

The Czech Republic Joins ESO

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(ESO Director General)

I am delighted to welcome the Czech Republic as our 13th member state. From its size, the Czech Republic may not belong to the 'big' member states, but the accession nonetheless marks an important point in ESO's history and, I believe, in the history of Czech astronomy as well. The Czech Republic is the first of the Central and East European countries to join ESO. The membership underlines ESO's continuing evolution as the prime European organisation for astronomy, whilst at the same time it enables Czech astronomers to become fully integrated in the European astronomical community.

As always in such cases, joining an international organisation requires a process with a political underpinning and a set of formal steps. Not surprisingly, this process can take years. In the case of the Czech Republic the first informal contacts occurred at the time of the XXVth General Assembly of the IAU in Sydney, Australia.

Discussions continued in the Czech Republic leading to an invitation for me to visit Prague on 10 November 2005. During the visit, in which I was accompanied by Claus Madsen, we had very successful interactions with high-ranking Czech officials, including Prof. Václav Pačes, President of the Czech Academy of Sciences, and representatives of several ministries. We were also received by Dr. Martin Jahn, the then Deputy Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, who expressed strong support for the Czech bid to join ESO. The visit also included a major press conference and a live TV interview with Dr. Jan Palouš, of the Astronomical Institute of the Academy of Sciences, and myself.

It was clear that the process was gaining considerable momentum, and thus the formal request for membership arrived in the spring of 2006, leading to the establishment by the ESO Council of a negotiating team, chaired by Council Vice-President Dr. Monnik Desmeth.

The XXVIth IAU General Assembly, held in Prague in 2006, clearly provided a boost for the Czech efforts to join ESO, not the least in securing the necessary public and political support. Thus our Czech colleagues used the opportunity to publish a fine and very interesting popular book about Czech astronomy and ESO, which, together with the General Assembly, created considerable media interest.

On 20 September 2006, at a meeting at ESO Headquarters, the negotiating teams from ESO and the Czech Republic arrived at an agreement in principle, which was subsequently presented to the Committee of Council.

This Agreement was formally confirmed by the ESO Council at its meeting on 6 December and a few days thereafter by the Czech government, enabling a signing ceremony in Prague on 22 December (see photograph below). This was important because the Agreement foresaw accession by 1 January 2007. With the signatures in place, the agreement could be submitted to the Czech Parliament for ratification within an agreed 'grace period'. This formal procedure was concluded on 30 April 2007, when I was notified of the deposition of the instrument of ratification at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We look forward to an active Czech participation in ESO's programmes in time to come.

Photo: Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic



Ms. Miroslava Kopicová, Minister of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, and Tom Wilson, Associate Director of ESO, shake hands following the signing of the agreement for the entry of the Czech Republic into ESO which took place on 22 December 2006 in Prague. The formal accession took place, without ceremony, on 30 April 2007.

Dr. Jan Palouš of the Astronomical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences addressing delegates at the ESO Industry Day held in Prague on 8 June 2007.



Photo: L. Calçada, ESO