



Speeches by Other U.S. Government Officials

Democracy and Human Rights: Shared Challenges and Opportunities – Remarks by Sarah Sewall, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

Budapest, May 26, 2016

- as prepared for delivery -

Hello everyone, *jó napot kívánok!*

Let me begin by thanking the Hungarian Journalists' Association for inviting me to speak with you all today. For 120 years, you have stood for a free and vibrant press, helping generations of Hungarians stay informed and engaged in the debates shaping their future.

That legacy should give all your members pride, and though this is a challenging time for media around the world, I wish you another 120 years of brave advocacy and fearless, independent reporting. Hungarians, like people everywhere, deserve nothing less.

I would also like to thank former Foreign Minister Martonyi for joining us today and for his many contributions to strengthening the ties between Hungary and the United States.

Though I am privileged to travel across the globe in my work as Under Secretary of State, this is actually my very first trip to beautiful Budapest and to Hungary.

Until now, the closest I've come was attending the traditional Hungarian wedding of a good friend, where the wedding party wore those gorgeous embroidered dresses in the traditional style. I'll confess that, when it came time to dance the *csárdás*, I concluded that honoring a great culture sometimes means leaving it to the experts.

In preparing for this trip, I learned that a member of my team in Washington actually spent a year living with a family in the town of Kaposvár through a high school exchange program.

These are just two examples of the deep ties between our two peoples – ties that transcend the relationship between our governments.

Americans and Hungarians, each a mix of different peoples and cultures, share a history of fighting for fundamental freedoms.

During the American Revolution, a Hungarian named Michael Kovats helped establish the U.S. cavalry and gave his life for America's freedom. So the Hungarian people have stood with Americans from the birth of our nation.

And during the Cold War, as you well know, Americans defended global freedoms and human rights,

extending solidarity to the millions trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

And in 1989, it was near the town of Hegyeshalom that that wall first tore when Hungarians took bull-cutters to the once electrified barbed wire fence, sending a shock across Europe that hastened freedom for Hungary and millions across the region.

As 250,000 Hungarians streamed out to Heroes' Square to celebrate their liberation and to symbolically bury the hundreds lost in 1956, the world stood in awe of them – in awe of Hungarians.

The hope was impossible to contain: factories whistled; cars honked; and church bells rang out across your beautiful country – the sound of a nation clamoring to realize dreams long delayed.

Like America's founders, Hungarians knew that with freedom came a profound responsibility to defend it, not only against threats from without, but also inevitable pressures from within.

So over the following decades, you undertook the hard work of building a democracy able to withstand these challenges.

You established a Constitutional Court to reinforce the rule of law and protect fundamental rights. In 1990, you held your first free elections in over 44 years. You launched a flurry of independent media outlets to ensure that citizens could make informed choices about their future, and many of those outlets are represented here today.

And as your democracy grew stronger, so did your economy. During the 1990s, inflation and the national deficit fell while economic growth and foreign investment rose. With these reforms – and the leadership of people like Foreign Minister Martonyi – you grew closer to the European Union, joined NATO, and emerged as a vital contributor to Euro-Atlantic institutions, security, and prosperity.

Hungary's 20th century story--of heroes and hard-won freedoms, of struggle and transformation--has inspired people across the globe. And that story continues today, for as President Obama has said, "the blessings of liberty must be earned and renewed by every generation."

That is the duty of citizens – to hold fast to democratic values, institutions, and fundamental freedoms while adapting to the new challenges of modernity and the international environment.

But that is not always easy, especially during moments of anxiety and fear. In the history of both Europe and the United States, we have seen how demagogues can exploit difficult moments for political gain by playing to our worst human impulses and targeting the constitutional rights and institutions designed to limit the power of those impulses.

Left unchecked, these forces can erode democracy and open the door to all manner of abuse and exploitation.

The United States has confronted these forces at many junctures in our history.

In the early 20th century, xenophobia led us to close an "Open Door" immigration policy that had welcomed millions to our shores and helped transform the United States into a global power.

During the Second World War, fear drove us to confine over 100,000 ethnic Japanese behind barbed-wire fences in our country.

When we should have compassionately welcomed those in need, a current of anti-Semitism within our country forced a ship of Jewish refugees back to Hitler's Europe.

Racial segregation was once brutally enforced across much of the South. And during the Cold War, U.S. political leaders ruined lives with loose accusations of communist sympathies.

We're not proud of these moments. But in each case, the United States emerged from these wrong-headed policies more inclusive, more just, and ultimately stronger.

We made these changes because, though we sometimes fell short of our deepest values, we never fully abandoned the individual rights and institutional checks and balances designed to uphold those values during periods of trial and turbulence.

Today, both Europe and the United States face another such period marked by a convergence of new challenges.

Gruesome acts of terrorism have left many anxious and afraid. Growing global competition, the dislocation of new technologies, and the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis have left others struggling and frustrated.

And more recently, streams of migrants and asylum-seekers have come to our borders seeking safety and a better life, prompting a fierce backlash.

As a result, both our countries unfortunately have seen a rise in bigoted and xenophobic rhetoric.

In the United States – against Muslims and immigrants from Latin America. Here in Hungary – against religious and ethnic minorities, along with those fleeing violent extremism, civil war, and political repression in the south.

Some voices have emerged questioning whether democratic institutions can still deliver.

Like those before us, we must answer these moments of challenge by holding fast to core democratic values and institutions.

Even in my country's darkest moments, the rights to free speech and peaceful protest allowed brave Americans to stand up for fundamental freedoms and ultimately strengthen our democracy.

Women were scorned for demanding suffrage, but in the end they won it. Activists for civil rights faced water hoses and police dogs to challenge America to honor its promise of equality.

LGBTI Americans continue to face discrimination, even as their activism has transformed popular attitudes toward their community and made our society more compassionate and just.

We all know that, at times, democratic majorities can stray from democratic values. By upholding individual rights, however, democracies protect the few from the abuse of the many, and empower them to challenge majority views that conflict with democratic values.

Individual rights are also the lifeblood of civil society, which amplifies the power of citizens to advocate for their interests, share their expertise, and shape their future.

Of course, if legal protections for individual rights are fundamental to democracy, they must be in turn supported by institutional checks and balances.

When popular majorities trample on individual rights, or when public officials abuse their authorities, citizens need independent courts to seek legal recourse. They need genuine political competition to offer and debate alternatives. And they need a robust, independent, and fearless press to keep them informed and to hold their leaders accountable.

The free press is a vital safeguard against the abuse of power. It can strengthen governance by exposing wrongdoing, as we have seen when investigative journalists uncovered corruption in countries as diverse as Guatemala, Honduras, Ghana, and Ukraine.

In the United States and here in Hungary, the press has exposed incidents of wrongdoing. We know the headlines: officials misusing government funds, cases of bribery, or changing regulations to reward their friends at the public's expense. As citizens, as taxpayers, we should welcome the power of a free press to hold government to account.

It should come as no surprise, then, that as undemocratic forces seek to consolidate power and escape accountability, they often target independent media and other checks and balances.

They harass editors and journalists, invoke vague anti-defamation or national security statutes to compel self-censorship, or concentrate the ownership of outlets in the hands of political or business allies to exert subtle but undeniable influence on press coverage.

For example, last October a Hungarian television station reported that government officials had "instructed" senior managers on which politicians to interview and which topics to cover.

Acts like these are meant to stifle the free press and deprive Hungarians of the independent and diverse views they need to make informed choices about their future.

But the press is not the only target of those seeking to erode liberal democracy.

Those forces also target the independence of the courts. In Hungary, for example, changes to the selection process for the Constitutional Court justices have raised concerns about the body's future autonomy.

They rewrite the electoral code to weaken political opponents. For example, the OSCE has reported that the process for redistricting constituencies ahead of Hungary's 2014 parliamentary elections lacked "transparency, independence, and consultation, and allegations of gerrymandering were widespread."

They also use corruption to corrode the rule of law and buy-off opponents. Or they push through significant changes to laws and the constitution with little or no consultation with citizens and opposition parties.

Or, they often disguise their agendas with seemingly obscure institutional and legal reforms, hoping

they will go unnoticed by most citizens.

Wherever they occur, such challenges -- to the free press, to the constitution, to civil society, the courts, and the electoral code -- are a challenge to democracy itself.

After years of struggle and hard-won gains, Hungarians – and citizens of democracies everywhere – must continue standing up for the independence of the institutions that anchor their democracy, and standing up for the checks and balances that protect their fundamental freedoms.

Americans know all too well that this is a difficult and constant struggle. But we also know the benefits of ultimately staying true to democratic values and institutions.

That's because the hallmarks of liberal democracy – tolerance, inclusion, and debate, the rule of law, individual rights, free and fair elections, institutional checks and balances – are also the sources of economic dynamism and political stability.

The rule of law empowers citizens to unleash their creative energies while giving private enterprise a level playing field to compete and invest.

Free speech and a robust press help educate the population and drive innovation by encouraging the exchange of ideas.

Unfettered civil society enables citizens to peacefully air grievances. And free and fair elections allow the system to learn from new ideas and to self-correct as realities and preferences change.

We saw those forces unleashed across this region after 1989.

But still, skeptics of democracy have pointed to some traits of democracy – the noisy debates, political compromises, changeable voters, and popular demonstrations – sometimes, these are pointed to as signs of weakness or instability.

They couldn't be more wrong.

Just look across the Arab world, where decades of political repression and graft contributed to regime collapse, upheaval, and conflict with far-reaching consequences for global security.

Or even closer, look to Ukraine, where under the former regime, stalled reforms, political persecution, and unchecked corruption helped trigger an international crisis in 2013.

The lesson is clear. It is systems that are rigid and unchanging, that stifle new thinking and citizen engagement, that grow brittle and break over time. By contrast, liberal democratic systems recognize that lasting stability and prosperity are rooted in the fundamental rights and aspirations of the people.

That is why institutions like the European Union and NATO affirm that our collective strength is rooted not only in shared interests, but also in shared liberal democratic values.

Few understood that better than the late U.S. Congressman Tom Lantos, revered as a staunch champion of global human rights.

As you may know, Tom was born right here in Budapest in 1928. When the Nazis seized this city in 1944, they sent him to a forced labor camp and murdered his entire family because they were Jewish.

But instead of falling into despair, Mr. Lantos stood up for the freedom of others.

He escaped and joined the anti-Nazi underground, and later the student movement against communism. Congressman Lantos once said that, "The veneer of civilization is paper thin. We are its guardians, and we can never rest." He certainly never did, and neither can we.

Our challenges pale in comparison to what he faced – to what previous generations of Americans and Hungarians have faced and overcome to build more inclusive, free, and just societies.

That is our inheritance, as Americans, and Hungarians, and heirs to hard-won and precious freedoms. This is in our partnership together – to renew those goals. And as citizens, that is our responsibility: to renew the blessings of liberty in our time, whatever the challenges.

Thank you.

[Back To Top](#) ▲

Share:

[Programs & Events 2016](#) >

[Press Releases 2016](#) >

[Speeches by Other U.S. Government Officials](#) ▼

[Magyarul](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[FAQs](#)

[Site Index](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

[Full Site](#)