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Enlargement Policy and the Western Balkans – the Role of the Czech Republic and the EU in the Context of the New Enlargement Methodology

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Abstract: The presented text analyzes the role of the EU and the Czech Republic (CR) in the Western Balkans in the context of enlargement policy, which has been revised through the new methodology. The research is based on a case study covering a defined period of time. The research premise states that the role of the EU and the Czech Republic in the Western Balkans is shaped by internal and external influences, rather than the specific situation and challenges in the Western Balkans region. The argumentation is based on the role theory and verifies the extent to which the Czech Republic acts as a mediator and regional-subsystem collaborator or bridge within the EU to WB. In the future EU should set out clear and concrete changes that candidate states should make; should clearly define benefits that the state will receive after meeting the requirements and identify clear disadvantages or losses that will follow non-compliance. The author finds that both the EU and the Member States should have a stronger and more dynamic role in the accession process of the candidate countries.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU enlargement, Czech Republic, role theory, presidency.

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Introduction

Enlargement policy has been pervading the integration process since the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. The enlargement process is an example of EU foreign policy, which is difficult to predict and has many specificities. All the more so in connection with the region of the Western Balkans (WB), which combines many cultural, political and geographical specifics (Bauerová 2014, 8-9). The issue of EU enlargement to WB offers a wide field for research (see for example Bieber (eds.) 2017; Kmezić 2018; Džankić, Keil, Kmezić 2019). The adoption of a new methodology for EU enlargement has opened up more scope for analysing the influence of Member States on the overall enlargement process. The text of the article responds to the EU policy towards WB and contextualizes it with the action of one selected member state – the Czech Republic (CR).

Although the relationship between the EU and the WB (in the context of enlargement policy) dates back to the beginning of the new millennium, it cannot be said that it is nearing a successful conclusion in terms of EU accession. Therefore, the question arises: Why is the enlargement process to the Western Balkans not completed? The answer is so broad that it is not possible to include it in one article. The following text is therefore based on two levels of analysis. 1) the level of the EU's role as a key player in influencing enlargement policy; 2) the level of the selected member state – the role of the Czech Republic in the enlargement policy.

The analysis of the role of the EU and the Czech Republic is based on the theory of roles, specifically on the study of the concept of the national role and the transcription of the role. The reason for choosing both perspectives is the effort for a comprehensive analysis of the formation of the Czech role towards the countries of the Western Balkans in the context of enlargement policy. The analysis will include external and internal influences that affect the formation and change the role of the state. There will be monitored the role of the CR in the process of EU enlargement to the WB. The EU will be analysed as a leading player in the enlargement process. The author is aware of the breadth of the topic, and therefore it will be verified to what extent the CR indeed acts as a mediator and regional-subsystem collaborator or bridge within the EU to WB (Holsti 1970).

The text aims to analyse the role of the CR and the EU in the enlargement policy in the geographical area of the Western Balkans. In terms of time, the analysis includes the period from 2009, i.e. the first Czech presidency of the EU to the present, i.e. half of June 2022. The period was chosen in terms of topicality because it will reflect the changes that significantly shape enlargement policy in recent years. Specifically, it is the impact of the migration crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Special attention is paid to the new enlargement methodology, as it changes the role of both the EU and the Member States in the enlargement process.

From a theoretical point of view, the text is based on the concept of role theory, which is associated with two levels of influences shaping foreign policy. The first is the national level at the state level; the second level is the international or supranational environment. The analysis of Czech foreign policy will include both aspects. The author believes that the role of the state is shaped both by the reality within the political system and by the influence of the state's surroundings. There will be monitored the influence of the EU on the formation of Czech foreign policy.

The text poses the following research questions: Does the external environment affect the formation of the Czech Republic's foreign policy (the role of the state) towards ZB countries? Does the Czech Republic act as a mediator between ZB and the EU in the field of enlargement policy? Is it possible that the new methodology will allow states to influence enlargement policy in the context of the roles they currently have? The initial hypothesis of the text is the claim that the role of a Member State has a greater influence on the course of enlargement policy than the role of the EU. The text is divided into two main parts. The first presents the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the use of role theory in the analysis of EU and Czech foreign policy. Subsequently, in the second part, the text analyses the role of the CR and the EU in the process of accession of the WB countries to the EU.

Role theory as a theoretical and methodological basis for studying foreign policy

The presented text is based on the theory of roles, which is used as a conceptual and theoretical framework that applies to the analysis of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic (Beneš 2010, 73) and the EU toward the WB region. The theory of roles concludes foreign policy from an analysis of the shared ideas of elites about the right role and purpose of any state as a collective in the international arena. It is possible to say that role theory is a source of ideas about the role of states in the world. The foreign policy of the EU and the Czech Republic towards the selected region (WB) will be the subject of analysis. An analysis of the national context (e.g. history, political influence), external expectations and other structural factors will be included in the analysis.

The analysis is based on the basic definition introduced by Holsti. Holsti (1970) defines a national role conception: "A national role conception includes the

policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional system. It is their 'image' of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment" (Holsti 1970, 245-246). Holsti also puts into the theory of roles the influence of the external environment, which shapes the role of the state. Specifically, he states: "National role conceptions are also related to, or buttressed by, the role prescriptions coming from the external environment" (Holsti 1970, 246). He also talks about the influence of the international system, regional international organizations.

The text perceives the external environment as an area of the EU, not of the whole international system. The analysis includes two levels – a) the EU level as an actor influencing EU enlargement policy, as well as the behaviour and actions of the Member States and countries seeking to join its structures. b) level of the CR, where the areas of formation of the Czech role in foreign policy will be examined. The level of national policy is expressed by official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the CR, the Office of the Government of the CR and the President of the CR.

The applied part of the text will monitor the function of the CR and the EU in the WB, which is formed in connection with the enlargement policy. Holsti identifies 17² role conception. Due to the topic of the text, only selected roles will be verified. Specifically, it will be the role of a regional-subsystem collaborator. The role is associated with long-term activity in a certain subsystem, region and leads to mutual, especially political and economic, cooperation in the regions. Furthermore, the role of the mediator-integrator can resolve conflicts or differences between states, in terms of diplomatic role (Holsti 1970, 265). Given that the analysis also examines the influence of the Czech Republic on the EU, the role of the bridge is also included, in which the state operates mainly in terms of communication. The analysis uses Holsti's analogy that the state acts as "acting as a translator" (Holsti 1970, 267).

The theory of roles will be used for the analysis of Czech foreign policy in connection with the perspective of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans. The issue will be seen in the light of changes in Czech positions in the context of the

² Specifically, these are the following roles: Bastion of revolution-liberator, Regional leader, Regional protector, Active Independent, Liberation supporter, Defender of the faith, Mediator-integrator, Developer, Bridge, Faithful ally, Independent, Example, Internal Development, Isolate, Protectee, Regional-subsystem collaborator.

first and second Czech presidencies of the EU. The reason for choosing the time period is the statement that the presidency of states can be perceived as a space where it is possible to promote national interests and also to defend them (Kaniok, Smekal 2010).

The analysis is based on the assumptions of the existence of a prescription for a role that has its source in the external environment. The analysis, therefore, takes into account the influence of national influences that shape the position of the Czech Republic. At the same time, the external influences shaping the Czech foreign policy towards the EU enlargement policy and the Western Balkans are also included. The analysis will take place on two levels: 1) involves a purely national level of action; 2) includes the external environment shaping Czech foreign policy.

In connection with the creation of the national role, it is necessary to solve questions about its formation. In the text, we admit that the role of the state changes over time. The role of the state is influenced by the past, either to oneself or to others (Beneš 2019, 18). The fact is that the current role of the state is influenced by the past. The role of states is influenced by the so-called others, with whom the state comes into contact. However, not all others have the same influence on the state. Therefore, in role theory, a distinction is made between significant other, generalized other. When creating the role of the state, it is necessary to follow the context of various variables. It is possible to agree with Hollis and Smith's conclusions: "roles are a two-way process between structure and actor" (Hollis and Smith 1990, 167). Politicians are affected by the internal (domestic) and external (international) environment in creating the role of the state. External stimuli in the form of changes in the international system can be a stimulus to gain public support for a role (Aras, Gorener 2010, 76-77).

EU and Western Balkans

The Western Balkans are key areas for the EU, especially in terms of security, defence and energy policy (AMO 2020). Interest in the Western Balkans region has been evident since the 1990s. However, several key moments can be identified when the EU has shown interest in WB in the context of enlargement policy. The Thessaloniki Summit (2003) was the first in which the WB states were promised a European perspective. In particular, the conclusions of the meeting state that: "... support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which will become an integral part of the EU, once they meet the established criteria" (Council of the European Union 2003, 12). In the same year, the Thessaloniki Agenda for the

Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration was published. The general statements are repeated here, namely the EU's cooperation with WB (for more see Council 2003). Subsequently, at the 2006 Brussels Summit, the EU 'only' confirmed the future of the WB in the EU if it fulfilled its obligations under the Stabilization and Association Agreement (EU Council 2007, 3). Another key document referring to EU accession is from 2018 – Strategy for the Western Balkans.

Before we turn to the latest Strategy, we need to ask ourselves what changes have taken place since 2008 that led to a slowdown in the EU's engagement in the Western Balkans? It is not possible to talk about weakening the influence in connection with the economic point of view. EU investment in the WB region has been steadily increasing since 2006. Trade between the EU and the WB has also increased. More than 80 % of WB exports go to the EU (Euractiv 2018a). In 2020, the countries of the Western Balkans exported 81,5 % of their exports to the EU and imports from the EU accounted for 61 % of all imports in the region (European Commission 2021). In addition, the EU has launched a Stabilization and Association Process with all WB countries, which means access to the EU's internal market. At the general level of enlargement policy, a decline in interest can be observed, especially in the context of the enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania. The EU has begun to be more careful. The year 2013, when Croatia joined the EU, can be considered the imaginary culmination of the active enlargement policy towards the WB. In the following period, it is possible to observe a departure of the EU from the region in terms of an active policy that openly supports accession. Access processes are at a standstill. We can interpret the EU's interest in the WB as *purposeful*, often associated with solving its security problems. A clear example was the economic and migration crisis in 2015 and 2016. The EC set aside € 30 million to support the World Bank's border capacity and migration management. Confidence in the EU was not supported by the coronavirus pandemic. Although the EU has set aside € 3 billion to fight the pandemic and provided the region with € 41 million worth of medical equipment. However, the EU has failed to distribute vaccines to WB quickly enough. Compared to the activities of the Russian Federation and China,³ deliveries were very slow and inefficient (Merheim-Eyre 2021, 74-75).

It can be said that the EU's role is weakening after 2013, as enlargement policy has not been a priority area for integration. On the one hand, the EU promised accession, but at the same time did not provide sufficient incentives, did not

³ For example, Serbia launched a vaccination program three days before the EU (Niksic, Stojanovic 2021) because it received vaccines from Russia, China and the USA.

encourage local states to be willing to follow it in meeting the accession criteria. The weakening influence of the EU has been exploited by third players who have become competitors for the EU. Russia, China and Turkey are establishing separate partnerships in the region. Their interests and policies in the region are often more effective and targeted. The EU supports the region stably and more massively, but the timing of aid did not meet local needs (Strážay 2021, 4; cf. Factor 2021). Third countries are therefore EU rivals who can frustrate Europe's role, interests and needs in the WB. The EU has a clear advantage in terms of financial assistance in the area and the prospect of operating in the European market. The membership offer is currently losing its appeal because it has been delayed for a long time. Europe is currently interested in changing the direction of enlargement policy to a more dynamic form.

At the Sofia Summit (2018), the EU returned to the Thessaloniki talks, where it reiterated the perspective of the WB countries in the European Union. At the same time, the EU has responded to the problems that significantly link it to the Western Balkans. Firstly, the effort to create an Energy Community and cooperation in the fight against illegal migration. Furthermore, the EU mentioned, in particular, the problems that block the fulfilment of the rules of the accession process, *i.e.* the dominant dysfunction of the rule of law and corruption. Part of the document is the setting of Sofia priorities, which very vaguely set out the activities that need to be done by both the EU and the WB (see EU-Western Balkans Summit, 2018). On the one hand, the Sofia summit can be interpreted as a return to a more active policy. On the other hand, there is clear scepticism about the enlargement process stemming from Donald Tusk's comment: "Today we have not tried to pretend that everything is clear and beautiful. Scepticism in the EU about enlargement as a political phenomenon is clear" (Euractiv 2018b). The facts are clear. The EU needs WB countries; faces the risk of third-country influence in the region while insisting on pre-accession conditions, plus it must take into account the views and interests of the Member States.

The change is offered by the Strategy for the WB from 2018, which can be described in retrospect as an awareness of the importance of the WB for European integration. In the Western Balkans Strategy, the EU already openly acknowledges the need to pay more attention to the region than in the past. EC President Jean-Claude Juncker said (2018) that: "... Investing in the stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans is an investment in the security and future of our Union" (European Commission 2018). The European Partnership takes the form of a pledge that begins and ends with the implementation of the accession rules. The aim of the new methodology is: "... to be more dynamic and more politically steered" (Popović 2021). In connection with the new EU methodology, it makes explicit

reference to: "... own political, security and economic interests" (European Council, Council of EU 2021). The new methodology should be a new impetus for enlargement policy. An instrument that overcomes scepticism about the EU's passive role in the WB. The new methodology as stated by the European Parliament: "makes the accession negotiations more credible, more predictable, more dynamic and guided by a stronger political steer" (Stanicek 2020, 1). The EU believes that the new approach will restore confidence in the enlargement process and lead to dynamic changes again.

The EU is aware of the importance of the current situation, which is not moving towards enlargement. The EU makes it clear that the enlargement process has not been dynamic enough. The question is, to what extent is and will the EU's role be active and convincing? How can the EU motivate the countries of the Western Balkans to lean towards it? Despite the new methodology, it is clear that the EU continues to require compliance with the rules formulated in the previous period. A novelty is an effort for enhanced cooperation on a ministerial basis and to speed up the accession process. The enlargement process is supposed to be: "... more credible, more dynamic and subject to stronger political steering" (European Council, Council of EU 2021). From the point of view of role theory, it is an essential element, the so-called strong political leadership, which presupposes the strengthening of the dialogue between the EU Member States and the acceding countries. Member States are key to the final approval of enlargement, and therefore a more active dialogue could potentially have the effect of removing or removing obstacles to enlargement by the Member States (EU Council 2021, 5).

However, more dialogue is to be expected, as the basic methodology scheme provides for at least one ministerial meeting per year (others as needed). The question is, therefore, how often will the meetings be and how effective will they be? In particular, the role of Member States in the methodology is specified as: "The Member States will continue to be able to contribute more systematically to the accession process, including via monitoring on the ground through their experts, direct contributions to the annual enlargement package and sectoral expertise" (Rada EU 2021, 6). "Member States should be able to contribute to this process by requesting the Commission to react in case of any stagnation or serious backsliding in the reform process" (Rada EU 2021, 10). The example of North Macedonia and Albania has shown the strength of the influence of the Member States. First, France (2019) refused to open accession talks with Northern Macedonia and Albania, even though they met the necessary conditions. Subsequently, Bulgaria blocked the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia (2020) (AMO 2020). Also problematic is the relationship with Kosovo, whose secession has not been recognized by Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain (Scazzieri 2021). The question is how and if at

all, it is possible for the new methodology to shift and change the problematic relationship between some EU Member States and the countries of the WB.

The confidence or inclination of the Western Balkans towards the EU was not strengthened even by the evaluation reports issued by the EC in 2020. According to the report, Northern Macedonia and Albania have made more progress than Serbia and Montenegro. Nevertheless, accession talks have not been opened with them (North Macedonia and Albania). The question is, what shapes the EU's position towards the countries of the Western Balkans? Here it is possible to agree with Stojić's thesis:

“The current EU enlargement policy appears to be less about the candidates' genuine domestic reforms and more a reflection of wider geopolitical rivalries in the region and particular interests of the most influential EU members to hasten or hinder this increasingly ill-suited policy” (Stojić 2020, 7).

A certain solution to the enlargement policy crisis outlined above may be a new methodology to respond to developments in the potential/candidate country and to take the path of real benefits if the state fulfils the conditions for accession. However, the question is, to what extent will the accession process be affected by the separate interests of the EU Member States? Respectively, how can the EU apply the conclusions of the methodology in practice and how the EU's geopolitical and security interests will be reflected in the European approach, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. Accession to the EU alone has not been enough as a reward for meeting the conditions. Reform steps and rewards should be phased in so that partial successes and rewards are an incentive for further change. The motivation for change should be more tailored to the specific Western Balkans. The Russian example shows that partial incentives can be more effective than a long-term but difficult-to-achieve vision of full EU membership. The EU's role is weakening in the Western Balkans and its actions are not being taken seriously by political elites or the public (Stojic 2020, 9). The analysis of the situation in the individual countries of the Western Balkans is not the subject of analysis. However, it should be noted that the EU's efforts also run into the problems of local states, where often political elites formally agree to the rules of access but do not implement them in practice (see Strážay 2021).

The new methodology can be assessed positively as a new direction of enlargement policy (see e.g. Nechev, Tilev, Marović, Čela 2021, 8). The drive for greater links between the Member States and pre-accession countries can be seen as positive. Of course, given the frequency of conferences and the use of the possibility to draw attention to the lack of accession negotiations by the Member States. The following text, therefore, has the ambition to respond to the influence of

the Member States on the accession process. Due to the scope of the text, one case study related to the Czech Republic is used. The text follows the role of the Czech Republic in a longer time perspective so that it is possible to monitor a possible change in the role. The role will be monitored on the basis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, and the President of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic and the Western Balkans

In general, it can be stated that within the EU there is a group of Member States supporting the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU. In addition to the Czech Republic, these are the Visegrad Group countries – Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as Austria, Croatia and Slovenia (Noyan 2021). From a long-term perspective, the interests of Czech foreign policy overlap with the interests of the V4 platform. The Visegrad interest is the European perspective of the Western Balkans in the EU. In addition, it should be noted that the V4 is the only regional organization at the EU level that supports the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. Its role is therefore irreplaceable and Czech foreign policy also reflects the interests of this group. The V4 talks state that the V4 states will convince their partners in Europe of the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU (Vláda ČR 2019). In February 2020, the Visegrad Group countries signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Western Balkans Fund and the International Visegrad Fund (Havlíček, Svobodová, Jungwirth 2020). Regional cooperation between the V4 and the Western Balkans could be an appropriate model for cooperation for EU action in the region.

From the point of view of role theory, it is necessary to perceive the fact that these are new EU member states and states that are rather small or medium-sized. Due to these characteristics, they may face the challenge of asserting their interests in the Western Balkans within the EU.

If we focus on the Czech Republic's foreign policy, it is evident that the interest in the Western Balkans region is long-term. As early as the first half of the 1990s, it was associated with conflict resolution in the region. In general, it can be said that the Czech Republic has the Western Balkans as one of the priorities of long-term foreign policy. Monitoring the development of the relationship with the region since 2009, it is clear that the Western Balkans were already clearly enshrined in the presidency's agenda and were a priority area. In particular, the Czech Republic supported Croatia's accession to the EU and supported the acceleration of the

Stabilization and Association Process. Croatia was to set an example for other countries in the Western Balkans. The presidency's program mentioned cooperation efforts with Kosovo, Macedonia; harmonization of relations between Belgrade and Priština. The Western Balkans have been linked to security issues, the fight against terrorism and enlargement policy (Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU 2009). However, the program was very general and broad in the section on the Western Balkans. It can be said that the program of the Czech Presidency corresponded to the foreign policy of the Cabinet of M. Topolánek, whose program statement did not mention the Western Balkans in the area of foreign policy priorities. After all, the subsequent governments of Fischer and Rusnok (after 2013) did not similarly mention the Western Balkans. The presidency's program, therefore, represented a certain continuity in the Czech Republic's foreign policy, which focuses on the Western Balkans, but this is not an absolute priority (Dopita 2012, 189). As Tesař states, Czech foreign policy lacks a solution to specific current Balkan issues. The public is not sufficiently informed about the situation in the region and has no relation to it (Tesař 2010, 227, 237). The Czech Republic's role in enlargement policy has been supportive of the Western Balkans. The Czech Republic supported visa liberalization and the continuation of the Stabilization and Association Agreements. However, we cannot talk about a specific or active policy within the EU. Rather, it was a matter of following the EU's priorities in the Western Balkans.

Subsequent government cabinets (Sobotka's [2014-2017] and Babiš's [2017-2021]) combined foreign policy toward the Western Balkans with a more proactive approach. The program statements mention the Western Balkans in connection with EU enlargement (Vláda ČR 2014; Vláda ČR 2018). Increased interest in the Western Balkans was driven by efforts to protect the Schengen area from the influx of refugees. The Western Balkans were associated with European security and the issue of resolving the migration crisis (Vláda České republiky 2018). The fact that the Balkans became a buffer zone for migration towards the Schengen area resonated in Czech foreign policy. The Western Balkans have begun to be linked to the protection of external borders and the closure of the Balkan migration route.

In the case of Czech foreign policy, it is necessary to take into account the double-track system resulting from the influence of the President of the Czech Republic. As early as 2008, it was evident that President Klaus was open to negotiations with Belgrade, but did not support Priština's international recognition (Tesař 2010, 234). Even the current President Zeman supports the withdrawal of such recognition.⁴ On the contrary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been

⁴ For example: President Zeman "... promised to try to persuade his country to withdraw its diplomatic recognition of Kosovo, granted in 2008." (Zivanovic 2019).

continuously supporting the declared independence since 2008 (Vláda ČR 2008). These facts cast a sign of inconsistency on the Czech role in the Western Balkans. We can agree with the statement that the approach of the Czech Republic is rather ambiguous (Tesař 2010, 237). The general approach to the Western Balkans is well demonstrated by President Zeman's statement during the EU enlargement to Croatia in 2013. Zeman said that he considered "the enlargement of the Union to be a 'nice thing', but the EU should... deepen its integration mechanisms" (Euractiv 2013). The polarization of the Czech Republic's foreign policy was evident in 2016. The Chamber of Deputies and the President were against cooperating with the authorities in Kosovo, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported it (Dopita 2016, 204). Therefore, it was not possible to ratify the bilateral agreement between two sides. The agreement has been negotiated since 2014 and has been postponed eight times until 2016 (Dopita 2016, 209). The tensions arising from the disunity of Czech foreign policy resonate in Serbia's accession process, because without the normalization of relations with Priština, there will be no shift in Belgrade's accession negotiations. The divergent position of Czech foreign policy towards Kosovo generally reduces the credibility of Czech foreign policy in the Western Balkans.

If we return to the general level of Czech foreign policy, then its basic starting points are based on the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic (its updates from 2011, 2015 and 2019 in the period under review). The concept from 2011 identified the Western Balkans as a neighbouring region, where the Czech Republic is willing to engage and support integration efforts on a bilateral basis and within the EU (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí 2011, 16). The new Foreign Policy Concept of 2015 identifies the Western Balkans as an area of security interest and refers to political, historical and cultural ties. The support of Serbia in joining the EU and other countries of the Western Balkans, in general, is explicitly mentioned. However, EU membership is linked to the fulfilment of pre-accession conditions. The Czech Republic rejects additional conditions for joining the EU (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí ČR 2015, 13-14). The latest concept from 2019 largely copies the previous concept. A certain shift can be observed in the communication that: "... will seek to address bilateral issues between Member States and EU candidate or potential candidate countries outside enlargement policy" (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí 2019). The Czech Republic is finding a partnership in fulfilling this goal in Austria and within the Visegrad Group platform. The concept seems to follow the intention of the new enlargement methodology and the current problems of enlargement policy, albeit at a very general level.

The not very proactive policy towards the Western Balkans is evidenced by the fact that the only text on the Czech Republic's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans region is available on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and this

one is from 2013. (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí 2013). There are no updates that would correspond to the changes in the region. In this respect, the role of the Czech Republic is very weak. The Czech arbitrator of foreign policy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has not issued an updated version of foreign policy towards the Western Balkans in the last nine years. This fact is striking given the statement of Czech politicians about the priority interests of the Czech Republic in the Western Balkans. The 2013 Program states that: “The Czech Republic has a strong, long-term policy towards the Western Balkans, based on clearly defined interests and going across the political spectrum. Enlargement support is a positive agenda based on the premise that countries meet the criteria and implement internal reforms responsibly on the road to the EU. On the other hand, it is necessary to actively contribute to reaching a consensus within the EU. This policy brings positive points and has no negative effects inside or outside the Czech Republic. The continuation of the current strong, but not unilaterally presented support for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU remains beneficial for the Czech Republic” (Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí 2013, 17). The statement shows that the Czech Republic is aware of EU membership and partnership with the Western Balkans. However, the question is which area of activities will be implemented, whether to the EU, ie the use of the potential to present WB in a good light. Or the Czech Republic will launch a more active policy directly with the countries of the Western Balkans.

The development of recent years suggests that the Czech Republic has chosen a rather active policy at the EU level. The Czech Republic has been involved in developing a new methodology, actively supporting the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Czech foreign policy perceives the adoption of the new methodology as a revitalization of confidence in enlargement policy (Havlíček, Svobodová, Jungwirth 2022). Activities within the V4 continue (see above). At the summit in Sofia (2018), the Czech Republic supported the agreed conclusions, but at the same time demanded the setting of a specific date for accession to the EU, which would act as an effective motivation for the countries of the Western Balkans. Foreign Minister Petříček (2019) stated that: “Enlargement policy is the best instrument for ensuring stability, prosperity and economic growth in the Western Balkans. A clear perspective of future membership in the European Union is key for further transformation, reconciliation and promotion of the values, rules and standards of the Union” (Petříček 2019). In 2020, the Czech Republic opposed making the opening of accession talks conditional on issues of national self-determination. Foreign Minister Kulhánek, together with the ministers from Austria and Slovenia, called on EU member states not to delay the accession process (in response to the Bulgarian negotiations) (Merheim-Eyre 2021, 74). At the time of the Coronavirus

pandemic, the Czech Republic was in a group of 13⁵ Member States that supported the allocation of part of the vaccines to the Western Balkans. However, this request has not been heard at the EU level. At present, Czech foreign policy is shaped by a new government cabinet, which was established after the parliamentary elections in 2021. The government statement mentions the Western Balkans rather marginally, in connection with the support of the enlargement policy to the countries of the Western Balkans (Vláda ČR 2022).

The real role of the new government vis-à-vis the Western Balkans can be seen in the case of shaping the program for the Czech Presidency, which will take place in the second half of 2022. From a long-term perspective, it was clear that the Western Balkans will be one of the priority areas during the presidency. The new cabinet does not necessarily follow the original plan, not only from an ideological point of view. It is necessary to perceive some external variables that affect the role of the Czech Republic in the position of mediator. On the one hand, this is a problematic situation in the Western Balkans region itself. In particular, the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, tensions in Montenegro or between Belgrade and Priština (Čermák 2022). The impact of the conflict in Ukraine cannot be ignored, as it largely overshadows the original agenda that the Czech Republic planned to address during the presidency (Muni TV, 2022).

When planning the Czech Presidency, it seemed that the Western Balkans region would be a clear priority area of the Czech Republic's foreign policy. It provided an opportunity to develop an EU-based debate on the accession of the Western Balkans to its structures, and there was a presumption that an EU-Western Balkans summit would take place. The role of the Czech Republic is all the more crucial because the next presiding states (Sweden and Spain) have no interests in the WB region (Reilly 2022).

With the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the agenda underwent a significant change. Because the content of the program of the Czech Presidency (May 2022) is not known at the time of writing, it is not possible to analyse Czech priorities directly. At present, it seems that the WB area will be rather neglected. The statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the main topics will be Russian aggression in Ukraine, digital transformation, energy security or strengthening of democratic institutions is currently available (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2022).

⁵ Specifically, these countries were: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden.

Conclusion

The Western Balkans are linked to the political, security and economic interests not only of the EU and its Member States, but also of non-European actors. Overall, the Western Balkans have a strategic position. The EU is aware of this by trying to use enlargement policy as a specific foreign policy tool. The EU's role has not always been consistent in the Western Balkans. It is possible to observe a period of increased interest, especially at the beginning of the millennium. The Thessaloniki Summit formulated the perspective of the Western Balkans in EU structures. Through its enlargement policy, the EU has begun to support an overall transformation aimed at meeting entry conditions. Following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania (2007) to the EU, it is possible to observe a gradual slowdown or slowing down of interest in further enlargement. The exception was Croatia, whose entry was followed by a departure from an active enlargement policy. Although the economic partnership with the WB continued after 2013, the EU's role in the area began to be weakened mainly by making entry conditional on strict entry conditions. The EU's role at the WB was shaped by: 1) an internal environment that has not been in favour of further expansion. In terms of sub-issues between the EU Member States and the WB States; 2) The Migration Crisis (2015), as an external influence shaping the EU's role, demonstrated the importance of the Western Balkans in ensuring the EU's internal security. Nevertheless, it is not possible to say that the EU's role at the WB has changed. The prospect of further enlargement has been repeatedly questioned by the EU, leading to growing scepticism about EU integration among the public and politicians in the Western Balkans. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic has fully exposed the growing influence of third countries in the Western Balkans. The involvement of Russia, China and Turkey in the region has encouraged the EU and some Member States to pursue a more active policy linked to the renewed prospect of EU accession.

The result is the adoption of a new enlargement methodology, which promises new mechanisms and dynamics for the pre-accession period. The EU's role seems to have remained broadly the same, ie to monitor pre-accession and entry conditions and to declare interest in enlargement, which is often motivated by the EU's security and geostrategic interests. The new methodology gives the Member States a greater role. In general, Member States' influence on enlargement policy remains crucial. The question is how the Member States will make use of the new opportunities, and whether the negative attitude of some EU Member States outweighs the accession of the Western Balkans.

In analysing the role of the Czech Republic in the enlargement policy of the Western Balkans, it is possible to draw several conclusions in the context of role theory. The Czech Republic has undeniably long-term interests in the WB region, which correspond to the role of a regional subsystem collaborator. Specifically, these are political, economic, cultural and historical ties with the countries of the Western Balkans. These ties include the Czech Republic in the group of countries that support the accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU. However, this is a role linked rather purely to the interests of the Czech Republic as such and does not overlap with enlargement policy. If we want to apply the role of mediator, there is more room for analysis of Czech foreign policy within the EU. At the level of the Government of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there is an obvious effort to mediate the relationship between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. The Western Balkans were mentioned in official documents, but it was not about setting out specific policies or activities. The general references linking the WB to EU integration prevailed. The change in role was a) prompted by a change in the composition of the government cabinet after the 2014 elections. It was dominantly a reflection of the migration crisis, the solution of which in the Czech environment was associated with securing the Western Balkans route. Despite the above-mentioned pro-WB direction of the Czech Republic's foreign policy, it is not possible to say that it would play a purely mediator or bridge role. The first reason is that the government's programs and foreign policy concepts of the Czech Republic are very general towards the Western Balkans. The issues of the Western Balkans are not addressed at all in public discourse. In addition, the last concrete concept for the Western Balkans was issued in 2013 and has no updates. The second is the inconsistent direction of foreign policy, because it is formed on two levels. In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this is the influence of the president. The president cannot, from his position, formulate a foreign policy. Nevertheless, in the last more than ten years, presidential administrations have been associated with formulating their views and attitudes on foreign policy. Due to internal disagreements regarding the recognition of Kosovo, Czech foreign policy appears inconsistent.

We can observe the role of the bridge in recent years, when the Czech Republic's EU-based policy is becoming more active. The Czech Republic supported the adoption of a new enlargement methodology, the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Alternatively, an active policy towards the WB at the level of the Visegrad Group can be seen.

Currently, it is necessary to take into account the influence of the new political representation, which formulates the program of the Czech Presidency of the EU. The Western Balkans were to be one of the priorities of the Czech Presidency.

However, in the context of the war in Ukraine, it seems that the region of the Western Balkans will be addressed rather marginally, although the presidency's program is not yet officially known. Partial priorities have already been formulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Western Balkans are absent.

In the context of the new methodology, the role of the Czech Republic should be more active, for several reasons. 1) the long-term foreign policy goal to the Western Balkans would be symbolically met; 2) the agenda of the Western Balkans should not be neglected precisely because of the more pressing issue (solving the war in Ukraine). On the contrary, given the growing influence of the Russian Federation in the Western Balkans, changes were to be made to accelerate the rapprochement of the Western Balkans with the EU; 3) the strategic position of the Western Balkans and its importance for European security should be taken into account.

If we are to assess the importance of the methodology for the future of the enlargement process, it must be said that the EU should take a more proactive approach to enlargement policy. 1) It should set out clear and concrete changes that individual states should make. 2) It should clearly define the rewards or benefits that the state will receive after meeting the requirements. 3) Also identify clear disadvantages or losses that will follow non-compliance. In general, the role of the EU should be more motivating. The role of the Member States should be more active in enlargement policy and focus in particular on sceptical states such as Bulgaria or France. This could fulfil the goal and purpose of the new methodology – to speed up the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU.

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**POLITIKA PROŠIRENJA I ZAPADNI BALKAN – ULOGA ČEŠKE REPUBLIKE I EU
U KONTEKSTU REVIDIRANE METODOLOGIJE PROŠIRENJA**

Apstrakt: U ovom istraživanju analizira se uloga EU i Češke na Zapadnom Balkanu u kontekstu politike proširenja, koja je promenjena usvajanjem revidirane metodologije. Istraživanje se zasniva na studiji slučaja u okviru definisanog vremenskog intervala. Polazi se od premise da je uloga EU i Češke na Zapadnom Balkanu oblikovana od strane unutrašnjih i spoljnih aspekata, pre nego specifičnom situacijom i izazovima samog tog regiona. Argumentacija se zasniva na teoriji uloga i potvrđuje opseg delovanja Češke Republike kao posrednika i regionalnog saradnika između EU i Zapadnog Balkana. Ubuduće bi EU trebalo da definiše: jasne i konkretne promene koje se zahtevaju od kandidata; precizno odredi benefite koji će kandidatima sledovati nakon ispunjavanja kriterijuma i identifikuje posledice ili gubitke koji će uslediti u slučaju neispunjavanja uslova. Autorka nalazi da i EU i njene države-članice treba da preuzmu snažniju i dinamičniju ulogu u pristupnom procesu kandidata za članstvo.

Ključne reči: Zapadni Balkan, proširenje EU, Češka Republika, teorija uloga, predsedavanje.