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The Prague Post, 22.10.2008, rubrika: the front page, strana: 1, autor: By Curtis M. Wong
German Chancellor visits Prague, urges EU unity amid market meltdown

Europe's current financial crisis and the future of the Lisbon Treaty were at the top of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's agenda during her Oct. 20 meeting with Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek in light of the country's impending European Union presidency.

Merkel received an enthusiastic welcome upon her arrival at the Kramář Villa, the prime minister's official residence next to Letná Park, where she was greeted by Topolánek and a full-scale marching band. After posing for photographs, the two headed inside the villa for a press briefing.

Merkel praised the Lisbon Treaty in her opening remarks to reporters, which some interpreted as a brazen move, as the Czech Republic is one of a few countries that have yet to ratify the controversial document, which aims to set rules for the functioning of the enlarged EU.

Picking up after Merkel, Topolánek assured reporters that "the ratification

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process is not simple. I support the ratification despite all the problems ... with the treaty."

Following the press conference, Merkel proceeded to the Karolinum at Charles University, where she was presented with the Golden Memorial Award, the university's highest honor, in recognition of her support of Czech and German relations, particularly in the realm of scientific research.

After accepting the award, Merkel praised the country's efforts before a crammed audience of local dignitaries, including Topolánek and Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Alexandr Vondra, as well as university professors and students.

"The Czech Republic definitely had a large stake in the reunification of Germany, and, as Germans, we will never forget that," Merkel said. After describing Czech and German relations as "traditionally complicated," she added, "We are now neighbors who are curious to get to know each other well. ... We need to face up to our past, and our future is crucially linked to the integration of Europe."

She went on to congratulate the Czech Republic in its preparations to take on the EU presidency in January as only the first post-communist country since Slovenia to take on the position. "With the Czech Republic's presidency, a voice will be heard that's of a different past than those of us which have always enjoyed freedom. The Czech Republic has had its share of oppression, particularly during communism, and that's why it's very important to have this perspective in the EU." Europe's voice

Merkel also stressed the need for strong cooperation between the two nations, particularly in terms of the current financial crisis. "From a fiscal perspective, this is going to be the greatest challenge we've seen since World War II," she said. "Such a crisis can only be solved by a worldwide [collaborative] effort."

She was, however, critical of the EU's leading industries, suggesting there was room for improvement.

"The European economy is one of small and midsize industries, which are role models in many ways," she said. "However, much of the problem is that most of their work is done only for short-term gains, and that long-term perspective is forgotten in the process."

She spoke of the need for EU integration in the face of global competition. "Europe's voice in a globalized world ... is something that we need to develop," she said. "We need to show that the EU is a confident model that can face today's challenges." After touching on ecological and bureaucratic issues, she concluded her address by entreating a final plea for the Czech Republic's support of the Lisbon Treaty. "I'm quite certain it's a treaty that shows we have learned from our mistakes in the past," she said. "I clearly hope that the Lisbon Treaty will soon be used as a basis for all of us." Topolánek ignored all talk of the treaty during his brief follow-up remarks, simply describing political relations with Merkel as being "ever more alike in our thoughts and approaches," and focusing on the country's presidential agenda.

"The Czech Republic has to be prepared to take on a number of controversial topics. ... I don't think the size of the country or the duration of its EU membership matters in this respect," he said. "If we lose in the race for new ideas, then we'll lose in the future." Differing perspectives

Merkel had long been expected to discuss issues regarding Belarus, often called “Europe’s last dictatorship,” with Topolánek in the wake of last week’s removal of a travel ban against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, seen by many authorities as a reward for that country’s recent moves toward democracy, since her visit was announced. However, most officials weren’t surprised by the German chancellor’s decision to forgo the topic in favor of economic issues.

“Merkel’s visit is meant to serve as a platform for the exchange of information between the Czech Republic and Germany, and the Czech government is seeing it as an opportunity to inform German officials on its agenda for the EU presidency,” said European integration specialist Jan Karlas from Prague’s Institute of International Relations. “In the middle of the global financial crisis, it was likely that the agenda would be modified somewhat. They had to react to fiscal events that have taken place in the past two months.”

Karlas said relations with Germany should be a top priority during the Czech Republic’s presidency, due to the geographic proximity of the two countries as well as their bureaucratic similarities. He went on to describe the “European Neighborhood Policy,” a plan that proposes establishing a strong relationship between current EU members with countries not expected to join in the foreseeable future, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

“Germany is one of the most important countries in the EU.

... Both the Czech Republic and Germany have a strong interest in the EU’s activity in Eastern Europe and are keen on the development there,” he said. “However, their perspectives often differ, and the case of Belarus is just one example.”

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Angela Merkel, German chancellor