World Forum for Democracy

Plenary Session 1: "Democracy untended?"

Strasbourg, Hemicycle of the European Parliament, 6 November 2023

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today in the context of this very topical and relevant debate.

Six months ago, when I addressed, as President of our Parliamentary Assembly, the Heads of State and Government of Council of Europe member States, associated states and international organisations in Reykjavik, at the 4th Summit of Europe's oldest and broadest treaty-based peace organization, I referred to 1949, almost three quarters of a century ago. At that time, the founders of the Council of Europe declared that maintaining peace would depend on the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The pursuit of peace based upon justice and international cooperation was considered to be vital for the preservation of human society and civilization. Mutual respect for individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, had to be the basis for a truly genuine democracy, which would be needed to protect peace and promote prosperity amongst its citizens. Peace and democracy – two sides of the same coin.

After the devastation of the Second World War there was no other viable option, we thought, in 1949. But in spite of that clear conviction, post-war Europe became cold-war Europe for four long and again devastating decades, during which West and East did not unite but remained divided and only maintained peace based on quite opposite convictions: that of the always present danger of mutual destruction, of a third and final world war. According to many this was an accident just waiting to happen.

Fortunately, that did not happen and after 1989, the whole of Europe finally became united under the Statute of the Council of Europe, on the belief that the pursuit of peace based upon justice and international cooperation would again be considered to be the only viable option to preserve human society and civilization in the future. After the two world wars and the Cold War, peace now would be the result of a system of democratic security in the whole of Europe.

Almost a quarter of a century later we know that the promise of peace to the citizens of Europe is again evaporating. Due to the Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, caused by an authoritarian and by now even dictatorial regime in the Kremlin, war has returned to Europe. Tens of thousands have already been wounded and killed, and millions of citizens of Ukraine have fled their homes, often even their country. While we speak here, people are dying there.

All this is happening when democracy, seen as the guardian of peace, is showing serious backsliding throughout Europe and losing its strength to protect peace, which is subsequently ruined by war. Neither peace nor democracy can be taken for granted anymore, if ever. If we want to bring back peace in Europe, democracy has to be strengthened, revitalized, perhaps reinvented. This is not an option, this is an obligation if we are to preserve human society and civilization. Democracy untended causes peace to crumble.

That is why I welcomed so much the clear re-commitment to democracy by our Heads of State and Government through the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy. These principles must be revitalized with all our energy, by parliaments, governments, civil society and citizens themselves. As agreed in Reykjavik, it is our duty to commit ourselves, more than ever, to the freedom of expression, assembly and association, to independent institutions, impartial and effective judiciaries, to the fight against corruption and democratic participation of civil society and especially of young people. Clear commitments, clear perspectives. And let me say once more: Peace needs democracy, democracy needs peace. There is no other alternative. So, let us commit to that goal.