

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: ENRICHING FUTURE COMMUNITIES

Opening remarks by Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Tomáš Petříček, 5 November 2020

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the fifth Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue conference, hosted and co-organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. In the very beginning, I want to thank our partners and co-organizers: the OIC Ambassadors' Prague Group, Institute of International Relations and Anna Lindh Foundation. And thank you all for your participation and your interest in this crucial issue.

“CRISIS AS AN OPPORTUNITY”: this idea has been on my mind – with a sense of urgency – over the past months and especially the last weeks and days. The abhorrent and tragic events in France and Austria only reaffirm the urgent need for more dialogue, more open minds and more understanding in order to jointly work against extremism. But also the very fact that this conference is taking place – although in virtual form – during the raging pandemic is a good example of our ability and readiness to act pro-actively regardless of crises, economic shocks, all kinds of restrictions and so on.

The distinguished personalities who accepted our invitation deserve much attention and credit for their long-term dedication, as well as their daily efforts and intellectual contribution to education, integrity and tolerance within their respective communities and toward a broad international audience. I wish to mention at least three of them in particular: *Dr Hanan Ashrawi*, *Prof Gilles Kepel* and *Prof Tomáš Halík*. They all played a beneficial role in reviving the Czech humanistic tradition, which dates back to the creation of Czechoslovakia, and which was brought back to life by the late President Václav Havel – with whom they all met and worked already years ago.

Sadly, Prof Halík and Dr Ashrawi had to cancel in the last minute due to COVID-19. I wish them a speedy recovery, and perhaps they are able to follow the conference on-line. On a more positive note, I am pleased to welcome here *H.E. Charles Daniel Balvo*, Apostolic Nuncio to Czechia. He has lately recovered from the same disease and kindly agreed to re-join the conference, as he did already last year.

To start with, I would like to recall a speech by Václav Havel from 1997, where he raised a philosophical question about a common and universal awakening of humane spirit and humane responsibility for the world. He then asked whether such an “existential revolution” would need to be enforced by an extraordinary shock or a global catastrophe, or whether it could actually rest in the abilities and power of wise men and women, and in their collective and deliberate action without any external gruesome cause.

Well, in autumn 2020 we witness both scenarios. On the one hand, unprecedented external shocks brought about by the virus but now also the latest attacks. On the other hand, wise men and women coming to Prague from four continents and bringing their particular expertise and experience to discuss our existential challenges and global responsibility. And here, I wish

to underline values such as solidarity, humbleness, respect, hope and faith. These I consider truly fundamental, socially inclusive and supportive of each and every community. However, fear and bias are powerful too, for instance in their capability to erode those values and paralyze societies; especially if they are misused by populists or extremists. Solidarity might then be confused with naivety and humbleness with weakness. No doubt we can and we should – times and again – reassert the correct meaning and significance of all these terms. And we now can set yet another example of mutual understanding, cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

Today, I mainly hope to learn from you so I will soon switch to the listening mode, trusting your expertise and insight on issues of our common good. Be it implementation of new initiatives introduced in Brussels, Geneva, Paris or Washington; or the constant inspiration and encouragement by Pope Francis in Vatican; or various, sometimes low-key or rather unnoticed, initiatives coming from the Muslim world. There are key official documents, such as the *EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief* from 2013, and inspiring recent initiatives like the *Global Exchange on Religion and Society*, launched in September 2019. But I also want to recall the historic *Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, which was jointly endorsed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, in 2019. This milestone reflects the spirit of the Second Vatican Council: it conveys clear messages to the general public, and opens new ways to intercultural and interfaith dialogues, like the one we are enjoying here today.

On the framing questions of this conference, I wish to underline four aspects:

First, LEGITIMACY of intercultural and interfaith dialogue in education, public awareness and daily life. It has been instrumental in countering the many malevolent efforts in our shared history by those who like to misuse religious identity or symbols as a source of disrespect and who want to incite conflicts.

Second, SOLIDARITY in the course of our public service and social life. I consider solidarity and justice as key common principles of our cultures, morals and ethics; and a necessary precondition for our personal as well as socio-economic liberty.

Third, RESILIENCE as a complex phenomenon incorporating security, prosperity, and social and environmental responsibility. These have been articulated in the *UN Sustainable Development Goals* and need to be re-assessed now – with a new urgency! – in the context of current pandemic.

Fourth, HUMAN RIGHTS, both as a starting point but also as an every-day challenge – for our human dignity as well as the right functioning of our democratic institutions, our societies and our families.

I believe we already can find application of these values in the handling of both major crises that we in Europe have been facing recently – the so-called “migration crisis” and the current pandemic. And I hope these values will further be reflected in the actions of those who aim to overcome the crises in a sane, strong and self-confident manner.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion I want to underline the key role of young generations, notably the importance of their community networks and social contacts in general, including the virtual ones, within the ever smaller “global village”. I voice my hope in our children, students, young activists but also “adult” faith-based societies and all kinds of positive role-models for the public. Last but not least, I want to highlight the need for clarity and openness of communication among our religions, cultures and societies, especially by using modern, inclusive and comprehensive language.

And finally, I want to come back to the alarming recent events - the murder of the French teacher Samuel Paty, the escalation of faith-based tensions and incitement in its aftermath, as well as the attacks in Nice and Vienna. I believe that today we have an opportunity to come up with fresh ideas for common actions toward de-radicalization, peace and unity. We must help prevent and counter hate crimes and hate speech, but also the misinterpretation of events for advancing narrow political agendas. We need positive initiatives – I think here of the example of Unity Marches in Paris and other world capitals in January 2015. And I ask you to consider, discuss and suggest any new initiatives, of course with respect to relevant pandemic restrictions. I think the new effort, aside from other dimensions, needs to be political too. I can promise to take up pieces of advice from this conference and use them in developing political approaches, be they at the level of Czechia, the European Union or even more broadly.

Thank you for your attention, and my appreciation to all organizers and partners who did a great job in bringing us together today, despite these extraordinary and unpredictable conditions!

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