

**Address by the Minister of the Government of the Czech Republic
for Human Rights Mr. Michael Kocáb – COSAC CONFERENCE,
11.5.2009**

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

It is my honour to greet you both personally and in the name of the government of the Czech Republic at this gathering of representatives of the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) and present to you a brief paper on the topic of the Role of the EU in Defending Democracy and Human Rights in the World.

Mr. Václav Havel was supposed to speak in this place on this day. But the president had to excuse himself due to his worsened health condition. I will try to replace Mr. Václav Havel with full knowledge of what a complicated situation I am putting myself into with that promise. But I accompanied Václav Havel as his advisor for more than a decade, and our cooperation is what justifies me representing him here.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am a rock musician and a composer of symphonic as well as pop music. As such, I don't like to waste time with bureaucratic clichés about the necessity of monitoring adherence to the rights of people of all nations, skin colours and religious or political worldviews through the help of permanent committees or other advisory organs. I prefer to spend my time with people directly, listening to them; then I ask the politicians and high state officials who are now my partners. My approach has proven itself useful more than 15 years ago, when, as an MP in the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly, I oversaw the change of presidents, the formation of the government, preparations of the first free parliamentary elections and later the resettlement of the Warsaw Pact troops which had occupied Czechoslovakia since 1968. Always and on principle, I have amended my steps from below, in debate with the people who were directly affected by them.

After handling these projects, I partially withdrew from politics and devoted myself to realizing my dream, which was to develop my musical career in a free environment, playing for the first free generation. But at the same time I remained publicly active. It was as an advisor at the side of President Václav Havel where I co-organised more than 80 thematic roundtable debates with moral, spiritual and intellectual authorities from our country and the entire world. These seminars were especially concerned with the topic of human rights and their philosophical basis and institutional support. The last, under the title of How Far Should Europe Go in Defence of Human Rights? took place on 22 November 2008. The participants were mainly members of the World Movement for Democracy, a global organization.

In January of this year, on the basis of my lifelong journey and with the support of the Czech Green Party, I became a member of Mirek Topolánek's cabinet. A government which received the task of managing the functioning of the European Union's institutions.

The union, whose parliament in its Annual Report on Human Rights in the World 2008 and the European Union's policy on the matter comments on the status of providing equal and fair

treatment of people, their rights and freedoms. And it comments considerably critically on third states as well as members of the Community.

The union, which wants to be an important player in the field of protecting human rights within the United Nations and other international organisations and fora.

The union, which precisely for this reason also holds up a strict mirror to its members, and our Czech Republic is no exception. Becoming the minister for human rights at a time like this was a great challenge for me. I addressed myself to studies and work, and built a team of people who are today capable of both fulfilling their official responsibilities as well as presenting themselves to the media. What's more, they are also people who are generally very active in civic life.

But after three months of hard work, for reasons that are incomprehensible to many people, the government fell. Europe was horrified, but certain politicians on the contrary made no secret of their satisfaction. And I was convinced that the Czech Republic's "presidential" activities as well as my own would be perceived as completely unsuccessful – I didn't get anything passed, and what's more, I'm a member of the government of a state which at the time of a presidency framed by the debate on energy security, terrorism and dealing with the global economic recession, behaved very irresponsibly!

Eventually, though, things turned out differently. The party chairmen realised that an emphasis on human rights must remain strongly imprinted on the new government as well. What's more, it occurred to them that a whole range of projects were left unfinished under the minister's management. And for many of these, such as the passage of an anti-discrimination law, a solution to issues of a memorial area for the Romany holocaust, the Czech Republic's accession to certain international conventions (the so-called Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the optional protocol relating to trafficking in children, child prostitution and child pornography in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, etc.), improvement of the lives of individuals with handicaps, a decrease in the segregation of Romany minorities in Czech schools, preventing the growth of violence and extremism, literally the entire Union awaits these. For this reason the post of Minister for Minorities and Human Rights remained in the new government as well. The chairman of the Green Party, Martin Bursík, contributed greatly to this. To the surprise of all, including me personally, out of all the ministers, I alone remained in my function! And I am very glad about this for our country!

Ladies and gentlemen,

As Václav Havel said several years ago, "the idea that all people have equal and inalienable rights, that a person is born free and their dignity must be honoured under all circumstances, was created on European soil, and to this day is one of the basic values of the European political order. This idea was adopted and meaningfully developed by the United States of America, but it later became the property of all mankind and was incorporated into the documents of the UN.

The set of basic human and civil rights is also contained in the documents of the European Union; they create its spiritual fundament and at the same time give meaning and ethos to its expansion and deepening.

Of course rights can be respected only against a background of generally shared responsibility of a person for the world and their basic solidarity with one another. Which today is

significantly amplified by the circumstance that humanity is for the first time living in one global and globally-connected civilisation and that human fates are joined in a single fate."

It must be added that to this day, forces exist that want to interrupt this intercultural and intercontinental dialogue. It is the conduct of permanent dialogue and efforts toward mutual understanding that may be the supporting ethos for foreign policy and global diplomacy in the 21st century.

Recently, my team and I visited the meeting of the Alliance of Civilisations, a new initiative of two states on the borders between worlds, Turkey and Spain, which is meant to bring the Islamic and Christian worlds closer together. This initiative was established within the UN. Its second summit in Istanbul at the beginning of April 2009 was visited by influential leaders such as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and presidents and heads of government of dozens of states. The meetings, accompanied by Turkish hosts, were also briefly visited by US President Barack Obama.

The Alliance is a new initiative, and it should for the most part join young people together. In the future it wants to introduce a platform for the solution of conflict through dialogue. Its projects are generally focused on the technical and organizational provision of student exchanges from diverse countries and support for permanent videoconferencing ready to be used when necessary. The Alliance is now seeking its own sources of financing and its place within the UN. Because this is the Year of Innovation in the EU, we wish the new Alliance great success and the participating countries many interesting and successful ideas and projects.

Please allow me to quote this passage from the conclusion of the Report on Human Rights in the World, which was presented by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee:

"The fight for human rights is a long-term one." The EU must play a leading role in this fight. On the international field and in international institutions, the EU is perceived by a large part of the public, and despite its limitations and contradictions, as the main protector of human rights in the area of international policy. In this area there is a huge "demand for Europe," as is generally the case in all areas related to peace, democracy and development on a global level.

At the same time, it is clear that the EU is called into question by those who declare that it enforces its principles as it sees fit, or only in the case of its citizens. Clear ties between the internal and external functioning of the EU in the area of human rights must become the best answer to these critics. That requires exemplary policies dealing with immigration to be developed, just as a thorough inspection of legal guarantees related to the approach of all member states as part of the fight against terrorism. A change in the administration in the USA should enable new cooperation, which should prevent any kind of real or presumed reaction that threatens people's rights and dignity, and which are not only unacceptable, but are also counterproductive from the standpoint of the threat of terrorism. Not even in these demanding times must we let up in safeguarding basic civil, political, social, economic, cultural and other rights.

In its external manifestations, EU policy in the area of human rights should focus on favouring certain major goals without disregarding other goals:

1) A new impulse for achieving a general abolishment of the death penalty: The current generation can look forward to a realisation of this goal.

- 2) The "feminisation" of activities and programmes in the sense of special and increased awareness devoted to women's human rights.
- 3) Greater harmony between the bodies of the EU (the Council, Commission and Parliament) in the area of human rights, which requires improvement of coordination and, if possible, maximum coherence in approaches and activities.
- 4) Quantitative and qualitative development of dialogue and consultation with third countries in the area of human rights. This dialogue and consultation must be led according to the principles of equality and cooperation without interference, in a spirit of convictions and firm positions and must consistently adhere to valid agreements.
- 5) Searching for and developing wider coalitions in international institutions with the goal of supporting the fight for universal human rights.
- 6) As much as possible, developing quality represented dialogue and cooperation with civil society organizations and officials who fight for human rights on domestic, regional and worldwide levels.
- 7) An important priority for the Union must continue to be the maximum possible support for protection and protectors of human rights, women and men who, frequently in anonymity and who tirelessly struggle for the defence of these universal values.
- 8) The EU must continue to energetically confirm and protect the universal nature and indivisibility of human rights against any kind of relativism which would seek to question it from a cultural, religious, political or ideological position. All people should be equal and have the same rights independent of their race, sex, opinions, sexual orientation or origin.
- 9) In international institutions and mechanisms, the EU must, in the area of human rights on the world and regional level, support the inclusion of economic, social and cultural rights among universal human rights, and even more so in the current economic and social situation in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Domestic topics prevail in my agenda. Despite this, before I finish, please allow me to recall two of my experiences which somewhat close and frame this contribution. I hope they will be stimulative for our further discussions.

In March and April I had the honour of meeting with activists in the field of human rights in China and Venezuela. We organized both of these meetings with colleagues from the team holding Havel's debate seminars, which I mentioned in the introduction. They were essentially a complement to my programme, "Human rights have no color, are neither right nor left, and are always in first place," and that is valid worldwide. For this reason I issued a press release on my meetings.

Certain diplomats' reactions were an unpleasant surprise for me. Yes, today, just as at the beginning of the 1960s, we must hear that China or Venezuela are "different spheres of civilisation." At that time, Czechoslovakia paid for this with 20 years of non-freedom and the inability to develop autonomously. But despite this, some people still think this way today!

Injustice in individual cases by a certain part of the international community is again excused by the somewhat shady successes of "society." Friends, in the best European tradition, society is made up of individual people. China, Rwanda, Venezuela or Chad cannot be excepted from this. The rights of every person must be literally holy to us. The discrimination which is tolerated today, because President Chávez gave education to children from the favelas for free or because China is supplying the entire world with cheap products and satisfies the insatiable

Western person with permanent and sweet consumption, could hit any of us for other reasons tomorrow.

I don't want any disciplinary military campaigns against any countries, except for those where mass genocide has occurred, to tell the truth. What I want is qualified debate with the participation of all. So maybe in the future, on the issue of global terrorism, in addition to politicians, diplomats and armed forces it will also be necessary to invite to the table experts, people directly from the areas where terrorists are recruiting and maybe even some of their leaders. For this reason I support the Alliance of Civilisations initiative of President Gül, Prime Minister Zapatero and others, and for this reason I welcome the visits of President Obama to zones of tension and states which have not always taken a friendly stand toward Western democracy. I support the Middle East peace process (tens of thousands of women and children are suffering there!!), I support the international presence in Afghanistan, which has known the cruelty of a remorseless theocracy at the level of the beginning of the medieval period, I support pressure from individual governments to decrease discrimination and improve safeguards of basic rights for all in Sudan, Congo, Iran, China, North Korea, Burma, Indonesia, the Russian Federation and other states. But especially I greatly support the closest possible European integration. The EU will, in addition to the USA, be the sphere of civilisation that will fight with its unimpugnable strength for the rights of people the world over. What's more, due to its economic importance, it will not go unheard. Its voice, if it is to sound united in its plurality - I'm a musician, so please allow me this simile: Harmonically – it will be successful.

I am an optimist. The eurorealist Czech Senate last week approved the Lisbon Treaty. That now is held up at Prague Castle, but I believe it will not be for long. A common European foreign policy will thus be set in time. The Czech Republic, after resolving internal debates, political crises and the fulfilment of certain personal ambitions, will be here again, prepared to actively contribute to the debate on the direction of this Community policy.

Our experience with totalitarianism commits us to it. As does our long-term work in this area. The work of people such as Václav Havel, Karel Schwarzenberg, Milan Horáček and others justifies my optimism.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Hopefully your meeting will help Europeans to come a bit closer, and to get to know each other mutually. We all read the words of the conclusion of the European Parliament's report on Human Rights in the World with similar feelings and similar understanding: " The dignity and human rights of millions of people are being violated today thanks to structural injustices, governments that are autocratic, weak or ineffective, war, corruption, oppression and poverty. Far too often there is still a huge gulf between the lip-service paid to human rights and their honouring in reality. In addition, we have the problem of the renewed attempts to question the universality and indivisibility of human rights, as well as a situation where the international political agenda and the action of governments themselves tends to prioritise security issues, in some circumstances jeopardising the rights and guarantees of the citizen, international humanitarian and refugee law, and the international human rights standards

themselves. In these circumstances and in view of the new and old challenges, it is necessary to strengthen the EU's action in the field of human rights on a coherent basis."

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today, and now I await debate with you, which I am very much looking forward to.

Thank you for your attention.