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Remarks on the Plenary Session – *Our Region: Where Do We Go from Here*, 26 October

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This conference is about commemoration hence also celebration: We talk about twenty years of great change that brought liberty. Yet there is too much of gloom and unhappiness expressed in many speeches. We should not be too surprised by that, because democrats are rarely happy and satisfied: This is probably in their nature. Still, I want to start by saying that we should not be shy to celebrate as well: Twenty years ago we were captive nations indeed, and we are no longer. This means that if we are dissatisfied with how things are going in our countries, we do not have anybody else to blame: We know we are responsible for the failure ourselves. This may be the best definition of freedom: If we are unhappy, we cannot accuse anybody else of it.

Twenty years after, probably the most notable thing is how different we are. Large part of formerly captive nations is firmly entrenched in the democratic world: With its numerous problems and shortcomings to be sure, but still they are there. Some other countries – one very big one and several that are not so big, see the democratic world as an enemy and a threat, and do not want to be part of it. And then there are countries – I am coming from one of those – who are trying to build democratic institutions, but are less than successful in this. I will focus of problems of this third group.

These are countries that are haunted by a double set of challenges – lack of security and lack of consolidated democratic institutions. These problems are deeply

interconnected. The link is most conspicuous in my country, Georgia. It is true that we are failing to consolidate our democratic institutions and we have nobody else to blame for this. But it is also true that we are a country under attack from our northern neighbor, and at least one of the reasons for that (I am personally inclined to think that this is the chief reason) is that we are *too* democratic for their taste. This makes us dangerous, because we carry a virus that may undermine their regimes. This makes us, as well as Ukraine, frontier states. If we fall, Baltic States become next frontier states immediately. I have just come from a NATO conference in Riga where the presidents of the three Baltic countries spoke, and they have very clear understanding of this.

Therefore, with all (and different) faults that Ukrainian and Georgian democracies have, we are in an especially great need of democratic solidarity the spirit of which is grasped by the title of this conference, *For Our Freedom and Yours!*

Our divergent fortunes are also linked to divergent trajectories of development. Twenty years ago eastern Europe was carried away by euphoria of freedom – which ultimately brought it where it is now. We in Georgia experienced some of that euphoria – but unfortunately in our case (as in the Caucasus and the Balkans in general) it was overcome by euphoria of ethnic nationalism, and that immersed us in the period of civil wars. We spent the decade of 1990s mostly recovering from these wars rather than focusing on building democratic institutions (although some partial steps in that direction were also made). It was our turn to go through the period of the euphoria of freedom in the shape of so-called colour revolutions, and it felt good. However, almost six years after that euphoria, we are deeply dissatisfied with where we are. Now we are much more perplexed with complexity of democratic exercise, and this is probably very adequate attitude. Breakthroughs are necessary and uplifting, but ultimately the

success of democracy-building depends on much more mundane activities, on calculating interests and trade-offs and gradually improving quality of civil and governmental institutions.

We understand that we are not still there, and that there will be zigzags and setbacks on our way. Moreover, there is no guarantee of ultimate success at all: This is in an open-ended process. But if I had not firm hope of success, and if I did not recognize deep importance of democratic solidarity for that success, I would not be here.