Speech of Ms. Blanka Fajkusová, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to South Africa, on the occasion of the National Day celebration, 21 October 2014

Mrs. Louise Graham, Chief Director of the Department of Arts and Culture,
Ambassadors, High Commissioners,
Representatives of South African departments and institutions,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Czech compatriots,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon, dobrý den,

It is the fourth time I am giving a speech on the occasion of the National Day of the Czech Republic here in Pretoria. I always said I wanted to speak shortly; if I managed it is up to you to decide. But I promise I will try this year again.

It gives me a great pleasure to welcome you as we gather here to celebrate 28 October, the day of the establishment of the independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, 96 years ago, under the leadership of Tomáš Gariggue Masaryk, who became the first President of Czechoslovakia. President Masaryk and Minister of Foreign Affairs Beneš brought democratic and humanistic ideas not only into the Czech or rather Czechoslovak internal politics, but also internationally. However, after only 20 years Czechoslovak democracy was interrupted with the Second World War and soon after that with the events of February 1948 which put the country for many years under the Soviet influence. The democracy was restored only 51 years later. Today, I would like to use this opportunity and remind the events of 17 November.

The year 2014 is an important year for both South Africa and the Czech Republic. As South Africa marks 20 years of freedom and democracy, the Czech Republic celebrates its 25 years of freedom and democracy. I don't need to speak at length about the events which started on Friday 17 November 1989. The whole world knows them. The so-called Velvet Revolution was triggered with the brutal police intervention against the peaceful students march on the occasion of the International Students Day which was meant to commemorate their colleagues who 50 years ago had been shot to death, executed, or sent to concentration camps by the Nazi forces following the demonstrations on 28 October 1939. In 1989 I was a university student and I took part in the march, as many of my friends did.

The reaction of the Czechoslovak citizens actually caught the government by surprise. Already during the weekend the theatres went on strike, followed by university students on Monday. The Civic Forum was created with the involvement of many prominent dissidents, including Václav Havel. The number of people taking part in the demonstrations and requiring freedom increased every day. In a week hundreds of thousands were protesting in the whole country. As a reaction, the regime decided to release political prisoners. The Civic Forum, led by Václav Havel, managed to launch negotiations on transfer of power, which led to the formation of the interim government on 10 December and to the election of Václav Havel as President on 29 December. These events opened the way for the first democratic elections since 1946.
17 November has also been declared the Czech National holiday as the Day of the Struggle for Democracy and Freedom. Both 17 Novembers are symbols of students’ struggle against terror and oppression. They remind us of ideals of freedom and democracy, which form the basis of the Czech statehood and which should also be passed on to younger generations, which were born free. This is the only way how to maintain and uphold the freedom which we, our parents and grandparents fought for.

The year 2014 is special yet for another reason, as the Year of Czech Music. Since 1924, the years ending with the digit 4 have been perceived as such, as more than 60 prominent Czech composers and performers commemorate anniversaries of birth or death. It doesn’t concern only the most famous Czech composers – Bedřich Smetana (born 1824, died 1884), Antonín Dvořák (died 1904) and Leoš Janáček (born 1854), but many others. Symbolically, the song “Kde domov můj?” (Where is my home?), which became the Czech National anthem after being a part of the Czechoslovak one since 1918, was played for the first time in 1834.

As a part of world-wide programme of events organised in the framework of 2014 Year of Czech Music, the Embassy of the Czech Republic supported three concerts of Mrs. Michaela Malá and Mr. Lukáš Klánský in South Africa. After the opening speeches they will perform selected parts of the Slavonic Dances by Antonín Dvořák.

For the Czech Republic, South Africa as an important partner, not only in Africa, but globally. We maintain a regular dialogue, just in 3 weeks Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Tlapa will come to Pretoria for the discussion with his counterpart. South Africa is the major trading partner of the Czech Republic in Africa and more and more companies are coming to the country to contribute to its development, they take part in major trade shows, just recently for example the Africa Aerospace and Defence or Electra Mining.

Before I close my speech I would like to thank all the staff from the Embassy who worked hard to make today’s event happen, to Mrs. Alena Strolena and a group of Czech compatriots for the preparation of traditional Czech meals and to the SABMiller for sponsorship of Pilsner beer.

I would like to propose a toast to freedom and democracy in the Czech Republic and in South Africa and to the good relations between our two countries and nations.