

CZECH PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: ENLARGEMENT AS A STRATEGIC DECISION

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Introduction

The EU enlargement policy and the EU's South-Eastern and Eastern neighbourhoods represent some of the most prominent areas in Czech foreign and European policy for the last two decades. In the neighbouring regions, the Czech Republic enjoys a generally positive image, both as an example worth following in terms of political and economic post-communist transition and as a good and honest partner in the countries' own aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. It was expected that these traditional political priorities would be reflected also during Czechia's Presidency of the Council of the EU. The previous Babiš government communicated that the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans will be among the Presidency priorities, the Presidency itself, however, was dramatically affected by the unjustified Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Naturally, all priorities had to be reassessed considering the event and all its dire consequences.

With the world's attention focused on the EU's Eastern border, there was widespread fear in the Western Balkans both about the instability initiated by pro-Russian forces spilling over to the region and about Western Balkans being put aside by the EU. While the French attempts to reassure Western Balkan partners felt only half-hearted, the Czech Republic eventually managed to achieve a well-balanced approach, taking seriously the South-Eastern neighbours' worries and opening an honest exchange at the EU level.

Taking the lead in uneasy times

In the area of enlargement, the Czech Republic inherited an uneasy situation from the preceding French EU Presidency. On one hand, in the context of the ongoing war, the EU Member States were more open-minded about the prospects of

enlargement and the necessity to integrate the neighbouring countries more, resulting most prominently into the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and opening this perspective for Georgia.¹ This was a ground-breaking step, unimaginable just few months before due to the opposition from some EU Member States to open the possibility of EU membership to countries of Eastern Europe. On the other, while the last summit of the French Presidency brought a very positive outcome for Ukraine and Moldova (and partly Georgia), it did not deliver the same for the Western Balkans. First, the countries of the region as well as the Czech Republic waiting to take over the Presidency from France, had been left in a dark for many months regarding the nature of the announced “high-level conference on the Western Balkans” planned under the French Presidency. The ambiguity created uncertainty about whether the EU-Western Balkans Summit, expected to be held annually under the provisions of the Brdo Declaration,² will take place under the leadership of France or Czechia. The eventual meeting on the side of the EU Summit was then heavily criticized by Western Balkan leaders³ and experts and politicians⁴ for falling short of offering any progress to the region while delivering for the Eastern partners. The EU Member States and some EU actors were also divided over the outcome of the meeting with some strongly advocating for granting the long-awaited candidate status also to Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵ The bitter taste among Western Balkan partners after the June Summit threatened to burden mutual relationships during the Czech EU

¹ European Council Conclusions, 23 and 24 June, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

² European Council, *Brdo Declaration*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/52280/brdo-declaration-6-october-2021-en.pdf>.

³ Balkan Leaders Frustrated Over Stalled EU Membership Bids As Bloc Moves To Grant Candidate Status To Ukraine, Moldova, *RFE/RL*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkan-eu-membership-summit-frustration/31912243.html>.

⁴ Summit debrief with Viola Von Cramon: ‘A disastrous signal for the Western Balkans’, *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/summit-debrief-with-viola-von-cramon-a-disastrous-signal-for-the-western-balkans/>.

⁵ Slovenia to Seek EU Candidate Status for Bosnia, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/slovenia-to-seek-eu-candidate-status-for-bosnia/>.

Presidency. The Czech Republic was also put into an uneasy position with regard to North Macedonia's dispute with Bulgaria, blocking the candidate's progress on its EU path. While the so-called "French proposal" at the very start of the Czech term opened the way for the solution of the Bulgarian veto, it also threatened to destabilize North Macedonia and seriously harm its European future.⁶

Progress on enlargement as a highlight of the Czech EU Presidency?

In the area of enlargement policy and especially in relation to the Western Balkans, the Czech EU Presidency can be assessed as generally successful. The Czech Republic managed simultaneously to deliver on several concrete promises toward the Western Balkan partners and to revitalize to some extent the enlargement process as such with the implementation of provisions for accelerated integration outlined in the new enlargement methodology.

Apart from the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and conditionally with North Macedonia at the very beginning of the Presidency, the Czech Republic achieved the granting of the candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina and agreement on visa liberalization for Kosovo. Delivering on the promises to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, two countries lagging behind the rest of the region in European integration, was particularly important for repairing the EU's damaged credibility in the Western Balkans and for the two countries specifically not falling behind the rest of the region entirely. The candidate status for Bosnia and Herzegovina was argued for by some before the June meeting under the French EU Presidency, based on the balanced approach

⁶ A. Esteso Pérez, France's EU proposal for North Macedonia teaches us that nationalism shall prevail, *New Eastern Europe*, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2022/08/22/frances-eu-proposal-for-north-macedonia-teaches-us-that-nationalism-shall-prevail/>.

to both the EU's Eastern and South-eastern neighbours. The result of the June Summit, granting the status only to Ukraine and Moldova, created a negative and cynical impression in the Western Balkans that if their region is relatively stable and without a real risk of an armed conflict then they are forgotten and left aside by the EU. The hope was renewed in October when the European Commission in its annual report on countries aspiring for EU membership recommended the granting of the candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷ High expectations were then placed on the Czech Presidency which were met at the Summit on 15 December.⁸

The issue of visa liberalization for Kosovo was even more damaging to the EU's credibility and its ability or even willingness to deliver on progress made by the countries of the region. While other countries of the region entered the visa-free regime for stays up to 90 days in 2009 and 2010, Moldova in 2014, and Ukraine and Georgia in 2017, Kosovo was still in the waiting room in 2022.⁹ Furthermore, Kosovo had to fulfil significantly more conditions than the other Western Balkan countries - while all the other five countries had to meet from forty to forty-two requirements for visa liberalization, in the case of Kosovo it was 95 conditions which were formulated also in a more detailed way.¹⁰ The European Commission in its 2018 report further evaluated two additional conditions, the demarcation of the border with Montenegro and an improved track record in the fight against organized crime and corruption, as fulfilled and recommended the European

⁷ European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2022*, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2022_en.

⁸ European Council Conclusions, 15 December 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/60872/2022-12-15-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

⁹ J. Juzová, *The Unfulfilled Promise of Kosovo Visa Liberalization*, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, <https://europeum.org/data/articles/eastern-monitor-juzova-2.pdf>.

¹⁰ Visa Liberalization Roadmaps for Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are available for download at European Stability Initiative website: <https://www.esiweb.org/visa-roadmaps-road-visa-free-travel>. Visa Liberalization with Kosovo Roadmap, available online at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_roadmap.pdf.

Parliament and Council to introduce the visa-free regime for Kosovo.¹¹ The positive decision of the Council of the EU in December was thus not only long-awaited but also crucial for restoring of EU's credibility toward its partners. During the Czech EU Presidency, the country also submitted its application for EU membership¹² – while this cannot be considered entirely an achievement of the Czech Republic, it can suggest that the Czech Presidency was perceived as supportive of Kosovo's EU aspirations.

The Czech Republic also managed to achieve significant progress in the field of gradual and accelerated integration of the countries aspiring for EU membership, both institutionally and sectorally. The Presidency invited the Western Balkan countries' representatives to informal EU ministerial meetings, including them regularly in discussions on issues of shared interest, such as energy, foreign policy or migration. Furthermore, the Czech Presidency continued the annual EU - Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs,¹³ an important high-level platform for coordination between the EU and the Western Balkan partners.

Conclusion: Challenges lying ahead

While the achievements of the Czech Republic's Presidency of the Council of the EU are undeniable, the success of the EU enlargement policy cannot be dependent on one Presidency alone. The main challenge for the enlargement process will be the EU's ability to continue the momentum which was established in 2022, beyond the Czech Presidency. There are still some open issues, like the question of North

¹¹ European Commission, *Visa Liberalisation: Commission confirms Kosovo fulfils all required benchmarks*, online at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-4562_en.htm.

¹² Kosovo formally applies to join EU, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-submits-eu-membership-application-2022-12-15/>.

¹³ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/11/04/joint-press-statement-eu-western-balkans-ministerial-forum-on-justice-and-home-affairs-tirana-3-4-november-2022/>

Macedonia's ability to change the constitution in line with Bulgarian demands or dealing with Kosovo's EU membership application in the forum of EU Member States of which five do not recognize the country's independence. Furthermore, while the granting of the candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina has a high significance as it sends a very positive signal about the EU's interest and commitment to their European future, it does not guarantee further progress in the process and eventual membership.

Despite the formal opening of the first stage of accession negotiations in July, North Macedonia still finds itself in a difficult situation. The agreement with Bulgaria made it possible to launch the initial stage of the opening of accession talks but unlike Albania, which is now able to start the actual negotiations, North Macedonia remains deeply polarized over the sensitive reform which is still required (including Bulgarian minority as one of the constituent nations).¹⁴ While the first Intergovernmental Conference held with both countries in July¹⁵ was undoubtedly a successful start of the Czech Presidency, the EU should still be mindful of the precedent the deal created and aware of the new obstacles it created for North Macedonia down the road. If not handled well, the requirements could result into the country failing to change its constitution in line with the agreement and the opposition DPMO-VMRE, with warm ties to Russia and China, coming back to power. This scenario would reflect the decreased support for the EU due to what is in North Macedonia portrayed by the opposition to the public as dishonest blackmail and create a serious risk of the country derailing from its EU path.

¹⁴ Ursula von der Leyen urges North Macedonia to back French proposal on EU membership, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-urge-macedonia-back-french-proposal-eu-membership/>.

¹⁵ European Commission, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/first-intergovernmental-conferences-albania-and-north-macedonia-kick-start-accession-negotiation-2022-07-19_en.

The Kosovo application also represents a challenge for the upcoming Swedish EU Presidency which will have to deal with the fact that five EU Member States do not recognize Kosovo.¹⁶ The issue of how to deal with a country which aspires for membership in the European Union but is not even recognized as an independent state by some of the EU members has been long avoided. While Kosovo could find a partner and advocate in the Czech Republic, it cannot rely on this support from the upcoming presiding countries – Sweden, Spain (one of the determined non-recognizers) or Belgium.

One issue that the Czech EU Presidency did not manage to solve and which is strongly affecting the future of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is the orientation of Serbia. The country still claims that membership in the European Union is its strategic objective, the actions of the Serbian government in the past decade, however, tell a different story. The continuous deterioration of rule of law and democratic standards in the country and the lack of progress in the Dialog with Kosovo have been seriously damaging Serbia's prospects for EU accession. This year, another issue rose to the forefront – the unsatisfactory track record of alignment of Serbia's foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The country's failure to join the sanctions against Russia sparked a lot of criticism across the EU with some calling for a consequence in the form of freezing Serbia's EU accession process.¹⁷

Last but not least, the continuation of the EU's dialog, closer cooperation and deeper integration with the (potential) candidate countries will be crucial for the enlargement process. The Czech Presidency took some initial steps towards including the partners in discussions about serious issues affecting both the EU

¹⁶ Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, Spain

¹⁷ Socialists and Democrats, *S&Ds: Serbia must make a clear pro-European choice if it wants to continue on the accession path*, <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sds-serbia-must-make-clear-pro-european-choice-if-it-wants-continue-accession-path>.

and its neighbours, however, this practice should be continued and enhanced further. The European Commission should now provide suggestions on areas where closer cooperation is possible and the EU should also discuss how to integrate the countries further institutionally also in the pre-accession stage. The upcoming EU Presidencies of countries which are not traditionally very vocal supporters of EU enlargement or the Western Balkans pose a danger that the steps taken by the Czech Republic will not have any serious follow-up and the efforts will not continue. This scenario would only damage further the EU's wavering credibility and potentially the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan partners.

About the Author

Jana Juzová is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Global Europe Programme at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. She graduated in International Relations from Masaryk University in Brno, and she is currently finishing her Ph.D. studies there. During her studies, she gained experience also at the University of Bologna and the University of Pristina. Her previous working experience involves Central European think tanks and EULEX EU's Rule of Law Mission to Kosovo. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Brussels and ReThink.CEE Fellow in the German Marshall Fund of the United States. In her research, she focuses primarily on the Western Balkans, EU enlargement policy, Europeanization and democratization, as well as Visegrad cooperation and V4-Western Balkans relations.

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