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**Czech EU  
Presidency and the  
Western Balkans:  
The Story of a  
Sidelined Policy**

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# Abstract

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The Czech Republic has taken over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in July 2022. Czech officials had initially proclaimed that a breakthrough in Western Balkans' stalled EU integration process would be a top priority for the Czech Presidency. But after the Russian invasion of Ukraine changed the course of European politics, the announced Western Balkan priority gradually disappeared from the Czech political debate on the Presidency agenda. The chapter documents how the Czech political discourse on the Western Balkans changed during the year preceding the Presidency as a result of domestic and international political turmoil. Based on the comprehensive analysis of their statements, it identifies the key political actors of the Czech EU Presidency and reconstructs their positions on the Western Balkan agenda. The findings show that the governmental actors who are politically driving the course of the Presidency and setting its agenda opted to invest the limited political capital into the strategic issues related to the war in Ukraine while sidelining the Western Balkan agenda. However, the chapter also argues that the Czech EU Presidency cannot afford to avoid the volatile region completely in its agenda because of the anticipated turbulent developments in the Western Balkans. The Czech response to potential regional challenges is expected to be reactive and only pulled by external incentives rather than grounded in any profound political initiative for the region that could accelerate the Western Balkans' stabilization and European integration.

# Introduction

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Czech foreign policy towards the Western Balkans has recently undergone a change as a result of the earth-shattering international developments. Shortly after the change of government following the October 2021 elections, the Czech Republic took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from France in July 2022. The outgoing government declared the Western Balkans and its European integration to be among the top political priorities of the Presidency agenda and the new government initially reaffirmed this commitment. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed the political reality from the ground up. The new Czech government made a strategic decision to catch on to the escalating conflict and has devoted most of its capacities to supporting Ukraine not only in its defence but also on its path to the EU.

At the rhetorical level, the response to Russian aggression and the question of Ukraine's European perspectives quickly overshadowed the Western Balkan agenda in the debates on the political priorities of the Czech EU Presidency. However, past commitments toward the Western Balkans and external calls for active engagement in the volatile region have still resonated in the public debate. The new administration thus found itself in a delicate position. The Czech government needs to cautiously consider where to invest its limited political capital in the foreign policy sphere, and the situation in Ukraine is clearly its primary strategic point of interest. The war and its consequences understandably dominated over other issues including the Western Balkans in the Czech and European political agenda and have a direct impact on the Czech public that must cope with massive refugee flows and energy insecurity. However, the conflict in Ukraine only underlined the geopolitical significance and vulnerability of the Western Balkans.

The Czech government is thus still confronted with the previous political commitments to the Western Balkans that do not lose their geopolitical urgency with the war in Ukraine. From the position of the presiding country, the Czech

Republic inescapably has to deal with the burning regional issues going beyond the stalled process of EU enlargement. Protracted institutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, escalating tensions in Montenegro, and the deadlocked dispute between Kosovo and Serbia might all enter the European agenda during the Czech Presidency. However, it has been unclear whether the new government is truly devoted to engaging in the Western Balkans, and what positions it will take on the challenging regional issues.

From the Western Balkan perspective, expectations from the Czech Presidency are amplified by the fact that the region and the progress in its European integration were previously presented as priority agenda. This agenda-setting has already positioned the Czech Republic into a presumed role of an active player in the region in the upcoming months. In the context of the longstanding deadlock of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, any significant breakthrough in the integration process can hardly be expected within the six-month EU Presidency term. However, the Czech presidency has to get involved in the region as long as it attempts to keep its European perspective on the agenda and meet the expectations that have been already set.

## Research Questions

To address this state of uncertainty, the aim of this paper is to capture and analyse the course of the political debate on the position of the Western Balkan agenda in the priorities of the Czech EU Presidency. The paper comprehensively maps positions of relevant political actors who have defined the agenda of the Czech Presidency, and particularly their changes in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. Based on the recorded standpoints of the key stakeholders, the paper intends to identify possible trajectories of Czech policy towards the region in the upcoming period.

Research questions investigated through the paper are formulated as follows:

- Who are the political actors defining the agenda of the Czech Presidency and what are their positions to the Western Balkan agenda? (descriptive)

- What are the expected approaches the Czech EU Presidency will take towards the Western Balkans? (predictive)

## Methods of Data Collection

Empirically, the paper is grounded in collection of data from a variety of primary and secondary sources. The data collection was based on a continual monitoring of the political debate regarding the role of the Western Balkans in the Czech EU Presidency. The collected data were first used for the identification of relevant stakeholders in the debate, and subsequently for reconstructing their political standpoints to the Western Balkan agenda. In total, the analysis is based on the content of over one hundred relevant sources dating from mid-2021 until mid-2022 and consisting of public statements, press releases, interviews, and other media outputs. The desk research was supplemented with unofficial talks with relevant key informants from the media, the think-tank sphere as well as the state administration. While the author officially asked the key policymakers for interviews to openly discuss the topic of the research, these requests were rejected in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine as the key officials were preoccupied with responding to the crisis and the Western Balkans was disappearing from their agenda. Therefore, the supplementary material to the desk research is limited to off-the-record information gathered from informed interlocutors.

## Theoretical Background and Relevance

Conceptually, the paper departs from and contributes to the ongoing broader scholarly debate about the institutional role of the EU Presidency and its potential for agenda-setting in particular policy areas. While the EU Presidency as a *sui generis* institution has been studied intensely from the perspective of EU institutional structure (Tallberg 2003; Schalk et. al. 2007; Häge 2017; Vazonnyté 2020) as well as in comparative perspective (Drulák and Šabič 2010; Bengtsson, Elgström, and Tallberg 2004; Quaglia and Moxon-Browne 2006),

its potentially active role in the enlargement process has not been covered systematically within the existing literature. However, in the political context of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, the role of EU Presidencies has proved to be an important element within the integration dynamics.

The paper reflects this broader theoretical and empirical context by discussing the formal and informal powers of the EU Presidency as an institution within the politics of EU enlargement. Furthermore, it also overviews the experience of past Presidencies that have declared the Western Balkans EU integration as their priority, with a special emphasis on the last two Presidencies preceding the Czech one, Slovenian (2021) and French (2022), which both also committed to the European perspective of the Western Balkans in their priority agendas. By linking the empirical policy-oriented focus with the broader scholarly debate on the political powers of EU Presidencies, the paper not only directly communicates with the existing state of the art in the literature, but also contributes to it with an exploratory case study of the Czech 2022 EU Presidency.

## **EU Presidencies' Role in the Politics of Enlargement: (In)formal Powers and the Empirical Record**

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### **Informal Power of Agenda-setting**

The rotating presidency of the Council of the EU is a specific institutional mechanism within the complex structure of the EU inter-governmental decision-making. Every six months, one of the 27 member states takes over the presidency of the Council of the EU, which is, together with the European Parliament, the main legislative institution of the EU. In contrast to the Parliament, the Council works on an inter-governmental basis and member states are rep-

resented by their executive officials, commonly ministers of the national government responsible for the specific area (Lewis 2014). The Council Presidency is thus effectively conducted by the government of the presiding country whose ministers, supported by the national bureaucratic apparatus, chair the sessions of various sectoral configurations of the Council (Thomson 2008).

The mechanism of the rotating presidency was introduced back in 1957 within the European Coal and Steel Community and was subsequently incorporated into the emerging EU institutions. Since then, the political incentive of the mechanism has been to provide each of the member states, regardless of their unequal size and power, an opportunity to formally lead the legislative process and counterbalance the supranational power of the Commission (Kollman 2003). Over more than six decades, the powers and political relevance of the Presidency have significantly transformed. As the number of member states grew rapidly from the original six to the current twenty-seven, the Presidency developed from a rather routine formality to an extraordinary political opportunity that each member state is now granted only every thirteen years. Content-wise, the agenda processed in the Council has significantly increased as the European integration deepened and widened. On the other hand, the executive powers of the Presidency were partially reduced with the institutional reform introduced by the Lisbon treaty in 2007. Besides introducing the mechanism of Presidency trios to improve the continuity in agenda-setting, it also established the individual positions of permanent President of the European Council and Representative for foreign policy (Warntjen 2013; Missiroli 2010; Batory and Puetter 2013; Bunse and Klein 2014). The rotating Presidency held by national governments thus lost the exclusivity in the EU external representation (Dinan 2013).

While the Council is considered the most powerful among the three main institutions of the EU (Council, Commission, and Parliament), its Presidency itself has only very limited formalized power in the decision-making process (Schalk. et al. 2007). The role of the presiding country is mainly procedural and rests in the coordination of the Council's legislative process and inter-governmental mediation (Puetter 2014). The presiding country is thus expect-

ed to put aside its own interests and work primarily on seeking the consensus among 27 member states as it “transforms a national actor to a supranational European role” (Raik 2015, 20).

While it is commonly presented and perceived as a high-profile political opportunity for the national governments of member states, the EU Presidency provides the leading country with almost no tools to promote its national interests. However, what makes it a certain opportunity for each member state is the informal power that the country’s government can potentially draw from its privileged position in the influential institution to shape the agenda (Häge 2017; Vaznonytė 2020). The model of the Presidency’s informal influence developed by Tallberg (2003) distinguishes three dimensions of potential agenda-shaping power for the national government: *agenda-setting*, *agenda-structuring*, and *agenda exclusion*. On the other hand, the above-cited authors also agree that the space for informal power in high EU politics through agenda-setting and negotiating from a privileged position is constrained by the institutional settings. The actual influence of the presiding country thus to large extent depends on its long-term negotiating reputation and diplomatic capacities. Member states usually attempt to utilize this limited political opportunity to accent specific issues related to their own national interests in the EU agenda within their Presidencies.

## Historical Record

Since early 2000s, there have been several Presidencies that had the ambition to make a significant footprint in the European integration of the Western Balkans. Those Presidencies based their intended political impact on their long-term focus on the region and engaged in intense agenda-setting and negotiating both on the EU level and with the Western Balkan countries, bringing a varying level of political impact on the enlargement process. While the Western Balkans and its EU integration have been quite a frequent priority area of the EU Presidencies, only a few of them are remembered as truly groundbreaking and making a significant footprint in the currently deadlocked process.

Among those Presidencies that are remembered as bringing a breakthrough for the Western Balkans, the Greek Presidency in 2003 is probably the most notable one. In the shadow of the war in Iraq and anticipated Eastern Enlargement, the Greek Presidency was able to reach a consensus among the fifteen member states on the strategic commitment to the European perspective for Southeast Europe (van Meurs 2003). The declaration delivered as the outcome of the summit with the five countries of the region offered the region a clear perspective of EU integration leading to full membership based on the principle of conditionality (Koktsidis et. al. 2014; Armakolas and Triantafyllou 2017). The Greek Presidency thus succeeded in its agenda by strategically transforming the approach of the EU towards the region and establishing the cornerstone of the enlargement process for upcoming decades.

Much more recently, the Bulgarian (2018) and Croatian (2020) Presidencies were those that also declared substantial ambitions directed toward the Western Balkans' European integration (Simić 2018; Leutloff-Grandits 2019). However, in contrast to the remarkable impact of Athens in 2003, both Sofia and Zagreb were unable to deliver any significant progress within the deadlocked process. Their agenda-setting opportunities were substantially constrained by a combination of international and domestic limits as they faced a lack of political will and agreement on the EU level, but also domestic pressures related to the politically sensitive regional issues (Cipek 2020; Matias 2018).

## **Slovenian 2021 Presidency: Experience of Unfulfilled Ambitions**

The case of the recent 2021 Slovenian presidency under the controversial (former) Prime Minister Janez Janša illustrates the crucial importance of the informal negotiating position and reputation of the presiding state and its government at the EU level. Slovenia took over the EU Presidency in July 2021 after two Presidencies, German and Portuguese, that were preoccupied

with responding to the pandemic and the enlargement agenda remained on the margins of European politics. In line with its long-term geopolitical interests, Slovenia from the early stage of its second EU Presidency publicly proclaimed substantial ambitions regarding the Western Balkans and its EU integration (Kočan and Lovec 2021). However, these ambitions were from the onset limited by the controversial political profile of PM Janša whose government was in charge of the Presidency. Janša, nowadays a political veteran who started his career as a Yugoslav youth dissident in the 1980s, has faced harsh criticism on the EU level for his populist political style and disregard for the freedom of media (Bayer 2021; Vladisavljević 2021). Shortly prior to the start of the Presidency in July 2021, the credibility of the Ljubljana's Western Balkan agenda was disrupted by the affair of the non-paper that proposed partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines and whose authorship was allegedly linked to Janša (Tuhina 2021; Pusić and Biserko 2022).

In line with its program, Slovenian Presidency approached the Western Balkan agenda proactively and organized various political events organized during the six months (Dovžan 2021). This initiative was intended to culminate with the high-level informal summit of EU and Western Balkan leaders in Brdo in October 2021 which was a flagship of the whole Presidency (Rettman 2021). Despite the efforts of the Slovenian hosts, the EU-WB summit failed in setting a timeline for the southeast enlargement and opening of the accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania (Lynch and Vela 2021). While the Slovenian EU Presidency was overall assessed as a success, it did not achieve the intended progress in its priority area of the Western Balkan enlargement, bringing another disillusionment on both sides (Juzová, Ilková, and Pešek 2022). Apparently, the Slovenian agenda-setting capacity was not strong enough to escape the long-term ambiguity of the EU approach maneuvering between the commitment to enlargement and the emphasis on EU capacity to absorb new members.

## **French 2022 Presidency: Western Balkans Overshadowed by the War in Ukraine and Domestic Politics**

The agenda and prospects of the Czech presidency was to a large extent pre-defined by the preceding French presidency which was the first within the trio composed of France, the Czech Republic, and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> As a major European power, France has a long-term strong political role in agenda-setting and policy-making on the EU level, which was recently amplified by holding the Presidency. In regard to the Western Balkans, France has been on one hand generally uninterested in the regional agenda, and on the other was perceived as one of the most vocal opponents of the EU southeast enlargement among member states because of its reluctant position to extend to candidate states progress in the accession talks (Marušić 2019; Hübner et. al. 2022). In 2019, France blocked opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, calling for a comprehensive reform of the enlargement policy (Sandford 2019). To meet the French demands, new enlargement methodology was introduced in 2020, yet failed in delivering any progress in the Western Balkans' accession process, and only deepened the frustration within the region (Stratulat 2021).

Contradictory to its past position, France proclaimed Western Balkans' European perspective as one of the three main priorities in its Presidency program. In December 2021, President Macron announced a new 'strategic initiative' towards the region to 'clarify its European prospects' (Pollet and Moussu 2021). While some experts initially considered the French Presidency as an opportunity to break the stalemate in the enlargement policy, others predicted that it "will do little to advance Balkan EU accession" (Xhambazi 2022; Oxford Analytica 2022).

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1 The 'Trio' mechanism was introduced in 2017 with the institutional reform of the rotating presidency defined by the Lisbon Treaty to enhance the continuity in agenda of the Council (Batory and Puetter 2013). The trio consists of the three subsequent presiding member states who coordinate their presidency programs and agree on long-term priorities exceeding the single presidency terms.

French Presidency's commitment to the enlargement agenda was from the early stage defined in rather vague terms. Ambiguity was apparent in Macron's inaugural speech in the European Parliament in January 2022. While he called for a clear perspective of accession, he also openly stated that the EU is currently not prepared to absorb new members (EWB 2022). Macron's initial vagueness needs to be interpreted in light of the French presidential elections that were set to be held in April 2022, and which inevitably shaped Macron's political course on the EU level, particularly in regard to foreign policy issues that are potentially sensitive to the French electorate. After he was successfully re-elected, Macron had some more room to maneuver domestically during the final stage of the French Presidency to bring a more ambitious agenda to the table. However, he still had to cautiously consider the Parliamentary elections in mid-June when he unsuccessfully sought broad support for his new government (Basso 2022). Most importantly, the Russian aggression against Ukraine dominated both the agenda of the French EU Presidency and the election campaign in France. It became clear that the last months of the French Presidency would be fully dominated by the urgent political agenda related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences on the EU level.

French Presidency only turned attention to the Western Balkan agenda occasionally and rather inconsistently towards the end of its term. In early May, Macron provoked confusion with his vague proposal for formation of a 'European political community', without explaining what the formal role of such platform would be and whether it would be complementary with the existing enlargement policy (Ivković 2022). Confusion was followed by frustration among Western Balkan leaders after the high-level meeting organized alongside the European Council session in Paris in late June. Western Balkan states' hopes for a breakthrough in their integration process fueled by enlargement enthusiasm towards Ukraine remained unfulfilled and some of the regional politicians used unusually critical tone in their statements directed to the EU (Marušić 2022b). Finally, France proposed a controversial negotiating framework for settling the deadlocked dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the last days of its presidency, which caused politi-

cal turmoil in Skopje (Bieber and Dimitrov 2022). Overall, the footprint of the French presidency in the Western Balkans' EU integration will be probably characterized by unfulfilled expectations and unconcern in light of the war in Ukraine.

This brief historical record shows that, despite their limited formalized powers, EU presidencies can play an active role in the politics of enlargement through active agenda-setting and mediation. However, the legacy of the Slovenian presidency and the course of the recent French presidency show that this potential is limited in sensitive issues with a lack of consensus among the member states and under political circumstances dominated by other major geopolitical developments.

## Post-Yugoslav Space in the Post-1990 Czech Foreign Policy: An Elusive Priority?

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After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent dissolution of the Czechoslovak federation in 1992, the newly established Czech Republic faced the major challenge of formulating its new independent foreign policy from scratch (Cabada and Waisová 2011; Kříž, Chovančík, and Krpec 2021). Even though the Czech Republic is a small landlocked state located in the geopolitically fragile Central European space, the new political elite that arose from the 1989 Velvet revolution opted for an ambitious foreign policy agenda. The newly articulated foreign policy premises reached far beyond the country's direct neighborhood and were grounded in both normative and strategic considerations (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021). Besides the vital strategic and security interests of Euro-Atlantic integration and good relations with direct neighbors, the Czech Republic has also in the long run intended to be actively involved in more distant regions, particularly those going through their own transformative processes,

with the ambition to support democratization. One of such areas of declared special attention of Czech foreign policy has been the region of Southeast Europe. As an area that went through a turbulent conflict period in the 1990s and opted for European integration in the post-2000 decades, the region has attracted, at least rhetorically, permanent attention within the Czech foreign policy agenda.

The geopolitical space of former Yugoslavia, more recently labeled as the Western Balkans, has been an area of ambitious, but mostly unfulfilled interests and goals of the evolving Czech foreign policy over the last three decades. The Czech Republic has been repeatedly declaring its ambitions to take over an active role in the stabilization of the Southeast European space. In line with the general Czech foreign policy principles, the interest was motivated both by strategic and normative considerations (Hronešová 2015). Strategically, the Czech Republic perceived the region as a latent source of instability that could potentially spill into its own neighborhood and threaten the security of the European space. Normatively, the special interest in Southeast Europe was based on a combination of perception of historical ties with the South Slavic nations and a newly formulated universal emphasis on democracy promotion and development assistance (Tulmets 2014).

Through the 1990s, this emerging policy was mainly manifested in the active Czech involvement in conflict resolution attempts across the region, where Czech mediators and peacekeepers participated in stabilization efforts in all ethnic conflicts from Croatia to Macedonia. However, the potential created by the extensive presence on the ground during the unstable war period was not fully translated into political presence in the post-2000 era when conflict resolution was replaced by European integration as the driving stabilizing strategy for the region (Tesař 2010; Tesař 2013). Based on its own experience of political and economic transition, the Czech Republic had the ambition to assist the region on its path to the EU (Hronešová 2015). However, while the Czech political representation declaratory held stabilization of the Western Balkans and support of its European perspective high on its foreign policy agenda, its actual impact on regional processes has remained very limited.

At a declaratory level, European integration of the Western Balkans has been a constant priority of Czech foreign policy over the last two decades. An explicit commitment to the progress of the South-eastern enlargement was reaffirmed in program declarations of almost all Czech governments after 2004 when the country itself joined the EU. Czech diplomacy has been supportive of the European ambitions of the Western Balkan states both bilaterally and through multilateral channels including the Visegrad Group (Euractiv 2021; Visegrad Group 2019). None of the governments had, however, made a significant footprint in the process. Czech policymakers have been largely reluctant in taking clear positions over the problematic issues of the region that mostly remained on the margins of their agenda as it lacked political relevance on the domestic scene (Tesař 2010; Dopita, Heler, and Tamchynová 2017). The political elite never truly considered the Western Balkans as a top priority of the foreign policy that has been dominated by more crucial issues related to the country's geopolitical orientation within the Euro-Atlantic space and its relations with Russia (Šabič and Freyberg-Inan 2012).

In the atmosphere of general lack of political interest in the Western Balkan region, there has been one issue that has constantly attracted the attention of Czech officials and repeatedly caused domestic polarization: the question of Kosovo statehood. The 'Kosovo issue' since the 1990s developed into a symbolical matter in which different political actors and approaches repeatedly clashed over the country's international position. In landmark moments of the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, the Czech political scene and the broader public reacted to the issue generally divided into two different approaches, one supporting the Western engagement and later Kosovo independence, and the other one insisting on a diplomatic solution and advocating the Serbian position. The domestic clash first culminated during the 1999 NATO intervention when the interventionist approach represented by president Václav Havel prevailed over a restrained position held by then Prime Minister Miloš Zeman and leader of the opposition Václav Klaus (Znoj 1999). Political rift reemerged with Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 which revived the division rooted in the political clash from 1999. Again, the disagreement was most manifested in the opposite opinions of the President and some

parliamentary forces, yet with intermingled roles as Václav Klaus now held the position of the president while the pro-Kosovo position was advocated by the government (Dopita 2020). Through the post-independence period, the polarizing potential of the Kosovo issue persisted and mainly reappeared in domestic politics because of the offensive pro-Serbian agenda articulated by Miloš Zeman, who replaced Klaus in the presidential function in 2013. Zeman repeatedly expressed openly pro-Serbian statements that were in direct contradiction with the official government's policy of Kosovo recognition, causing political and institutional tension between his office and the executive (Sejdija 2019; Kundra 2019).

Overall, the polarized domestic debate on Kosovo recognition had long-term consequences for the internal consistency of Czech foreign policy towards the Western Balkans and its international credibility. Domestically, it deepened the political divisions over Kosovo's statehood. As Tesař (2010, 234) pointed out, the debate brought into conflict the government and president, government and parliament, government and opposition, and even the governmental parties themselves. Externally, it reaffirmed the ambiguity of the Czech policy towards the region that has been widely perceived in terms of an internal dispute over the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, thus putting the whole Western Balkan priority of Czech foreign policy into question.

## Political Actors of the Czech EU Presidency

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Czech foreign policy has been in the long term characterized by inconsistency resulting from double-tracking between multiple institutional actors. In particular, Czech governments and presidents have followed diverging positions defined by different geopolitical and ideological foundations (Kořan 2007; Baun and Marek 2010; Drulák 2010). According to the loosely defined Czech constitutional order, the government is primarily responsible for the coun-

try's foreign policy formulation and execution which is scrutinized by the two chambers of the Parliament (Kořan 2013). However, the President as another actor of the executive branch is also allocated rather symbolical powers in the foreign policy sphere by the constitution as s/he formally represents the country in international politics. Beyond its formal authority, the Office of the President can effectively apply its informal yet extensive political power to the foreign policy-making process (Dostál and Borčány 2018). Importantly for the practice of the foreign policy, all three Czech post-1993 presidents (Václav Havel, Václav Klaus, and Miloš Zeman) used extensively their powers and pushed forward their own ambitious foreign policy agendas, which were repeatedly in contradiction with the governmental policy (Hloušek 2014; Weiss 2021)

At the level of the government, the foreign policy powers are effectively shared by the Office of the Government headed by the Prime Minister, who represents the country in intergovernmental platforms mainly at the EU level, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for articulation and execution of the foreign policy as such. Furthermore, a specific institution responsible for EU-related affairs has been commonly established within the governmental framework, either in form of a State Secretary or as an individual Minister without a portfolio responsible for the European policy (Palounek 2022). In light of the expected voluminous agenda related to the Presidency, the new government formed after the 2021 elections re-established the position of the Minister for European Affairs, who is supposed to share the burden of the Presidency agenda with the Office of the Government and the MFA (ČTK 2021a).

The complex configuration of the foreign policy-making process is directly reflected in the institutional framework of the upcoming Czech EU Presidency. The political complexity of the policy-making process highlighted by the coalition arrangement of the new government. In the October 2021 elections, seven political parties in total entered the Chamber of Deputies. While the new executive was formed by five parties organized within the conservative and center-right coalitions, two populist parties ended up in opposition (Gos-

ling 2021). As a result of the complex coalition setting of the new government formed after the October 2021 elections, the foreign policy issues are tackled in multiple governmental structures politically controlled by ideologically different parties. While the strongest conservative ODS party nominated Prime Minister Petr Fiala and controls the central Office of the Government, two minor coalition partners hold the key foreign policy ministries: the liberal Pirate Party the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the center-right STAN movement the newly established Office of the Minister for European Affairs (Hutt 2021b). The three parties holding the key foreign policy positions are not uniform in their foreign policy orientation, particularly in regard to European affairs (Pehe 2021; Šidlová 2021). While Fiala, a scholar and professor of European Politics, and his party have been profiled as moderately Euro-sceptic in the long term, Pirate Party and STAN, together with other two minor coalition partners, hold openly pro-European positions (Bigot 2022; Nerad and Kabrhelová 2021).

Initially, it was uncertain how the distribution of powers between the three offices responsible for the European policy controlled by different parties will play out prior to the Presidency and who will be setting and driving its political agenda (Pehe 2022). However, the first six months of the government mandate revealed unforeseen unity of the administration both generally and specifically regarding the foreign policy issues (Tvrdoň 2022a). Particularly the firm Czech response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine both bilaterally and at the EU level showed that the ruling coalition is less heterogeneous in critical foreign issues than it might seem from the ideological background of its individual parties. The course of the foreign policy regarding the Ukrainian crisis also revealed that PM Fiala is the central actor in this field who deals with the strategic issues, while Ministers of Foreign and European Affairs play a rather supportive role. While the complex foreign policy structure of the coalition government has so far remained unified, it needs to be considered that more ambitious attempts in European policy, including in the Western Balkan agenda, would first need to be debated on the platform of the ruling coalition.

# The Changing Role of the Western Balkans in the Presidency Agenda

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## EU Integration of the Region as an Announced Priority

In general, the priorities of the Czech EU Presidency have been fuzzy in the months prior to the start of the Presidency, first as a result of the change in government and more recently because of the radically changed international situation. The previous Czech government was restrained in defining the political agenda of the Presidency, as its mandate ended with the October 2021 elections and also because of the critical stance of Prime Minister Babiš on the Presidency institution as such (Ly 2021; ČTK 2021b). In contrast to that, the new executive proclaimed the EU Presidency as its foreign policy priority. However, since the formation of the new coalition government in December 2021, the officials responsible for the foreign and European policy have been hesitant to publicly discuss the planned priorities of the Czech EU Presidency in much detail (Kozáková 2022). Their early restraint was probably a result of a combination of internal delimiting of powers within the government, and a need for coordination with France and Sweden, the other two members of the Presidency trio (Bek 2021b). More recently, the debate over the Presidency agenda was completely seized by the unexpected escalation of instability on the Eastern EU border after the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Matoška 2022).

Under this general uncertainty, the special focus on the Western Balkans and its EU integration has been one of few constants within the discourse on the tentative Presidency agenda, at least at the rhetorical level. The previous government, specifically its Minister of Foreign Affairs Kulhánek, announced the 'Balkan priority' for the Czech EU Presidency already back in mid-2021 (Zachová 2021). Kulhánek also specified that the Czech Republic should organize a high-level EU-WB summit as one of the main outcomes of the Presidency with a very ambitious goal: to set the EU accession date for Serbia or Montenegro (ČTK 2021c).

It is important to note that the previous government operated in a different political context regarding European Affairs. Czech oligarch Babiš, as the head of the previous government, had problematic relations with the European institutions due to his conflict of interests and misuse of EU funds (Mortkowitz 2021; European Parliament 2021). At the EU level, his government frequently led aggressive nationalist policy on sensitive issues such as migration and sought allies among other regional populist leaders including controversial Viktor Orbán and Janez Janša. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was controlled by Social Democrats, the minor coalition partner of Babiš's populist movement. Former pro-European minister Tomáš Petříček, who persistently balanced the nationalist positions of Babiš and Zeman, was sacked in early 2021 and replaced by Jakub Kulhánek who took a more conformist stance towards president Zeman (Hutt 2021a; Míková 2021).

Regarding the Western Balkans, the previous government pursued an active bilateral policy that was mainly driven by economic diplomacy and had Serbia as its special focus. In 2021, there was a spike in mutual visits on the top political level when Babiš visited Belgrade in February, and Serbian President Vučić and President of the National Assembly Dačić came to Prague several months later (RTS 2021; RSE 2021; B92 2021). The special regional focus on Serbia suited well the pro-Serbian agenda of president Zeman who used Vučić's visit to express an apology for the Czech participation in the 1999 NATO intervention, which ironically had been approved by Zeman himself as the then Prime Minister (Telegraf 2021). Meanwhile, both MFA Kulhánek and PM Babiš rhetorically stuck to the support of European ambitions of the region as a whole, while admitting the stalemate of the accession process (MFA 2021; ČTK 2021d). Babiš also repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Western Balkans in regard to the (anti)migration policy, which was a central component of his populist rhetoric (ČTK 2021e).

In contrast to Babiš's controversial administration, the new government took office unburdened by negative reputation at the European level, and thus it has been able to approach the EU politics from a more credible negotiating position. However, the new ministers also inherited the agenda already defined by the outgoing government, including the 'Western Balkan priority' of the Presidency.

With the change in power after the October elections, the newly formed government reaffirmed the rhetorical commitment to the Western Balkan agenda in rather vague terms without stating any explicit goals and ambitions (Bek 2021a). According to unofficial information, the government also considered the option of inviting regional leaders to the top-level EU summit in Prague (Kabrhelová and Daněk 2022). However, from the early days in power, it has been unclear to what extent the declaratory support truly reflected the actual intentions, ambitions, and capabilities of the new administration. The uncertainty was further amplified by the lack of time for preparations for the Presidency. New officials accused Babiš's government of under-prioritizing the Presidency and both policy-makers and experts admitted that the Czech ambition is to not fail and organize a formally smooth Presidency, rather than bring significant progress in any particular area (ČTK 2021g; Houska 2022; Hančl 2022; Šafaříková 2022). Nevertheless, the agenda-setting of the previous government already positioned the Czech Republic as an prospective active player in the Western Balkans during the 2022 Presidency.

## **Impact of the War in Ukraine: Western Balkans Disappearing from the Agenda**

The uncertainty regarding the role of the Western Balkans in the agenda of the Czech Presidency substantially increased as a direct consequence of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Since late February 2022, the escalation of the unprecedented crisis in Eastern Europe has shaken global, European as well as Czech domestic politics. The newly appointed Czech government responded to the crisis from its first days with a proactive policy based on a combination of direct bilateral support to Ukraine and calls for coordinated multilateral action against Russia. Prime Minister Fiala positioned himself as one of the most vocal advocates of Ukraine on the European level. He repeatedly called for direct European military support to Ukraine and tough sanctions against Russia (Reuters 2022). Fiala was among the first European leaders who traveled to besieged Kyiv to meet Ukrainian president Zelensky in mid-March and Czech Republic was the first country transferring heavy weap-

ons to Ukraine (Gijs 2022; Lopatka 2022). The Czech political debate became fully dominated by international issues related to the war in Ukraine and its impact on the Czech society that has been facing the challenge of the mass influx of refugees, rapid increase in prices, and imminent energy insecurity because of its dependence on import of Russian fuels.

Reasonably, the Russian aggression against Ukraine completely diverted the ongoing debate on the upcoming Czech presidency and its emerging agenda. As the key policymakers have been continuously overburdened by the pressing issues related to the war, the discourse on the Presidency went in the same direction. Politicians openly admitted that the priorities defined prior to the Ukrainian crisis need to be reconsidered in light of the new situation and its impact on the EU and the Czech Republic (Matoška 2022; Rakušan 2022). The suggested priority agenda has thus mainly concentrated on issues of energy security, management of migration flows as well as accelerated European integration of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states (Řežňáková 2022; Palata 2022; ČTK 2022c). Particularly the last topic is closely interlinked with the earlier declared priority of Western Balkans' European integration (Hájek 2022). On one hand, it returns the enlargement agenda to the top political agenda on the EU level, but on the other hand, it diverts the focus of the enlargement debate in another direction from the Western Balkans (Chrzová and Čermák 2022; Sybera 2022).

Despite its even increased geopolitical relevance after the Russian aggression, the Western Balkan region has almost vanished from the discourse on the Czech Presidency agenda after the Ukrainian crisis started. The key policymakers, busy enough with the urgent challenges in the East, only rarely mentioned what used to seem like one of the major priorities for the Presidency. Once the Western Balkans was mentioned in their public statements, it was usually related to the Ukrainian crisis. In March, MFA Lipavský said without adding many details that 'the EU needs a clear vision for the Balkans otherwise it may lose influence in the region to Russia' (Ponikelska 2022). In line with that, Minister for European Affairs Bek also said that in light of the war in Ukraine the Czech Presidency will advocate the EU integration

of the Western Balkan states, but it will also scrutinize their own progress and watch carefully their pro-Western orientation. He expressed clearly that “[o]nly states that share our foreign policy orientation deserve our support” (Plevák 2022).

## **Disagreement within the Government?**

As a consequence of the rapid change of priority agenda, a disagreement on the importance of the Western Balkans appeared between the Office of the Government and the MFA. The differing views have been primarily manifested in the issue of the summit with the Western Balkan states, which the Czech Republic committed to organizing last year in Brdo, and which has remained open even after the region as such disappeared from the Presidency priorities (Trachtová 2022). While the MFA has been continuously pushing the summit into the Presidency program, the Office of the Government led by the Prime Minister together with the Minister for European Affairs have been skeptical of its potential political impact and prefer to organize a summit related to Ukraine (Boubínová 2022b). The Western Balkan summit was only perceived as an exit-strategy in case high-level meeting with Ukraine would not be feasible (Nerad 2022).

According to Minister for European Affairs Bek, his cautious stance towards the Western Balkan summit results from the uncertainty over the potential political success of such a flagship event in the Presidency, in light of the recent Slovenian experience and general impasse in the Western Balkans. As he explained in Czech media (Trachtová 2022),

“[the r]eason for such an informal Summit in Prague depends on some progress in that region. Both the Prime Minister and I are very cautious in this regard, we don’t want to reproduce the situation from Slovenian Brdo where the Summit did not result in any success. It would not be a good step for the Czech Republic to be a host of another unsuccessful summit in just one year”.

The Chief advisor to Prime Minister Pojar openly admitted that the ambition of organizing the high-level EU-WB summit during the Czech Presidency depends on the course of action of the French Presidency which was planning its own Western Balkans conference for June (Křížová 2022). “We will see who comes with what, and we will respond to that accordingly,” suggested Pojar in indistinct terms, implicitly confirming the low priority given to the issue by the Office of the Government (*ibid*).

In contrast to that, the MFA seems to feel obliged by the commitment to the annual frequency of a Western Balkan Summit announced last year in Brdo as well as by the long-term declaratory priority of the Czech foreign policy towards the region. Apparently, there is a clash within the government between the political demand to deliver an impactful Presidency and the long-term efforts of the MFA to keep the credibility of the EU enlargement through regular political attention devoted to the region at the highest political level. While a summit without a high political impact would still make sense for the MFA to keep the regional agenda in focus, in the view of the government such an initiative would in the current circumstances only distract the limited political capacities of the Czech Presidency.

## **Western Balkans and the (Un)declared Presidency Priorities**

Contrary to the earlier proclamations, in May 2022 it became almost clear that the Western Balkans is disappearing from the priority agenda of the Czech Presidency. While the Presidency’s priorities are always officially announced only shortly prior to the start of the term, the key policymakers made quite explicit statements in regard to the priorities, and Western Balkans was no longer mentioned among them. Instead, the focus was unsurprisingly directed to urgent issues related to the war in Ukraine and its consequences, primarily in the field of energy security and migration (Boubínová 2022a).

This lack of political interest in the Western Balkans was confirmed in early June when the priorities first leaked to media and later were officially an-

nounced by the government (Bertuzzi 2022; Vláda ČR 2022b). The five political priorities include managing the refugee crisis and Ukraine's post-war recovery, energy security, Europe's defence capabilities, economic resilience, and resilience of democratic institutions. While being formulated in general terms, most of the priorities are implicitly related to the conflict in Ukraine and its economic and political consequences. Meanwhile, the Western Balkans was not even mentioned in the official governmental presentation of priorities. Even the MFA, the only political advocate of the Western Balkan agenda, only mentioned the region on the margins of its declared territorial priorities for the Presidency, equally to Eastern Europe, Indo-Pacific and Sahel regions (MFA 2022e).

Overall, it has become obvious that the interest of the new administration in the Western Balkan agenda has been shrinking since the war in Ukraine started. What seemed to be a firm priority for the Czech EU Presidency has been taken over by the course of the events in Eastern Europe and only reappeared rarely and almost exclusively within the context of the Ukrainian crisis.

However, the Czech officials were forced by external pressure to tackle the Western Balkan agenda in the days just prior to taking over the Presidency because of the French last-minute initiative. When leaving for the summit in Paris in late June, Fiala was openly skeptical regarding the prospects for a breakthrough in region's European integration (ČT 2022). Just a day after, he stated that "EU leaders asked [him] to prepare [...] a framework for an informal summit on wider European cooperation with non-member States that could be held in Prague" (Fiala 2022). While Fiala emphasized that Ukraine should be one of the guests, it was clear that the aim behind the idea was to bring together all countries aspiring for EU accession and materialize the French vision of broader political community. After formally taking over the Presidency on the joint meeting between the Czech government and European Commission, Fiala, in an apparent contradiction to his previous reserved approach, reaffirmed that progress in the Western Balkan enlargement will be the aim of Czech Republic (ČTK 2022e). Apparently, the external incentives from the political center of the EU were strong enough to change the narrative set by Czech politicians from reluctance to at least declaratory engagement.

# Standpoints of key foreign policy actors towards the Western Balkan agenda within the Czech EU Presidency

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## Office of the Prime Minister: Western Balkans Out of the Sight

Institutionally as well as politically, the Office of the Government headed by the Prime Minister is the chief actor politically steering the agenda and course of the Czech EU Presidency. Its strong institutional position has been further reinforced by the recent turbulent geopolitical developments. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Prime Minister Fiala together with his closest team of advisors took the opportunity to position themselves as the main representatives of the Czech Republic on the European level. Determinedly, they profited as one of the most vocal supporters of Ukrainian defence. After his early visit to Kyiv, Fiala has been calling for fast EU integration of Ukraine (Šidlová 2022b). The proactive approach toward the crisis and advocacy of the Ukrainian cause paid off and Prime Minister Fiala, just a few months after his government was formed, became an active stakeholder in high European politics.

This positioning had a direct positive effect on the international credibility of the Czech Republic which had been previously known rather as a passive and unpredictable actor on the EU level. However, the accent put on the war in Ukraine inevitably led to the loosening of interest in other unrelated foreign policy areas on the top governmental level. Western Balkans is probably the most prominent of the issues that almost disappeared from the top political agenda articulated by the head of the government regarding the Czech EU Presidency. Fiala himself only rarely mentioned Western Balkans in his recent public statements and mainly referred to the region in very general terms of

‘supporting its EU integration’ (Vláda ČR 2022a; ČTK 2022d). Fiala’s chief security advisor Tomáš Pojar was more specific in his statements and implicitly lessened the importance of the Western Balkan agenda in his public statements (Křížová 2022).

Apparently, the Western Balkans was largely overshadowed by the more urgent developments in Ukraine in the eyes of the government’s top leadership. As Prime Minister Fiala decided to highlight the Czech support of Ukraine in its war with Russia in the short term and advocate its European integration in the long term, it was not expected they will invest some of their limited political capital to other areas. Unless they are forced to deal with the region by external factors, the top of the Czech government would prefer to avoid engagement in the Western Balkans at the high level of the EU politics. However, as the dynamic change of the Fiala’s narrative in the days just prior to the start of the Presidency shows, the government is ready to meet the demand on the EU side for inclusion of the Western Balkans into the broader enlargement agenda.

## **Minister for European Affairs: Procedural Support to Prime Minister**

The office of the Minister for European Affairs Mikuláš Bek is institutionally a part of the Office of the government and lacks the massive bureaucratic apparatus of standard Ministries. The first months of the new government also proved that the subordinated institutional position corresponds with the political role of the Minister for European Affairs. Minister Bek has been mainly playing a significant supportive role to the Prime Minister in the European agenda. The close interlink between the two offices was confirmed by appointment of Fiala’s chief advisor Pojar to position of Bek’s Deputy Minister (Šídlová 2022a), a move interpreted as a way to keep the Minister under the Prime Minister’s direct political control. While PM Fiala has been focusing on the critical strategic issues negotiated politically at the EU level, Bek has been dealing with the voluminous agenda on lower levels of political impor-

tance and the formal legislative dimension of the preparations for the Presidency (Křížová 2021; Nalejvačová 2022).

From this position, the Minister for European Affairs unavoidably had to reflect on the previous commitments to the Western Balkans as a priority of the Czech Presidency. After its initial cautious affirmation, Minister Bek also changed his narrative in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. Generally, he pronounced the need for progress in the reform process within the region (Trachtová 2022). While he announced a continuation of Czech support for European aspirations of the Western Balkan states, he also explicitly mentioned the need for alignment in foreign policy orientation in an allusion to Serbia's current geopolitical dilemmas (Plevák 2022).

The Ministry for European Affairs is certainly an important, yet rather a procedural actor of the Czech Presidency as it deals with the massive legislative procedures. From this position, it will inescapably have to deal with the Western Balkan issues that will appear on the agenda. While it will presumably stick to the long-term priorities of the Czech Republic in its declaratory support of EU enlargement, no major proactive political initiative can be expected from the tiny office subordinated to the head of the government. As noted off the record by a member of the Minister's cabinet, the Western Balkans is understood as an agenda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

## **Ministry of Foreign Affairs: A powerless advocate of the Western Balkans?**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should supposedly play a crucial role in the EU Presidency in tandem with the Prime Minister. However, its position has been politically limited by the delicate balance of powers within the coalition government. Foreign Minister Lipavský nominated by the Pirate party recently faced criticism from media that labeled him as a passive minister with low visibility in foreign policy issues compared to Prime Minister (Kundra 2022a). The political position of Lipavský within the government has been since his

appointment weakened by his party affiliation as well as his personal background. First, Lipavský is nominated by the Pirate Party which is with only 4 deputies in the 200-member assembly by far the weakest partner in the coalition government, and the political position of three ministers appointed by the party is thus limited (Bastlová 2022; Procházková 2022). Second, during the government formation, Lipavský's appointment became a source of an institutional conflict between designated PM Fiala and President Zeman who openly criticized Lipavský for his alleged lack of professional experience and some of his foreign policy stances (Kottová 2022). While Zeman initially threatened to refuse Lipavský's appointment as foreign minister, Fiala managed to negotiate an agreement with Zeman that allowed the government with Lipavský to be formed (Koutník 2021; Jelínek 2021). However, their non-transparent deal implied that Zeman will only discuss foreign policy issues with Prime Minister and this rule has been applied since (Fendrych 2022; Kundra 2022b). The political position of MFA under Lipavský is thus significantly limited and the high-level foreign policy agenda was rather taken over by the Prime Minister supported by his own office and the Ministry for European Affairs.

Under these unfavorable circumstances, the MFA has been the only political actor consistently advocating the Western Balkan agenda and lobbying for its inclusion in the top political priorities of the Czech EU Presidency. In contrast to the reluctant narrative used by the Office of the Government, the high officials of the MFA have been consistently emphasizing the importance of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans and claimed that its urgency only increased with the Russian invasion of Ukraine (MFA 2022a; MFA 2022d). After the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in mid-May, Lipavský even claimed, in an apparent contradiction with the recent announcements of Minister for European Affairs Bek, that “the Western Balkans and EU enlargement are without any doubt of top priorities of the upcoming Czech EU Presidency” (MFA 2022b). The same strong statements resonated during the Pre-Presidency conference organized at the MFA in late May (Šnaidauf 2022).

Declaratory statements of the MFA officials have been recently also supported by more concrete political steps. After discussing the Western

Balkan agenda at the Foreign Affairs Council, Lipavský met bilaterally with the Foreign Minister of Serbia Selaković and used this opportunity to express Czech support for Serbia's European integration while also stressing the need for Serbia's geopolitical alignment with the EU's policy on Russia (MFA 2022b; MFA RS 2022). Meanwhile, Lipavský's Deputy Minister Dvořák made an official visit to the region where he met with high officials of Montenegro and Kosovo. In both countries, he openly supported the 'pro-European' political actors and declared Czech support for their EU integration (MFA 2022c). These practical steps, combined with the messages spread through public statements, show clearly that the political leadership of the MFA has remained largely committed to the prioritization of the Western Balkans within the Czech Presidency agendas despite the unfavorable geopolitical circumstances.

However, the MFA seems to be also aware of its weaker political position vis-à-vis the Prime Minister who is currently setting the top political agenda of the Presidency. The limited power of the MFA to put across the Western Balkan agenda is well illustrated by the above-mentioned issue of the high-level EU summit with the Western Balkan leaders that was earlier proclaimed as an intended political highlight of the Presidency. While the Office of the Prime Minister together with the Minister for European Affairs was already openly speaking about their plan to organize a summit focused on Ukraine, representatives of the MFA were still officially proclaiming that they are working on the Western Balkan summit (Trachtová 2022). Unofficially, however, officials from the MFA admitted that prospects for organizing the summit with Western Balkan states are uncertain and that the MFA cannot really compete with the Prime Minister's agenda in regard to the political priorities of the Presidency. After PM Fiala announced that Czech Republic might host a broader summit with all countries aspiring to EU membership, possibility of participation of the Western Balkan states returned to the table. However, it was not a result of MFA's active agenda setting, yet rather an outcome of Fiala's own political calculation based on the external pressure from the EU capitals.

## **President Zeman's Last Opportunity to Assert Pro-Serbian Policy?**

Besides the political interplay within the government, president Zeman is another political actor who might have the ambition and capacity to intervene in the agenda-setting of the Czech Presidency. However, the political position of President Zeman was recently substantially weakened by a combination of health and political factors. First, Zeman has been suffering from serious health problems that required longer hospitalization in the autumn of 2021 and have in the long-term limited his political activities (Lopatka and Hovet 2021). Zeman substantially reduced his public appearances and completely avoided international travels (ČTK 2021f). Politically, the domestic and international position of Zeman was shaken by the Russian aggression on Ukraine as he had been for long grounding his foreign policy orientation on a pro-Russian position. In the aftermath of the Russian aggression, Zeman, after previously relativising information about the upcoming invasion, formally condemned the Russian attack and cautiously admitted that he might be wrong in his previous assessments of the Kremlin's intentions (ČTK 2022a; ČTK 2022b). Consequently, Zeman's domestic popularity significantly dropped, and his political position vis-à-vis the government consisting of Zeman's political opponents weakened (Tvrdoň 2022b). President's opportunities to actively enter the agenda-setting of the Czech Presidency on the EU level will be thus rather limited.

On the other hand, Zeman recently entered the last year of his mandate, after which his long political career is expected to end. The Czech EU Presidency might be one of his last opportunities to make a high-level footprint in the foreign policy area even without a need to travel abroad. If his health condition allows, he could try to maximize his influence on the main political agendas of the EU Presidency. As his past sympathies to Putin's Russia cost him credibility in all issues related to the war in Ukraine, he might be seeking other areas where he could push his agenda and the Western Balkans would presumably be among the most preferred. The region in general and specifically the Kosovo-Serbia dispute have been Zeman's prominent issues throughout his political career

and he might thus try to assert his aggressively pro-Serbian stance against the moderate agenda of the MFA and the cautious stance of MEA. Zeman already indicated such intentions in his congratulation letter to Aleksandar Vučić after his reelection in April 2022 when he reaffirmed his inclination to Serbia and claimed that the Czech Presidency will be a great opportunity for further integration of Serbia into the EU (Zeman 2022).

While his weakened political position will probably not allow Zeman to substantially sidetrack the governmental policy during the Presidency, he might still be capable of at least rhetorically entering the agenda-setting process and challenging the Czech position on issues where he disagrees with the government. Based on his past extensive record and recent statements, the approach toward Serbia in light of the current geopolitical developments might become a critical point of disagreement where the President would clash primarily with the MFA and with the governmental agenda in general.

## **Conclusion: Possible Trajectories of the Czech EU Presidency's Approach toward the Western Balkans**

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 unsettled the post-Cold war political order of Europe. The outburst of the war and its far-reaching consequences have shaken politics on all levels and in all fields. The conflict in Eastern Europe has also substantially impacted the politics of EU enlargement and the prospects for the stalled process of Western Balkans' European integration. However, it has been unclear in what direction will the effect of Ukraine work in the long term for the Western Balkans' European aspirations. Experts and policymakers agree that the war in Ukraine confirmed and increased the perceived geopolitical relevance of stability in the volatile Western

Balkan region (Marušić 2022a; Džihic and Schmidt 2022; Sybera 2022). However, it is unclear whether the increased importance will gain the region more attention from relevant stakeholders who are now preoccupied with Ukraine, or it will be overshadowed by the turbulent developments in Eastern Europe.

The dilemma of the contradictory effects of the war in Ukraine on the Western Balkan European agenda has determined the course of the Czech political debate on the position of the Western Balkans in the agenda of the Czech EU Presidency. Presumably, both perspectives will be also reflected during the Presidency itself when the Czech decision-makers will be unavoidably confronted with challenging political tasks related to the Western Balkans at the EU level.

On the one hand, it became clear over the last few months that, contrary to previous political commitments, the Czech Presidency will not consider the Western Balkans a priority area that would deserve special focus. The key political actors decided to invest the limited political capital provided by the Presidency in issues directly related to the conflict in Ukraine and its consequences. Those actors still calling for prioritization of the Western Balkans are in a weaker political position as the political agenda is currently set by people who want to maximize the political credit for the country on the issue of Ukraine. The Czech Presidency is thus unlikely to come up with any high-level political initiative for the Western Balkans and its European integration. On the other hand, Czech policymakers will not be able to completely avoid the Western Balkan agenda during the six-month Presidency term. Even if the key political actors will focus primarily on the East, they will still be faced by challenges coming from the Southeast. However, their responses to Western Balkan challenges are likely to be reactive and pulled by external incentives.

At the EU level, the Czech Presidency will be required to tackle the stalled process of the Western Balkans's European integration at least formally. In this field, Czechs inevitably have to follow the path set by the previous French Presidency, whose real intentions in the region remained fuzzy through the six-month term. Macron's vague calls for a European 'political community', unpro-

ductive meeting with Western Balkan leaders in June as well as controversial proposal for setting the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia all confirmed the complex stalemate of the Western Balkans' European integration. Czech Presidency took over the Western Balkan agenda in delicate situation when hopes of speeded progress are high in the region, but prospects for real steps forward are much lower. After Macron's last-minute gestures that amplified the expectations on both sides, Czechs do not have an option to escape the difficult agenda.

Since the Czech Presidency announced to push hard for the speedy integration of Ukraine into the EU, it will have to engage in the politics of enlargement that is not possible without reflecting the stalled enlargement in the Western Balkans. If the Czech policy-makers would overlook the Western Balkan dimension of enlargement, their support for Ukrainian EU aspiration would probably backfire and meet resistance not only within the Western Balkan Six, but also among some EU members. In May 2022, the Austrian chancellor already told PM Fiala explicitly that the Czech EU Presidency must not ignore the Western Balkans' integration into the EU (ČTK 2022d).

Within the Western Balkans, the Czech Presidency might face multiple crises enduring or even escalating in the regional political hotspots. With the general elections scheduled for October 2022, the institutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina is expected to deepen as all sides will intensify their nationalist rhetoric and will attempt to pull external actors into the stage on their behalf. In Montenegro, the protracted political crisis might also have destabilizing consequences reaching beyond its borders as it is interconnected with the geopolitical orientation of the country and interplays with the regional ambitions of Serbia. Lastly, the Kosovo-Serbia dispute will continue to be a major source of regional instability that will not only effectively block the European integration of both states, but also prevent a comprehensive post-conflict settlement for the whole region.

The recent Russian escalation of the war in the Eastern Europe only fueled the spiral of instability in all these hotspots, as there have been political forces close to Moscow playing their part in them, and Kremlin can possibly use them to

destabilize another region on the EU border. If the Czech government is forced by the course of the events on the ground to deal with some of these regional hotspots, it will likely apply its perspective of the conflict with Russia on the Western Balkan agenda too. As the Czech policymakers are preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, they will look cautiously at all signs of Russian presence in the Western Balkans and deal with suspicion with actors linked to Kremlin. Regarding the enlargement policy, this approach will probably translate into a strong accent put on the need for full alignment of the candidate countries in the foreign policy field and specific scrutiny put over the Serbia's integration process.

While the Czech political leadership under the current geopolitical situation made a rational decision not to invest its limited political capital in the Western Balkan agenda, it would be naïve to expect that it will entirely avoid dealing with the region during the Czech EU Presidency. Quite the contrary, regardless of its currently favored agendas, the Czech Republic will find itself in the delicate position of an assumably active player advocating the region's EU integration. However, the Czech response to potential regional challenges is expected to be reactive rather than grounded in any profound political strategy for the region. Unfortunately for the Western Balkan states and their aspirations, such an approach is unlikely to bring any breakthrough in the stalled process of the region's European integration and will only prolong the enlargement fatigue on both sides.

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