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World Forum for Democracy
STRASBOURG 2022

Address by

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Prime Minister of Iceland

on the occasion of the
10th World Forum for Democracy

(Strasbourg, 7-9 November 2022)

Secretary General, excellencies, colleagues, friends

It is a pleasure to be with you today and be part of this esteemed forum, whose purpose is to protect human rights and freedoms and to engage with critical problems such as democratic transitions.

Recently, much has been made of the “decline” of democracy, with references to the ascendancy of authoritarian regimes, which often exercise power with impunity. There is a tendency to think that democracies perish as a result of violent action, such as military coups or aggression. But in our time, they can be undermined by other overt means or wither away in enforced silence.

We have witnessed elected leaders coming to power through parliamentary means, who, then, engage in a power grab aimed at eliminating democratic checks and balances. A favourite tactic is to take control of the mediascape, especially public broadcasting, to silence opposition voices and suppress critical media outlets as well as to demonize civil society groups as foreign agents.

Another one is to change electoral laws through gerrymandering or by restricting access to voting. And the final straw is to reject voting results outright or to abolish terms limits to stay in power as part of a broader effort to delegitimize the democratic process.

These anti-democratic practices are being repeated over and over again in different parts of the world. And, paradoxically, they have often been justified in the name of democracy. Authoritarians usually claim, in a populist fashion, to be fighting corrupt elites to bring back power to the people but usually end up corrupting the democratic systems they had promised to fix. This dangerous trend is a warning sign to all of us who are committed to democracy as the only way to guarantee equal political rights and to choose our own representatives.

Dear guests

Europe – and the whole world – has been experiencing multiple crises in the past decade: a financial crisis, a pandemic and, most recently, a brutal war. After recovering from the Great Recession, COVID-19 hit with devastating consequences for people’s lives and health as well as for our economies. And when countries were in the process of lifting long-awaited social restrictions, Russia began its senseless, illegal war against Ukraine – with no end in sight.

From day one, my government strongly condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and stood in solidarity with the victims – the Ukrainian people. We will continue to do so, together with our European, transatlantic, and other partners and friends.

What needs to be done is clear: that Russia withdraw its forces from Ukraine and cease all hostilities. It is the precondition for a lasting peace. Ukraine has become a symbol of a larger trend characterised by growing global inequalities, social disruptions, and human uprooting. The number of people forced to flee conflict, human rights violations and persecution has now reached 100 million for the first time on record. And as we deal with human displacements resulting from the pandemic and wars, the consequences of the climate crisis have become clearer and more dire: with floods, burning forests, droughts and extreme weather patterns.

When confronted with all these crises, it does not come as a surprise that democracy has come under strain. Following a period where a Western-led liberal order went unchallenged, non-democratic states, with no interest in the promotion of equality or human rights, have emerged as major players on the international scene. We can debate whether its matters more that democratic states are becoming fewer or whether they are becoming less democratic. Yet, as noted, democratic rights can be suppressed or they can slip away – and for this reason, they have to be fought for, nurtured and protected.

There are, to be sure, democracies that flourish today, having strong public institutions that function in accordance with democratic principles and political parties that are committed to the democratic system and the rule of law.

We need to educate our people on democracy – in the Icelandic curriculum which was published during my time as minister for education, children are supposed to learn about democracy and human rights but also how to act democratically – and become citizens of a democratic society.

And Icannot emphasize enough how important the political parties are as gatekeepers of democracy, where they can be in a position – through the exercise of tolerance and mutual respect – to mitigate extreme political polarization. When authoritarian forces challenge democracy, the parties also have a duty to suspend, temporarily, ideological differences and rally against a common foe, even if it means making political concessions for the cause of greater good. If there is one lesson to be learned from the failure of the international response to fascism in the 1930s, it is that democracies must stay together to protect hard-won political rights and freedoms.

Dear friends

In Iceland, we have a long parliamentary tradition, which has cemented democratic loyalties but also produced some quirky national peculiarities. At the beginning of every autumn session, each member of Parliament draws a number in the seating lottery. It means that one does not necessarily sit next to a member from one's own party. To be sure, sometimes Icelandic parliamentarians draw a deep breath before the random selection process begins, fearing that they will be allotted a seat beside a political adversary whom they dislike. Yet, the seating lottery has had the benefit of creating long-lasting cross-political friendships in parliament; after all, it is really difficult to persist in hating someone that one needs to spend so much time with!

Democracy – humans rights – equality. In my mind, these three values cannot be separated from each other. Democracy is, as noted, about the equal rights of people to make decisions for their societies. Social justice and equality are a key factor in ensuring those rights.

In the Council of Europe, there are representatives from different countries with different governments and different national policies. But the core values guiding the Council's work are clear: human rights, democracy and the rule of law. I would like to add equality to this conceptual mix. I come from a country, which is by no means perfect, but has enjoyed success when it comes to general income equality, gender equality and high participation in democratic elections. It is also one of the most peaceful countries in the world

I want to use this opportunity to state that Iceland will do everything in its power to fight for and strengthen human rights and democracy during its chairmanship of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers. We take over the chairmanship in troubled times – but we are committed to doing our best to serve the fundamental values of the Council.

Dear guests

Weapons do not make peace. Today's military complexes are often judged by the magnitude of destructive power, but they provide no guarantees for peace. Peace is not the absence of war, and war is not the absence of peace. Wars deprive people of human rights – the lack of respect for human life. To promote peace, we need a just society, where human rights and democracy are respected, where the rights of the many are guaranteed to influence decision-making and social and economic progress. And international conventions on human rights, such as the European Human Rights Convention, are one of our most important tools to ensure those rights.

For the past eight months we have witnessed the widespread human rights abuses Russia's war on Ukraine has generated. The list of atrocities and war crimes committed is one that must not be looked away from. It is imperative that war crimes be investigated and that we bring the perpetrators to justice.

Distinguished guests

Democracy is not a given and depends on those claiming it. It evolves and needs to be actively strengthened and protected against authoritarian tendencies. We have seen how new technologies are being used to spread messages with extraordinary speed, which, in itself, has changed the form and nature of political discussion. Social media have led to the creation of bubbles that often do not interact, and, as a venue for spreading all sorts of information, including disinformation and misinformation, they have also made it more difficult to have an informed discussion that reaches the whole population.

There is no easy way to counteract extreme polarization or to break such bubbles. But political leaders need to combine efforts to combat social exclusion and disinformation and they need to be combined with new visions of the collective good, which can appeal to the public and strengthen their sense of social

belonging. Participatory democracy – the idea that people's concerns should form the basis for change – is one way to complement representative democracy by encouraging equal participation in political decisions and shaping policies that affect people's lives.

Women have long been at the forefront of civil and political rights movements across the globe. Their full participation in politics – at the national or local levels – is fundamental to democracy. And when women's equality has been reached in the political arena, it makes for stronger decision-making and more representative governance.

Equal rights in Iceland have been fought for and achieved by women through collective action and solidarity. I greatly admire the generations of activists for women's rights that came before us and the ones that are still fighting today. We have had some historic breakthroughs, most notably with the election of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in 1980, who became the first woman who was democratically elected president in the world. She took office after a wave of feminist energy that extended from an epic 1975 day-off, in which 90 percent of Icelandic women walked off their jobs to send a powerful message about their contribution to society.

While we are trying to do things differently in Iceland, we still live in a world where most countries are led by men. What is more, the value-system of some are still rooted in decades-old traditions and practices. When I attend international meetings, the gender imbalance is jarring. To take an example: in September, the meeting of the European Political Community in Prague brought together 44 leaders of which only eight were women. We have to eliminate this lack of parity – and yes, it is doable.

Dear guests

In its foreign policy, Iceland is – and will be – a state without a military, which builds its sovereignty on the respect for international law and on active cooperation with other states as well as, multilaterally, in international organizations. Iceland is a strong advocate for human rights, democracy and rule of law and for peace and disarmament. Now and always, we will use our voice to champion the rights of women and girls, LGBTI+ persons, and children and youth as well as those of the environment. I can assure you that we will prioritise and safeguard these values when Iceland takes over the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe this week.

The Council – the Continent's oldest and leading pan-European organization – has a critical role to play as a guardian of human rights. It is built not only on our common European history but on our common European thought and culture. We believe that together we can swing back the pendulum and confront the dangers facing democracy today. To do so, we must continue to ensure that the Council is prepared to meet current and future challenges as well as the expectations of future generations.

The decision made today by the Council's Committee of Ministers calls on the leaders of the 46 Member States to "unite around our values" at a summit next year, only the 4th summit in the history of this organization. They will do so at my invitation in Reykjavik – the historic meeting place of Reagan and Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, when we witnessed the beginning of the end of the cold war. I use this historic reference to underline the challenges we face at a time when a war of aggression is being waged in Europe. It is a reminder that we have to believe in humanity, in the power of multilateral institutions, and in a common will to solve international disputes by peaceful means.

Distinguished guests,

Let me conclude by reiterating my deep respect for this organization and my gratitude for having the opportunity to share my thoughts with you. You are an inspiration and you give me hope. I feel the readiness and eagerness to do better – to work on the urgent tasks of protecting human rights and halting democratic decline and towards a better future, in which current and future generations can prosper in peaceful democratic societies.

I thank you.