

Slovenia and Canada: building thriving democracies

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Good afternoon, bonjour, Dober večer,

Thank you Doctor Janez Stare for your opening remarks and for giving me the opportunity to stand before you all. I'd also like to thank Doctor Mitja Durnik for all his efforts in organizing today's event.

As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's special envoy to the European Union (EU) and Europe, and in the presence of our outstanding Ambassador to Slovenia, her Excellency Isabelle Poupart, I feel honored to address members of the oldest and largest University in Slovenia:

- In this fascinating country at the crossroads of so many cultures: Slavic, Germanic, Italian and Hungarian;
- Viewing with own eyes this beautiful land, which has just won the best Sustainable Destination in Europe at the Berlin Internationale Tourismus-Börse;
- In this developed economy, one which is open, export-oriented, part of the Eurozone and a member of the OECD;
- With a trusted ally, one that has stepped up to send troops to the multi-national battlegroup Canada is leading in Latvia as part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence;
- A global-minded country that currently holds the Presidency of the UN Human Rights Council;
- A progressive country that is working with Canada through the Equal Rights Coalition to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of rights by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons worldwide;
- And to be here, in this democracy.

Slovenia and Canada: building thriving democracies. This is the topic that I look forward to discussing with you today. Young Slovenians, your parents have done something exceptional: they built a democracy. And they did quite well, especially when compared to the scenarios of some of your neighbours – I'll come back to that. So now it falls to you to continue to improve your democracy but also to support other young people in other countries that are struggling to build or to preserve their own democracy, in contexts which may be more difficult than yours, like your neighbours in the Balkans. But also think about Tunisia, quite possibly the only Arab spring country that can still be considered a democracy.

For those of us in this room who, like me, are not Slovenian, I believe that we have a lot to gain and a lot to learn when working with our Slovenian friends in their quest for an always better democracy. Our joint success, in strengthening our respective democracies, is more and more crucial, not only for our respective countries, but as an inspiration for the world. This is the main point that I would like to make.

Today, liberal democracies are under stress: electoral integrity, freedom of the press, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights are all in retreat, globally. According Freedom House, in 2017, average levels of political rights and civil liberties have

trended downward for the 12th consecutive year. The Democracy Index 2017 of The Economist notes similar erosions in freedom, tolerance and democratic trust, affecting every region in the world. The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2017-2018 observes the same democratic setback, especially regarding respect for fundamental rights, the independence and the effectiveness of the justice system, the constraints on government powers and the fight against corruption.¹

In some countries liberal democracy has been eviscerated, and even in strong liberal democracies, the rise of xenophobic populism threatens free movements of people, goods and services, social, political and religious tolerance, and individual and minority rights.²

We now find ourselves wondering how far democracy may backslide, but even more importantly, how we can stop these reverse waves of democratic breakdowns. It would be a terrible mistake to despair and give up. Instead, I believe that, as democrats, we need to remain resolute and optimistic. I fully agree with Condoleezza Rice's main point, noted in her recent book: *Democracy, Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*.³ She said that we should not expect the march toward democracy to be linear. Yes, we may have setbacks, even regression, but we must not lose sight of the end goal, and never forget from where we came.

When I was your age, as a student at the beginning of the nineteen seventies, the future for democracies did not seem promising at all. Latin America, Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and a part of Mediterranean Europe were all under the yoke of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. In countries such as France and Italy, about one quarter of voters supported parties that were openly hostile to pluralistic democracy. Such ideas penetrated labour and university campuses in all Western democracies. American democracy, for its part, was discredited by the aftermath of the war in Vietnam and the Watergate crisis.

In the years that followed, humanity experienced one of the most positive phenomenas in its entire history: a great democratic wave swept through every continent. However, there was nothing inevitable in that fortunate event, which was not the result of any historical determinism. Rather, it was the result of courageous choices and courageous people.

¹ Munich Security Conference, *Munich Security Report 2018: To the Brink – and Back?*, February 2018, <http://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjfhZa0kLnZAhUPyIMKHRf4BX0QFgg4MAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Freport.securityconference.de%2F&usg=AOvVaw1kVF3qxid9Zot3rHGsjjuq>, pg. 6. ; World Justice Project, *2017-2018 WJP Rule of Law Index: Global Press Release*, January 31, 2018, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/news/2017-2018-wjp-rule-law-index-global-press-release>. ; The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2017: Free speech under attack*, The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2018, http://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy_Index_2017.pdf.

² Larry Diamond, *The Liberal Democratic Order in Crisis*, The American Interest, February 26, 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/02/16/liberal-democratic-order-crisis/>.

³ Condoleezza Rice, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*, Hachette Book Group, May 2017.

And so today, knowing that nothing is inevitable, we must not take the progress we have made for granted. Instead, we should take determined steps to further solidify democracy and the universal values on which it is based.

One of the problems we have is that certain political forces in many countries are portraying democracy and human rights as a foreign agenda, a western agenda, one that is imposed on nations by arrogant cosmopolitan elites. There are also skilled elected leaders that are boosting nationalist narratives to firm their grip on their people and increase their capacity to weaken liberal institutions - the very same institutions charged with keeping these rulers under watch: a pluralist parliament, an independent judiciary, an independent electoral commission, autonomous regional or local authorities, a politically neutral public service, the free press, independent academic institutions, unions, employer groups and other civil organisations. In the name of nationalism, democracy and its pillars are eroded: the rule-of-law; basic freedoms of expression, association, and religion; the truly free, fair, open, and competitive elections; the opportunities beyond elections for citizens to participate; governmental transparency and accountability; a market economy that is free of corruption; and a democratic culture of tolerance, civility, and non-violence.

It is not easy to cope with this problem, as nationalism is a powerful ideology. In fact, sometimes by our very own intervention, we may inadvertently give these skilled politicians the pretext they need to fuel a nationalist backlash against democratic benchmarks that could challenge their power. There is no magic solution. But let me put forth two suggestions, which may be of help.

First, we should be always modest and recognize our own shortcomings. Let's take my country, Canada, as an example. We may be perceived as a young country, but we are in fact one of the oldest democracies with one of the oldest constitutions, and a country, with one of the longest experiences with responsible government, as well as that of diversity and immigration. We are in an advantageous situation. Indeed, we have less challenges than countries that have enjoyed democracy since the 1990s and who have limited experience with immigration. But Canada's democracy is far from perfect. We also have a lot to improve on and a lot to learn from others. Our government recognizes this.

When Prime Minister Trudeau spoke to the United Nations General Assembly last autumn to say that Canada will do much more to include indigenous peoples in the Canadian democracy, he did what all democratic leaders must do: to recognize that no country is perfect and that democracy is always a work in progress.

My second suggestion is that we not limit ourselves to criticizing and denouncing authoritarian abuses. We must also praise and support countries when progress is made, even if not perfect. We should support countries and leaders who are making courageous choices in challenging circumstances; this brings me back to Slovenia.

Your country is one of the most solid democracies borne out of the collapse of communism. According to the Democracy Index, you are ranked 36th out of 167 countries, surpassed only by the following two new democracies: Estonia (30th) and the Czech Republic (34th). It is commendable that the Authoritarian Populism Index 2017 lists Slovenia among the countries where the support for the populist parties is the weakest.⁴

Of course, democracy will always remain a work in progress. That is true in Canada, in Slovenia, everywhere. One key issue to maintain the populations' trust in democracy is the fight against corruption. The Transparency International 2017 Annual Corruption Perception Index ranked Slovenia 34 out of 180 countries, better than its scoring from 2014 and 2015.⁵ As you know, the Council of Europe just released an evaluation report proposing many recommendations to strengthen the fight against corruption in Slovenia in order to decrease the "significant gap existing between legislation and practice".⁶

One lesson that we may learn from Slovenia's recent history is the importance of remaining realistic about our expectations toward democracy. It is not an automatic and easy solution to all our problems. As Churchill recognized, democracy is the worst form of government...except for all the others. When Slovenia became a democracy, it enjoyed a strong economic growth over many years. And then, all of a sudden, starting in the late 2000s, it was severely hurt by the Eurozone crisis. It took years for the Slovenian economy to recover. It is during these times of painful disruption that a democratic society may be vulnerable to the appeal of a strong man whose determination will overcome all difficulties and make everything simpler, or the xenophobic nationalist movement who will blame the foreigners and the European Union, or the leftist populist party who will stigmatise all the elites and the European Union. But to date, the Slovenian democracy has resisted all this, and today it enjoys an envied economic growth.

⁴ Andreas Johansson Heinö, Giovanni Caccavello and Cecilia Sandell, *Authoritarian Populism Index 2017*, European Policy Information Center (EPiCENTER), July 2017, <http://www.epicenternetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/TIMBRO-Authoritarian-Populism-Index-2017-Briefing.pdf>.

⁵ Transparency International: the global coalition against corruption, *Corruption Perception Index 2017*, February 21, 2018, Transparency International 2018, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017.

⁶ GRECO and Council of Europe, *Fifth Evaluation Round: Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law enforcement agencies, Evaluation Report : Slovenia*, publication March 8, 2018, Adopted by GRECO at its 78th Plenary Meeting, <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-evaluation-round-preventing-corruption-and-promoting-integrity-i/16807912a8>.

There is also another lesson that one may learn from Slovenia. Not only is its economy growing, but its growth is relatively equitable. In a recent country report on Slovenia, the European Commission points out that Slovenia is not only working towards a balanced growth path, that the labour market and the banking sector are strengthening, and that the public debt is decreasing, but also that “income inequality continued to decrease and remains among the lowest in the EU”.⁷ This is a great asset for Slovenia’s democracy. One of the crucial drivers of populist backlash is the polarisation effect of growing economic disparities and the sense of unfairness that comes with rising inequality and weak social mobility. Populations are more likely to lose faith in the system if they have the sense that it works only for the wealthiest 1% or 0.1%.

The entire Slovenian democracy benefits from the fact that it performs relatively well on the indicators of the Social Scoreboard, which support the European Pillar of Social Rights. Of course, nothing should be taken for granted. The EU country report does point out that although the risk of poverty and social exclusion has decreased in recent years, old-age poverty still prevails. The EU Commission warns against major long-term challenges linked to the rapidly ageing population – one of the most pronounced ageing populations in Europe – and what that will mean for the labour force and the financial pressures on public pensions and health care.

Another increasing burden for the Slovenian economy is the negative effect of climate change on your beautiful natural environment. According the Slovenian Environment Agency, the air temperature in Slovenia has risen by 2 degrees Celsius over the past 50 years, causing more heatwaves and heavy rains.⁸

But these challenges are global: Canada too is not immune to populist and xenophobic trends; Canada too has an ageing population; Canada too has a natural environment and economy that are affected by climate change. The way to face and overcome these challenges is to work together. One of the essential tools that we have to strengthen our ties is the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and the European Union (CETA) and its political counterpart, the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the EU and Canada. These new agreements provide an opportunity to develop our economic, social, cultural and scientific ties in order to learn from each other, to share our best practices and technologies devoted to improving our health systems, to develop our capacity to respond to the social needs of our youth and ageing populations, including immigration policies that will be part of the solution, to protect our environment and to decrease our greenhouse gas emissions.

⁷ Commission Staff Working Document: *Country Report Slovenia 2018 Including an In-Depth Review on the Prevention and Correction of Macroeconomic Imbalances*, European Commission, March 7, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2018-european-semester-country-report-slovenia-en.pdf>.

⁸ Total Slovenia News, *Slovenia’s Changing Climate: Warmer, with More Heatwaves*, March 5, 2018, <http://www.total-slovenia-news.com/news/777-slovenia-s-changing-climate-warmer-with-more-heatwaves>.

Slovenia and Canada may learn from each other in order to fight corruption, to protect the integrity of the electoral system, to respect the independence of the judiciary, to enhance gender equality and the civil rights of our citizens, and to build inclusive, fair and sustainable economies.

We need to strengthen our bilateral relationships but also our capacity to support each other around the world. We need to provide more effective aid to countries ravaged by war and misery. On this front, Canada has recently adopted a Feminist International Assistance Policy. It has been shown that promoting women and girls is a powerful lever for development and democratization.

We live in a difficult period globally, where democracies face a wave of authoritarianism, populism, isolationism and xenophobia. To counter this, universal values and goals that our two nations share - democracy, human rights, freedom, justice, gender equality, a sustainable environment, progressive trade - must be embraced ever more fervently. So let's work together, Slovenia and Canada, to strengthen our economic, cultural, scientific relationships, so that we may progress, realistically, step-by-step, shoulder-to-shoulder, toward democracy and prosperity for all. Together, we can make our societies more inclusive, less vulnerable to populist drifts and better equipped to build justice, harmony, security and universal human rights on solid liberal democracies.