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Collège d'Europe



Natolin

## Opening Ceremony Madeleine Albright Promotion 2023-2024

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Speech Petr PAVEL,

President of Czech Republic

First of all, I would like to thank Rector Mogherini for inviting me here today. Opening the 2023-2024 academic year of the College of Europe is an ideal opportunity to address a specific audience – **a group of people** who are best placed to **assume responsibility for our common future** in the years to come. Both within the European Union and beyond.

In many ways, we experience **the European Union** as a daily reality. At the same time, this is **no matter of course**. From the outset, the Union has faced wishful predictions of its failure. Time and again, the project has proved more resilient than expected. It is safe to expect that upcoming times are going to be no less rough. Sceptical voices are on the rise. This is true even for some founding EU Member States and traditional strongholds of European integration.

Today, Europe and the wider world are confronted with a **multitude of challenges**. All of them will **sound familiar to you**. We find ourselves in an increasingly antagonistic international environment. No security threat is more pressing than the Russian aggression, no geopolitical challenge more demanding than an assertive China and its appeal to many countries. We are facing a whole spectrum of non-conventional threats. Our economies have been fragilized. In the long term, we experience a rapid transformation of industry and labour, which is turning our everyday lives into unfamiliar territory. Above all of this, the climate crisis looms large, amplifying major concerns such as environmental degradation, food insecurity or illegal migration.

Understandably, this **generates anxiety and spurs anger**. This is what **populists** thrive on in their **pursuit of power**.

Despite the daunting challenge, there is **no reason for despair!** The key takeaway from the Czech presidential election held earlier this year is indeed that it is possible to **succeed on a moderate platform**. Without a doubt, this is only the beginning of the journey. But I am confident that together, we can show that open societies can deliver – both in domestic and international arenas.

The core message of my address today is that **we would be worse off** if it was not for European integration and a wider strategic unity of the world's democracies. In view of a safe and prosperous future, **the European Union and the transatlantic alliance** are our **best bet!**

Much has been written about Europe's defining traits. The late Milan Kundera once described the European paradigm as "maximum diversity in minimum space". Yet, though culturally diverse and politically fragmented in the past, **Europe builds on a common heritage**. This heritage has its bright side and its ugly side, as well as noble ideals and moral imperatives. Europe carries with it the **memory of intolerance, wars and horrors of totalitarian regimes**.

In Czechia, this heritage is on our minds. For **Madeleine Albright**, my compatriot who is the patron of your promotion, **fragility of democracy** was first-hand experience. Throughout her life, therefore, Madeleine Albright – just like the first Czech President and her close friend Václav Havel – was also aware of the extent of our shared responsibility. They both knew **the price of indifference** for the fate of people in countries affected by domestic conflicts or foreign aggression.

Today we are witnessing the **end of globalisation as we know it** and the resurgence of **geopolitics**. This requires us to work together with our closest allies as a **resilient and robust political community**. For Europeans, this means that we need to strengthen our **sense of common strategic interest**. In 2012, many were sceptical when the EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Looking at the instability in our immediate neighbourhood, we now see how this was a justified choice. In order to safeguard peace and **strengthen our security in all its forms**, we need a more effective Europe.

We have important allies. First and foremost, **the United States**. Occasional differences in perspective should not obscure that we share core interests. The United States is a key security partner. There is no alternative to the NATO security architecture, in which the United States continues to play an essential role.

Once again, **Madeleine Albright's role in advocating for NATO's eastern enlargement** in the 1990s, both within the Democratic Party and the US administration, cannot be emphasized enough. Despite the romantic aspirations of the day to break up military blocs, and occasional European dreams of security autonomy, Albright proved visionary. Thanks to Madam Albright, Europe is more **"whole, free and at peace"** – with the painful exception of those countries, which have been left behind.

It is only desirable that our **strategic cooperation with the US is as broad as possible**. Besides security, we should not shy away from the – admittedly difficult – **effort to liberalise trade** – and perhaps expand the scope of the Trade and Technology Council.

United we stand, divided we fall. To the astonishment of “naysayers”, **our united stand against Russian aggression** so far – both in NATO and the EU – has proven that we are able to prevail. **Russia's aggression is truly a watershed moment.** It has upended a whole range of EU policies. Others need a major overhaul.

**Czechia was at the helm of these efforts in 2022.** Our second EU Council Presidency was crucial in finding a concrete policy response to the Russian challenge in many areas – in particular the energy crisis. We have proved that we can be relied on. This is true not just of our Presidency but also of our response to Ukraine’s needs. Building on this, I believe Czechia can bolster its European contribution. **Central Europe can be a driver of positive change.**

There is no more **geopolitical policy than enlargement policy.** The new geopolitical imperative asks for a new enlargement dynamic. For too long, we have left some European countries at the mercy of geopolitical manipulation. The ambition is clear: we must complete the European and – where desired – the Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans and the Associated Trio. As I said at the United Nations General Assembly two weeks ago, Czechia is aware of its responsibility. We are committed to ensuring that no one is left behind.

A true **change in mindset** needs to be carried through. In the name of our long-term interest, we must dare a leap. The frustration and growing alienation in some European countries is a genuine liability.

We can draw our lesson from the far-sighted **observation made by Václav Havel in 1999 in the French Senate.** Back then, he was referring to the EU accession of Central European countries. Havel reminded us, that the *“opportunity that is now opening before Europe” – “the chance for a lasting peace and security” – “will be fulfilled only when everyone is allowed to participate.”* Havel also **warned against “distrust towards the [at that time] new democracies”.** *If there is fear that they might consume too large a piece of the cake; or, if there is an overall fear of them, as of something new and difficult to fathom,” – Havel went on to say – “Europe will once again begin to divide and this new division will soon become a much more serious reason for alarm than the novelty, or the unrefined state, of today's post-Communist democracies”.*

We **should not postpone enlargement** until some hypothetical point in the future when candidate countries are perfectly aligned with us. Enlargement is a goal which **enhances – not undermines – our security and serves the stability of democracies.** Our criteria must be transparent and achievable. Where possible, we need a credible schedule. At the same time, we must not compromise on our principles and shared values enshrined in the Treaties, namely respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

**My country knows where it can add value.** EU accession is a process we have been through. We are already working to share our experience with the candidate countries and are ready to do more to help them with reforms. This is also the driving force behind my meetings with the leaders from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

We must **create incentives to facilitate the process.** In the first place, this will require a more flexible approach. There are already promising proposals on the table. Let us explore ways of opening certain policies to candidates and increasing their presence in decision-shaping.

Obviously, the enlargement debate is linked to **efficiency** – not a particularly popular subject matter in smaller and middle-sized member states. We all should be ready to look at the various proposals to improve the **governability of the EU** in our domestic discussion, including the shift to qualified majority voting in some areas. We need to raise awareness that **stability and power – that is to say our collective ability to act** – are in our shared interest.

Another policy area I wish to highlight is **European defence.** The dominant role of NATO as security provider must no longer mean that Europe neglects its defence obligations. It is imperative to strengthen the European pillar of NATO and enhance European interoperability.

Very likely, **we will have to go beyond the 2% spending goal.** Partially reducing the reliance on the US and developing European strategic enablers is to be seen as our contribution to our transatlantic partnership.

I have briefly touched upon the new **geopolitical urgency** and its ramifications for the enlargement and defence policies. In the long run, the **inner resilience** of our societies is the core element of our success or failure.

We must focus on elements, which erode **trust** – the fabric holding our societies together. Let us carefully uphold the **European democratic model:** our democratic culture and the willingness to meaningfully engage with citizens. I wish to turn democratic resilience into one of the central themes of my presidency and plan to organize a conference in Prague on the subject.

Trust is a **precious asset.** Our people must know that no country, no region and no citizen is left behind. We must reduce inequalities and proceed in an inclusive manner. Among other things, this is why cohesion policy has been so important to transforming countries like Czechia.

Now, we are facing another major transformation: **the green transition.** It is in our shared interest to make sure this is a **just transition** which takes into account all **social costs.** It is a huge enterprise, which has a disproportionate impact on certain regions of Europe, in particular on countries, which are heavily industry-dependent. The costs and benefits are not evenly distributed and European

policies – while maintaining high levels of ambition – should reflect this. I am glad that Commission President von der Leyen recognised this in Prague last week.

Geopolitical shifts and the green transition must also inform **our trade and industrial policies**. Together, Europe and its transatlantic partners are still in a position to shape international rules. It is much needed to develop an open strategic autonomy in key areas. **Dependency on unreliable or hostile suppliers** of energy, technology and raw materials has already proven costly. It must be our ambition to put ourselves in a position where **it will be too painful for our rivals to blackmail us**. To this effect, we should double down on our efforts to deepen trade and investment arrangements – first and foremost with like-minded countries across the world.

Europe is no longer in the position to **impose its notion of the good on the world** – as Václav Havel famously reminded us in his “*Europe as a Task*” speech in 1996. All the more, we must strive for a deeper alliance of democracies regardless of geographical distance.

In the international arena, we must learn to understand that **acceptance of our values** will be increasingly hard to obtain. We should therefore not tire of emphasizing the importance of **respecting agreed rules**. When international law is turned into a mere piece of paper, the **road to disaster opens wide**.

In the **Global South**, we now have **much different mission**. We are facing a treacherous narrative by Russia, which portrays the West as the eternal colonizer, or – to quote – “the Empire of Lies”. It is an obvious attempt to turn matters on their head and reframe the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

We need to do all we can to counter this narrative. We need to demonstrate a **genuine interest in these regions** through a combination of political presence, tailored development assistance and sustainable commercial trade and investment on an equal basis.

**Africa** remains Europe’s natural partner. I therefore welcome the recent announcement of the Commission’s a **new strategic approach**.

In **Africa**, Czechia, as a country with no colonial past but enough experience with Russian expansionism, is **particularly well placed** to play an active part. We can build on our credibility and a **solid “trademark”**. Due to historical circumstance, political elites of some of these countries - such as Mozambique - have received Czech education.

Well, the tasks at hand **are many, and certainly complex**. Yet, I believe that our democracies have all the necessary resources to succeed and to thrive. To this end, it is vital to establish ourselves as a **genuine political community**. We need not only closer coordination at the political and expert

level, but also an opening to the **wider public**. The elections to the European parliament in 2024 will be the next occasion on which we will be put to the test. It is our common task to **strengthen the awareness that Europe and the democratic world are the natural framework for our decision-making**.

Dear students of the Madeleine Albright promotion,

As polyglots, cosmopolitans, and people with a healthy degree of ambition, you have a **special role to play in this task** – and a lot of **responsibility on your hands**. Wherever your lives take you after you leave the halls of the College of Europe, I wish you well in your endeavours!

Thank you!

*Disclaimer: This text might not be an exact transposition of the speech, spoken words prevail:*  
<https://youtu.be/kprsX60HVb8>