

**2023 Czech and Slovak Freedom Lecture****By Rasto Kužel****Prepared for delivery in Washington, D.C.****November 17, 2023**

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, it is a real honor for me to be here today and share with you my thoughts on the importance of free and fair elections for democracy. I am very grateful to Friends of Slovakia, the American Friends of the Czech Republic, and the Czech and Slovak embassies for giving me this opportunity to join a long list of distinguished speakers going all the way back to November 2000. I am also very grateful to the German Marshal Fund of the United States for hosting this year's event at their premises.

The previous speakers have all made very important contributions to the democratic legacy of our three countries, and while the topics of their speeches differed, there was one overarching theme – the importance of our transatlantic partnership. In today's world, we face several unprecedented challenges, ranging from health pandemics and the return of a full-scale war in Europe, to terror attacks, foreign intervention in elections, and natural disasters. The growing inequality and poverty make some people question the fairness of our democracies, and the foundations on which they are built have been shaken. The level of trust towards institutions is low and continues to decline. This is why we must return to our strong roots to withstand these negative tendencies. Today, more than ever, we realize the importance of our transatlantic partnership.

Let me start my speech by paying tribute to one person who is not on the list of previous speakers but is certainly very deep in our hearts. I am talking of Mr. Karel Schwarzenberg, former Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic.

He unfortunately passed away a few days ago but will always remain in our memories as a true champion of human rights and democracy. In an interview on the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, he praised Slovak civil society, stating “I have always admired the fact that Slovaks overthrew Vladimir Mečiar in normal elections and were able to elect good presidents two times in a row. And most recently, they stood up against a virtually omnipotent prime minister. Both he and his interior minister had to resign.”

In the meantime, as you already know, we in Slovakia like to make even simple things as complicated as possible. Not to talk about democracy, which is, by default, not very simple. Since 1992, my country has endured periods of violations and restorations of the liberal democratic system. About a month before our most recent parliamentary elections, a good friend of mine – and yours! – former Slovak ambassador to the United States, Martin Butora wrote an editorial entitled “Let’s not run away.” He correctly predicted that when it comes to our democratic trajectory, we would once again experience going down the hill but, at the same time, offered a vision that some institutions, media, and NGOs would be able to resist the attempts for the “Orbanization” of Slovakia. Many of the challenges that we experienced during our recent elections are of a global nature. Let me try to unpack some of them and offer my vision on how to tackle them – both globally and in the framework of our region.

It is a global trend that many countries have been gradually using new information and communication technologies in our elections. While they promise new ways of voting, they also bring dangers as artificial intelligence and cyber tools expand the scope for disinformation and manipulation before elections.

While AI contributes to the automation of data analysis and has the potential to improve and support the upholding of democratic values and processes, including elections, its application in social media can contribute to social polarisation, resulting in the formation of separate groups that no longer understand each other and find themselves increasingly in conflict with one another.

AI can also have significant gendered implications, including, among others, gender-based exclusion, algorithmic bias and discrimination, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and the objectification of women. The use of AI can affect minorities in similar ways, causing discrimination based on ethnic or social origin, religious convictions, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other characteristics. I strongly believe that understanding this dynamic is fundamental to safeguarding the integrity and credibility of our electoral processes.

In May this year, I participated in a conference organized by the Council of Europe entitled Elections in the Time of Crisis, where we discussed such challenges. But one of my main takeaways was related to foreign interference in elections, specifically how certain bad actors who systematically meddle in our elections integrated various forms of foreign interference into their foreign policies. Just think about how relatively easy and cheap it has become to meddle in someone else's elections and how much is at stake – one election can change the geopolitical orientation of a country. The main goal of such interference is to fuel polarisation and disseminate harmful content, more precisely disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, fake news and deep fakes, which cast doubts about the integrity of the vote, and blur the lines between reality and fiction.

No country is fully immune to such foreign interference, as you experienced here in 2016. But my country is particularly vulnerable. In the past ten years, it has experienced recurring bouts of populism, high-level corruption scandals, declining trust in democracy, and growing illiberalism and extremism. The erratic performance of the OĽANO-led governments, characterized by chaos and political instability, further undermined public trust in democratic institutions.

Talking of trust, let me give you a very concrete example. In 2022, according to the World Values survey, as many as 59 % of people in Slovakia trusted the integrity of our elections. In February this year, an extremist party leader featured a video hinting that the September elections could be manipulated. The video was widely disseminated on Facebook and YouTube. By April, more than 50 % of the population feared that the elections would be manipulated. This tells you a lot about the role of social media and disinformation in my country.

The current perception of democracy as a superior political system in Slovakia is below 50% and is tied to both personal economic conditions and the poor performance of the previous governments. As a result, many dissatisfied citizens were much more open to disinformation and populism, leading to radical swings in political preferences and stability – areas cynically exploited by radical groupings but also by more traditional parties. This largely contributed to the outcome of our recent elections, that saw such illiberal and populist forces, openly articulating pro-Russian, anti-democratic, and anti-Western narratives, coming to power. The incumbent ruling coalition has used social media to spread disinformation, which helped them to win the elections.

Even after taking their government seats, the ruling coalition leaders have continued their open animosity or ignorance of the free independent media and have used social media platforms and other “friendly” outlets to communicate – primarily with their voters. Like in Hungary or Poland, they will attempt to influence traditional media and will take over the public broadcaster. They also want to cut the funding for NGOs and label those who receive funding from abroad as foreign agents.

But I did not come here to complain or bring only bad news – as I am sure you have enough of those on your own with the upcoming elections. As mentioned earlier, I also would like to share some positive developments and potential solutions to some of these challenges.

For me, the fact that both people in Poland and Slovakia came to recent elections in large numbers is very good news. I was particularly pleased to see how many young voters came to vote. The participation of the first- and second-time voters was 69 % in Slovakia and 70 % in Poland. This is good news, as the main aim of disinformation is to create passive and cynical societies.

Thanks to our former Prime Minister Meciar, we have a robust civil society in Slovakia that has been a bulwark against democratic backsliding in the past. We were able to demonstrate it already in 1998 when Mr. Meciar attempted to derail our pro-European and Transatlantic orientation – for which we were famously called a black hole of Europe by your distinguished secretary of state Madeline Albright.

My organization MEMO 98 is a product of this period, and we still keep '98' in our title. When I think of our story, I think of the transatlantic partnership I mentioned at the beginning. If it were not for NDI, IRI, NED, or USAID back in 1998, I would not be here today. Their support was crucial at the beginning of our existence. And what we learned from them during those early years was not wasted. We understand the importance of free and fair elections, and to date, we have worked in some 60 countries, sharing our experience and fulfilling our mission, which is expressed in our slogan: 'Ensure that all citizens have free access to comprehensive information.'

Many such NGOs exist in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. What we learn, we share with others. But the actors on the other side understand this as well, which is why they do not like us. They do not like active citizens or free and open societies, as it challenges the way they govern. How far this can go is visible in today's Russia.

Let me conclude by saying that I am convinced that people's activism will prevail and we will overcome this difficult period. But we need to be united in our partnership. We need help from our U.S. partners and friends to win our own battles so we can continue supporting Ukraine, which clearly refused the vision of an unfree society and has made such a huge sacrifice in fighting for our freedom.