



## **Freedom in 2019 Slovakia: From Retrospective to Foresight**

The 20th Annual Freedom Lecture

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### Transcript

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, honorable guests,

It's a true honor for me to be here, to present this year's Annual Freedom Lecture, and it's a special honor and pleasure to be the third woman to do so, after Madeleine Albright and Iveta Radičová. I am happy that I can commemorate the events of November 1989 here in Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States. This country was, during the times of oppression and lack of freedom for our parents and several generations of people living behind the Iron curtain, a lighthouse of freedom, democracy, and prosperity. So many of our fellow citizens from Czechoslovakia have found their new home here, saving their lives and their freedom.

We should not forget that the United States played a key role in our pursuit of freedom throughout the 20th century, starting with its endorsement of the establishment of Czechoslovakia during and after World War I, next by helping save Europe from Nazism during World War II, and finally by assisting the forces of mostly underground dissent survive the oppression and maintain the commitment to the fight for freedom.

The United States has been one of the strongest advocates for the revolutionary changes in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989. Partners in the US,

including the US Congress, recognized that these “remarkable events led to the end of the Cold War and the creation of a Europe, whole, free, and at peace”.

On November 17th, 1989, as the people in Czechoslovakia took to the streets, the US House of Representatives and the US Senate were deliberating the SEED Act (Support for East European Democracy), a bill to promote political democracy and economic pluralism in Poland and Hungary. The day prior, November 16th, the leader of the Polish Solidarnost Lech Walesa spoke to the US Congress and appealed for US assistance: “*Assistance extended to democracy and freedom in Poland and all of Eastern Europe is the best investment in the future and in peace, better than tanks, warships, and warplanes, an investment leading to greater security,*” he said. And the US partners listened.

Thereafter, the US fully recognized our “growing pains associated with the difficult transitions from dictatorship to democracy, and from a command economy to the free market”. One concrete example among hundreds: The US-funded technical assistance projects were instrumental in establishing independent parliamentary administrations and transformation of the formal rules of procedure - the way of functioning - of our parliaments.

After 30 years, it is time not only to look back to 89 and to evaluate where we have come and what we have achieved, but also to look into the future and to recognize the threats to the most valuable treasures that our parents have achieved for us: freedom and democracy. It would be naive to think that winning the fight of 89 means a victory for eternity, a happily ever after, the end of history. A mere glance at Slovakia’s neighbors to the south and to the north, but also to other countries, tells us that it is not the case and that we have to be vigilant and avoid falling into the trap of taking democracy for granted, as something that is irreversible because it is not. On the contrary, the struggle for freedom and democracy is an ongoing process, and these are values to be constantly protected, together with the rule and law and alliances that increasingly seem to no longer matter the way they used to. But they are important, and we must stick to them, on both sides of the Atlantic.

30 years is a long time, there is a new and younger generation that was born long after ‘89. They have no memories of it and the Velvet Revolution seems as distant to them as 1968 seems to me. Perhaps it is partly also here from where the problems of freedom and democracy in Central Europe stem from today. This is a generation that has not lived under communism, who does not even hear about it anymore. The values of freedom and democracy are something they take for granted. They never missed them and never had to fight to achieve them.

The young generation of today cannot imagine what it was like to stand in long queues at the borders when you wanted to travel, let alone not being allowed to cross these borders. On one hand that is good, and it is something to be grateful for. On the other hand, however, it is dangerous in some ways because the young generation has not learned to be vigilant of those who want to tear apart the system that we have. Young people are vulnerable to influence by various anti-system narratives, hoaxes, and fake news that are spread, limitlessly, in the spaces of the internet and social networks. And it is mainly the young people who are the most threatened by the totalitarian

ideas of nowadays that in reality are nothing but the old ones dressed in new clothes. Unfortunately, that is one of the reasons why extreme-right populists have the highest support among the young generation, and this is also why nationalism, extremism, and populism are so successful in Central Europe. It is these forces that are benefiting from the support of the Kremlin, whether it is technological, personal, or financial. Here is where the enemies of the West have identified its Achilles' heel and are working relentlessly to undermine the unity and stability of the free world.

Being well aware of our economic and military strength, the enemies of our freedom and unity have found new ways. They are using to the fullest the tools of hybrid war, of undermining the democratic order from within, in Europe as well as in the US. They are abusing the frustration of parts of societies to dismantle the system that enabled us, on the old continent, to live for 70 years in peace and prosperity. And, as we can see in recent years, even in the US, where democracy has a 250-year-old tradition, people are not immune to these new types of threats.

I was only 4 years old back in 1989, so I only have blurry recollections of those times. But as time passes and as I closely follow the developments in the world around me, it makes me think about freedom and democracy, about their value back then but mostly now when it is increasingly clear that democracy is not necessarily forever.

There is no guidebook for democracy, and nobody teaches you how to manage it. We in Slovakia, for instance, had to learn from our own mistakes. The era of Vladimir Mečiar, when Slovakia became "the black hole of Europe," as Madeleine Albright put it, was the first lesson on how freedom and democracy can be misused and mistreated. As Slovakia managed to get rid of Mečiar's legacy in 1998, we took on a speedy race to close the gap on our neighbors already in the process of joining the EU and NATO. Quickly, we managed to succeed in finalizing the economic transformation and became a transition success story.

Today, looking at where we have come over those 30 years, I am of two minds about it: on the one hand, there are influences and dangers ahead that we haven't even dreamt about until quite recently - the hybrid war, extremism, various efforts to pull apart the system rather than make it better and stronger. This is a disease spreading through the western world and Europe and it did not avoid us either. And just like with any disease, the healthier the organism the greater are the chances to resist it. Unfortunately, the great speed of economic transition was just too painful for certain groups of people who, for various reasons, were unable to cope with the transformation and came to feel like the losers of the whole process. They were feeling betrayed by the promises of a better life that they never actually experienced. It would have been our duty to come back and support those people, but we failed and let them down. The governments that promised to do so ended up creating parallel structures for themselves and quickly forgot about their promises to the common people. Corruption, a malfunctioning justice system, and the influence of oligarchs all added up to the frustration of the people. And frustration, disappointment, and a feeling of betrayal are fertile grounds for breeding extremism.

On the other hand, I have to confess that I am grateful to Slovaks for not letting democracy be taken away from them and for their willingness to fight for it, so different from what we are experiencing in our immediate neighborhood to the south and to the north. Slovakia is currently going through a healing process, and Slovaks clearly show they will not put their values at risk. They have demonstrated in the massive and peaceful protests around the country, and they have shown it in the recent presidential and European elections. Slovakia is maintaining its freedom of the press and a healthy civil society. All these things give me hope that it is a fight we can win. There can be pitfalls, detours, and missteps, but we have set out on a road that is clearly signed by democratic principles and freedoms. Some will always be suspicious of the motives of the people protesting. They will question their motives, suggesting that the protests must be led from outside, financed by foreign organizations and governments. I believe that despite the disinformation campaigns, authenticity, community-spirited engagement, grass-root movements, and decency are the key components in the current-day and future fight for freedom. And that only through these we can prevail.

It makes little sense to talk about Slovakia without discussing the wider region of Central Europe, especially the countries of the Visegrad Group. Historically, this region has always been a sensitive geopolitical spot. The interests of great states and empires intersected here, it has never been stable, it has never been truly calm. It was for this reason that the ideas about setting new and fresh relationships with neighbors appeared still in the wave of excitement shortly after the 1989 revolution. One of the most positive outcomes of these discussions has been the creation of the V3 format of cooperation between Central European countries, soon replaced by the V4 format. This was something the region had never seen before. Also, there was a clear agreement on joining forces in order to set a European path for the countries thriving for peace and prosperity that only membership in euro-atlantic structures could guarantee. Compared to what was happening in the decaying Soviet Union or Yugoslavia at the time, this was close to a miracle.

When the alliance was created in the castle of Visegrad near the Danube River on February 15, 1991, by the presidents of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, they set a clear goal: the Visegrad Group was the expression of the efforts by the countries of Central Europe to cooperate on issues of common interest within the process of Euro-Atlantic integration. Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland have always been members of the same civilization based on similar cultural and intellectual values and common roots of religious traditions, which they all pledged to sustain and support. All 3, and later 4 countries were inspired to become EU and NATO members as they understood their integration into these structures as a step forward in overcoming the artificial dividing lines in Europe through cooperation.

Sadly, I see less hope looking at the Visegrad region and some of its member states these days. It's a paradox that this group - originally created to assist better integration of its members states into the Euro-Atlantic structures, the group that was meant to strengthen the EU and to enhance European cooperation, today seems to be doing just the opposite. Openly renouncing the liberal democracy and replacing it with an illiberal one, restricting freedom of media, interfering with

justice, increasing populism and nationalism, in Hungary even going as far as the revisionist tendencies of Trianon with the 100th anniversary of the treaty approaching.

Some of the Visegrad leaders are attempting to transform the agreement from a tool that supports freedom and democracy to one that will enforce some new form of democracy that is not a real democracy anymore. One of the main targets of their actions is the EU - a partnership we all fought hard to become members of after 1989. Their narratives are increasingly infused with creating the division between “us” and “them”, blaming all the bad on the EU, the greatest challenge being to defy the “Brussels dictate”. Sadly, all of this leads to a new divide between East and West, between “old” and “new” member states, painfully remindful of the Iron Curtain. And this is exactly where the creators of hybrid war want us to be. Nationalism instead of cooperation, division instead of unity, scattered individual players following their own interests instead of a strong solid bloc.

Despite its many flaws (and I am aware all societies have some), the European Union proved to be the best cure against nationalism causing conflicts in this region. It is absolutely unacceptable for myself and for all politicians and voters strongly believing in the European path to join the fight with imaginary enemies from Paris, Brussels, Berlin or Washington. Warriors like Victor Orban will continue to seek alliances with other nationalists across Europe and it is our duty to remind the world that nationalism has never been an answer to any problem, on the contrary, just in the last century it sparked two world wars with tens of millions of victims.

In the interest of the future of the EU, we cannot be dragged by those who attempt to fight a new Cold War, we cannot be dragged by nationalistic egoism destroying the common European project. We need to be supporting the further strengthening of the EU and searching for joint solutions, not the destructive tendencies within.

How we will succeed in doing that is what will matter the most in the years to come. Those refusing cooperation generally do not represent any meaningful alternative, they are riding on a wave of popularity but have no plan and often not even the slightest vision of what we would do once we are on our own. We saw how quickly the loudest advocates of Brexit dispersed. We politicians, but also we societies, need to take a more responsible stance in these times, when we are witnessing a whole range of disruptive trends, questioning our membership in NATO and EU, as well as our democratic values. New information channels, especially so-called “alternative media” and social networks, are often abused to these ends. Those are phenomena with a capacity to dismantle our society, the EU and existing alliances as well as the democratic world. Our duty is to face them and fight back by all means and tools that the West has at its disposal.

Europe and the US are intertwined like communicating vessels on both sides of the Atlantic. And it has become evident that even old, established democracies like the US are not immune to the threats to democracy, to temptations of isolationism and populism. What we can see from the outside is that America cannot be great if it shuts itself off and withdraws from cooperation. Cooperation is indispensable, especially in today’s interdependent world. We will do the best for freedom and democracy by standing together in times when the value basis on either side of the Atlantic is at risk.

It was cooperation between US and Europe that brought 70 years of peace to the European continent. Therefore, seeing that the fight for democracy is not over, the biggest challenge for the future is to preserve the democracy and freedom that we have on both sides of the Atlantic. And this is something we can only succeed in by joining forces.

Today, instead of putting at risk our cooperation within NATO by controversial statements and seeing one another as competitors, introducing new tariffs and trade barriers, we should go back to the reason why we started cooperating in the first place. It is our common values that bind us: freedom and democracy. And the only way to preserve them is cooperation, one that needs to go beyond the immediate benefit of the transaction. If, after World War II, Americans would have been looking at the cost of the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Germany through “America first” optics, where would we both be today? History has shown us that transatlantic cooperation has been beneficial for both sides in many ways, whether it was defense cooperation that provided for 70 years of peace in NATO member states (which is of particular value in Europe that has been caught in constant conflict for centuries before) or economic cooperation that provided for relative prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic. Mutual investment, taking down barriers, exchanges in goods, students, professionals, and experience made stronger both Europe and the US. We share values, allies, and goals. The transatlantic bilateral trade has been and will remain, a central artillery of the world economy. Our mutual cooperation is for the best, we have common interests and challenges, whether it is Ukraine, the Western Balkans, the Middle East, the fight against terrorism, or the vulnerabilities related to the spread of disinformation and cyberattacks. We should remember that together we are stronger, and we can make a difference. Becoming competitors, on the other hand, would make us both weaker, especially in the current global playing field. It would only play into the hands of other more hostile actors.

Today, more than ever in recent years, we are facing challenges and threats that would not even seem real not so long ago. We have found ourselves in a situation where the essence, one of the pillars of Western civilization, is at risk. We thought that democracy was the end of history and that it was a system from which it's impossible to backslide, but the recent developments in Europe, the US, and elsewhere in the world are showing us that it is not as unimaginable as we thought. Therefore, the biggest challenge for all of us will be to defend our values and to preserve freedom and democracy for our children and the future generations. The first step in that way is to realize the threats. At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that freedom and democracy are not thriving in isolation, and that is why we must enforce them together, by means of cooperation. Freedom and democracy are incomplete when the third element is missing - cooperation.

Symbolically, this year, 2019, that marks the 30th anniversary of our own victory in the fight for freedom, seems to be the year of a fight for freedom, democracy and prosperity in many regions of the world. People from Hong Kong through the Middle East to Latin America are taking to the streets to stand up for the same values that we in Central and Eastern Europe fought for 30 years ago. If there is something that we learned during these last 30 years it is that the change towards freedom and democracy has helped not only us in Central Europe, but the enlargement of the

democratic space has benefited us all. That is why we should not resign from a common effort to further enlarge this space of freedom and democracy. In the short term, that would mean supporting people in the countries concerned, but in the long run, we are helping all of us, towards a stable, predictable world with a rule-based order.