

ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT CAPUTOVA TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 19 October 2022

Madam President, Honourable Members,

Dear Representatives of the Czech Presidency of the Council,

My Fellow Europeans,

It is an honour and a privilege to be with you today and to address the beating heart of the European Union's democracy here in Strasbourg. This is where the modern concept of defending universal human rights was translated into concrete institutions. While serving a broader purpose, I see the European Parliament as one of them.

My message today is simple: if we don't start defending democracy, it will cease to exist. The date of my speech here was planned long ago and I could not have expected that the recent murder of Juraj Vankulič and Matúš Horváth on the streets of Bratislava would so painfully remind us of this simple truth. It is hard to put into words the grief felt in Slovakia's cities in the past few days. Because hate has decided to kill love. Just because the killer could not accept that love can come in different forms. This was an assault not just on young people from the LGBTIQ community. It was an attack on everyone in Slovakia, because hate crimes always target the very essence of what our society stands for.

I would like to assure you that hatred does not dominate our society. I welcome the fact that Slovakia's civil society swiftly and resolutely condemned this attack. Just yesterday, the Slovak parliament, adopted a resolution strongly condemning this terrorist act and assuring all minorities that they are valuable members of our society, and most Slovak political parties have signalled an openness to make further legislative changes.

I consider this to be a necessary step in the right direction of their protection and equality.

In its essence, democracy is majority rule in the interests of all, with a key emphasis on the protection of minorities. If we fail in their protection, we are undermining democracy itself.

In my view, the defence and protection of democracy is the core mission of our generation of political leaders, the elected representatives of our citizens. The task before us, is to restore balance in Europe, a balance which has been shaken by crises from within and without. A balance between our rights and our commitments. Between our security and our prosperity, which we have partly built through dependence on those who wish to destroy our democracy. A balance in which we can have different opinions, but where we are bound by the values of freedom, solidarity and liberal democracy.

And now, allow me to switch into Slovak - so even here, in the European Parliament's Chamber, one can hear the beautiful Slovak language.

Esteemed Madam President, Honourable Members of Parliament,

The balance I speak of has been endangered by two huge crises in the recent past – the pandemic and the security crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The European Union has reacted to both of them properly. In the case of the pandemic, we quickly shifted from closing borders and competing to see who would procure more face masks to adopting a joint and unified approach. We have begun the joint post-pandemic recovery of our economies through the EU Recovery and Resilience Fund. And we shared solidarity even beyond our borderlines. Today we are among the largest global donors of Covid-19 vaccines.

We also decisively reacted to the war which Vladimir Putin started against our eastern neighbour on 24 February. Let us remember that the events on that gloomy February morning were only an intensification of the war that has been waged for many years, first through disinformation and propaganda and in 2014 through military means, with the clear goal to subdue or destroy Ukraine.

The sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union are the most intensive sanctions that a developed economy has ever faced. We provide political, financial, humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and the majority of countries, including Slovakia, have provided military assistance, which Ukraine desperately needs and which should be continued. The European perspective which we offered to Ukraine, is also very important, and I believe that one day it will be implemented in the form of full-fledged membership.

Through our help, we strive for one thing, to bring about peace. But it must be a fair and just peace, otherwise it would be nothing more than a temporary truce.

For those who have had to flee the war, we have opened not only our homes, but our hearts. Over 800,000 people have crossed the Slovak borders alone; many have remained in our country and I am proud of the outpouring of solidarity and assistance of our citizens.

The people of Europe have also come away with a strong experience of pan-European empathy and unity from both crises, in addition to fear and worry. It is this experience which demonstrates that our unity, cooperation and solidarity represent the best way to overcome any challenges that we, the Union, face.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Striving for balance in Europe does not end here. Ironically, although we are unprecedentedly unified against external challenges, we also face strong internal pressures. These are caused by the concurrence of several crises and the long-term neglect of our vulnerabilities. If we fail to manage these European crises, it could escalate to the crisis of Europe.

Millions of European households and businesses today are endangered by the surge in energy prices. These prices began to rise before the war, as Russia began to lower its

supply of gas to Europe even last summer in an attempt to deform the European energy market and put our citizens in danger. Slovakia, which until recently received 85% of its gas from Russia, has reduced its dependency to 33% thanks to diversification. But we do not know when Vladimir Putin will stop the supply of gas completely.

As the European Union today, we need to resolve the causes and impacts of this crisis. Therefore, the proper solutions should be European, shared and unified. Solutions that will quickly help all member states in difficult situations and in addition to the compensation, allow for joint agreement on the capping of gas prices. We also need to separate the interdependency of electricity and gas prices, because today countries like Slovakia, which produce the majority of electricity from low carbon sources, pay inappropriate prices for it. That is why I would like to ask you to support these solutions.

Aside from the consequences, we must also address the causes that got us into this situation. The European Union should never again be dependent on one supplier. And our economic model and prosperity should never be dependent on fossil fuels.

The commitment to become a climate neutral continent by 2050 must not be postponed or questioned. First of all, we must help those suffering the greatest impacts of the energy crisis today. But the objective is clear: to innovate our development model in order to maximise our use of renewable energy sources and minimise our destruction of our own planet. We must become the global leaders in the declaration and performance of our climate commitments. We will survive only if we restore the balance between our way of life and the planet we live on.

Esteemed Members of Parliament,

Today we also face the crisis regarding democratic rules and adherence to them.

Every single country which has joined the European Union, and every single country, which strives to do so must be and remain a liberal democracy. Membership in this club is not an entitlement. It is a privilege. Simply become a member of this club is not enough; membership must be constantly updated by having a clear understanding of and respect for common values such as the rule of law, separation of powers and independence of the judiciary, freedom of media and protection of minorities.

If these cornerstones on which our communities are based, face attack, we must come to their defence. I want to emphasize that we do not lack the rules, but we fall short in terms of the thoroughness and consistency in which we enforce them. If our measures are not decisive, the problems will grow and those who violate the values of the European Union will encourage and inspire others.

The term liberal democracy itself is misinterpreted, misunderstood, questioned and attacked by extremists on both sides of the political spectrum in many of our countries. Although there is no single model of liberal democracy, I am certain that the expression “non-liberal democracy” is an oxymoron.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our democratic rules are being abused in an attempt to destroy democracy. Freedom of speech is one of the most important democratic rights. We must protect it, but not without discernment. How is it possible that we have allowed freedom of speech to extend to verbal crimes? How could we frequently promote it to the level of an absolute right? This is not democratic, it's foolish. Freedom of speech cannot become a cover for the dissemination of intolerance, lies and disinformation.

The social networks are where this issue is the most serious. A radicalised teenager, who a week ago killed two young people and wounded a third on the streets of Bratislava, was to a great extent inspired by what he read on social networks; in fact, he uploaded a long diatribe against various minorities on the social network before embarking on his murderous rampage.

Although this took place in Slovakia, the risk of such acts concerns all of us. We can observe the escalation of aggressivity towards minorities and the growth of right-wing extremism throughout Europe. And the deterioration of the social and economic situation only emboldens these radicals. We must treat any hate-inspired attack as an attack on the essential values of the European Union, which include equality, tolerance and respect for human rights.

It seems to me that our approach to social networks is as naïve as our approach to other technological innovations. In other words, we don't exercise sufficient preliminary caution. We utilize their benefits without knowledge and vigilance of their possible and obviously negative consequences. We use social networks without fully realizing, as a society, how their algorithms can harm us, how they increase polarization and strengthen opinion bubbles.

“Trust the truth, live the truth, defend the truth” is the motto of General Milan Rastislav Štefánik, one of the founders of the modern Slovak nation. This must be applied in the public space even when it seems that it would be more effective to simply shout out loud, regardless of the quality or truthfulness of statements and to not listen to each other, engage in dialogue or show respect for facts.

Let us not allow democracy to die from the naivety of democrats. From naïve faith in the idea that democratic rights and freedoms will be only used and not abused. Let us not forget that every right is also an expression of responsibility and vice versa.

If we do not defend democracy, we could be the last generation to live it. Its defence is the main task of our generation of political leaders.

Therefore, we must also take proper steps at the national level. I am pleased that the European Parliament passed the Digital Services Act and I welcome the European Action Plan for Democracy. What is illegal in offline space must be also illegal online. However, we must do more at the global level. The business model of social platforms is based on exploiting the basest human emotions and instincts. Social platforms are not only operators of legendary information channels – because their profit is directly proportional to the amount of hatred, aggression, lies and disinformation that flows through them. Therefore, they must be held responsible for the content which they publicize.

Esteemed Madam President, Honourable Members of Parliament,

The challenges I have mentioned are making the European Union more fragile than we may be willing to admit. Economic, security and energy crises, the continuing fragmentation of our communities and the pressure of illegal migration have created a breeding ground for extremism. In many Member States one election cycle is sufficient and the majority sitting in the deputy seats, even your seats, will not want to build Europe, but destroy it.

Therefore, we must not be lax and defensive; on the contrary, we must be persistent, brave and confident in defending our common values.

Despite the necessity to address many crises and perhaps just because of that, we must not forget what politics as such should be based on. On the value basis which we, politicians, must defend. Therefore, let us hold firm to the demands we make of ourselves, in order to represent decency, ethics and democratic values. Faithfulness towards these principles is no weakness, but the essence of democratic policy.

One hundred years ago, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, stated that democracy is not only a political system, but primarily a moral system. Let us all keep this in mind when carrying out our mandate - our responsibility and duty to our citizens.

If we can perceive democracy in this sense, I am certain that we will handle the crises we face today and thus we will fulfil our mission to be guardians and defenders of democracy, European values and balance.

Thank you.