

Dear Federal President Steinmeier, dear Frank,

Dear Chairman of the Board Evers,

Dear Director Peter,

Dear Executive Director Sacher,

Dear Ms Antasova and Mr Manda,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege to be here with you today and receive the 2021 Schwarzkopf Europe Award. Thank you for all the kind words that have been said.

Earlier today, we discussed with President Steinmeier some of the very questions that the Schwarzkopf Foundation has as its core mission: how to make Europe more peaceful, more united and more sustainable.

Of course, these are not new questions. But in the past few months, the unique combination of internal and external crises has made them far more urgent. The rules which have served our continent so well are coming apart in a number of ways, making us more fragile than we think. That should not be the legacy we leave for Europe's future generations.

First and most obvious, in relations amongst states, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has openly challenged the rulebook which for decades ensured peaceful co-existence of European countries. Few had expected that Russia would challenge these rules so fundamentally. Despite the signals we got in 2008 and 2014, the 24th of February caught Europeans by surprise.

We replaced the initial shock by our resolute defence of the very rules that Russia is trying to destroy. Our unity and assistance have already helped Kyiv defend and regain parts of its territory. At one point, there will be peace talks. These must respect Ukraine's sovereign choice. Their ultimate outcome must be the return of just peace and the rules-based order in Europe. Our continued and timely support for Ukraine's defence is the best means to achieve it.

Dear all, ladies and gentlemen,

While we are facing this huge security crisis, we cannot ignore the internal challenges to our democracy. In the European Union, we see attempts to undermine the rule of law, weaken the separation of powers, or restrict media freedom. These are the cornerstones our liberal democracy is built on. If these basic values and rules are attacked inside the EU, we must defend them. Delaying our actions might encourage other rule breakers.

Within Europe, the informal rules, which have kept our societies healthy, are also coming apart at the seams. For decades, tolerance of differences, and an embrace of diversity, was part of our success. Since the end of the Cold War, we have managed to get the best from our differences. After all, "in Vielfalt geeint", or "united in diversity" has become the European Union's official motto.

Today, we are witnessing rising polarisation and fragmentation. Divisions are growing in every society and in the EU itself – be it between the liberals and conservatives, east and west, black or white, straight or gay. These differences have always been there – and they have enriched our societies in many ways. Diversity and freedom to be different have become some of democracies' main privileges. Diversity is not a problem – it is the way we approach it. Each of us chooses how to treat the differences in our societies, how we react to the “otherness of others”. Whether we choose empathy, understanding and cooperation or confrontation, conflict and isolation.

But increasingly, extremists are misusing differences among us to get influence and power, and ultimately, to destroy democracy. In many European countries, it can take just one election cycle for democrats to find themselves in a minority.

It's not a secret that social media contributes to polarisation – after all, it has become the extremists' favourite platform to spread their narratives. We should stop being naïve: democratic rights can be used to undo democracy itself. Further regulation of social media is a must. Even online freedom must end where other people's rights begin. But regulation alone will not be enough. We mustn't stop at addressing the symptoms and address the root causes.

Let me quote a famous Czechoslovak entrepreneur Tomáš Baťa, who lived at the times of the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Back then, he said: “At the root of this crisis is the crisis of morals...What we have come to label as economic crisis is just another name for moral destitution. Moral destitution is the root cause; economic downturn is the consequence.”

Baťa's call for morals is a call for values. Because these translate into rules guiding our behaviour. Yes, we have already codified many of our values into law. But moral destitution – or the diminishing of values such as humanism, empathy or respect in our societies – can't be fixed through legal regulation alone. We must bring back these values at the centre of how we behave towards each other and return them to our public life, into our exercise of power, our education system, and our professional lives.

This is especially true for us, politicians, because we have a special responsibility. The choices we make are a guide for others. You, dear Maria and Constantin-Alexandru and many of your fellow young leaders, are showing us, how values of humanism and empathy can be translated into our everyday lives and our work. Because choosing interest and empathy, instead of conflict and confrontation, is not a sign of weakness. It is the quality of the strong.

All of us who want to protect democracy, must have high expectations when it comes to living by these values, but first and foremost from ourselves. This is when our democracies – and a peaceful, united and sustainable Europe – will flourish.

Thank you.