

Priorities and challenges of the Czech presidency of the EU, an interview with Ondřej Ditrych



Ondřej Ditrych has been the Director of the Prague Institute of International Relations since 2018. He studied international relations at the University of Cambridge (MPhil.) and the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University (Ph.D.), where is now Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations. His professional interests include terrorism and revolutionary violence in global politics, NATO and European security, ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Soviet space and global trends and their predictions.

What security policy issues do you expect the Czech government to prioritise during its EU presidency term?

Russia's war on Ukraine and its impact on the European security order are now clearly at the centre of the Czech government's attention. The Czech Republic has been one of the leading member states in terms of military support to Kyiv. What the presidency can actually achieve will depend on timing. In particular, a stalemate following the expected Ukrainian counteroffensive could pave the way for real diplomatic engagement in the coming months, although this seems unlikely. No doubt, the presidency will seek to resist as much as possible the growing war fatigue in the EU and the related calls for enforcing a settlement from outside. It will also push ahead with the reconstruction plans for Ukraine and lay the groundwork for accession talks. Another priority of the Czech presidency is the strengthening of the EU's defence capabilities. The presidency will in particular work to implement the Strategic Compass, advance defence industry projects and reduce technological dependencies while fully exploiting the potential for EU cooperation with NATO.

How is the Ukraine conflict impacting these priorities?

Significantly. Ukraine is a top priority in its own right, but the repercussions of the conflict are also shaping other priorities. These include the defence capabilities mentioned above, but also energy security, which is crucial as the Kremlin keeps using energy supplies as a weapon to weaken the EU's cohesion. There is also the need to make the EU's economy more resilient, more competitive and less dependent due to the disruptions in global markets and supply chains. At the same time democratic institutions need to become more resilient and adaptive to new pressures, including those from the Moscow. Advancing the digital agenda is key to making the online space a channel of democratic debate and participation rather than a means to erode the foundations of European societies.

How do you assess divisions within the Visegrad Group (V4) regarding relations with Russia?

This is now a key faultline. The Czech government has strongly opposed such moves as the calls by the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban for an immediate ceasefire, or the recent visit to Moscow by his Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó which was at odds with the EU's efforts to cement a united front on gas supplies. What will this lead to? We are unlikely to see a declaration disbanding the V4 grouping. After all, it is not an organisation. But the format is bound to operate in a limited capacity due to internal disagreements. Moreover the brand has become somewhat toxic outside the Group. It may even burn out over time – unless dramatic political changes occur within these countries.

As the leading centre in the Czech Republic on WMD disarmament and non-proliferation, what activities are you conducting on these issues?

In addition to our ongoing research, we organise, together with the Czech foreign ministry and other partners, the annual Czernin Security Forum conference that often addresses these issues. In recent years, the Forum tackled arms control after the INF demise; this fall, during the presidency, we plan to focus on drones and other emerging disruptive technologies and the regulation of their use in armed conflict. We can draw on our disarmament and arms control expertise and also the relatively new research programme on the governance of new technologies. We also regularly convene *ad hoc* expert workshops, most recently on the issue of arms export controls on which we are increasingly focusing. We have also been involved in the EUNPDC internship programme. One of our graduates who took part in the programme will soon publish a paper in a high-ranking academic journal and I'm very glad that we contributed to making this possible and that we participated in the programme.

Russia and the threat of Nuclear Armageddon

In the traditional "grammar" of nuclear deterrence, threats to use nuclear weapons were both implicit and defensive, backed by demonstrations of capability. Russia's invasion of Ukraine reversed this trend in several ways. Drills of Russian strategic deterrent forces were conducted officially to "test [their] readiness" and "train [them] to inflict a guaranteed defeat on the enemy". Poland and Lithuania were identified as targets for short-range Iskander nuclear-capable missile attacks from Kaliningrad, or with Yars intercontinental nuclear missiles. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered "the deterrent forces of the Russian armed forces on special combat alert".

The 2020 Russian nuclear weapons doctrine marked a shift towards first use. Among the four cases justifying resort to the use of nuclear weapons is "[a]ggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy". This is worrying given the lack of definition and the subjective nature of any "existential threat". More dangerously, Russia has accused Ukraine of seeking or having weapons of mass destruction that it could use against Russia, which would justify a nuclear response. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov bluntly said that "Ukraine still has Soviet nuclear technologies and the means of delivery of such weapons". Russia also claimed to have seized documents proving the existence of toxic depots for a chemical attack that would be attributed to Russia. It later accused Ukraine of having planted mines at an industrial site to attack Russian forces. Russia has repeatedly claimed that the US Department of Defense is funding laboratories on Ukrainian soil for the production of pathogens for germ warfare. Of course, none of those accusations are based on evidence, as demonstrated by IAEA, OPCW or UN reports.

Russia's nuclear arsenal, which totals 5,977 nuclear weapons, includes 1,912 non-strategic warheads, with a shorter range and lower destructive power. Although they seem to remain undeployed, tactical weapons pose additional risks since they are under the delegated physical control of the general staff who could launch a missile even without the president's green light. This increases the risks of miscalculation, misinterpretation or reckless initiatives. State or non-state actors could penetrate command-and-control sites or satellites on which these weapons depend, causing unauthorised nuclear launches. This is a compelling reason to regard the reduction of the nuclear risk and the elimination of nuclear weapons as an urgent priority for the international community.

Marc Finaud
Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)



Funded by
the European Union

Latest Publications

Examining 'Gender-Sensitive' Approaches to Nuclear Weapons Policy: a Study of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Laura Rose Brown, British American Security Information Council (BASIC), 7 July 2022.

La Boussole stratégique de l'UE répond-elle aux énigmes existentielles de la défense européenne? Federico Santopinto, Group for research and information on peace and security (GRIP), 11 July 2022.

Reflections from 1MSP: There is something new happening in nuclear non-proliferation, Tarja Cronberg, European Leadership Network (ELN), 6 July 2022.

Network Calls

Strategic Analyst Cyber Policy

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) is hiring a Strategic Analyst. The analyst will be working in the field of Cyber Policy and Resilience, Cyber Norms, Cyber Deterrence and Cyber Transparency. The deadline to apply is August 15.

More information: [here](#)

Senior Researcher and Program Director, Arms Transfer Program

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) is hiring a Senior Researcher and Program Director to lead the Arms Transfers program. The initial closing date for applications is 8 August. Applications will be accepted until the position is filled.

More information: [here](#)

EU NEWS

Josep Borrell's visit to Iran paves the way for the resumption of JCPOA negotiations

The visit by the EU High Representative to Iran on 22 June 2022 had one main objective: to break the current escalation dynamic and negotiating stalemate on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Borrell discussed with Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amirabdollahian, the reasons for the stalemate. One of the main results of the visit was the resumption of the talks on the nuclear deal.

The High Representative recalled his decision, as coordinator of the JCPOA talks in Vienna, to pause them in March this year due to fundamental divergences that needed to be discussed bilaterally between Iran and the United States. After three months there is a renewed feeling of urgency. The resumption of the talks opens a significant window of opportunity. The negotiations between Iran and the United States, facilitated by the EU, will focus on outstanding issues. The High Representative emphasised the importance of reaching an agreement on the basis of the text proposed by the EU.

At the same time, the High Representative underlined that the EU had adopted a new approach towards the Persian Gulf region, offering countries a deeper relationship based on a broad agenda that includes global issues – the green and digital transitions – as well as trade and regional security. The High Representative stressed that this new approach required the involvement of Iran.

Josep Borrell also welcomed the gradual deepening of bilateral relations between the EU and Iran. There is enormous potential, he added, in many fields, from trade – including oil and gas – to many other issues. "Nobody can talk about the stability in the Gulf region – he stressed - without taking into account Iran. But for that, again, we need to go back to the full implementation of the JCPOA".

See full document [here](#)

NETWORK NEWS

Réseau Nucléaire et Stratégie - Nouvelle Génération (RNS-NG)

The *Réseau Nucléaire et Stratégie - Nouvelle Génération* (RNS-NG) was created in September 2015. The network is intended for students (Master 2 level, doctoral students, PhDs) and young professionals interested in furthering their education and thinking on military nuclear issues, in particular deterrence and non-proliferation. The Network is administered by the *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique* (FRS) and *l'Institut français des relations internationales* (IFRI), with the support of the French government.

The eighth "session" (October 2022 - September 2023) will include activities such as visits to facilities and sites related to nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation, seminars or conferences, a "summer university" in the Paris region during the summer of 2023, as well as invitations to certain FRS and IFRI activities.

More information: [here](#)

60th Course of ISODARCO on Advancing Technology, Nuclear Weapons Security and International Stability

The 60th ISODARCO course, which will take place on 8-15 January 2023, will address nuclear threats, discuss the nuclear policies of major nuclear powers and examine the impact of new technologies on nuclear security and strategic stability. The main goal of the summer school is to understand the changing technological context of the current nuclear era and explore the implications for the management of the nuclear order and the impending risks to the non-proliferation regime.

More information: [here](#)