
Democracy needs leadership: Metsola at G7 Speakers' Summit

In her Keynote Speech at the G7 Speakers' Summit in Berlin, the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola spoke on the necessity to stand up for democracy.

Yesterday, the world celebrated the International Day of Democracy.

This is the year we were forced to face those who wish to bring back an iron curtain to shroud democracy in a cloak of oppression and violence. A clash that saw - and still sees - our very way of life come under threat by those who see democracy as weakness. By those who see rights and liberties as an obstacle rather than a goal.

I wanted to say this, because we do not say it enough: Democracy is directly opposed to autocracy. And that bears repeating. It is the imperfect system but it is the system - the best system - on which everything else is built.

The world changed on February 24th when Russian tanks rolled into independent Ukraine. It was a wakeup call to all of us that we have been way too complacent, way too comfortable with the idea that our democracies, and our way of life were here to stay. We take the freedom of voting for whom we like for granted. We take being able to read independent journalism for granted. We know that we can assemble, that we can say what we want, we can disagree, we can pursue our happiness, we can dissent, we can live and love as we choose without consequence. That is our open and free way of life.

However, this has come under threat over the past 205 days and it can only prevail if we stand up for it; if we explain its benefits to generations who have never seen it be called into question; if we equip young people with the skills they need to strengthen it, to protect it.

Education is key. In this war, we have seen how information is weaponised. Russian disinformation tactics are reaching unprecedented and unparalleled malice and magnitude. We face a toxic online battle of scale that threatens the very basis of our free societies and our free elections. This is something we must first learn to understand, and then to counter.

Our history has taught us that democracy cannot afford complacency. The world needs leadership now. Now, when it is hard to lead. When war fatigue has set in. When prices are rising. When homes are harder to heat. When cars cost more to run and when food is more scarce than before.

This is the real test of our resolve, of our systems, and I am proud that this formation, our global democratic partnership, has held strongly in rising up to face this challenge.

We can say that it is a credit to us and to our democratic freedoms that Ukraine and its people are looking to us - parliamentary democracies - for support. When I talk about support, I do not only refer to tangible aid, but I also refer to supporting a multi-party parliamentary democracy around the world that ensures it will not only survive this onslaught, but it will thrive.

So to function, dear friends, our democratic parliamentary systems must be held to account via elections, via a pluralistic society, through supporting a free media, with strong institutions and civil society. This means that voters' scrutiny is essential. Too many young people look at politics in a different light to how we looked at politics when we were young. I grew up in EU politics. I became an activist because I wanted my country to join the European Union 20 years ago. Even then, I thought that I was fighting and losing a battle with colleagues of mine for whom elections did not matter. Thinking that by not voting it would be all right, nothing would change, politicians are the same anyway. But we have learned that was not the case: voters' scrutiny, strong institutions and civil society, with the involvement and engagement and interest and participation, are so important. Now I look to 2024, which is the next time we will face scrutiny as European Parliament. Getting people out to vote - fighting back against apathy and cynicism is a challenge.

Because once autocracy gains momentum and when simplistic rhetoric becomes a truth on social media platforms, when populist, nationalist, politicians sow doubt everyday: it is our responsibility to educate, to reassure and to listen to our electorate.

Democracy requires effort. Democracy deserves bravery. Democracy needs leadership.

It is our job to convince our voters of the merits - and the responsibilities - attached to civics and democracy. Not by being condescending or with drudgery, but with a true willingness on our behalf to get people on-board-with-the-programme of 'parliamentary democracy', that we mistakenly took as self-evident for far too long.

That means we must be honest about the failings of our systems too. Democracy is not without its problems but ultimately it is the best way, the only way, forward for progress.

We still need to translate the benefits of a democratic society, the necessity of checks, balances, accountability and pluralism to an audience that is growing increasingly weary. We see backsliding in fundamental rules also in the European Union; we see that it is so much more difficult to become a member of the European Union than it is to stay. At the same time, we have an audience whose newsfeeds and televisions are constantly bombarded with the false comfort of easy answers to difficult questions.

I give one quote by rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who says: “A free society is a moral achievement. Over the past fifty years in the West this truth has been forgotten, ignored, or denied. That is why today liberal democracy is at risk.” And we also know that it is not easy to counter mounting democratic-scepticism. But if democracy is truly to succeed then we need to return to basics.

We need to explain to people that our political structures are a means to a better, fairer life rather than an end in themselves.

And we really need to explain, again and again how democracy can help people. Because otherwise, we create gaps for this toxic narrative to take hold.

Let us talk about improving civic education in our schools from a very early age. Let us partner further with our education boards and higher education authorities, civil society, and youth and student organisations. This is a big challenge for us in Europe and in many EU Member States. We need to reach out to young women and girls in particular. Too few women enter politics and it is increasingly intimidating to be a young woman in politics today.

School children are calling us today for not learning enough about elections in class. And I think we can do better. We can make politics interesting for young people. We can do so practically in so many communities.

Here on our European soil, that has witnessed the most appalling crimes against humanity, is the ground where the lessons in democracy must be taught and must be learnt.

Thank you.

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