



Left photo shows Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg
Right photo shows Czech Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg with European Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner, and Foreign Ministers of Sweden and France during their trip to the Middle East

First country to do so from Eastern Europe

Czech Republic has presidency of EU for the first half of 2009

For the first half of 2009 the rotating European Union Presidency has been taken over by the Czech Republic. It is her first such venture, as the Czech Republic became the full-fledge member of now 27-strong club of European countries only in May 2004. The Czech government has selected the motto 'Europe without Barriers' for its presidency, having in mind also a political and historical connotations associated with this year. 2009 is a year of significant anniversaries - above all, the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the so-called Iron Curtain, which ended the division of Europe and really opened the continent for the first time after more than a half century. It is also the fifth anniversary of the most extensive historical enlargement of the European Union of ten new members, including the Czech Republic - that will commemorate the successful project of the reunification of Europe. The motto "Europe without Barriers" reflects also the four basic freedoms: the free movement of goods, capital, labour and services. And as the Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek said: "We intend to uphold these

freedoms to their fullest."

The European Union and all its member states are now confronted with a number of serious challenges and decisions. Due to the financial crisis, it is necessary to prepare for the threat of a significant slowdown in economic growth or even an economic downturn, with all its social, political and international consequences. Although urgent measures have been already taken at global, European Union and national levels in recent months, the European Union will have to give attention to a solution to this problem also in 2009. Prime Minister Topolánek hopes that these measures could increase Europe's competitiveness, enhance consumer confidence, but also the confidence of small and medium-sized enterprises in the market economy, to deal with the financial crisis in an effective and reasonable way, to carry on liberal reforms of the budget and EU policies, and, last but not least, to promote employment. Not surprisingly, *Economy* is one of three main Czech priorities.

As the European Union will play a significant role in international negotiations about a financial system reform that would prevent the

recent crisis from recurring in the future, the Czech Presidency will strive - particularly at the April G-20 Summit in London - to ensure that the EU makes a coordinated contribution in the search for a solution at European and global level. The issue is, above all, to remove any barriers that still stand in the way of the full utilization of all internal market freedoms, but also to dismantle external barriers. It cannot put up with the stalling of the process of world trade liberalisation, with persisting obstacles to access to other markets, unfair competition, or insufficient protection of intellectual and industrial property. The new global economic situation may make protectionist's approaches seductive. The Czech Presidency will therefore endeavour to ensure that the EU does not diverge from its path of openness, which has led it so far to economic and social prosperity. "Successful finalization of negotiations of European Union-Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement during the Czech Presidency could be one such step forward," adds Czech Ambassador to ROK Jaroslav Olsa, jr.

The second priority of Czech Pres-



Czech Prime Minister Topolánek with German Chancellor Merkel, Turkish Prime Minister Gul and French President Sarkozy at recent Summit at Sharm el Sheikh



Czech Prime Minister Topolánek with President of the European Commission Barroso

idency is Energy and especially Energy Security. *Energy security* is a basic prerequisite for the functioning of the economies of EU member states. In light of the EU's increasing dependence on energy imports from the surrounding world, it acquires a special urgency. The Czech Presidency feels that to achieve a greater territorial diversification of suppliers to EU member states, a broader range of utilised sources, an enhancement of the range of renewable resources and the creation of a truly unified internal energy market in the EU which would allow for solidarity in crisis situations, should be among the main goals of European Union. "January crisis with deliveries of gas being stopped to significant number of EU member states, some of them having been fully dependent on the only source, and subsequent Czech Prime Minister's diplomatic efforts to restart the energy supply showed the importance of this second Czech presidency priority," notes Ambassador Olsa.

But not only this, but also reducing the economy's energy intensity must be pursued, as well as reducing the economy's impact on the environment at European and global level. The Czech Republic regards the energy policy as a search for balance between the demands of the environment protection and the preservation of competitiveness and energy security in Europe. The Czech Presidency will also try to involve actively in international negotiations about climate protection after 2012 as possible. This is a pressing topic, significantly concerning the economy and having international policy and security implica-

tions. Building upon the commitments of the European Council from March 2007 elaborated further in the adopted Climate-Energy Package, the Czech Presidency will strive to prepare a path for reaching a broad international consensus on how to face climate change, which should be reached at the end of 2009 in Copenhagen. It must be stressed that any solution to the climate issue will imply not only certain economic and political costs, but also opportunities. "As a country which inherited very shattered ecological balance after forty years of a communist rule," says Czech Ambassador, "we are well aware of importance of proper measures to be taken soon and on appropriate level."

Last, but not least, among the "3 E's" - three main priorities of the Czech Presidency - are *External Relations*. The European Union is a significant global player due to its weight in the global economy, high level of integration into the multilateral system, stabilization efforts in international conflicts, and the volume of its development aid aimed for many countries all around the world. A major reason for the EU's role as a stabilizing force is not only its prosperity and economic power, but also its value system. The Czech Presidency will thus continue the present emphasis of the EU on development cooperation, supporting human rights, building the rule of law and democracy and resolving conflicts in the world. The European Union will have to carry on in its struggle against new security threats, primarily the proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon deliv-

ery systems, and international terrorism.

The emphasis will be given European Transatlantic relations with the United States, which the Czech Republic, considers to be fundamental for European security and economic cooperation. A priority of the same importance for us is the openness and further enlargement of the EU. The Presidency will pay special attention to this Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and the Presidency will do everything to ensure that EU enlargement with Croatia takes place as soon as possible. The Czech Presidency will also continue to develop the Southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy and to improve relations with the partner countries included in this political concept. A subject of the Presidency's great interest is also the Middle East peace process. The very special emphasis on this topic was visible on the very first Presidency EU action, when Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg visited the Middle East with aim to stop the conflict in Gaza.

The Czech Republic is fully aware of its responsibilities as presiding country, and it is prepared to address current and strategic challenges to the benefit of the EU and our partners. "Therefore a few summits and a lot of high-level meetings with Asian countries will take part during the Czech Presidency," adds Czech Ambassador Jaroslav Olsa, jr. "European Union summit with the Republic of Korea should take part, as well as meetings with EU partners from Japan, People's Republic of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, to name only a few." ☞