

**Peaceful democratic transitions: the Czech and Slovak experiences**  
**Panel Discussion, University of Pretoria, 16 September 2013**

**Introductory Remarks by Ms. Blanka Fajkusová, Ambassador of the Czech  
Republic to the Republic of South Africa**

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**The Czech Republic: 20 years after**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the University of Pretoria and South Africa Institute of International Affairs for their collaboration in organising this afternoon's event.

The Czech Republic came into existence on 1 January 1993. The peaceful hand-over of power from the totalitarian communist regime to democratic institutions, widely called the Velvet Revolution, inspired also the title of Velvet Divorce, used to describe the negotiated split of the Czechoslovak federation at the end of 1992.

I would like to remind some of the benchmarks and priorities in the 20 years of the Czech Republic's history.

The foreign affairs priorities of the Czechoslovak government became clear soon after the political changes in 1989 and can be summarised as "return to the Euro-Atlantic community", in which Czechoslovakia was anchored in the period between the World War I and II (and where it historically belonged for much longer period). The Czech foreign policy followed this direction.

First: The most symbolic became the membership in the OECD, an organisation which emerged from the success of the Marshall Plan. It is probably worth reminding that in 1948 under the Soviet pressure Czechoslovakia had to withdraw its acceptance of the Marshall Plan. In January 1994 the Czech Republic submitted a request for the full fledged membership in the OECD, after being a part of the "Partners in Transition Programme" for then Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland since 1991. In 1994 and 1995 a number of peer reviews were conducted in the OECD Committees and the Czech Republic adhered to all the OECD instruments to demonstrate its willingness and ability to accept the obligations of the membership. The Czech Republic acceded to the OECD in December 1995.

It is fair to state that the accession procedure to the OECD prepared the ground for the future accession negotiations with the EU. It remains almost forgotten that a new foreign exchange law which enabled the convertibility of the Czech crown was adopted in 1994 in connection with the preparations to join the OECD. The benefits of the OECD membership for the policy making have always been appreciated by the Czech governments and the OECD recommendations were instrumental for many structural reforms, like those in the area of social security, education, job creation, financial markets.

Second: Aligning the Czech Republic with the transatlantic security structures has become a clear priority of the Czech government, in contrary to a somewhat ambiguous approach of the federal government. Intensive diplomatic efforts, mainly

in the USA, contributed to the decision of the NATO summit in January 1994 to launch the “Partnership for Peace” programme which offered to Central and Eastern European Countries and former Soviet republics possibility for closer cooperation with the NATO in political, military and economic areas. It was in Prague later in January 1994 where President Clinton discussed with Presidents of all Visegrad Group countries the conclusions of the NATO summit and its opening to new members. The Czech Republic joined the NATO on 12 March 1999.

Third: The accession to the EU was always considered by Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic as an ultimate goal in its integration to the European structures. It should be reminded that Czechoslovakia signed the Cooperation Agreement with the European Economic Community and the Euroatom already in 1990 and that this agreement was replaced by the so-called Europe Agreement and the Interim Trade Agreement which introduced, gradually and asymmetrically, the free trade area. As the federation split before the agreement entered into force, it had to be renegotiated for the independent Czech Republic. The new agreement was signed already in 1993 and became operational in February 1995.

The Czech Republic formally presented the application for membership in January 1996. The enlargement process was officially launched in March 1998 and the negotiations lasted almost 5 years. The Czech legislation was thoroughly screened vis-à-vis the *acquis communautaire* (the European legislation). The Czech Republic had to implement the *acquis* in many areas, like free movement of goods, capital, services and persons, competition policy, agriculture, transport, social policy, energy, industrial policy, science and technology, culture, environment, regional policy, justice and home affairs, taxation but also financial control and institutions. The internal legislative work associated with the accession was simply unprecedented.

On 1 May 2004 the Czech Republic, together with other 9 Central and Eastern European countries, joined the EU. It is worth mentioning that 77 % of the Czech population voted in favour of the accession in the first ever referendum. Furthermore, in December 2007 the Czech Republic joined the Schengen area.

Fourth: Besides the transatlantic and European drive, one should not forget the importance of regional cooperation for the Czech Republic, either the continuing and enhanced Visegrad cooperation, Regional Partnership including also Austria and Slovenia, Central European Initiative aimed also at supporting the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries in their European aspirations, later the EU Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership.

Fifth: The respect for and protection of human rights has always been in the centre of the Czech foreign policy, as a legacy from the totalitarian past and fight for freedom, democracy and the rule of law. In many aspects it was personalised with Václav Havel, the first President of the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic has been a vocal critic of human rights violations and plays an important role in the international organisations in this area. I would like to use this opportunity to remind you that now, as we speak, former President of South Africa, Frederik de Klerk is in Prague to take part in the 17<sup>th</sup> Forum 2000, major conference founded by Václav Havel. This year's forum is hold under the overall title “Societies in Transition”.

From the 20 years perspective, the goal of full integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures has been successfully achieved. The Czech Republic is an active member of the EU, the NATO and the OECD and enjoys good relations with all its neighbours, first and foremost with the Slovak Republic. By the way, it has become a tradition that new Czech and Slovak Presidents and Ministers of Foreign Affairs after elections pay a visit to the other country first.

While attaining this level of integration into international community, the Czech foreign policy has become more diverse and in certain sense it seeks a re-establishment of some of the close bilateral links from the past with countries in Africa and Latin America.