

'The Czech Republic applies for EU membership' from Le Monde (23 January 1996)

Caption: On 23 January 1996, the French daily newspaper Le Monde comments on the Czech Republic's application for accession to the European Union.

Source: Le Monde. 23.01.1996. Paris: Le Monde. "La République tchèque demande son adhésion à l'Union européenne", auteur:Plichta, Martin.

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The Czech Republic applies for EU membership

Marriage of convenience or of love? Prague's application to join the European Union (EU), submitted on Tuesday 23 January, is a sensible compromise between the Government's Euro-scepticism and the desire to complete the 'European homecoming'. The memorandum annexed to the application for accession openly admits that it was not easy to accept all the institutions, procedures and laws as they have come to exist after several decades of negotiations between the Member States. 'Despite that,' the document adds, 'the Czech Republic accepts for its future membership the European Union such as it is.'

As the last country in the Visegrad Group to apply for accession (after Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), the Czech Republic has earned itself a reputation for Euro-scepticism because of Mr Klaus' fierce attacks on Brussels. 'I believe that the idea of integration enjoys broad support in Europe but the idea of unification is not advocated by all Europeans,' he declared in Paris in November 1995. Being an ultra-liberal, Mr Klaus happily uses Margaret Thatcher's words to lambast the 'bureaucratisation' and 'interventionism' of the Commission in Brussels, which 'is akin to the socialist planning committee'.

Mr Klaus has nevertheless evolved over recent months. He is now often heard to say that 'as far as the future is concerned I am a Euro-optimist, particularly with regard to the benefits of European integration. But I am a Euro-realist when it comes to our capacity to unite Europe under a single ideological banner.'

Negotiations in 1998

Even though he considers that 'the single currency is not a suitable objective for the near future', the Czech Prime Minister is quick to brag about being at the head of one of the few nations among the EU associated countries or Member States to meet most of the convergence criteria.

This 'preparedness' for membership is an important element in the future negotiations that could begin at the end of 1998. According to a Western diplomat in Prague, 'In economic terms the Czech Republic has made a successful transformation with macro-economic indicators that would make many a European capital green with envy, and it has no problems on the sensitive issues such as agriculture.' However, the talks will not be easy with the current leadership in Prague, which is likely to be re-elected for a further four-year term in parliamentary elections next June. According to Czech political scientist Alexander Ort, 'There is a real danger that the negotiations will be complicated because Mr Klaus is sure to ask some awkward questions.'

Martin Plichta