

Beat: Politics

SPEECH BY JEAN YVES LE DRIAN MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AT CONFERENCE BEYOND

BEYOND 1989 IN PRAGUE DEC 6 Part 1

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USPA NEWS -

Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, attended the conference "Beyond 1989: Hopes & Disillusions after Revolutions" held in Prague, 6 December 2019, and made a remarkable speech, that is now published by USPA, in two sections. This is the first section of the remarks, by the French foreign Affairs Minister addressed at Charles university, Prague, alongside, Mr Thomas Zima Rector of Charles University, and Jerome Heurtaux, Director of the Academy of Sciences, head CEFRES. Here is the full transcript of the speech. « Dear friends, Thirty years have passed since 1989. A generation, who have gone from euphoria to doubt. I am profoundly European and I must say Europe is what drives my political engagement. I remember the enthusiasm and the jubilation of those days that, in autumn 1989, would change the face of our continent and would move all peoples of Europe, without exception. What strikes me today, as French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, is that as each decade passes, we are less enthusiastic and less united in celebrating the commemorations of 1989. " Jean Yves le Drian stated as an introduction.

"Minister, dear Tomáš, Rector of Charles University, who is hosting us today, Vice-Rector, Director of the Academy of Sciences, CEFRES Director, dear Jerome Heurtaux, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends, Thirty years have passed since 1989. A generation, who have gone from euphoria to doubt. I am profoundly European and I must say Europe is what drives my political engagement. I remember the enthusiasm and the jubilation of those days that, in autumn 1989, would change the face of our continent and would move all peoples of Europe, without exception. What strikes me today, as French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, is that as each decade passes, we are less enthusiastic and less united in celebrating the commemorations of 1989. And this, at a time when there has never been a greater need for a Europe that is strong, free and true to its principles. That is why I wanted to come here to Prague, to Charles University, in the heart of Europe, to reflect with you on the meaning of 1989 and what this year can tell us about who we are today, and on the European ambition that we must continue to pursue. The message I came to share with you today is a message from one European to other Europeans about this most singular year, a message about its hopes and its disillusions, but also a message about the future of the spirit of 1989. The disillusionment that some of you have described today should be of concern to historians and researchers. This is precisely one of the subjects of this conference, held by the French Research Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences in Prague, with the Academy of Sciences and Charles University, which I would like to thank for inviting me to speak before you today. It should be of concern to historians and researchers, and also to all Europeans " and especially those who have political responsibilities. It forces us to take a look at essential questions such as the many memories of our history, the autonomy and security of Europe and the relation between the sovereignty of States and European sovereignty.

Addressing this disillusion and restoring the thread and energy of our European dream is our shared challenge.

I would like to begin by telling you what I have not come to do in Prague. I am a political leader at an academic conference on social sciences. We each have our responsibilities. They are important but they are different. I therefore did not come to give you a history lesson. Researchers must be able to work freely on this period in history as they do on others. This year, we will commemorate not only 1989, but also the 80 years of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the organization of Nazi and Soviet occupations of Europe which occurred simultaneously and successively.-----

The temptation is great for certain people to conduct a "history policy" in order to manipulate the past for their own ends, to stir things up, to add to the confusion, and to further a specific ideology. Today, we are faced with an additional danger of history being re-written on the basis of re-interpreted national interests and narratives.-----

Too many legends presented as official truths have motivated bloody rifts on our continent so that we remain indifferent to their resurgence. If we are to return to the ideals of Europe of the Enlightenment, we must preserve critical thinking within our societies. If the truth and the counter-truths are considered to be the same, the word "truth" will be emptied of its very meaning.-----

That is why, Ladies and Gentlemen, 23 States, including France, have asked that an Observatory on History Teaching in Europe be created, at the initiative of the French Presidency of the Council of Europe. Taking stock neutrally and factually of school curricula and textbooks, this observatory will promote dialogue on our teachings, prevent racist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic discourse from re-emerging, and work to bring peoples closer together. And perhaps we will be able to show that, while respecting our singular histories,

there is also a history that brings us together, the history of our continent and of this European spirit we have inherited and must safeguard.

As the great French historian Marc Bloch once said "the misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past"[1]. It can also be the consequence of the manipulation of history. One of the European principles is academic freedom and if this freedom is threatened, democracy and peace will be threatened as well. Our political responsibility, however, as against scientific responsibility, is to build, on the basis of your research work, a shared European memory, adhering to two principles. First, strict respect for national memories that should be recognized and heard. Our national narratives are built around selective references to the past. A same date can resonate very differently from one State to another.

THE YEAR 1968 DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME RESONANCE IN FRENCH, CZECH AND POLISH MEMORIES

The year 1968 does not have the same resonance in French, Czech and Polish memories. I will give you another example. We just celebrated the centenary of the end of the First World War in Paris a year ago. In France, 1918 signifies the armistice and relief for French people. However, what marked this period in your region until 1923 was the collapse of empires, wars, revolutions, displacements of peoples, and pogroms. And even 1989, for a French person or a German person, will bring to mind images of the fall of the Berlin Wall before those, for example "" which were just as moving "" of the human chain which spanned in late August 1989 three Baltic States. We never recognized the annexation of these States and they had yet to regain their sovereignty. This understanding of our different national memories must be at the heart of European integration. All Europeans, starting with the French, need to listen and understand that.-----

Secondly, saying that does not mean that we support "projects to manipulate history to their own ends"[2]. It does not mean that we encourage historical relativism or revisionism. Nor does it mean that we promote a unifying narrative by leaders. It does not mean that we create a single history, but rather develop a "European historical awareness"[3] based on the belief that our national histories must form a basis for a common awareness of what it means to be Europeans, finally united in our diversity.

We should keep these words of Victor Hugo in mind: "Memories are our strength. When night attempts to return, we must light up the great dates, as we would light torches." [4] Commemorating 1989 and reflecting on its promises together "" those that have come true and those that have disappointed us "" can only strengthen our determination to build a common future in peace and democracy.

If I am here today, it is because I am convinced that the European memory must assent to the polyphony of national memories. I am convinced that we have yet to reconcile ourselves with the diversity of our memories to better understand how this diversity has made Europe what it is.-----

When he talked about the "Tragedy of Central Europe"[5] in 1983, Milan Kundera was not speaking only of Soviet domination. He regretted most of all that Central Europe no longer existed in the eyes of the West other than as part of the Soviet empire. Differences should not mask what unites us, our common destiny and the universal enlightenment principles, any more today than they did in the past.-----

I believe that it is by including all of these voices in the collective narrative that we must build together and by getting them to communicate with one another within this narrative that we will be able to fully understand what 1989 means in the history of Europeans. If I have been stressing this point since the beginning of my speech, it is because we need to understand where we have come from so that together we can decide where we are headed.

Please allow me to now share with you what 1989 means to a French person and why I wanted to come here to Prague to celebrate the turning point of 1989, a year in which, after 50 years of Nazi then Soviet occupation, Central European countries regained their freedom and their sovereignty and in which the reunification of Europe started. That year bestowed three great things upon us: freedom, sovereignty and unity. The year 1989 clearly marked the return of freedom and liberties, the end of totalitarian oppression and of the destruction of the individual, the triumph of democracy, and the rule of law, in other words the establishment of a State that no longer oppresses but that protects.-----

That is the meaning of the European project that Jean Monnet thus described: "We are not forming coalitions of States, we are uniting men"[6]. He could have added: "free men"[7]. Let us not forget that there can be no democracy without a regime that protects rights and liberties and that ensures right over might. Those who equate so-called liberal democracy with the tyranny of minorities, with multiculturalism, and contempt for traditions are not only sophists but are also suffering from amnesia. They forget that it was here in Prague "" and in Warsaw and Budapest "" that men and women resisted totalitarianism and fought for freedom at the cost of their own lives. To be continue Part 2

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