

ROUND TABLE INTRODUCTORY SPEECH by M.:W.: VLADIMIR MARKOVIĆ. G.M. of the Liberal Grand Lodge of Serbia

Embracing Masonic Values to Advance Democracy in Society

Welcome to this Round table session and to Belgrade. I have great honor to greet all of you on behalf of ADOGMATIC ASSOCIATION OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE.

I hope you will enjoy your stay in Serbia and our today's discussions. The aim of this session is to contribute to better understanding of masonic values and democracy.

To get us started, let me read my introductory note, and after that please share your thoughts and ideas.

Democracy in Central and Eastern European countries has faced significant challenges in recent years, including pressures on judicial independence, media freedom, and the rule of law. At the same time, citizens increasingly see the EU as a key defender of democratic values. According to Freedom House's 2024 report, the state of democracy continued to deteriorate for the twentieth year in a row. Of the 29 countries covered in the report, 10 saw a drop in their democracy score, while only five saw improvements. The countries of the Western Balkans remained in the category of transitional regimes or semi-free countries.

There is still a need for greater involvement of citizens and strengthening of democratic institutions to oppose authoritarian tendencies and preserve democratic values in the region. The decline in democracy came despite efforts to make the electoral process more accessible. For example, Estonia introduced electronic voting. Apart from external challenges, many countries face internal problems, populist leaders, and electoral fraud. As a strong response to external and internal threats, citizens gather to fight for their rights. Divisions and lack of trust in institutions are pronounced. Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe is very unstable, from Vienna and Prague to Tbilisi.

In Poland, citizens gathered against environmental pollution, and in Serbia and Montenegro against corruption. From October's referendum in Moldova, fraught with accusations of Russian meddling, to Georgia's struggles with misinformation surrounding parliamentary elections that determine the country's future course toward Europe or Russia.

In Romania, the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the first round of the presidential election sparked mass protests across the country. The Central Electoral Bureau has barred the far-right candidate from re-running in the presidential election in May. All this is causing a political crisis in the country.

In Austria, there is an increase in support for right-wing parties and citizens' dissatisfaction with the functioning of institutions. Conducted research shows that citizens' satisfaction with democracy is at a low level. As many as 37% of respondents believe that democracy functions very poorly or quite poorly.

Democracy in Hungary is causing great concern within the EU and the wider international community. In 2022, the European Parliament introduced a report stating that Hungary can no longer be considered a full-fledged democracy but rather a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy. Concerns about the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and the freedom of the media are highlighted.

Serbia has been facing the decline of democracy for a long time, especially since the tragic event during the collapse of the railway canopy in Novi Sad, when 15 citizens died. This triggered a mass protest across the country led by students demanding responsibility and the fight against corruption, the work of institutions in accordance with their competences.

Georgia is rated as a partially free country, with special challenges in the area of political rights and civil liberties. The government's decision to freeze negotiations with the EU led to mass protests in Tbilisi. This indicates a deep political crisis and polarization in the country.

According to Freedom House, Croatia has maintained the status of a "free" country with a slight decline in the rating of civil and political freedoms. It is necessary to continue the fight against corruption, for the freedom of the media, and to solve the problems in the judiciary.

Estonia, Slovenia, and Greece have retained the status of free countries, and the report for the year 2024 indicates a high level of standards of political rights and civil liberties in these countries. Bulgaria remains a free country but faces challenges in the fight against corruption, media freedom, and political stability.

All this speaks to the need for more intensive efforts to promote and protect democratic values in the region, with a special focus on strengthening independent institutions, media freedom, and the rule of law. It is necessary to advance social dialogue and intensify the democratization process.

The values advocated by Freemasonry have long resonated with the core principles of democracy. At the heart of both Freemasonry and democratic ideals are foundational tenets such as equality, justice, and the importance of civic duty. Freemasonry champions the belief that all individuals are equal, regardless of their background, a principle that directly

correlates with the democratic assertion that every citizen has an equal voice in governance. This shared commitment to equality not only fosters equal opportunities for different groups in society but also encourages active engagement in public affairs.

Moreover, the Masonic emphasis on justice aligns closely with the democratic expectation for fairness and moral integrity in society. Masonic teachings urge us to uphold ethical standards and promote social justice, mirroring the democratic ideal that all individuals should have access to rights and opportunities without discrimination. This pursuit of justice is a vital to fostering a harmonious community where every member's rights are respected and upheld.

The civic responsibility inherent in both Freemasonry and democratic governance further illustrates their intersection. Freemasons believe in the vital role of informed and active citizens in shaping their communities and governments. This mirrors the democratic imperative that emphasizes an educated and engaged populace as essential for the health of a democracy. Historical examples of Masonic leaders facilitating democratic movements illustrate this connection vividly – from George Washington in the 18th-century American Republic to António Arnaut in modern Portugal and many others. Their contributions, rooted in Masonic values of enlightenment and moral duty, have left a lasting impact on the quest for a more equitable society.

In an era in which societal challenges abound, the principles of Freemasonry offer a guiding framework for fostering a more equitable and participatory democracy. Freemasonry is built upon ideals such as liberty, equality, and brotherhood, which are essential for building strong communities. By actively embracing these values, individuals can contribute significantly to the reinforcement of democratic principles within society.

The call to action for all Freemasons in Europe is clear: we, as citizens, must engage deeply with our communities, prioritizing dialogue and collaboration over division. Through Masonic practices that promote tolerance and understanding, we should strive to cultivate an environment where **diverse perspectives are not just acknowledged but valued**. This commitment to open discourse is a **cornerstone** of a healthy democracy, enabling communities to address complex social issues collectively.

Furthermore, as advocates for change, it is crucial to remind ourselves of the importance of upholding Masonic tenets such as justice and equality. By challenging injustice and standing up against inequality, we not only honor the principles of Freemasonry but also encourage a culture where democratic values can flourish. **Therefore, let us embrace the Masonic call for moral fortitude and civic engagement, forging a united path towards a brighter and more democratic future for all.**

Today, we opened a discussion on significant issues that concern not only the future of Freemasonry but also society as a whole. The discussion that was initiated today is meant to help us better understand the time and circumstances in which we live, as well as our role in recognizing new challenges, reforming ourselves while preserving the core ideas and principles that Freemasonry has inherited and nurtured through the centuries.

I believe this is just the beginning, and that we will discuss our role in society more frequently in the future. I want to believe that the entire fraternity, regardless of whether someone belongs to regular or adogmatic Freemasonry, will become much more involved in the fight to preserve the fundamental values that Freemasonry protects and nurtures, thus helping society to recognize the right and only path in the building of humanity.

Once again, I thank everyone who responded to our invitation to participate in this Round Table and helped in the better understanding of Masonic values and democracy.