

Dear Mr President Gauck, Minister President Haseloff, Madam Vice President Barley, Mayor Borris, dear Excellences, dear guests

It's an honour to receive the Emperor Otto Prize and to represent my country, Slovakia.

Few probably know that the Slovak history is closely linked with Magdeburg. In the 12th century, German-speaking settlers began arriving on the territory of today's Slovakia. They brought not just their unique skills, but also a set of legal norms collectively known as the Magdeburg law. These norms later helped speed up socio-economic development of our medieval towns. Beautiful historical centres of many Slovak cities are a testament to the ethnic and religious diversity, which the Magdeburg law helped protect for centuries.

Dear Excellences, dear guests,

The Prize I have just received reminds us of the importance of European cooperation. Europe was built as a peace project, born out of tragedy of the two world wars. But it has also become a democracy project, rooted in shared values, including the rule of law. Over time, across much of Europe, peace has become synonymous with democracy.

That is still the case today, even as both democracy and peace are under enormous pressures. Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, Slovakia's direct neighbour, has shaken the peaceful European order. And when our citizens saw democratic governments struggle to deal with the pandemic, or with inflation and energy crises, many of them started to question not just their administrations' competence. But also democracy itself.

This is true especially today, when in many countries, support for populists and extremists is on the rise. Why is it so? Indeed, the current economic or energy and security challenges would be a test for any government. Democratic politicians rightly focus on finding solutions to these crises. But together, we also need to make a greater effort to protect democracy itself.

Democracy cannot survive without democrats. Without responsible individuals, who practise democratic values in their everyday lives. Democracy requires leaders, who see politics as a service to the public, and not gladiators seeking to destroy their opponents. Leaders who are mature individuals, who understand the temptations of political power and are capable of resisting them. Leaders who know that empathy is the quality of the strong. Who see decency and respect for others as a strength, not as a weakness.

To protect democracy, let's not allow the fear of rising extremism to paralyze us. Seeing the anti-democrats grow, many democrats choose to stay in their opinion bubbles. This only reinforces the dividing lines in our societies, and deepens polarization and fragmentation. Democrats can never resign on bridge-building and dialogue, including with those whose opinions differ. The only ones we should refuse to have a dialogue with, are those who are trying to destroy democracy itself.

In defending democracy, democrats should be courageous and resolute. This applies to the protection of its key pillars such as the separation of powers, the rule of law or fundamental human rights. But we have been timid in addressing a more recent threat to democracy, coming from online social media. Extremists have benefited the most from these unregulated platforms. Just like the undemocratic forces, their business model is based on misusing the lowest of human emotions.

As a result, in the online space, freedom of speech has often become abused to undermine the rights of others, to spread panic and false alarms, or to endanger public health. This is an example when a democratic value is used to attack democracy.

Freedom has its limits in every democratic society. As the US Justice Wendell Holmes said, "Your right to swing your arms ends just where the other man's nose begins". This should also apply online. This is not a call for censorship. I grew up in communist Czechoslovakia, and as a lawyer I know how essential freedom of speech is to democracy. But essential doesn't mean unlimited. Social media platforms should be more regulated at national, EU but also global level - and they must be responsible for the content they publish.

Dear Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy also requires democratic citizens. Societies, which realize that democracy is not a one-off achievement but a never-ending process of self-improvement. Democracy can't be exercised at the ballot box alone – it must be practiced in our everyday lives, in communities, kindergartens, schools, churches or offices. Democracy will flourish where society has big expectations not just from its leaders but also from itself. Where critical thinking, empathy or respect for every human being is cultivated early on at the grassroots level.

This is even more important today, when according to many scientists, technological progress is moving faster than the evolution of human mind and emotions. Just as the industrial revolution triggered profound social changes, today's technological advances will also dramatically transform our societies.

We should embrace this progress – but also prepare for the rapid changes it will bring. We must ensure that people don't get lost in this brave new world, and that democracy doesn't become its victim. That, and nothing less, is our common task.

Thank you.