

35 years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain: the View from Slovakia

Dear Ambassador McFaul, dear all.

Thank you for your kind words. It's an honour and a pleasure to be with you today. I would like to thank you for your contribution to the study of democracy in our region, including in my home country Slovakia.

Today, I am here to share a reflection on where we are 35 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain. As students of democracy, you know, that there were many factors, that contributed to the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Broken command economy, and the rigid communist system, Western pressure or strategic arms race.

But from my point of view, people's will to live in freedom was the strongest among them. I was born in communist Czechoslovakia and I was 16 when the Velvet Revolution ended communism in 1989. I am thankful for this experience. It taught me, how totalitarian regime works, what it means to live in a lie.

Back then, it was illegal to say what we really thought. So we lived in two parallel worlds: a public one, where everyone was just pretending, and an authentic one, which was private. Kitchens became the only place where one could be truly honest.

The Iron Curtain was not just a physical barrier separating the East from the West. It was hanging in our communities, workplaces and even families.

In my country, communism claimed thousands of victims, people who were executed for their dissent, or killed when they tried to escape, and cross the border. I remember what 'unfreedom' feels like.

That was 35 years ago. Since then, Czechoslovakia peacefully separated into Czechia and Slovakia. Both countries later joined the European Union and NATO. This year, we will mark 20 years of our membership in the most democratic, prosperous and safest clubs in the world.

If I stopped here, this would be a perfect happy-end to the story of Central Europe's democratization. But as we all know, history is never so straightforward.

Only 6 of the 11 former communist countries, which are now in the European Union, are ranked by Freedom House as consolidated democracies. Four are semi-consolidated. One is a transitional or a hybrid regime.

Democracy is a fragile system everywhere and it's tested by many crises. In the past five years alone, we have faced several tough ones. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic slowdown. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine – Slovakia's direct neighbour – and the global energy crisis and high inflation. Illegal migration. Worsening impact of the climate crisis.

These challenges are a test for any democratic government. Many of them struggled to cope, so voters began to question not just their leaders' competence, but the system itself.

Populists and extremists were quick to jump in. They blamed democracy for failing to protect the people. In some European countries, they are now in government. They openly attack not just their political opponents but liberal democracy itself. As well as its key components such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and media freedom. All in the name of 'dealing with the establishment', 'improving efficiency' or protecting the 'traditional values'.

This is happening at a time, when democracies are experiencing a huge rise in polarization and fragmentation, amplified by the rise of social media. These platforms have become the extremists' favourite stage to spread their lies and manipulation. In some ways, their business models are similar: they both live from abusing the lowest of human emotions. And it works.

Democracies were slow to see, the dark side of these platforms. We ignored that in the digital space, freedom of speech is openly abused to spread lies and panic, to endanger public health or undermine the rights of others. And that undemocratic regimes are actively supporting this, to weaken the West. Evidence shows that disinformation has influenced election outcomes. The West hasn't yet fully understood, that the pillars of democracy – such as freedom of speech – are being used to attack or destroy democracy itself.

This mix of crises would be a huge test for any country. Two years ago, I addressed the European Parliament and warned, that democracies are more fragile than we think. It may take just one election cycle, for democratic leaders, to end up in a minority. Looking at the elections many countries hold this year, this is a real threat.

But younger democracies, such as those in my region, are even more vulnerable. Our institutions are still relatively young. The first session of the US Supreme Court was in 1790. The Slovak Constitutional Court was established in 1993.

It's not just that democracy there is young, it is also without deep roots. The three and a half decades since the fall of communism, have been the longest period of political freedom in the history of my people. Democracy there is much easier to uproot, than in countries, that have enjoyed it, for over centuries. And even those countries are not immune, as you know.

Our history does not excuse today's failings. But it helps to explain them.

One of the founders of democratic Czechoslovakia, Milan Rastislav Štefánik, had a simple motto: "Trust the truth, live the truth and defend the truth". As I said in the beginning, totalitarianism was built on lies. Democracy must be built on the truth.

"Nothing is true and everything is possible," is how one author described Putin's Russia. If we accept this in our politics, our democracy dies.

Yes, democracy is under threat, and not just in my region. My source of hope for the future is our people, because the quality of democracy depends on who we are as citizens, and on the values we practice. In the three decades of our independence, civil society has become the strongest fortification of democracy in Slovakia, and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe. The civil society understands that democracy is not a one-off achievement. They understand it, as a never-ending process of self-improvement, exercised in our everyday lives, communities, churches or offices. And yes, sometimes it must be defended on the streets – or the battlefield, as it's now in Ukraine.

The civil society's public mobilisation, their everyday cultivation of democratic values in our communities fills me with optimism. And it gives me reasons to believe that no matter the pressures, democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is there to stay.