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Remarks by

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on the occasion of the
10th World Forum for Democracy

(Strasbourg, 7-9 November 2022)

Friends,

In this week, thirty-three years ago, the people of Berlin tore down a wall. History did not end that day.

But for millions of Europeans, a new life did begin.

A great wave of democratisation washed across our continent. Promising prosperity. Raising hopes.

Subsequent years saw progress. Exemplified in the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, under Ireland's Presidency. But in the past decade the tide has turned.

Amidst economic uncertainty and rising inequality, democracy has come under sustained assault. From without. And, more damagingly, within.

Today, as the Varieties of Democracy project records, we are back where we were when the Berlin wall fell.

Democracy is at a low ebb. Autocracy a high mark.

For many, the origins of this reversal can be traced to the Kremlin. But, wherever they began, they reflect deeper problems with our democratic systems, which we, as advocates, must understand and address.

Several of the most recent Star Wars episodes were filmed in Ireland. So I recognise the appeal of framing democrats as Jedi and autocrats as Empire. The reality is often more complex. Less light and dark. More shades of grey. But undoubtedly, the past months have reinforced why democracy matters.

In the Russian Federation's actions, we have seen where tyranny can lead.

In Ukraine's brave response, the heights a proud people will rise to in protecting their homes and the freedoms we might take for granted.

In my few words this morning, I want to highlight three factors I consider critical to securing those freedoms for Ukraine and democracy on our continent:

- . First, how we protect the integrity of our public institutions;
- . Second, how we promote the prosperity of our citizens;
- . Finally, how we understand the 'demos' in democracy - the psychology that motivates us as human beings.

Protecting Institutions

First, our institutions.

We must be clear what it is that we strive to protect. Democracy demands more than majority rule.

Free elections are its foundation. But democracy also requires impartial rule of law and respect for human rights.

As Judge Brenda Hale, a former member of the Strasbourg Court put it, "Democracy values everyone equally, even if the majority does not."

Understood this way, illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms. An illiberal politician may be a majoritarian. They cannot be a democrat.

Securing democracy, then, demands that we safeguard freedom of expression, association, and assembly. It means promoting independent, impartial, and efficient judiciaries. It means guaranteeing the integrity of our electoral systems.

Because democrats contest elections. Not results.

Democracy is our world's most precious metal. But it tarnishes easily. Without a free press, without civil society, without independent courts it corrodes. And eventually collapses.

To restore its lustre and protect it, we must recommit to the principles the Council of Europe embodies.

And reinvest in its core institutions – above all the European Court of Human Rights, now led by the brilliant Irish Judge, Síoifra O’Leary.

That is why, as Chair of the Committee of Ministers, I called for the leaders of our 46 member states to convene for a fourth time in the Council’s long history.

A decision, I’m glad to tell you, the Committee of Ministers endorsed at the final meeting of our Presidency this morning.

Delivering Prosperity

Democracy delivers dignity.

Through their vote and their voice, any citizen can affect change, linked to this is one of its great virtues - a capacity for self-correction.

In the long-run, democracy’s unique feedback mechanism means it is always better placed to deliver stability and prosperity for our citizens.

But if democracies are to thrive today, we need to convince those citizens - young people, in particular - of our capacity to deliver over shorter time horizons.

Key to that is improving the quality of governance.

How do we do this? There are many steps.

But one is to listen more directly to our citizens, above all young people. And, critically, to make them heard.

Ireland’s experience with Citizens’ Assemblies over the past decade has been hugely positive in this respect.

It has proved a way to deepen democratic engagement, bolster trust and improve public policy.

It is not a panacea for democratic decline. But it can be part of a toolkit for democratic revival.

Collectively, we need to do more to share such experiences – and draw inspiration from them. Which is one reason this Forum is so very important.

Understanding People

Alongside protecting institutions and delivering prosperity, we must strive to better understand the essence of democracy – the “demos” or people we represent.

In Strasbourg, human rights and the rule of law are concrete terms. But for most of the Council of Europe’s 675 million citizens, they are abstract.

If we’re to convince a new generation of their value, we must communicate them differently.

Through a decade and a half of democratic decline, autocrats have understood this. And acted on it, at home and abroad.

Telling stories. Tweeting slogans. Promising simple solutions to complex problems. Appealing not to reason or evidence, as we perhaps too often do. But to emotion - typically and, most powerfully, fear.

But also, more positively, to something all human beings share - a desire for connection, to be part of a group, a community.

Much of what these autocrats preach can be dismissed as disinformation.

And certainly we need better tools to counter untruths, and prevent their spread, above all on digital platforms. But we must also understand why those appeals resonate. And draw lessons ourselves as we make the case for inclusive, diverse democracies.

Because we will not defeat falsehoods with fact checking alone.

We need to counter them with the dark with light. Powerful truths. Compelling stories. Above all, perhaps, a positive conception of patriotism.

One that validates our need for collective identity. But not at the expense of individual rights.

President Biden, who hosted the Summit for Democracy last year, speaks often of his Irish heritage.

And has said of the Irish that we “are the only people in the world nostalgic about the future.”

By this, I take him to mean that, given our history, Ireland does not yearn, as some nations do, for a great imperial past.

That is true. But hope for the future – if not nostalgia for it – is not Ireland’s alone. It is inherent in all democracies.

Because while the world’s autocracies fixate on history, democracies are fuelled by what another American President, also of Irish heritage, called “the audacity of hope.”

At times, hope can be elusive. It is always intangible. But it is no less real, no less needed, for that.

It is amongst the reasons democracy emerged. And why, I believe, it will endure. But only if we fight for it. With all our energies.

As the people of Berlin did thirty three years ago. As the people of Ukraine are doing today. We must prevail. For as a small, green, wise man once put it:

“Try not. Do. Or Do Not. There is no try.”

Go raibh maith agaibh.