

## **Czech mate not ignoring Canada-EU free-trade talks**

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PARIS - The Czech Republic, which replaces France at the helm of the European Union next month, isn't ignoring Canada-EU free-trade negotiations even though the issue isn't mentioned in Prague's declaration of priorities, according to a government official.

Czech Deputy Premier Alexandr Vondra, in a recent speech, didn't mention Canada once while outlining key priority areas that focused on the 27-country EU's relations with Russia, the U.S. and Israel.

But a Czech official said Mr. Vondra's discussion of U.S. economic and strategic issues, under the heading of the "transatlantic relationship," implicitly included Canada.

"Transatlantic relations are a key priority for the incoming Czech EU presidency. Relations with Canada fall into that category," Jan Sliva, spokesman for the Czech delegation at EU headquarters in Brussels, said in an e-mail to Canwest News Service. "The Czech Republic will work closely with the European Commission and other EU countries towards an agreement on deepened economic partnership."

He said he hopes Canada and the EU can officially launch trade negotiations during the Czech Republic's six-month presidency in the first half of 2009.

Jason Langrish, spokesman for the Canada-Europe Roundtable for Business, expressed disappointment that Vondra didn't consider the matter important enough to include in his speech.

But Langrish said he expects French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who announced the EU's willingness to launch talks during his visit to Canada in October, will continue to push bureaucrats in Brussels to advance the file.