

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we mark the anniversary of the proclamation of the Czech Republic that took place on 28 October 1918, and we do so in a year that is of extraordinary importance in terms of contacts between the Czech Republic and Latvia: this year, exactly 90 years have passed since our countries established diplomatic relations, and 20 years since their restoration in the year 1991. This provides an occasion to reflect on the achievements within our mutual relationship, on what binds us together and what awaits us in the future.

The high standard of quality and friendly nature of our relations is a long-lasting tradition. Both our independent states were born at the same moment, and in the twenty inter-war years they moved closer in many areas of cooperation. The aspirations of independent Latvia for economic and cultural development found many proponents among us. Many of them tirelessly promoted your culture, which, until then, had been virtually unknown to us. Trade evolved, and Czech industrial products earned a steady place within the Latvian market. Latvia was perceived in our country as the natural centre of gravity of the southern Baltics and, among other things, as a potential economic springboard into the Russian space. In the context of the foreign policy orientation of pre-war Czechoslovakia, Latvia did indeed occupy a peripheral, yet never a marginal, place. The subsequent trajectory of this relationship was affected by the loss of both countries' independence on the eve of World War II and the ramifications this brought along. The restoration of Czech-Latvian relations at the level of sovereign and independent states was only enabled by the collapse of the Soviet empire in the early 1990s. At that time, both of our countries had a kind of development behind them that was characterised by many similarities and a shared experience. It may be due to this that the communication among the members of both nations has been so easy, and the same concepts have identical content on both sides. It is also perhaps for this reason that the differences, determined by your lengthy incorporation into the Soviet Union, are broadly comprehensible to us.

Both countries have shared an ambition to enter the ranks of democracies and to participate in the processes of European integration. Both of them felt the need to secure the necessary security framework for this ambition by joining the North Atlantic alliance. This brought their relationship to a new, qualitatively superior state of union, reaffirmed by explicitly defined mutual obligations.

In the past twenty years, both of our countries have lived through the inevitable process of common economic and social transformation, which changed their character, often positively, often adversely, and many a time controversially interfered with the daily lives of their citizens. In addition, they both often found themselves in a strange and unfamiliar place, they made many missteps, yet the overall positive effect of this process is visible and undeniable today in the Czech Republic and Latvia alike. In both our countries many things, previously banned, are taken for granted, and a trend is emerging towards idealising the past, where the state had full control over the behaviour of its citizens and encroached on their lives, while simultaneously acting as a guardian that also provided the disadvantaged ones with a certain degree of social security. Yet I belong to those who believe that we are dealing here with a tendency that is not permanent and one that for many people is rather determined by their financial position – which is dependent on the state of our respective national economies.

I am certainly not exaggerating by asserting that we can be content with the state of the current relations between the Czech Republic and Latvia. This is also reflected in terms of contacts and information exchange at all levels – including the highest level, to which mutual visits by top state officials pertain. I do not wish to conduct any kind of book-keeping here,

but do allow me to remind you at least of the visit of our President here in Riga last year and the subsequent visit by your President to Prague. At all the lower levels, the fact that our countries share common interests has also become manifest. Our politicians and elected officials who have visited Latvia are well-informed of the nature of your problems and regard your efforts to build an integrated society unmarred by ethnic or ideological divides with much sympathy. It is also appropriate to note at this point that there are also people in our country who admire your prudent and methodologically well-wrought way in which you – aided by international assistance – overcame the most severe consequences of the recent financial crisis.

Both of our countries are heavily dependent on external factors economically and are as such vulnerable in the event of upheaval that has broader continental or global dimensions. Both have felt the impact of the recent crisis, even though in the case of the Czech Republic it has been much less severe. It must be noted here that the said crisis has also had an adverse effect on our mutual trade turnover. A turn for the better has only been observed in the last few months. I am confident that this commercial exchange will, in time, also comprise areas in which it has only been negligible to date, such as in the energy sector, which is of crucial importance for both countries and in which the Czech Republic can offer the potential of advanced technologies.

Both of our countries are experiencing a certain frustration with respect to the situation within the European Union, but they are quite aware that the interests of the smaller members of the Union have to be protected in a concerted manner. The threat of recurrence of the recent downturn only renders this necessity ever more urgent. This also offers a wholly new space for cooperation between both countries at the level of Union institutions and within the framework of regional structures, e.g., between the V4 and the B3. Another similar area of cooperation relates to certain Union initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership.

Ladies and gentlemen!

Allow me to conclude this short inventory of future possibilities for the relationship of both countries by expressing my confidence that the outlook of this relationship remains good and that cooperation within the European Union and the larger global context will only lead to its strengthening.

In addition, please let me say a few words regarding my mission in this country, which is now nearing its conclusion. These have been four unforgettable years, and I am departing with the sense of, perhaps, a job well done, even though probably one that has not quite been fully completed. It is understandable that not everything worked as I had envisioned it, yet the positives have certainly prevailed. I would like to thank all the people of this pleasant and hospitable country with whom I have had the opportunity to work, meet and share many beautiful impressions. I must also thank those who, at times, entered into polemics with me and did not share my views. This way, they often provided me with an impulse to look at things from new angles.

I cannot omit to mention the absolutely perfect collaboration with the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The professionalism of the people working there is very high. Their readiness to accommodate, exhibited towards myself and my institution, was outstanding. The same applies to the Chancery of the President and all the other bodies and institutions. The friendly and informal atmosphere of the local diplomatic corps will also remain in my memories. I have always attributed great significance to what is referred to as “public diplomacy”. The Czech Embassy can look back at a great effort in the areas of culture and education – not just here, in the capital cities, but in all the regions of Latvia, to which it returns over and over

again. I am delighted that we have left our traces even in the remotest areas of this country, thus reinforcing a perception of our land, its history and its culture. After I have left, these activities will most certainly continue.

I wish to thank you all once more.

In conclusion, permit me – with a degree of pathos, maybe – to wish the very best to Latvia, which I have come to love. I trust that a country, which in the very first verse of its beautiful national anthem turns to God, seeking his protection, is in the best of hands. I am also confident that, after all that Latvia has gone through, it will overcome any potential future challenges.