

“Democracy Under Fire: Is Hungary Still a Rights-Respecting Democracy?”<sup>1</sup>

REMARKS TO THE GOVERNING COUNCIL OF THE COMMUNITY OF DEMOCRACIES

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Your excellency, Ambassador Leissner, thank you so much for inviting me to speak to this distinguished group, and thank you to Doug and our other civil society colleagues who have work that all of the governments in this room are dealing with multiple crises that are straining our capacities. And so I am grateful for your attention to the serious but seemingly less urgent threats to democracy and human rights we are discussing today. Others have spoken about a “recession” in democracy. In fact, the democratic world is under a new kind of ideological attack from the authoritarian camp. The attack is led most aggressively by Russian President Vladimir Putin, but also joined by would-be-authoritarians and human rights violators, inside Europe and the former Soviet bloc, and beyond.

This is a multi-pronged assault on the democratic ideals and the values that we cherish most. And even amidst the current storm of crises, it demands a thoughtful and muscular response.

The first prong of the attack is a reprise of the old canard that democracy is a Western concept unsuited to traditional societies. The countries represented in this room are testament to how outdated that concept is, and how outrageously disrespectful it is for any leader to assert that his citizens are quote “not ready for democracy.”

The latest incarnation of this old authoritarian propaganda point is that citizens do not accept “Western-style democracy” because it is based on “Western liberal values.” But of course there is nothing “Western” or “liberal” about universal human rights - or the value of the democratic process, of checks and balances and the rule of law as tools to advance those universal rights.

Another prong in the attack on democracy is the erroneous conflation of citizen demands for an expanded definition of human and civil rights with “Western liberal democracy.” In country after country, including my own, opponents of same-sex marriage, legal abortion and women’s attempts to control their own fertility do not view these as human rights or civil rights. They see them as attacks on their religious or cultural identities, matters in which outsiders should have no say. I happen to disagree, but that’s not the point. My point is that those who seek power have seized upon cultural, religious, ethnic and identity issues and used them as a wedge to justify rolling back a broader set of democratic rights.

We have seen this in Russia, Hungary, Azerbaijan and many other countries, where governments whip up anti-foreign sentiment to try to justify denying citizens the right to organize to advance a different vision of what they want their country to be. There is nothing “Western” or “liberal” about the freedoms of assembly and expression that are being violated. . What’s interesting is that regimes that crack down on protestors and NGOs, as Doug just laid out, also feel empowered to keep calling themselves democracies, even while violating the most fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> As prepared.

democratic right of citizens to attempt to change their government by peaceful means. That gives democracy a bad name.

At the same time, many established democracies are under fire from within. Some of our citizens are concluding that the ruling elites have failed and wondering whether democracy has failed as well.

Here again, it will require muscular leadership to explain to a new generation that democracy is a tool for problem-solving, not an outcome. Where governments have failed to deliver jobs and a path toward economic security, or haven't been sensitive to what citizens see as their core interests, whether it's their cultural, religious, ethnic, national interest, these are failures of policy, not failures of democracy.

As obvious as may seem to the people in this room, it is not obvious to a new generation of young people around the world that democracy is a tool for pressing governments to remedy such policy failures.

Since today's topic is the challenges to democracy, I would like to discuss the situation in Greece and Hungary, both countries in which democratic elections have led to widespread human rights violations, deep citizen alienation from their governments and profound failures of governance. While their problems may seem minor in comparison with the global crises we face, I believe developments in these two E.U. democracies pose real dangers to human rights, European unity and our shared democratic project. Human Rights First has just released a long [report](#) on these two countries, where violent ultra-nationalist movements have whipped up the ugliest forms of hatred, blended in modern economic anxieties, spiced the mixture with local identity politics, denied any connection to the violence they incited, and won election after election.

Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece are not fringe skinhead movements. They represent something much deeper and more frightening – the view that their elected governments are venal, corrupt and fundamentally incapable of defending their citizens' interests. Jobbik and Golden Dawn are antisemitic, anti-Roma, racist, homophobic and xenophobic, and also pro-Russian, anti-NATO, and anti-E.U. By no means do all of those who voted for Jobbik and Golden Dawn agree with their antisemitic views or their incitement to violence. But that does not make Golden Dawn, Jobbik or other extremist parties, any less of a threat to democracy.

These hate parties now hold seats in their national parliaments and in the European Parliament. They are well-organized, with local branches as well as a sophisticated online presence. In Hungary, political analysts are predicting that Jobbik could win as many as 30 mayoral races in the elections scheduled for October 12. They are promising an anti-Roma crackdown if they win.

In Greece, the government is prosecuting the top leadership of Golden Dawn – not for their ideology but for their crimes. This is commendable. But decapitating the leadership structure is not sufficient to end the movement. Groups of men wearing jack boots and black t-shirts are continuing vicious attacks on the streets of Athens. Their targets are mainly migrants and LGBT people - but also Greeks who have dared to go out in public dressed like liberals. Two retired Greek generals who were elected to the European Parliament for Golden Dawn are planning a trip to Australia. As you know, last summer, Australia saw a hideous antisemitic attack on a bus full of Jewish schoolchildren. Golden Dawn has a sister branch in Australia, as well as here in New York.

When I started on this project, I expected to go to Hungary and Greece and report on the rise of violent, antisemitic, racist movements, and what could be done to combat them. What I did not expect was to find that Jobbik and

Golden Dawn are the symptoms of a much broader failure of governance. We found compelling evidence that the governments of Greece and Hungary had not only ignored these movements, but in some cases enabled them, and sometimes profited politically from having a fascist bogeyman on their right flanks.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has enacted nearly every plank of Jobbik's 2010 campaign platform. I refer you to our report for details on how Fidesz has co-opted Jobbik's agenda.

In the case of Hungary, I am afraid that democracy is not merely in recession. It is under attack by its own government. Jobbik is a threat to human rights, democratic norms and European values. But the Hungarian government's behavior poses an even greater threat.

Since 2010, the Hungarian government has taken a wide range of actions that have eroded constitutional checks and balances, the independent judiciary, media freedom and religious freedom. It has also promoted revisionist views of World War II that downplay the history of Hungarian fascism and collaboration with the Nazis. This has so upset the Hungarian Jewish community that it has refused to cooperate with the government's Holocaust Commemoration activities. Hungarian opposition figures have for years been describing a worsening climate for political freedom. Prime Minister Orbán has played cat-and-mouse with the European Union, making limited changes in response to E.U. criticisms and legal actions, but continuing to consolidate power. . Institution after institution has found fault with the Hungarian government's actions – too many to mention here, but there is a full list of these legal censures in our report. The government has also failed to implement unfavorable rulings from its own Supreme Court.

I also call your attention to the OSCE's preliminary and final reports on the most recent Hungarian election. In short, the April elections were free but not fair. The ruling party has rewritten the election laws to its own advantage. It becomes harder and harder for any opposition party to challenge the government or any excesses of majority rule.

With checks and balances removed, we are already seeing the results of an unchecked majority violating minority rights with impunity. Hungarian opposition leaders have for years been decrying a worsening climate for political freedom. The independent Hungarian media is no longer. Editors and reporters told us that they practice extensive self-censorship.

The chill is on.

Now the government has introduced a selective media tax that appears mostly aimed at foreign-owned media companies that have until now broadcast television newscasts that were beyond the control of the Hungarian state. These actions are straight from Putin's playbook, including efforts to mute independent voices that could contradict the state-dominated media narrative.

Minister [Vidar] Hellegren [of Norway] discussed Hungary's crackdown on NGOs funded by Norway, which also had been funding Hungarian government development programs. In the second round of raids the Hungarian government deployed elite, special *armed* police units to raid NGOs to deal with an alleged *accounting* problem. It no longer matters much whether the government ever proves its allegations of campaign-law violations. The message has been received loud and clear. Mr. Orbán has demonized NGOs as "foreign agents," another Putin-esque tactic. The government has an "enemies list" of 13 NGOs that are deemed to be too close to the opposition, and a total of 54 NGOs are now reportedly under investigation. This "enemies list" includes such respected organizations as

Transparency International, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. In fact, the 54 NGOs are the who's-who of Hungarian civil society – so much so that one NGO group has started a sardonic Twitter campaign with the hashtag: #ListMeToo.

As the minister just noted, Mr. Orbán's own statements about liberal democracy are not only chilling, but a direct challenge. In a stunning speech last summer, the Prime Minister formally declared that Hungary would become a quote "illiberal democracy." He also asserted that the Western democratic model would not likely produce competitive economic results compared with authoritarian states such as Russia, China and Turkey.

Now, we could discuss for days whether Hungary is still a democracy, or will still qualify as a democracy, one or two or four years from now. But it is self-evident that Budapest is no longer qualified to play a leadership role in an organization whose mission is to expand, protect and improve democracies around the world.

Its position on the Governing Council of the Community of Democracies diminishes the role of the other nations on this council, nations that have worked for decades to overcome harsh legacies of dictatorship, communism, civil war or foreign domination. They know democracy isn't a slogan, or a cure-all, or an ideological cover-up for bad behavior; it's a process. It's a commitment to advancing security and prosperity by means of respecting fundamental freedoms and human rights. They recognize that respect for human rights, democratic freedoms and political pluralism are the way countries achieve stability and prosperity. Rights are not privileges to be granted to citizens by governments once they have achieved these landmarks.

This organization has an unambiguous mission – to stand up for and democracy and help countries whose democracies are imperfect – meaning all of them – to improve themselves and the lives of their people.

Of course, it is the sovereign right of every country to chart its own course according to its own judgment of its national interest. But no country has an inalienable right to membership in international organizations whose fundamental principles it rejects and whose norms and standards it has violated. I am delighted to be in this room to see Mali return to the democratic fold. I hope that this organization can help Hungary to do the same, by standing up for the principles on which it was founded.

Thank you.