

Dear Vice-President Beer,

Dear Professor Dr Paqué,

Dear Professor Dr Heuss,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am so glad to be with you today in Paulskirche, in the place which played an important role in history of this city and of Germany.

I am deeply touched by your words, Vice-President Beer. I am honoured and humbled.

The prize I am receiving today is called the Freedom Prize. And I am impressed by how this simple idea, freedom, has been so empowering, over the course of our history.

Few days ago I watched a documentary movie about a life of two catholic dissidents, Silvester Krčméry and Vladimír Jukl in communist Czechoslovakia. For years, the regime kept them in prison and tortured them. Yet, they would always say, that inside, in their spirit, they stayed free. Communists could break their bodies but they couldn't take away their freedom.

Later this motivated them to start building the underground church. They founded small groups, called "islands of freedom". People would secretly meet to discuss and pray together. Decades later, the underground church, together with civic dissent played an important role in the regime's collapse. It was people like Krčméry and Jukl, and many others, who, in the end, helped us restore our freedom and democracy in 1989.

To me, the lesson is clear: only those who are free in their minds can build a free society. Freedom is a quality of an individual person, not an abstract value. You cannot separate the nature of the society from the nature of the individuals who form it. Freedom cannot be imposed top down. If it comes from outside, it will not last. And, equally, freedom is not a value-neutral concept. It must be rooted in values, otherwise it becomes a force of destruction.

We must apply this lesson in practice and let this freedom of spirit be the guide for us and the future generations. Good laws and constitutions are important, but by themselves they will not keep societies safe from autocracy. We, the politicians, must do our share to keep our countries free. But we are powerless unless parents, schools, foundations, and the churches also lead new generations to value liberty and freedom. That is why the work of foundations such as the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung is essential, and much appreciated. Because, as your motto says, strong democracy needs responsible citizens. Citizens who know what freedom is and who value it accordingly.

Over the course of centuries, humankind tried and tested different political systems and ways to govern societies. Liberal democracy proved to be the best guarantee of freedom for any individual, and any society. When I speak of liberal democracy, I speak of a political system which is based on checks and balances, on the rule of law, on respect for the rights and freedoms of everyone.

But, it seems to me, that many forget, that freedom implies not just "freedom to choose" but also "freedom to refrain". To voluntarily refrain from doing something or having something, because of the greater needs of the society.

Liberal democracy requires that we voluntarily give up some of our freedoms, so others can enjoy theirs. That we observe laws not only because of the threat of sanctions, but because we see that they work to our advantage, and permit us to live peacefully in larger societies.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are lucky to live in freedom and liberal democracy. Totalitarianism in Europe is over, but our democracy is not safe from various external and internal pressures. If we don't act, we might lose democracy again. Anne Applebaum and others are right to sound an alarm about a potential twilight of democracy. This must be a wake-up call for all of us.

Let me begin with external threats. East of Slovakia's borders, Russia is trying to destroy Ukraine. Not only as a sovereign state, but also as a community of free individuals. I saw it first-hand, when I visited the ruins in the suburbs of Kyiv in June. There is no military logic to bombing a children playground or a church. But if you want to break people's free will, if you want to break their resistance, it is sadistically logical.

Every free individual has an obligation to defend the freedom of others. This is also our duty, the duty of the free world, towards the Ukrainians. To support them not just in words but in deeds, including through political, diplomatic and military aid. Because our words of support and encouragement, or our humanitarian assistance alone are not going to stop Russia's missiles raining on the Ukrainian cities this winter.

Liberal democracy is also under the pressure of the ongoing economic crisis. European history is full of examples of how rising poverty and economic hardship undermine democracy. Many of those experiencing worsening of their living standards are starting to blame liberal democracy for failing to protect them. And many might be open to populist and authoritarian solutions which, while destroying democracy, offer false quick fixes.

To protect democracy we must be guided not just by the logic of free market but also by the values of compassion and solidarity. Addressing inequalities and supporting the most vulnerable, is not socialism or communism – it is the right thing to do for any society which wants to protect freedom.

Dear all,

The war on the European soil and the economic crisis should not blind us to other risks we are facing at home. In Europe, liberalism has become a punching bag, for those who want to destroy democracy. They present liberal democracy not as a system of governance protecting individual freedoms. But as an ideology, which supposedly dictates everything from the forms of sexual behaviour to identity and ethnic make-up of our societies. They accuse liberal governments of being anti-conservative, of destroying traditions and even religion.

Nothing can be further from truth. Liberal democracy ensures, that an individual can make choices that are responsible towards the society, and which are respected by others. The mission of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, is the best answer to today's haters of liberalism.

Too often, our own governments in Europe fail to apply the rules they adopted against those who are spreading hate. There is a good reason, why we outlaw the incitement of hatred, and why we criminalize the adoration of totalitarian regimes. Such actions can kill. That is not a theory, but the truth, learned through our own bitter experience. Including in very recent past.

Only three weeks ago, two young innocent people lost their lives and another one was injured in a terrorist attack in Slovakia, inspired by hatred of minorities.

We mustn't allow our own naivety and blindness to the fact that democratic rights can be not just used but also abused, to destroy democracy. The incitement of hatred and violence doesn't stop being illegal just because it is posted online.

In fact, nothing symbolises the naivety of some of today's democrats more than their hesitancy to regulate social media platforms. The same rules that apply offline, must also be respected online. I very much hope that we will realise the scale of this problem before it is too late.

Because boundless and limitless freedom will turn into a force which will destroy the fabric of our societies.

Dear all,

To safeguard democracy, we must work together. And by “we”, I mean everyone who has a stake in preserving our democracy. Our opinions or solutions might differ, but we should maintain our ability to engage in a constructive dialogue. A dialogue, which is based on a mutual respect for each other. And an understanding that even if our opinions or solutions differ, we all agree on the basic democratic values.

Finally, to safeguard democracy, we must reinforce the values our societies are built on, such as humanism and mutual respect. We need to put a greater emphasis on ethics and morality, because they translate these values into norms of behaviour. And we should make them more prominent in our education system but also in our professional lives.

Already hundred years ago, the first president of democratic Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk argued that “Democracy is not only a political system, but a moral one as well – a moral one first of all.” This is why all of us who want to strengthen democracy, must have high expectations, first and foremost from ourselves, when it comes to living by these values. In this regard, political leaders have a special responsibility and an obligation, to follow them.

If we live by these principles, I am sure that democracy and freedom will flourish.

Thank you.