

International Conference

Protecting Human Rights in the World – Protecting our Rights – Experiences, Challenges and Solutions, October 28, 2021

Mr. Prime Minister, Madam Minister of Justice, distinguished Members of the Parliament, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear guests,

Let me welcome you to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and thank you all for accepting our invitation to participate at this Conference. There are a few dates in our history that remind us about the importance of human rights – one of them is today, October 28, the anniversary of the first democratic state in the history of our nation – the First Czechoslovak Republic which was established today, 103 years ago.

It is important to remember it now, when we are deeply concerned about the state of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the world. New megatrends, threats and disruptions, including digital revolution, impact of climate change, increasing inequality, irregular migration, violent extremism, pandemic and so-called infodemic to name just a few. These phenomena are creating pressures in our societies both at home and globally. And they are often accompanied by rising nationalism, populism, and shrinking civic and

democratic space and decline of trust in governments and experts.

We believe that these tendencies must be vigorously fought against. Support for democracy and rule of law must be reinforced both at home and globally. As our contribution to these international efforts, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs decided to adopt a new Concept for Promoting Human Rights and Democracy in the World. It provides a clear guidance for our values-based foreign policy which is based on internationally accepted values, standards and commitments to human rights, democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms.

Having said that however, we have to recognize that we are all in need of democratic renewal and therefore we need to strengthen democratic institutions at home and abroad. We clearly see that where human rights are violated there is an increasing instability, lack of prosperity and resilience to withstand new and old challenges. This is why it is such an important part of foreign policy. Because human rights and rule of law are clearly a precondition for stability. And this is the Slovak national interest. Therefore, we are standing up for those deprived of human rights around the world because we know it serves our own interest.

We need to make a self-reflection why democratic systems are losing their support, why in some countries populists and illiberal systems are taking over. A renewal of public-private partnership in defending democracy and human rights is needed. Therefore, I welcome the presence of the EU Special

Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore and OSCE ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci as well as online statement of the UN Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights Ilze Brands Kehris that will follow.

Let me use this opportunity, ladies and gentlemen, dear guests and welcome the US President Biden's initiative for convening Summit for Democracy. It matches with Slovakia's long-term commitment to advance and protect universal human rights, support democracy, fight corruption and uphold a rules-based order both at home and abroad.

In case of my country, our experience and lessons learnt from our mistakes and achievements, having inspired several initiatives that Slovak government has undertaken in areas such as fight against corruption or support for free media. We have seen in our recent past that corruption goes hand in hand with erosion of principles of democracy and rule of law, suppression of critical voices of independent media. In line with the EU Human Rights Action Plan we want to be active internationally with promoting laws and practices that protect freedom of expression and, last but not least, promoting media freedom, pluralism, discouraging interference with impartial or critical reporting. We are ready to continue sharing best practices but also our bitter experience which led to the tragic event when journalist Ján Kuciak was assassinated by doing his important job. Together with our partners, we want to be part of a long-term flagship project for supporting investigative journalism for revealing corruption, sharing best practices, and protection of journalists.

That is why we welcome and support the proposal of the European Commission to launch the preparation of a comprehensive “EU Media Freedom Act” and we want to be an active participant and contributor in the upcoming legislative process.

And finally, Slovakia is putting in place several mechanisms, initiatives and events, both at home, in the EU and internationally, to prepare an inventory of best practices and tested solutions, which we want to share also through our programs of development cooperation. In this regard, we welcome the initiative of European Commission in securing a greater synergy and impact of those individual programs of EU Member States through “Team Europe Democracy” exercise.

I wish to conclude my remarks by reassuring you that we will do our best in translating ambitious objectives of our Concept for Promoting Human Rights and Democracy Abroad into very concrete practical steps and active engagement on all fronts in promoting shared values and human rights commitments. I believe this Conference provides a great opportunity to generate useful ideas and suggestions to this end. I wish you a very productive and inspiring discussion.

Thank you so much.