Conclusion

The diploma thesis focused on the role prioritization of the chairman in the Council by comparing the behaviour of the recent French and Czech presidencies in the field of environment policy. Based on specific activities connected to each role of presidency (political leader, mediator, manager and representant), we have analysed these roles and by which *way* the presidencies played them. We have studied the prioritization of the roles of manager, mediator and leader in environmental policy based on the attached weight to these roles by the presidencies. In the second analytical part, the thesis investigated the influence of different factors (independent variables) derived from the rationalist approach (the power of the country, the approach to environmental policy, French presidential elections) and sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies) on the role prioritization of presidencies (dependant variable). Finally, we tested whether our findings about the role prioritization of the French and Czech presidencies intersects with theoretical assumptions and whether we can confirm our hypotheses.

As regards the role prioritization of the manager, political leader, and mediator role, we can summarize that both countries have played each of these chairman roles during their presidencies in environmental policy. However, the relative weight attached to these roles varied among presidencies as well as *the way* by which they played them. The Czech Republic has played very actively the mediation role during its whole mandate. Despite the ambiguity of its environmental ambitions at the beginning of its presidency, it has during the second half of its term equally chosen to accentuate leadership role by aiming to finalise the whole “Fit for 55” package by the end of their term and promoting new initiatives in environmental policy. The presidency equally put emphasis on the manager role and engaged actively in daily coordination tasks of the presidency. Nevertheless, based on the interviews, we found that the country played the mediation role with slightly more relative intensity than the leadership role since despite the country’s ambitions in the environmental field during the second half of their term, at the beginning of their presidency their objectives were ambiguous as well as the ambitions to promote actively environmental EU goals. As regards France, we have discovered that it has prioritized the leadership role during their term in the Environmental configuration of the Council. The leadership role prioritization was especially observable during the second part of their presidency since they demonstrated a real ambition to negotiate general approach on concerned files. They have equally chosen to play to a certain degree the role of mediator,

however the emphasis on the role was reduced especially by the end of their term. The role of manager was exercised as well, yet with less weight attached to the role as there were some tensions between Paris and Permanent Representation of France which has slowed down the coordination process. Thus, we can assume that the Czech presidency emphasized more the mediator and manager role than France during its presidency. Concerning the leadership role, environmental attaches acknowledged that France was a bit louder in promoting EU environmental goals than the Czech Republic. The last, although being an active leader especially during its second half of the term, was more careful about how it manages expectations of member states, and it was not clear at the start whether they aim to finalise all the files of the package by the end of the year or only parts of it.

The presidencies have also differed in the *way* by which they have selected to play the presidency roles. In case of leader role, France has chosen to conduct it by undertaking unilateral and coercive actions as they strongly promoted their political objectives and put pressure on members states to realize their national interests. On the other hand, the Czech Republic played the leadership role by manifesting entrepreneurial activities rather than unilateral actions. In effect, the presidency concentrated more on promoting new initiatives in environmental policy such as the light pollution and restauration of Ukrainian landscape instead of leading by imposing its perception of issues to other states. The presidencies have equally taken a different approach in playing the manager role. France has chosen to chair the environmental working parties or Coreper meetings in more traditional way, highlighting the formal tasks of the presidency and focusing on the structure of negotiations. Contrarily, the Czech Republic has chaired the meetings in more informal way, putting emphasis on personal connections within environmental working parties and the informal communication.

In our thesis, we have equally analysed and identified factors from rationalist (the power of the country, the approach to environmental policy, French presidential elections) and sociological approach (experiences from previous presidencies) that might have an impact on role prioritization of France and the Czech Republic and tested five hypotheses which suggested prioritization of a specific role depending on these factors. In the case of France, the theory on all factors from the rationalist approach intersected with our observations from the first analytical part. As regards the factor of power, we found that the country was conducting unilateral actions (not always listening to all member states and omitting interests of smaller member states) as well since it might have benefited from its power position and size as theory

suggests. Concerning the French presidential elections, the manner of France playing the leadership role equally matches with the theory since it might have strongly pushed its political will and undertake coercive and unilateral actions which was manifested most remarkably at the end while negotiating general approach on the package. With reference to the approach to environmental policy of France, being assessed as a country which gives more importance to environmental issues domestically and internationally than the Czech Republic, the country has promoted the EU long-term environmental goals during its presidency as the theory suggests. Concerning the factor of experiences from previous presidencies from the sociological approach, the theory converged with our findings only in case of the second hypothesis (H4b) since France behaved as during its previous presidencies like an arrogant leader, who despite his unilateral behaviour, is active in promoting the EU environmental goals. As regards the first hypothesis on experiences from previous presidencies (H4a), it did not match with our observation since France did not prioritize the manager role as was suggested by the theory.

In the case of the Czech Republic, we have discovered that the theories on the factor of power intersects with our findings since although the presidency played the leadership by undertaking entrepreneurial tasks during its presidency while promoting environmental initiatives (as it did not promote its interests so forcefully as big states because of the lack of resources), the mediation role was overall a bit more pronounced than the leadership during their presidency since during the first half of the presidency, the ambitions of promoting environmental goals were a bit ambiguous. In case of the approach to the environmental policy, our expectations converged only with the behaviour of the Czech Republic during the first half of their term. However, theory was not in line with the findings concerning the second half of their term as since October, the country demonstrated a real ambition to finalize the whole package by the end of the year. Hence, the Czech Republic contrarily of the theoretical expectations, played actively the leadership role during its second half of the presidency. With reference to the factor of previous presidencies, for the first hypotheses (H4a), the theory intersects with our findings only in the case of the active playing of the mediator and manager role of the Czech Republic. Yet, we did not detect in our analytical part understating of the leadership role of the Czech Republic as indicated by the theory since the country emphasized the leadership role as well (mostly during the second half of the presidency) by putting forward long-term EU goals of the EU by closing all environmental files from the “Fit For 55” package during their term. Concerning the second hypothesis on this factor (H4b), theoretical assumptions were not in line with our findings since during its recent presidency, the country

played actively the leadership role in environmental field (except for the beginning of its term) contrary to its precedent presidency in 2009.

We will now briefly elaborate on difficulties met during our research concerning the empirical data. Despite our endeavor to conduct interviews with more environmental representatives or officials from GSC who all were contacted by the author, it was not possible to meet them due to the problem of their availability. Nevertheless, we conducted several productive interviews with environmental attachés from different member states (Netherlands, Estonia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Denmark, Slovakia, Belgium) including the representatives from the Czech and French Permanent Representation which contributed a lot to the analysis of role prioritization. In some cases, such as studying the manager role, it was the only source of data since we did not find any available documents on the process of communication between the capital and Permanent Representation and on the contact of presidencies with the GSC, Commission and EP during the recent French and Czech presidencies. Moreover, we have benefited from a flexible structure of interviews since although not asking representatives on factors which might have influenced the role prioritization of France and the Czech Republic, they have elaborated themselves on possible influence of factors from rationalist approach (size, presidential elections, political and economic weight) which was a useful additional source for our second analytical part. Personal observations of the author from the internship in Brussels during the Czech presidency were a complementary source of information while maintaining the objectivity. Finally, we have seen that we need to study with attention articles published before the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. To explain, the chairman's influential capacity has been diminished in some aspects, which is especially remarkable in the ability of the presidency to set its own political priorities and represent the EU externally.

To conclude, we need to state that the studied factors would have to be examined more in depth and equally other factors would need to be considered to get a complete picture about the influence of different features on role prioritization since we did not study it complexly in our thesis which focused more on the role prioritization itself. Moreover, our thesis could be further enlarged after the end of the Swedish presidency in June 2023 by comparing another trio presidency (e.g., the preceding one-Germany, Portugal, Slovenia) with the trio France-Czech Republic-Sweden to have a larger representation of member states which have quite diverse characteristics.

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## List of Appendices

### Appendix no. 1: Framework for interviews with EU environmental representatives (text)

1. Questions posed personally to seven environmental attaches working at Permanent Representation in Brussels (Hungary, Estonia, Belgium, Slovakia, Netherlands, Denmark, Bulgaria) about the French and Czech presidencies.
  - 1.1. Questions concerning the role of manager
    - 1.1.1. How can you characterize the form of leading working groups for environment and Coreper meetings of both presidencies?
    - 1.1.2. How can you describe the coordination between the capital of presidencies and the Permanent Representation in environmental field?
    - 1.1.3. How was the chosen centre of coordination (Brussels or capital) of the presidencies reflected into the managerial tasks of the presidency in the environmental field?
    - 1.1.4. How would you characterize the ability of the French and Czech presidencies to deal with the daily management tasks of the presidency (scheduling and managing content of meetings, preparing and sending working documents)?
    - 1.1.5. Can you tell something about the cooperation between the presidency and the Commission, European Parliament?
  - 1.2. Questions concerning the political leader role
    - 1.2.1. What would you say about the ambition to promote actively their environmental priorities?
    - 1.2.2. What would you say about the communication of these priorities?
    - 1.2.3. What would you tell about the ability of the French and Czech presidencies to push for the long-term EU goals in environmental policy?
    - 1.2.4. What would you tell about the initiatives in environmental area of the studied countries?
    - 1.2.5. Which main events in environmental field took place during their presidencies?
  - 1.3. Questions concerning the mediator role
    - 1.3.1. What would you say about the ability of the French and Czech presidencies to set compromises among the member states?
    - 1.3.2. Did they try to accommodate objectives of all member states?
    - 1.3.3. In case of the trilogue phase occurring mostly during the Czech presidency; was the presidency trying to stick to the general approach as much as possible?
    - 1.3.4. What would you tell about the ability of the French and Czech presidencies to handle their national interests?
    - 1.3.5. How can you describe the informal communication between the presidencies and member states? How often it took place?
  - 1.4. How can you characterize the international and European context of the French and Czech presidencies?

2. Questions (besides the above-mentioned questions) posed via telephone to the Czech and French environmental attaché working on the presidencies from the Permanent Representation in Brussels.

2.1. Which institutions were the most crucial actors in the coordination of the French and Czech presidencies?

2.2. How can you describe the coordination between the Permanent Representation in Brussels and the capital of the French and Czech presidencies based on the centre of coordination of the presidency (Brussels-based/capital-based)?

2.3. How can you describe the informal communication of the French and Czech presidencies between the presidency and member states?

2.4. What could you tell about the coordination between the presidency and GSC and other EU institutions (EP and Commission)?

2.5. For the two questions above: How often the cooperation took place? By which form was it held? Did you encounter any difficulties during this cooperation?

2.6. How can you describe the communication during the preparation of trio programme between the members of the trio (France, the Czech Republic, Sweden)? And how you can describe their cooperation during the trio presidency?