

Points To Make by

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

**H. E. Miroslav Lajčák**

in the Joint Plenary Session of CD Pillars and Ministers on

THREATS AGAINST CIVIL SOCIETY AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

**Community of Democracies Ministerial Meeting**

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is beyond any doubt that **civil society represents one of the essential pillars of democracy**. Contribution of civil society to promotion of democratic values, protection and respect for human rights is invaluable.
- The civil society, civic movements were **at the very heart of the changes and the whole democratic transformation** in the former Czecho-Slovakia and later on in the Slovak Republic (... I suppose just like in the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>).
- Our own experience shows that the role in the democratic society is indispensable. The voice of civil society representatives cannot remain unheard or even ignored. **The more conducive and fair environment for civil society is developed; the better prospects for democratic transformation can be reached.**
- It is with much regret, that even in the second decade of the 21 century we are witnessing **severe measures against civil society organizations in many parts of the world.**
- Various forms of restrictions on civil society, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly constitute **serious impediments to democracy** and in countries in democratic transitions **may put the whole process at risk.**
- There are several areas related to civil society and the right to freely express its views, which constitute the matter of our serious concern. In this respect, let me refer to **systemic problems related to restriction of the civil society's freedom of expression**, in particular legislative framework on NGOs, police harassment, threats and inspections against civil society carried out without justified legal grounds. Violent attacks against civil society resulting into deprivation of freedom or even lives of many of its representatives are unfortunately no exception.
- Therefore I highly appreciate the role of Community of Democracies, its enthusiasm and engagement in promoting and maintaining democratic values around the globe. Slovakia is proud to be an integral part of these efforts.
- First of all, **our own experience serves as an inspiration** to help strengthen emerging civil societies in other countries that are either in the early phase of transformation to democracy or still under totalitarian regimes.

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<sup>1</sup> CZ MiZV K. Schwarzenberg bude spoluúčastníkom diskusie.

- It is very natural that after successfully completing our transformation from recipient country to a **member of a donor community** we began to share our experiences. Since 2003 when established, Slovak Aid has been focused on building democratic institutions and civil society in Western Balkan, Eastern Europe, Central Asia or Mediterranean. More than **one fifth** of the Slovak ODA is focused on knowledge sharing in this area.
- With an assistance of traditional donors we created **development aid instruments capable to provide timely and well-focused response** to the operational demands of our foreign partners by means of tailor-made consultations, expert assistance or internships. With this intention we created the **Centre for Experience Transfer in Integration and Reforms** (CETIR) in the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs.
- For already one decade we have contributed to capacity building of the civil society and expert community in **Serbia, Montenegro or FYROM**, supporting their integration process to the EU. Via our NGOs we implement projects in **Belarus and Ukraine** stimulating public debate, fostering public policy and increasing the analytical community's research capacity. In **Moldova** we are reinforcing sectorial capacities of local NGOs and help them to become part of the Moldovan decision-making processes.
- Our NGOs have successfully developed projects called "**National Convention**" (in Ukraine, Montenegro and Moldova) aimed at establishing dialogue between government and civil society in partner countries.
- During these ten intensive years of providing development aid we have learned that our first-hand experiences are valuable and appreciated. However, they **cannot be copy-pasted** without respecting different cultural environment and historical backgrounds.
- In this respect, our co-chairing the Community of Democracies' **Task Force for Tunisia** provided us with invaluable experiences (*I shared the lessons learned in Tunisia with you yesterday in more detail*).
- 2013 could be a crucial year for democratic transition in many parts of the world. With this in mind, countries struggling for democratisation should use all available tools and resources including the EU financial instruments. In this regard, the **European Endowment for Democracy**, a new structure, autonomous from the EU, with the main objective to "support unsupported", should be referred to. The European Endowment for Democracy's mission is to provide quick and flexible financial support to main pro-democratic movements in third countries with initial, although not exclusive focus, on the European Neighbourhood.
- Slovakia was among the EU member states that supported the creation of the European Endowment for Democracy from the very beginning. Our contribution is both financial and personal. We are proud that **Slovak candidate** was elected as a member of the EED **Board of Governance** for one of the three positions reserved **for civil society representatives**.

The recent story of Slovakia could be briefly wrap up in few points - established 20 years ago, starting to build its statehood and democratic institutions from the scratch and successfully transformed from a net recipient to a steady member of donor community. I believe this could be an inspiration for our Community of Democracies and we are ready and pleased to continue sharing it with you. Thank you for your attention.