

**Speech by Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs,  
at the conference “Beyond 1989: Hopes & Disillusions after Revolutions”**

**Prague, 6 December 2019**

Minister, dear Tomáš,

Rector of Charles University, who is hosting us today,

Vice-Rector,

Director of the Academy of Sciences,

CEFRES Director, dear Jérôme 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”. 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. 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”. 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” 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.” 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” 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”. He could have added: “free men”. 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.

I have thus come first to pay tribute to those who, thirty years ago, rose up and imposed on dumbfounded governments “the power of the powerless”, to quote the famous words of Václav Havel.

Václav Havel is a name that I cannot say here without thinking of the morning of 9 December 1988, which Tomáš mentioned earlier, and the historic meeting between François Mitterrand and eight Czech dissidents, one of whom was to become the first President of a liberated country. I am proud, very proud, that France recognized his struggle as it did. And the following year, we were many in France to watch with admiration and enthusiasm the peoples of Central Europe who took control of their destinies and who chose to write their own history, indeed not only their history, but our history: that of Europe reunified.

With them, I would also like to salute the memory of the dissidents whose spirit of resistance, in a way, paved the way for this leap. I am thinking of Jan Palach, and of course of Václav Havel and Jan Patocka and all those who brought forward Charter 77. I am thinking of Father Popiełuszko, the chaplain of Solidarność, and of so many others, including the students in Budapest in 1956 who fought for freedom.

I have mentioned 1989 and freedom, but I know that 1989 also symbolizes regained independence and sovereignty for all the countries under Soviet control. The 1989 revolutions ended the Brezhnev Doctrine, this theory of limited sovereignty drawn up after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviets and their allies on 21 August 1968, after great hope was brought by the Prague Spring. And it was again here in Prague that this doctrine was done away with when

the Warsaw Pact was officially dissolved on 1 July 1991.

This sovereignty restored thirty years ago should make us attentive to the reticence expressed here or elsewhere regarding the notion of “European sovereignty” – and I will come back to this point later. And I understand the attachment of former Eastern Bloc countries to national sovereignty, this valuable thing that they had only enjoyed on and off. This is also why those who must choose their alliances – or their lack of alliance – are the countries concerned, and the peoples constituting them, and not third parties.

Finally, the freedom regained in 1989 is that of the entire European continent. As I have already said, I prefer the word reunification of Europe, which brings us closer, to enlargement, which distances us from each other. “To call things by the wrong name is to add to the world’s misfortune”, Albert Camus once said. Something that is wrongly named cannot be apprehended precisely.

This regained freedom and this history, which you have written with courage – you the Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian and Romanian peoples and more – were also ours. You returned them to us. The freedom of Europe, including Western Europe, was limited by the servitude of Central Europe and the Soviet buffer zone. 1989 marked the end of Yalta, an order to which we were subjected but that France never accepted. More than a “return to Europe” – which Central European countries had never left, as Milan Kundera noted – it affirmed a geographical but also cultural and therefore political fact that was sometimes complacently neglected: the unity of the European continent.

I would like to say, Ladies and Gentlemen, to resume what Tomáš said earlier, that “Eastern Europe” as such never existed. It was a fabrication of the Cold War, not a relevant division arising from Europe’s long history. With 1989, for the first time, Europe, which had long been deprived of a vital portion, had the opportunity to play a role in its history and no longer merely be subjected to it.

And those who use the lack of unity in Europe today as an argument to criticize the European project are wrong. The unity of our continent is not an abstract idea or a political slogan or an “intellectual’s musing”; it is a tangible reality for all Europeans who enjoy on a daily basis this freedom of movement which was gained at such a high price.

Perhaps one of the most disastrous consequences of the 2015 refugee crisis are these borders that have been closed, these walls that have been erected, and this challenging of the area of free movement created by the Schengen Agreements. Because Schengen is, with the euro or, in another area, Erasmus, one of the most tangible and visible signs of European unification. These achievements are as necessary as they are fragile, as is European integration. When faced with doomsayers who are so ready to give lectures, often motivated by elections, it is important to always remember what together we have been able to build to the benefit of our peoples.

The horizon of this memory that draws on several sources of 1989 is, of course, our common

European project. I would like now to share the conclusions I have drawn from this reflection on our common history for our common future.

The project that France promotes, with you, is a project of European humanism, which begins with the uncompromising defence of our values and our principles. It is a project of social, economic and fiscal convergence, as Tomáš recalled. For there is an urgent need to address disillusionments and bridge European divides. They do not constitute a new wall between “two Europes” co-existing within the European Union. Inequalities, populist temptations, and the loss of meaning and common references are shared problems for all of us. We should consider them to be common problems.

This is a project of European power working for our peoples in the face of the excesses of globalization and challenges of international competition. More than ever, international unrest and brutal expression of power struggles are structuring life internationally. Europe has a choice: to accept this situation and risk seeing its own choices be dictated, or assert itself to make a difference every time it so requires, for its identity and its principles.

With no hesitation, I choose the second option. Why? Because we have known, since the time of Paul Valéry, that civilizations are mortal. How? By having Europe take charge of its own destiny.

And overall, there is an obvious fact that I need to recall: we can only hope to complete this project, over time, if we are able to guarantee our security.

That is why I believe that we cannot bring up 1989, when Europe was reunified around democratic principles and humanist values, without mentioning 1990 and the adoption of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe. What was its aim? To build European collective security by putting to work the ten great principles adopted in 1975 in Helsinki.

This ambition to build European collective security, which was so present in the early 1990s, gradually faded away. This ambition needs to be revived.

Little by little, we have seen the unravelling of the components that helped establish the security architecture set out in the Charter of Paris and we have witnessed a methodical effort to deconstruct which has led to the progressive, systematic and now nearly comprehensive dismantling of all the violence regulation instruments, from confidence-building measures to arms limitation and reduction treaties, whatever their category. And all things considered, a danger void is opening up and the threat of conflict, be it accidental or deliberate, is looming over our continent once again. The growing number of military incidents is proof of this. Remaining true to the promises of 1989 means seeking to resolve this instability and reducing these risks.

Since the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which showed Europeans what their own responsibilities were in ensuring the security of their continent, other threats have emerged. I am not only thinking of hyper-violence of terrorism. In Europe, war is back in Georgia and Ukraine. Chemical weapons have been used on the soil of a major European city. Cyber attacks have sought to sabotage and undermine the foundations of our democracies, our electoral processes and our

public debates.

Some seem to have resigned themselves to this. But we, Europeans, after the horrible tragedies that brought devastation to our continent throughout the 20th century, cannot accept them. That is why we cannot content ourselves with the status quo regarding Russia, whose aggressive actions have, we know, shaken up our strategic environment over the past ten years.

So what do we need to guarantee our security and return to the promises of November 1990 when, in Paris, this Charter to overhaul the principles of European security architecture was adopted?

We above all need the transatlantic relationship.

We, the French people, also want to preserve it. We need it, politically, militarily, and strategically. And particularly in the military operations we are conducting in the Levant and the Sahel region, alongside Czech forces. Which does not rule out considering developments with lucidity and drawing all the ensuing conclusions. Everyone understands that the time when Europe could entirely entrust others with taking care of its security and depend exclusively on them has passed. And this movement did not start when President Trump was elected. What we call in Europe strategic autonomy and which, in fact, corresponds exactly to the notion of burden sharing, is a condition for a strong and credible transatlantic relationship.

Moreover, some of our American partners suggest that our ability to act for ourselves is precisely what makes France Washington's best partner when it comes to defence.

We need the transatlantic relationship, and also need NATO to remain what it ultimately was for every one of us after 1989: a stabilizing force.

That is why France wanted to start discussion on the current malaise in the Atlantic Alliance. The Summit that was just held in London launched genuine strategic discussion in NATO. We were both there. This was necessary, in the very name of continuity and consolidation of the transatlantic relationship.

The absolute condition for a strong Atlantic Alliance is now that Europeans act more proactively and shoulder more of the responsibilities, within an overhauled and rebalanced alliance. There cannot be European defence without NATO just as there cannot be a credible and sustainable NATO without strengthening European responsibilities.

We have thought this for a long time and France is committed concretely to NATO's deterrence and defence posture, for example in Baltic States and in the Black Sea. France respects the security interests of all of our European partners, which it has made entirely its own. It will always defend them as an absolute priority, as President Macron recalled yesterday in London. We are and will always be uncompromising when our sovereignty and that of our partners and allies is at stake. Our allies can count on France, on its engagement and on its armed forces. Always.

Thirdly, we need our security to be organized in Europe so that it can ensure strategic stability

across the continent.

This is why NATO's approach of "deterrence and dialogue" has been used since 1967 and the Harmel Report. That is also the intention of President Macron's proposal for a European security and confidence-building architecture.

We need to be clear, and I want to stress this here: if we are to roll back the systematic dismantling I just mentioned, it is with Russia with whom we must re-establish dialogue. Without taking a soft line or being naive, to defend the security of all Europeans and by entering into power struggles every time it is needed. But we cannot simply ignore geography.

The initiatives that we have taken, we have created in strict compliance with agreed European principles. And we do not intend to neglect the security interests of our European partners; on the contrary, as they are also ours.

That is why we want Europe to address the major strategic, military and nuclear issues that concern its security directly. These include the reconstruction of a legal framework and transparency that should limit the risks of involuntary military escalation, set limits on the capacities of our potential adversaries and thus reduce the threat.

With the termination of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, the end of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the uncertainties looming ahead of 2021 over the New START Treaty, Europe could find itself becoming the theatre of a relentless and lawless military and nuclear competition. We have not experienced such a situation since the end of the 1960s after the Berlin and Cuba crises.

This overhaul of arms control in Europe is our responsibility, as Europeans, if we want to avoid becoming a simple arena for confrontation between third powers. We hope therefore that such European reflection can be launched shortly, as a European contribution of to the strategic reflection of NATO launched the day before yesterday and to the defence of our interests and vision of the international order.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, we need to restore the spirit and intention of Helsinki and the spirit and intention of the Charter of Paris.

When the Helsinki principles are ignored or violated, it is always at the expense of what we have been trying to build here in Europe. The last thirty years have shown that. When a "spheres of influence" approach re-emerges, the sovereign equality of States and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty are flouted. When a sole border is challenged by force, it is the inviolability of all borders that is affected and, with it, the principles of non-use of force and territorial integrity of States. When the opposition is imprisoned, when fundamental or academic freedoms are crushed, human rights and democracy are trampled.

That is why I think that these basic principles, Helsinki and the Charter of Paris, and the need to see them applied, are clearly relevant in today's context. It is now up to us to make improvements



to what was attempted thirty years ago. In the coming year, we will ensure this discussion happens at European level so that we can address this subject together by next November when the third Paris Peace Forum will be held.

Ultimately, as regards security and other issues, our challenge is to build genuine European sovereignty.

And we have already started working on this. Thanks to our efforts, Europe is finally beginning to accept its power so that it can remain free to make its own choices and free to promote its own values.

This common sovereignty does not take anything away from national sovereignties. In a dangerous and overly competitive world, it protects them. Choosing one does not mean giving up the other. Quite the opposite is true.

I understand that countries that up until just thirty years ago belonged the Eastern Bloc are fiercely attached to their sovereignty. But I would like to tell them that European sovereignty is not a return to the Holy Roman Empire, nor a return to a Brussels version of the Brezhnev Doctrine. It is the possibility for every State to remain independent in a world in which power struggles can be seen in every area.

I would like to stress that a real European is not someone who denies the existence and importance of Nation-States, just as a real patriot is not someone who rejects and has given up hope on Europe. A patriotic European or European patriot is someone who, on the contrary, knows that, without strong nations, the European project is weakened and that without a strong Europe, our nations are weaker.

Lastly, if we are not to be passive as the 21st century unrolls, there is an area which Europeans must absolutely master to ensure their sovereignty: digital technology. Tomáš and I talked at length about this subject earlier.

Because in this area as well, there is a real risk that others will impose their choices on us, be it countries or companies.

In this new space of conflicting interests, we can see more and more sophisticated power strategies being used, which aim to attack and destabilize. Another possible risk to us is dependence on the technology of others, from 5G to artificial intelligence. It is finally the risk that practices of certain major private sector players, which are not subject to regulation, breach the fundamental rights of our citizens, especially when it comes to privacy.

We must therefore take action, among Europeans, to build European digital sovereignty which is both effective and in line with our values. In other words, that is neither isolationist nor dominating, but that enables us to decide our future freely.

It is important to remember that we are not starting from scratch. We have technical infrastructure

and innovation ecosystems. We have a vision for the digital world we want: a digital world that is “free, open and safe”. We have the ability to promote it. This is what we have done with the General Data Protection Regulation, the GDPR, and we are now working to do the same regarding digital taxation.

I believe we should work on implementing four projects to gradually build digital sovereignty in Europe and advocate a European vision of digital technology and human rights in the digital era.

We need to begin by bolstering security in cyber space.

As I have said, security is the foundation of our sovereignty. Espionage, sabotage and intrusion take on new dimensions in the digital age and are violations that we cannot accept. To protect ourselves from these threats and, if necessary, respond, we need to have our own capacities. We also need to strengthen the stability of the environment where these threats are emerging: cyber space.

We have already launched several initiatives. They include the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace, which brings together governments and companies to determine joint principles that will help to better protect individuals’ rights and strengthen international norms, and the Christchurch Call to prevent the Internet being used for terrorist purposes. We also need to help other countries protect themselves without having to be subservient to a cyber power.

Secondly, we also need to win the battle of innovation.

In just a few years, Europe has found its way back to the path of digital innovation. Several European cities, including Paris, have become innovative ecosystems.

Europe needs to rebuild its forces and propose European solutions to the challenges of tomorrow: smart cities, connected health and autonomous transport. We must identify crucial sectors and areas, from 5G to issues related to digital identity and crypto currencies. And of course, we need to progress in research along with businesses.

I believe that we must continue to move forward in implementing a genuine single digital market. But this cannot exhaust the subject. We must also work determinedly to strengthen European digital technology in terms of data storage, big data management and cloud computing. This is key to ensuring our values and rights are respected.

Thirdly, we must also consolidate our role as a normative power.

As we did with the GDPR, we need to continue to innovate when it comes to rules: in order to ensure predictability and trust in the sector, but also to impose adherence to fundamental principles. I am thinking of regulation of artificial intelligence, regulation of content, security and trust in cyber space. Regarding all these subjects, we will need to build, my dear Tomáš, majority coalitions. We can do it.

Lastly, we need to protect the common goods that are common and open digital infrastructure.

Today, a European innovator has to make use of a whole set of resources – infrastructure, data and payment systems – that are the property of monopolistic players. These players, through their terms and conditions, which they define themselves and without concertation, set their own rules.

As we do not have a hegemonic vision of sovereignty, we would like the digital world to instead be organized around common goods that are not captured by those who hold de facto monopolies thanks to their computing power, mastery of technology, or financial domination. This is why we need to remain vigilant to protect or develop common, open digital infrastructure that is usable by all and improvable by all.

Regarding these issues, France hopes that, together with European countries that so wish, we can launch reflection on European digital sovereignty in 2020. I believe this reflection is in line with the first statements made by the new President of the Commission.

Dear friends,

To conclude, and I have had a lot to talk about, I would like to say that if there is one thing we learned from 1989, it is that history is not linear. It is now considered good form to denounce Western arrogance, which, in light of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, declared it a victory for liberal democracy and the market economy.

But the “democratic determinism” of the time should not be followed thirty years later by a “populist determinism”. In light of the rise of populism, the questioning of the liberal democracy model and the challenging of multilateralism, some have predicted “an end to the liberal order”. A new, reversed, ending to the story in a way, which would seem more like a cautious withdrawal than a rosy future.

And yet the real lesson of 1989 is that history is never written in advance, and that it is peoples that write it. We can only welcome this as political leaders. It is great news because this means that Europeans are free to determine their future and by working together, they will be able to create and defend models for society and international governance in which they believe. As Václav Havel once said, the spirit of resistance and courage pay.

Undoubtedly, 1989 has not yet kept all its promises. Is this a reason to give into the prevailing disillusion? I don't think so. I see it more as an additional reason for Europeans to continue working to write their common history.

I believe it is the best way to remain true to the spirit of 1989 and pay homage to those who, thirty years ago, with their faith, their endurance and their enthusiasm, made history, your history, our history, for our common Europe: a free, sovereign and humanist Europe.

In order to encourage you to dip into the force of 1989 to better build the Europe of tomorrow together, let me conclude by paraphrasing the wise words of Nietzsche: redeem the past while creating the future; let that be our present.

Thank you.