



# KOSOVO

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### **Kosovo autonomy dispute rages**

By Marketa Hulpachova, The Prague Post

<http://www.praguepost.com/articles/2008/06/25/kosovo-autonomy-dispute-rages.php>

One month after the Cabinet sauntered off to the north Bohemian town of Teplice to formally recognize the independence of Kosovo in an “extraordinary meeting,” the decision continues to fulminate among local pundits.

Emotional tirades interwove with constructive criticism in a June 18 panel discussion that pitted Foreign Affairs Minister Karel Schwarzenberg against some of the country’s top experts on Czech foreign policy in the Balkans.

While commended by several participants for his willingness to face the onslaught of disapproval voiced by the audience, Schwarzenberg’s arguments for recognizing Kosovo appeared meek next to the commentaries of his fellow panelists, including former Foreign Affairs Minister Jiří Dienstbier.

One day after returning from a visit to Belgrade, Dienstbier initiated the discussion with a reminder of Serbia’s historic solidarity with the Czechs.

“For the Serbians, the Czech recognition of Kosovo was perceived differently than the recognition of other countries. They recall that their country was willing to mobilize [against Germany] during the Munich Agreement, that they protested against the [Soviet] invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, that they supported the Charter 77 [anti-communist] movement,” he said. “From this less intellectual perspective, they view the Czech decision to recognize Kosovo as a betrayal.”

It was the first of several panelist allusions to the infamous agreement of 1938, when France and England yielded to Germany’s request to annex Sudetenland, an ethnically German area in Czechoslovakia.

Although the Czech government may not have realized this, the fact that the Cabinet’s decision was made on the territory of the former Sudetenland is an irony that did not go unnoticed by Serbian intellectuals, said Dienstbier.

“An area belonging to another country was annexed because a different language was spoken there. This is symbolic of what happened in Kosovo,” he added.

Despite what Dienstbier called a “feeling of regret” at the abrupt Czech decision — which caused Serbia to recall its ambassador to the Czech Republic — Serbian politicians have no intention of severing diplomatic ties with Prague, and are in fact searching for ways to ease tensions that erupted there as a result of the Czech decision.



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With Prague's diplomatic priorities firmly fixed on the Balkans, Belgrade hopes that the Czech Republic will champion Serbian interests when assuming the EU presidency in January. These include the approval of an association agreement strengthening Serbia's ties to the EU, the abolishment of visa requirements for Serbs traveling to the EU, and the establishment of EU education programs and scholarships for Serbian students.

### **Ambiguous policy**

Aware of Serbia's disappointment, the Czech government "remains committed to fully integrating Serbia into the EU," said Schwarzenberg. "We must support Serbia, but we must also support Kosovo."

He stressed cooperation with the United Nations' plans for regional stability and emphasized the importance of boosting Kosovo's economy. "The biggest problems in Kosovo are terrible poverty, destitution and unemployment," he said. "It is therefore extremely important to attract foreign investment."

Aside from outlining the Czech government's future involvement in Kosovo, Schwarzenberg attempted to defend the government's aberrant decision to recognize its independence. As recently as February, Schwarzenberg said the Czech Republic was "in no rush" to recognize Kosovo, and that a final decision would be based on an EU consensus and further negotiation with the region.

"Initially, we postponed the recognition, but we cannot be engaged in the region without participating in the development," he now said. "Prime Minister [Mirek Topolánek] decided that it was time that I present the issue."

Schwarzenberg's main argument for the recognition was the presence of 500 Czech soldiers in the area, who would be placed in an "unpleasant situation" if they occupied a territory whose government was not recognized by their country. However, this explanation was promptly refuted by Dienstbier, who pointed out that Slovakia had deployed soldiers to Kosovo despite not recognizing it.

Aside from complicating the Czech military presence, Schwarzenberg said failing to recognize Kosovo jeopardized the Czech Republic's membership in the International Steering Group (ISG), a recently forged union of countries supporting independence and democracy in the region.

After joining the group in March, the Czech Republic was recently expelled due to its fragmented stance on Kosovo independence, Schwarzenberg said, earning harsh criticism from Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Lubomír Zaorálek, who questioned the logic of joining the ISG in the first place.



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“We voluntarily joined a group of the most ardent supporters of Kosovo independence, and were then kicked out when they found out this decision had no support here — not in the governing coalition or Parliament,” he said, collecting applause. “What sort of purpose did this serve?”

According to Zaorálek, this sort of ambiguity is characteristic and extremely detrimental to the country’s foreign policy. Instead of joining the ISG, the Czechs could have used their knowledge of the region to try and find a compromise for the Kosovo issue while maintaining their position as negotiators. “I saw this as a great potential for the Czech foreign policy platform and for the EU presidency,” he said. “But now our chance has been lost.”