JD Vance's full speech on the fall of Europe

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Here's a full transcript of the speech that JD Vance gave at the Munich Security Conference this afternoon.

One of the things that I wanted to talk about today is, of course, our shared values. And, you know, it's great to be back in Germany. As you heard earlier, I was here last year as United States senator. I saw Foreign Secretary David Lammy, and joked that both of us last year had different jobs than we have now. But now it's time for all of our countries, for all of us who have been fortunate enough to be given political power by our respective peoples, to use it wisely to improve their lives.

And I want to say that I was fortunate in my time here to spend some time outside the walls of this conference over the last 24 hours, and I've been so impressed by the hospitality of the people even, of course, as they're reeling from yesterday's horrendous attack. The first time I was ever in Munich was with my wife, actually, who's here with me today, on a personal trip. And I've always loved the city of Munich, and I've always loved its people.

I just want to say that we're very moved, and our thoughts and prayers are with Munich and everybody affected by the evil inflicted on this beautiful community. We're thinking about you, we're praying for you, and we will certainly be rooting for you in the days and weeks to come.

We gather at this conference, of course, to discuss security. And normally we mean threats to our external security. I see many, many great military leaders gathered here today. But while the Trump administration is very concerned with European security and believes that we can come to a reasonable settlement between Russia and Ukraine – and we also believe that it's important in the coming years for Europe to step up in a big way to provide for its own defence – the threat that I worry the most about vis-a-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China, it's not any other external actor. What I worry about is the threat from within. The retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values: values shared with the United States of America.

I was struck that a former European commissioner went on television recently and sounded delighted that the Romanian government had just annulled an entire election. He warned that if things don't go to plan, the very same thing could happen in Germany too.

Now, these cavalier statements are shocking to American ears. For years we've been told that everything we fund and support is in the name of our shared democratic values. Everything from our Ukraine policy to digital censorship is billed as a defence of democracy. But when we see European courts cancelling elections and senior officials threatening to cancel others, we ought to ask whether we're holding ourselves to an appropriately high standard. And I say ourselves, because I fundamentally believe that we are on the same team.

We must do more than talk about democratic values. We must live them. Now, within living memory of many of you in this room, the cold war positioned defenders of democracy against much more tyrannical forces on this continent. And consider the side in that fight that censored dissidents, that closed churches, that cancelled elections. Were they the good guys? Certainly not.

And thank God they lost the cold war. They lost because they neither valued nor respected all of the extraordinary blessings of liberty, the freedom to surprise, to make mistakes, invent, to build. As it turns out, you can't mandate innovation or creativity, just as you can't force people what to think, what to feel, or what to believe. And we believe those things are certainly connected. And unfortunately, when I look at Europe today, it's sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the cold war's winners.

If you're running in fear of your own voters, there is nothing America can do for you
I look to Brussels, where EU Commission commissars warned citizens that they intend to shut down social media during times of civil unrest: the moment they spot what they've judged to be 'hateful content'. Or to this very country where police have carried out raids against citizens suspected of posting anti-feminist comments online as part of 'combating misogyny' on the internet.

I look to Sweden, where two weeks ago, the government convicted a Christian activist for participating in Quran burnings that resulted in his friend's murder. And as the judge in his case chillingly noted, Sweden's laws to supposedly protect free expression do not, in fact, grant – and I'm quoting – a 'free pass' to do or say anything without risking offending the group that holds that belief.

And perhaps most concerningly, I look to our very dear friends, the United Kingdom, where the backslide away from conscience rights has placed the basic liberties of religious Britons in particular in the crosshairs. A little over two years ago, the British government charged Adam Smith Conner, a 51-year-old physiotherapist and an Army veteran, with the heinous crime of standing 50 metres from an abortion clinic and silently praying for three minutes, not obstructing anyone, not interacting with anyone, just silently praying on his own. After British law enforcement spotted him and demanded to know what he was praying for, Adam replied simply, it was on behalf of his unborn son.

He and his former girlfriend had aborted years before. Now the officers were not moved. Adam was found guilty of breaking the government's new Buffer Zones Law, which criminalises silent prayer and other actions that could influence a person's decision within 200 metres of an abortion facility. He was sentenced to pay thousands of pounds in legal costs to the prosecution.

Now, I wish I could say that this was a fluke, a one-off, crazy example of a badly written law being enacted against a single person. But no. This last October, just a few months ago, the Scottish government began distributing letters to citizens whose houses lay within so-called safe access zones, warning them that even private prayer within their own homes may amount to breaking the law. Naturally, the government urged readers to report any fellow citizens suspected guilty of thought crime in Britain and across Europe.

Free speech, I fear, is in retreat and in the interests of comedy, my friends, but also in the interest of truth, I will admit that sometimes the loudest voices for censorship have come not from within Europe, but from within my own country, where the prior administration threatened and bullied social media companies to censor so-called misinformation. Misinformation, like, for example, the idea that coronavirus had likely leaked from a laboratory in China. Our own government encouraged private companies to silence people who dared to utter what turned out to be an obvious truth.

So I come here today not just with an observation, but with an offer. And just as the Biden administration seemed desperate to silence people for speaking their minds, so the Trump administration will do precisely the opposite, and I hope that we can work together on that.

In Washington, there is a new sheriff in town. And under Donald Trump's leadership, we may disagree with your views, but we will fight to defend your right to offer them in the public square. Now, we're at the point, of course, that the situation has gotten so bad that this December, Romania straight up cancelled the results of a presidential election based on the flimsy suspicions of an intelligence agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbours. Now, as I understand it, the argument was that Russian disinformation had infected the Romanian elections. But I'd ask my European friends to have some perspective. You can believe it's wrong for Russia to buy social media advertisements to influence your elections. We certainly do. You can condemn it on the world stage, even. But if your democracy can be destroyed with a few hundred thousand dollars of digital advertising from a foreign country, then it wasn't very strong to begin with.

Now, the good news is that I happen to think your democracies are substantially less brittle than many people apparently fear.

To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice
And I really do believe that allowing our citizens to speak their mind will make them stronger still. Which, of course, brings us back to Munich, where the organisers of this very conference have banned lawmakers representing populist parties on both the left and the right from participating in these conversations. Now, again, we don't have to agree with everything or anything that people say. But when political leaders represent an important constituency, it is incumbent upon us to at least participate in dialogue with them.

Now, to many of us on the other side of the Atlantic, it looks more and more like old entrenched interests hiding behind ugly Soviet era words like misinformation and disinformation, who simply don't like the idea that somebody with an alternative viewpoint might express a different opinion or, God forbid, vote a different way, or even worse, win an election.

Now, this is a security conference, and I'm sure you all came here prepared to talk about how exactly you intend to increase defence spending over the next few years in line with some new target. And that's great, because as President Trump has made abundantly clear, he believes that our European friends must play a bigger role in the future of this continent. We don't think you hear this term 'burden sharing', but we think it's an important part of being in a shared alliance together that the Europeans step up while America focuses on areas of the world that are in great danger.

But let me also ask you, how will you even begin to think through the kinds of budgeting questions if we don't know what it is that we are defending in the first place? I've heard a lot already in my conversations, and I've had many, many great conversations with many people gathered here in this room. I've heard a lot about what you need to defend yourselves from, and of course that's important. But what has seemed a little bit less clear to me, and certainly I think to many of the citizens of Europe, is what exactly it is that you're defending yourselves for. What is the positive vision that animates this shared security compact that we all believe is so important?

I believe deeply that there is no security if you are afraid of the voices, the opinions and the conscience that guide your very own people. Europe faces many challenges. But the crisis this

continent faces right now, the crisis I believe we all face together, is one of our own making. If you're running in fear of your own voters, there is nothing America can do for you. Nor for that matter, is there anything that you can do for the American people who elected me and elected President Trump. You need democratic mandates to accomplish anything of value in the coming years.

Have we learned nothing that thin mandates produce unstable results? But there is so much of value that can be accomplished with the kind of democratic mandate that I think will come from being more responsive to the voices of your citizens. If you're going to enjoy competitive economies, if you're going to enjoy affordable energy and secure supply chains, then you need mandates to govern because you have to make difficult choices to enjoy all of these things.

And of course, we know that very well. In America, you cannot win a democratic mandate by censoring your opponents or putting them in jail. Whether that's the leader of the opposition, a humble Christian praying in her own home, or a journalist trying to report the news. Nor can you win one by disregarding your basic electorate on questions like, who gets to be a part of our shared society.

And of all the pressing challenges that the nations represented here face, I believe there is nothing more urgent than mass migration. Today, almost one in five people living in this country moved here from abroad. That is, of course, an all time high. It's a similar number, by the way, in the United States, also an all time high. The number of immigrants who entered the EU from non-EU countries doubled between 2021 and 2022 alone. And of course, it's gotten much higher since.

And we know the situation. It didn't materialise in a vacuum. It's the result of a series of conscious decisions made by politicians all over the continent, and others across the world, over the span of a decade. We saw the horrors wrought by these decisions yesterday in this very city. And of course, I can't bring it up again without thinking about the terrible victims who had a beautiful winter day in Munich ruined. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and will remain with them. But why did this happen in the first place?

It's a terrible story, but it's one we've heard way too many times in Europe, and unfortunately too many times in the United States as well. An asylum seeker, often a young man in his mid-20s, already known to police, rammed a car into a crowd and shatters a community. Unity. How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilisation in a new direction? No voter on this continent went to the ballot box to open the floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants. But you know what they did vote for? In England, they voted for Brexit. And agree or disagree, they voted for it. And more and more all over Europe, they are voting for political leaders who promise to put an end to out-of-control migration. Now, I happen to agree with a lot of these concerns, but you don't have to agree with me.

I just think that people care about their homes. They care about their dreams. They care about their safety and their capacity to provide for themselves and their children.

And they're smart. I think this is one of the most important things I've learned in my brief time in politics. Contrary to what you might hear, a couple of mountains over in Davos, the citizens of all of our nations don't generally think of themselves as educated animals or as interchangeable cogs of a global economy. And it's hardly surprising that they don't want to be shuffled about or

relentlessly ignored by their leaders. And it is the business of democracy to adjudicate these big questions at the ballot box.

Embrace what your people tell you, even when it's surprising, even when you don't agree
I believe that dismissing people, dismissing their concerns or worse yet, shutting down media, shutting down elections or shutting people out of the political process protects nothing. In fact, it is the most surefire way to destroy democracy. Speaking up and expressing opinions isn't election interference. Even when people express views outside your own country, and even when those people are very influential – and trust me, I say this with all humour – if American democracy can survive ten years of Greta Thunberg's scolding you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk.

But what no democracy, American, German or European will survive, is telling millions of voters that their thoughts and concerns, their aspirations, their pleas for relief, are invalid or unworthy of even being considered.

Democracy rests on the sacred principle that the voice of the people matters. There is no room for firewalls. You either uphold the principle or you don't. Europeans, the people have a voice. European leaders have a choice. And my strong belief is that we do not need to be afraid of the future.

Embrace what your people tell you, even when it's surprising, even when you don't agree. And if you do so, you can face the future with certainty and with confidence, knowing that the nation stands behind each of you. And that, to me, is the great magic of democracy. It's not in these stone buildings or beautiful hotels. It's not even in the great institutions that we built together as a shared society.

To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice. And if we refuse to listen to that voice, even our most successful fights will secure very little. As Pope John Paul II, in my view, one of the most extraordinary champions of democracy on this continent or any other, once said, 'do not be afraid'. We shouldn't be afraid of our people even when they express views that disagree with their leadership. Thank you all. Good luck to all of you. God bless you.