

Europe – Our Uncompleted Mission

**Speech of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic,
Lubomír Zaorálek at the German Council for Foreign Relations (DGAP)**

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very glad to have this opportunity to be here and very honoured to have the chance to speak to this splendid audience. Thank you for the invitation and for the opportunity. When I see the title „Europe – Our Uncompleted Mission“, it seems to me somewhat nebulous. Now, I would like to speak about our Czech uncompleted mission. Though it may be true that the whole of Europe is an uncompleted mission, I would like to concentrate on Czech positions specifically. As it has been mentioned we have a new government. Since every government is like a new beginning, let me tell you what this government would mean for Europe and the Czech-German relations.

Allow me to state at the very beginning of my brief address, which I am privileged to deliver on the ground of the German Council for Foreign Relations, that we live in interesting times. However, I am fully aware that it's much easier to say this than to accept it.

We all know the old Chinese curse wishing others to live in interesting times. We don't need to have old Chinese sages around to explain what this (at first sight) lovely wish actually means. More than sixty years ago the founding fathers of the European Union started a project whose purpose may be simplified to wishing to create a situation on the post-war European continent as peaceful as possible. Their project doubtlessly succeeded as Europe (and particularly the European Union) has enjoyed more than fifty years of permanent peace and a staggering rise in the quality of life. Yet this success had also its price. We Europeans have got used to (if not addicted to) good messages and the desire for more of them. It resulted in something less desirable.

Many have analysed what went wrong in Europe (as well as world-wide) with the economy, which became a victim of its previous success, and started to appeal not only to human needs but also to human greed. It would be cheap to reject all the attempts to establish consumerism as a driving force of social progress. Reasonable consumption has surely contributed to the peaceful development in Europe, particularly after the two previous destructive wars. Regardless, an economic climate whose main ambition seemed to be to make people buy things they don't need with money they don't have, has finally facilitated something different – the return of interesting times to Europe.

I dare to say that the main victim of this economic aberration was not the economy itself but its, perhaps, most important attribute - confidence. Confidence may not be everything but without confidence we have nothing. We all surely know the famous quote of the political advisor of President Clinton: "it's the economy, stupid". But this quote comes from the golden period of time when banks were eager to lend money without questioning the real credibility of the borrowers. These times are gone. The picture of the current economic world show banks that are still scared to do their job, which means lending money to the clients of

the real economy, even though they very often have been recapitalised by the state. How does that happen? It's confidence, stupid.

The lack of confidence does not only harm the banking world. It is, unfortunately, a phenomenon which gives a hard time to the rest of us also. It affects the elites as well as the general public; it affects the European Union as well as the member states, but most of all it affects us so that we question that we are still with our goal, our strategy and our rules on the right path. After having enjoyed more than fifty happy years of European integration this is something that should be taken extremely seriously, but it does not mean that we should panic.

Lack of confidence is a serious deficiency but it is curable. Since the economic crisis or, I should say, the crisis of mutual confidence broke out, we have witnessed many valid attempts in the European Union to come up with a proper remedy. One of these attempts was the so-called Fiscal Compact whose most obvious goal was to coordinate fiscal politics within the Eurozone, but all the transparency and peer-control involved served the less obvious (but maybe more important) purpose: the restoration of mutual trust among the participating states.

The previous Czech government, as you know, found its difficulties submitting to this goal even though it reserved for the Czech Republic the right to join the Fiscal Compact some time in the future. I am more than happy to announce that the new Czech government decided that this time has come and we are determined to join the Fiscal Compact and to be a part of the broad efforts to restore mutual confidence within the European Union as well as its future.

We know very well that restoration of trust is not a sprint but a marathon. We went this way many times in the recent past and it is no exaggeration to say that we were quite successful. You may have followed the common endeavour of the states united in the Visegrad group to introduce in the Central European region a genuine and deep collaboration based upon mutual respect and, of course, trust. The Visegrad group, thanks to the determination of all participants, overcame all the temporary difficulties it faced in the period of the adjustment of our economies. Everything, including the establishment of common goals and inner practice, was then in flux. All we wanted was just to overcome the heritage of the communist time and to establish a genuine partnership in the Central Europe instead of the enforced Soviet-like brotherhood.

We knew that without this our goal to join the European Union would never materialise - and we succeeded. We established not only sensible rules for our collaboration reaching beyond the common accession to the European Union ten years ago, but we also learned how to sort out our inner dissension without damaging our sense of unity. How did we do it? We agreed on common vision, shared our interests but, most of all, we built up mutual trust.

But Czech politics, and its efforts to build up this mutual trust, were successful not only within the Visegrad framework. We have also achieved this with our Czech-German relationship. As you must know the signature of the common Declaration in 1997 created not only the basis for our dealing with our common, occasionally very painful past but it created a context for our collaboration for a better, predictable Europe based upon mutual respect. We learned how to deal with our problems, how to solve them if possible, and how to accept differences, if necessary.

We learned that not all problems must have a formal solution, occasionally it is sufficient to create a context where we can understand each other as real and genuine partners. Mutual understanding is the best way to build up mutual trust.

I dare to say that the work invested in the Czech-German Declaration has not changed only the Czech politics and the way how Czech elites perceive our relationship. It seems to me that the German perception of the Czech Republic (and not only of the Czech Republic) has changed too: Germany has become one of the most sensitive member states within the European Union which takes even the smaller partners and their notions or objections very seriously. We appreciate this very much. It contributes not only to the positive climate in our bilateral relationship but deepens productive atmosphere and mutual trust within the whole European Union.

Mutual trust, however, has not only to be established, it also has to be maintained. The latter task is not easier than the former but there is at least something which may require a certain know-how. The rules. Rules are the best invention framework within which mutual confidence is achieved. But their implementation may be occasionally very painful and the temptation to suspend them for a temporary benefit very strong.

We don't need to look to history to find proper examples - the recent problems with disobedience of the Maastricht criteria demonstrated more than vividly that if everybody would go for some short-cut whenever it would suit him better, it may end up not only with the others losing their temper, but also with a loss of common goals. This price proved definitely too high for the whole community. It did not poison just mutual trust, it also poisoned the self-confidence of all protagonists.

Retrospectively, of course, we always know better. One of the pillars of the modern European civilization is nothing but historical lessons which we already had to learn. Yet for fulfilling our European goals is not good enough just to know. We need to act.

Czech President, Miloš Zeman, addressed recently the European Parliament in Strasburg. He used this opportunity to speak about his European dream. This dream consists of a strong European Union which has its common foreign policy as well as one generally respected Foreign Minister. European Union has in his dream also a strong European Commission and common military force.

This all is not just an end in itself. This all will enable European Union to live up to its own expectations at the world stage. This all would turn the European Union into a strong, self-confident partner of the United States, a partner which not only the United States are missing so badly in the current world.

This dream is very close to my heart. There is only one point I wish to add. This dream won't come true by itself. We all need to work for it. It's absolutely clear that it won't happen overnight and that it still will cost a lot of the traditional stuff like blood, sweat and tears. But the history shows that we can succeed. Our chances will definitely increase if we could rely on our mutual trust as well as the shared self-confidence.

A European Union without self-confidence would be a problem not only for us but also for the rest of the world. Let's look just at the current crisis in Ukraine. The future of Ukraine may be the first victim of a divided and unambitious European Union.

But we should not fool ourselves. The crisis in Ukraine won't be solved quickly. We are all at risk, but first of all the people of Ukraine already face a path to a functioning democracy which is very serious and demanding. A self-confident EU alone does not suffice for the people of Ukraine in winning their fight for the establishment of the rule of law on their, hopefully, undivided territory. But I am sure that the people of Ukraine without a self-confident EU on their side, (which would not only reach out its helping hand but also stick to its rules and not compromise them for the sake of a short benefit and good economic relations with Russia), would hardly succeed at all.

The question of how self-confident the EU is or may be won't just be related to the crisis in Ukraine this year. It will also dominate the upcoming European election. The importance of the European Parliament has rapidly grown since, and thanks to, the Lisbon Treaty. The voters in the EU will, for first time ever, get the chance to vote for common European candidates and behave like one political entity. I regard this as a huge progress compared to previous practice.

But there is no gain without pain, as we know. The upcoming election will also be the first one where the populist and euro-sceptical parties across the whole of Europe may secure a significant share of votes. Their criticism of the European Union is to be taken seriously even though it very often comes across as very random and calculated. However we should not fear them, as political competition is an inseparable part of democracy. I am absolutely sure that the attractiveness of the European Union and the benefits of the tight, cross-border cooperation within the EU still outdo all real and invented deficiencies.

A self-confident, proper functioning European Union can't lose to its critics. It can only defeat itself by giving up on its rules and principles. The upcoming European election is a chance for all of us to make clear that what we want is a self-confident EU.

We don't know the result of this election. I don't know who the winner will be. Whether the national-populist groups or liberal, conservative, socialist or some other streams. What I can say is that as a social democrat I believe that only a socially advanced and sensitive European Union is the best answer in our fight against social inequality. I am deeply convinced that the problem of social inequality is something which is in the heart of the problems of the current world.

The main alternative to the current situation is really to deepen social inclusiveness. The prerequisite and the precondition for this is to deepen the process of European integration and to strengthen the democratic character of the European institutions. I believe that what is the core problem of the current Europe is the model of economy. It is there not to increase the prosperity of few but it has to work for the prosperity of the majority. Sometimes it seems to me that in the globalized 21. century this model is subject to a far greater threat than our national identity. In my view, the main challenge for us is to change this tendency which is deepening inequality in our countries and which is deepening instability. It could be the reason of turbulences which could influence our current way of life and the current shape of Europe.

That's why I'm convinced that before this election there will be interesting discussions and I hope it will be more than only campaigning and include a deep discussion on the future shape of Europe.

Thank you for the attention. I am ready to answer your questions.