Mr. President of the General Conference, Mr. Chairperson of the Executive Board, Madam Director-General, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, allow me to congratulate Mr. President of the General Conference on his election and to wish him much energy and success in fulfilling his role.

It is a great honour for me to address the General Conference of UNESCO today on behalf of the Czech Republic, which also aligns itself with the statement of the European Union to be delivered later.

We are living at a time that brings many challenges. We are still not spared from armed conflicts; we seem unable to stop climate change; we often feel helpless in the rapidly evolving world of modern technology; we are witnessing a fundamental questioning of the relevance and significance of the system of multilateral organisations. The transformations of our planet, human civilization and social relationships show us how important the mandate of our organisation is, how important it is to work together to fulfil the ideals of quality education, protection of cultural and natural heritage, development of science for all, sharing of knowledge, protection of human rights and the freedom of expression that are indivisible.

But words are not enough – we need to act – together, responsibly and effectively. We are meeting here after two years, in order to reflect on our work and to set priorities for the coming years. I hope that the ongoing strategic transformation of UNESCO will, provided it is well-managed, help to restore respect to this organisation.

As a Minister of Culture, I will first focus on cultural aspects.

Cooperation between our institutions in the field of culture is excellent; I should like to mention the Czech Republic’s current mandate in the Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. We have been active members of the Committee since 2015, and we strive for re-election this December. Our membership has contributed to improving the inter-ministerial cooperation at a national level as well as our international engagement in this important agenda. I would like to mention the organisation of a round table in 2018 on the topic of international legal protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict.
Another important initiative by the Czech Republic is the current plan to provide expert assistance to rescue Iraq’s cultural heritage. This involves training courses for Iraqi professionals focusing on the areas of restoration and reconstruction of architectural monuments. The other project under preparation, which we would like to associate with the UNESCO Director-General’s initiative “Revive the Spirit of Mosul”, is the documentation of the destroyed heritage fund. We would be honoured to offer our cooperation to UNESCO on the implementation of this project.

The Czech Republic is proud to have on its relatively small territory 14 properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, included two added earlier this year. Alongside Prague, our capital, sites included in the List are the most sought-after by both foreign and domestic tourists. In its pursuit of the sustainable development of tourism, the Czech Republic focuses on maintaining the authenticity of these destinations, improving the quality of life of local residents by developing infrastructure, and expanding the range of activities at sites that are less popular and beyond the peak tourist season.

In the field of natural sciences, the Czech Republic considers it urgent to seek solutions to stop unsustainable ways of exploiting natural resources, which lead to the aggravation of problems related to climate change, the loss of biodiversity and environmental protection. In this respect, the Czech Republic fully supports the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network, not only in the field of conservation, presentation and responsible approach to the Earth’s heritage, but also by stimulating the activities of municipalities and regions and focusing on the quality of life of local residents and the development of their environmental maturity.

In the field of education, the Czech Republic supports the adoption of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education, which lays down clear rules for the recognition of higher education certificates on an international scale. However, the transparent exchange of information between states will be very important prerequisite for its smooth and complete implementation.

The Czech Republic is currently preparing a new Education Policy Strategy to 2030+, which will be a key strategic document, placing strong emphasis on achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, because the Czech education system prioritises ensuring equal access to inclusive and quality education.

In relation to education, I would also like to mention that the Czech Republic has proposed to include the 350th anniversary of the death of John Amos Comenius in the list of anniversaries with which UNESCO will be associated in 2020-2021. A number of exhibitions, Comeniological conferences, etc. will take place not only in the Czech Republic. Comenius was one of the most important Czech thinkers, philosophers and writers and remains a prominent personality in the European context. We might still be inspired by Comenius’ organic philosophy, which
shows the importance of synthesis. As he himself put it, “we all stand on the stage of the great world, and whatever takes place here, concerns us all.”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, which divided Europe into two parts. The Velvet Revolution fully opened our country up to democratisation processes and its regained freedom. As our first modern, freely elected president, Václav Havel, staunch supporter of the principles of humanity, democracy and human rights, said in his New Year’s speech of 1990: “the best government in the world, the best parliament and the best president, cannot achieve much on their own. And it would be wrong to expect a general remedy from them alone. Freedom and democracy include participation and therefore responsibility from us all“.

I believe that the ideas of Comenius and Havel and their appeal to freedom and the shared responsibility of each of us will continue to bear a powerful legacy for everyone.

Thank you for your attention.