

# REMARKS AT THE GLOBSEC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT EVENT

**Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State**

**Historic Old Parliament Building, Bratislava, Slovakia**

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**MR VASS:** Good afternoon. My name is Robert Vass and I'm the president of GLOBSEC. It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you here at today's conversation with the Secretary of State of the United States of America, Mr. Michael Pompeo, on the topic "The Legacy of 1989: The Courage to be Free."

Dear Mr. Secretary, welcome to Slovakia. We are very honored to host you here in Bratislava. (Applause.)

This visit is very important for us, and I would even say historic, for three reasons. First of all, we are hosting the U.S. Secretary of State in the – first in 20 years. Second, Mr. Pompeo, you are on a tour in Central Europe, but you chose specifically Slovakia and Bratislava to have the conversation with youth as the only city. This sends a very strong signal not only to Slovakian young generation but also to all Central Europe that the United States cares about us.

And third, which is very important, is that we are celebrating 30 years' anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and fall of communism and the Iron Curtain, and the legacy of these changes are tremendous. We have gone through huge changes: first free elections, freedom of speech, full independence.

In 1989, I was only six years old. Without realizing it, I soon became part of the generation who did not only speak about freedom, but who was able to live it. And this was only possible because of the courage of the young generation in 1989 back then across the region, but also because of the leadership and the vision of wise men and women across the Atlantic, on both sides of the Atlantic, and this is very important. Thirty years on, we have gone through big changes, but I think that the job is still not fully finished making Europe whole, free, and at peace. And we both, on both sides of the Atlantic, have still things to do.

And let me have one final point: Interests come and go, but deep, lasting partnerships based on shared values are much harder to find. We have learned that we are stronger when the values and interests are in harmony. For the last 70 years, Europe and the United States together largely set the rules of the global order. The emerging challenge now is even more important in the world that is unpredictable and full of disruption in security, economy, technology, and politics. To use the words of the well-known American scholar, it used to be a garden, but now the jungle grows back. And in this world, we need a strong America and strong Europe shoulder to shoulder. That's where the United States and EU make a difference, working together at the sharp end, right where it counts.

Mr. Secretary, and ladies and gentlemen, let me welcome on stage Mr. Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State. (Applause.)

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Good afternoon, everyone. This is – I anticipate this being the highlight of my trip. When I – we used to – way back when, when I was a member of Congress, I would meet with lots of people. But the most fun I ever had was meeting with the next generation of leaders, and I’m looking forward to taking your questions. I hope they’re hard questions, and I’m ready to give it my best shot to answer. Thank you, (inaudible) and Robert and the entire team at GLOBSEC helping organize this event. We appreciate it.

You talked about this. This will mark the 30th anniversary, 30 years – I see the young people; none of you are 30 years old. I’m old enough to remember the restoration of freedom here and across Europe. These anniversaries have given me many opportunities to reflect. I had, today, the chance to visit your Gate of Freedom Memorial, which, as you know, commemorates hundreds of innocent people who were killed attempting to escape communist oppression. That tells you something. That tells you something about the horrors of communism. Your brave countrymen thought it was better to dodge gunfire to live another day – than to live one more day under tyranny. It’s that kind of courage to be free that defines the Slovak people in the minds of many around the world and in the United States. It’s incredibly inspiring.

This visit also brings the events of (inaudible) – full circle for me, personally. In the fall of 1986, I left the United States and came to live in Europe. Was stationed in a little town called Bindlach, West Germany. I was a young Army officer. I patrolled the Iron Curtain for three years. I could see the fencing; I could see the gate guards; I could see the dogs of communism. Not only could I see the divisions between East and West, I could sense how tightly the Soviets had caged the human spirit in this part of the world.

The change that’s occurred since then, since I left in 1989, is remarkable. Slovaks have blazed a new path and reaped freedom and prosperity because of their alignment with the transatlantic community. You liberated. You liberalized. You innovated, and you’ve prospered.

But in your country, as well as mine, we must remember that freedom and prosperity aren’t guaranteed. With the passing of time, we may be tempted to forget what drove those brave Slovaks to risk their lives to escape. Some countries, like Russia and China, want you to forget this heritage, because they believe that weakening others’ commitment to democracy, free markets, and the rule of law will strengthen their positions in the world. They’re not fans of NATO because they aim for domination, not for mutual security.

The United States – the United States, on the other hand, has always believed in freedom for you and for all peoples of Europe. In 1918, two dozen Slovak and Czech patriots gathered in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to sign to the Pittsburgh Agreement, also called the birth certificate of the first Czech Republic. After World War I, Bratislava was almost renamed “Wilsonovo Mesto” after President Woodrow Wilson’s advocacy for your freedom. And in more recent times, America has been proud to contribute to your success through aid, assistance, and helping to bring both you and NATO closer together and jointly work for freedom.

I came here today to speak with you to say that America’s commitment to your freedom endures in our time as well. Today, I had the chance to meet with your leaders to talk about shared goals – not just shared security and stronger economies, but a commitment, a commitment to principles of individual liberty. I look around this room and I know you, too, will rise to the challenge to preserve what generations before you have bled for. Our embassy here in Bratislava offers many ways to strengthen this bond between our two countries, so please

connect to our team. And most of all, never forget it's up to all of us to ensure that the spirit of 1989 lives on. Thank you, and I look forward to our conversation today. (Applause.)

**MR VASS:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Before I give floor to the young generation here in this room, let me ask you – and use the privilege of being the moderator and ask you the first question.

You're here in Central Europe in a very important time, 30 years after the Velvet Revolution. And the United States played a very important and tremendous role here. What is the message you want to send across the region right now? And also why did you choose specifically Slovakia to have this debate?

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. So there are multiple messages. One also is – one thing is I want everyone to know America listens, so we wanted to come here to hear from the people who are living in the region, who have deeper understandings and are here actually experiencing what's taking place. I always learn on these visits as well. But it's really important for America to demonstrate our commitment, to continue to support freedom and liberty here in Slovakia, here in Bratislava, throughout the EU.

Our commitment to these things – I've watched as some in the press would want to describe President Trump and our administration as America First, as abandoning this commitment. That's fundamentally not true. We are fundamentally commitment. Indeed, we have engaged in Central Europe like no administration before has done. We believe deeply in the important democracies that are here, and we want to do everything we can to help and continue to support them.

**MR VASS:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for this reassurance. This is very important for us. So let me use the opportunity to give floor to the young generation here, and I should be seeing some hands. Let me pose the first question here to the first row.

**QUESTION:** Thank you for the floor. My name is Tomav Shekme (ph). I come from an NGO called Euro-Atlantic Center. Dear Mr. Secretary, my question is: As you have mentioned, the United States historically were – and currently still are – a very important ally for Slovakia, mainly given by USA's leading position in NATO. What are, in your opinion, the biggest threats and challenges that the alliance has to face today? Is it populism and anti-NATO propaganda, as we have experienced here in Slovakia and in other EU member-states? And if so, how should we, as a member of the alliance, cope with these views that try to undermine the alliance? Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. So it's a good question. I always start with the – this proposition, which is the biggest threat to freedom and liberty is each of us forgetting how important it is. Whatever others might do – you referred to propaganda or efforts to drive wedges between members of the EU and members of NATO. It's actively out there. I spoke about it this morning here. It's real and it's intentional, and they're trying to do things that undermine your democracy. So be it. I wish they wouldn't do it. It's not in the world's best interest. But the most important thing, the biggest risk, is that you all will lose sight of the fact of the value in democracy. Democracy is hard. It's boisterous; it's contentious. People have different views. Boy, it's different in Russia. It's very different. They don't suffer those same – that same political to and fro. They have a state-controlled world. They're worse off for that, and we can never forget it.

If the next generation remembers that these – that we treat every human being with dignity, that they have – they are entitled to respect, that this idea of freedom and democracy and open press is of real value, not only will we have more economic success – and that’s good; we want to create wealth for ourselves and for our families and for our nation – and we’ll have the capacity to defend ourselves. But just as importantly, we’ll be living in a world with the values and interests and ideals that I know the people here in this country have held so closely to and have had to fight so hard for all these years.

**MR VASS:** Thank you, sir. The values and ideals, absolutely important. Please, the second question.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Dear Mr. Secretary, my name is Yan Shvedha (ph). I’m student of international relations. And my question is: Since the earliest days of the European integration project, European leaders have valued U.S. support and helped to ensure European security and prosperity. Nowadays, the European Union is facing many challenges like Brexit, populism, and others. In my view, the United States and the European Union still need each other. How can U.S. policy help EU in times of challenges? Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. We all – all democracies need each other. I concur. We work together to deliver good outcomes for each of our countries.

With the things we can do, I think we’ve hit on some of them already. The first is the acknowledgment and the rewarding of other democracies. We should be first among equals in terms of allies and friends. We should support each other when times are difficult. We have formal commitments that do that through NATO. We have commercial commitments that do that as well. So that’s probably the first thing that we can do is honor those democracies and work closely alongside them.

And then the second piece is we should speak very straight about countries that aren’t democracies and the threats that they pose. And when they attempt to interfere in our national sovereignty, in our countries or inside of the EU or inside of one of our alliances, we should call them out on it.

I must say, for a decade and a half, or a little bit more, too many in the West took a holiday. 1989 was a momentous time. I had the opportunity to experience it up close and personal. You all lived it here even more directly. And then in 1991 and 1992, more good came as the Soviet Union fell. And I think too many places – the United States and Europe – took a holiday, took our eye off the ball, didn’t recognize the risk. Let me assure you that Vladimir Putin is intent on undermining democracies throughout the world. Make no mistake about it. We should be very candid about that. We should talk about the things that we can do together to make sure that our democracies are strong, that each of us takes care of our countries first and then works together to achieve good outcomes on behalf of freedom and liberty.

**MR VASS:** Thank you very much. I’ve seen some questions on this side.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, my name is Michal Sventik (ph), and I’m also a member of the Euro-Atlantic Center and the Students for Liberty. My question is: What advice would you give

to us, the students, just so we can keep the liberty our parents fought for, and we can keep it safe from those who'd like to harm it?

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. So I am the father of a 28-year-old, so I'll give you the same advice I gave him. So if he's watching or listening, he'll say I know; I can give this speech. Here's the first rule for young people: Make sure you know who you are. If you understand your personal value set, if you understand the things that you're committed to, then no matter what others do, no matter the tax that others will bring to you, no matter the challenges you face in life, you'll come to know who you are and you'll be able to continue to be successful.

Second thing, I've never seen anyone have a great deal of success who didn't work really hard. I know sometimes things happen and it looks like someone got lucky. Almost always the case that what put them in place for that luck was an enormous amount of effort, preparation. And so my challenge to each of you that care about liberty and care about freedom and care about democracy: study. Work hard. Build out groups, alliances, friends, partners that share your core set of beliefs, and work on it. Work hard at it. Work diligently. Outwork everyone else. When you do that, you'll be an important part of the very success that you've just described.

And then the last piece – and I referred to this in response to the other question, but I can't emphasize it enough – speaking the truth matters. It's not always easy. There'll be people that are in a room with you that disagree with you, that think about something that's different. It's not about being mean; it's not about being confrontational. It's just about candor and truth. And I think we each have an obligation to speak that as clearly as we can, and then explain it and justify the statements that you've made as best as you can defend them. And when you do that, and when you do that in the context of supporting democracy and freedom around the world, really good things will happen.

**MR VASS:** Thank you very much Mr. Secretary. I see a question on this side of the room.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, I'm Marsella Brivinai (ph). I'm a student of journalism at Comenius University. Slovakia is a small state, so what role do the small countries play in international relations these days?

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. I'm trying to do a little bit of math, but I'll stop because I'm not going to get there fast enough in my head. Every nation that raises its voice for liberty and democracy matters, whether that's a country that's as big as the United States and with as large an economy as we have in America, or a smaller country. They're each valuable. Each time one falls, each time a country – no matter how small – each time it moves away from democracy and moves towards a different system of governance, the capacity for the world to continue to deliver freedom for human beings is diminished. And so I would urge every country, no matter its size – whether it's a country the size here in Slovakia, or a country in Western Europe that's much bigger – to stay focused, maintain its commitment.

You see in many of these places votes occur inside of organizations, just because of the nature of a nation-state. So whether it's a nation-state with 3 million people or a nation-state with 300 million people, that voice, their efforts, all the work that they do counts. Make no mistake about it, those who are attempting to undermine democracy will begin with smaller states. They'll view them as easier to defeat, to pick off, to separate, to split off from the democratic institutions that they are trying to undermine. And so, frankly, in some sense smaller states probably are

under more pressure and are more important to be at the cutting edge of protecting freedom and democracy.

Does that answer your question, at least in part?

**MR VASS:** Thank you. I've seen a lot of hands. But let us come here.

**QUESTION:** Honorable Mr. Secretary, my name is Slavo Migregoric (ph). I represent Christian Democratic Youth of Slovakia. First, let me thank you and current administration for your pro-life and pro-family stances. It means a lot for us. And I would like to ask: Especially former communist countries are very aware of persecution based on religion. Hungary opened state office for protection of persecuted Christians, and former Slovak Euro commissioner Jan Figel became the first EU special envoy for protection of religious freedom. Does the United States see any possibility to cooperate with other countries or EU in this question? If so, I would like to ask: What are U.S. plans to defend religious freedom, push for it in countries where it lacks, and de-escalate tensions? Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Yeah. Thanks for the question. When I talk about respecting every individual, that includes individuals' rights to practice their own faith, their own religion – or, in fact, if they choose no religion. This is central in the United States. It's incredibly important. It's enshrined in our Constitution. This right to exercise one's religious freedom is right there in the First Amendment to our Constitution.

The second thing I'll say is we in the State Department in the United States work diligently on this. We have an entire office dedicated to helping countries and peoples protect their own religious freedom. This past summer, under the leadership of Ambassador Brownback and my team, we held the first-ever Ministerial on Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C. It was truly a remarkable thing. We had countries of every faith. We had persons from a broad array of backgrounds from all – from every continent in the world. I think 70-plus countries represented. We hope this summer we're going to do it again – the second time, even more – where we got together to talk about how we can develop institutions that protect religious freedom, how do we create systems that protect minorities inside of countries who are struggling to practice their own religion.

We think we came up with some great ideas about how to further that. The United States spends an enormous amount of its resources trying to do that, protecting minorities of every faith all around the world. We're committed to it, and we need partners in the EU and partners all across Europe working alongside of us to do that. We see the plight of religious minorities. We see people who are persecuted in that way, and we find it unacceptable, and we're doing everything we can to create institutions and countries that respect the freedom of every individual to practice their own faith in the way that they choose.

**MR VASS:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. We are slowly running out of the time, but I think we can take the last question. I see some hands here on this side, so let me cross the floor.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Mr. Secretary. My name is Vahi Sjiman (ph). I'm here for a Slovak debate association, and I would like to ask: The Russian electoral meddling has emerged as a key challenge to the democratic process in both Slovakia and other Western countries. Is the United States ready to officially denounce it and to take steps against it? Thank you.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Well, I think every American leader of every political stripe has denounced Russian election meddling. I can't think of one who hasn't. It is real. By the way, it's not new. I know some of you young people may think it's new; it's not. The Russians have been attempting to influence elections for decades all across the world, including in the United States. It's different today, because technology has changed, the capacity, the – we've reduced the cost, because of the new world in which we live. But that effort, that effort to undermine democracies in multiple formats, including through undermining Western elections, is ever present.

And so we are – we're dedicated to pushing back. We have helped dozens of European countries who have come to take a look at what happened in our elections in 2016 to see how we responded to that. We did some good work for our election in 2018 to reduce the risk in our own elections. We are prepared to work to help European countries across the continent understand the threat and help them not only with the technology but with the process and systems to reduce the risk of this interference. But as you know, it comes in many formats. It does – it's not just trying to get inside a ballot box or switch a vote, but it comes in the form of information, disinformation, all of those things where they try to undermine fact-based analysis so that citizens go to the ballot box and make a determination about who it is they want to represent them based on actual data on real facts.

We have an obligation in the West and in all of our democracies throughout the world to push back against that, and the United States is determined to do it.

**MR VASS:** Thank you very much.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Thank you.

**MR VASS:** I think we could be debating here for hours and hours, and we would like that. But I know that your schedule is very tight. Poland is your next stop, so we should not keep you from your commitments also in Poland. So thank you very much, Mr. Secretary.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Thank you.

**MR VASS:** It's been a great pleasure to host you and to have you here in Bratislava and Slovakia, and we hope you will come back very soon.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Great. Thank you.

**MR VASS:** Thank you very much.

**SECRETARY POMPEO:** Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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