

Mr. Speaker of the Senate, Mr. Speaker of the House of Commons, parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to welcome the parliamentarians from Central and Eastern Europe to Ottawa. Your objective is to learn how our Parliament works, but your visit should also serve as a reminder to us of the value of this institution.

Regardless of our political affiliation, we parliamentarians all share this conviction: it is absolutely necessary to debate current issues freely. We represent the people, and in this capacity we speak for them in our debates.

Nevertheless, it is easy to get carried away with partisanship and forget this essential duty. You are well aware of how fragile democratic institutions are and of how expediency and strong-arm methods can displace due parliamentary process.

I would like to salute your courage, and that of your compatriots for fighting relentlessly against tyranny to build your legislative assemblies — for fighting force with reason to form your political parties. Yours is an example that we cannot allow ourselves to forget.

Many of your compatriots gave their lives for the institutions that you serve today. You are the representatives of the new Europe, and it is our duty to ensure that your fight was not in vain.

Your visit comes at a particularly interesting time in the history of Canadian democracy and parliamentarianism. The results of our last federal election were interesting, to say the least!

Canada's political map has been drastically changed. Never have so many new parliamentarians been elected to the House of Commons — more than 200 out of a total 295 seats!

This historic event leads me to believe, on the one hand, that our democracy is doing well. On the other hand, these results show me that Canadians expect their elected representatives to listen to them, and want a role in this country's decision-making process.

Our government has recognized the importance of the geopolitical changes that you not only witnessed but played a part in. It has also clearly heard the message from the inhabitants of this country.

These two facts both come into play in the review of Canada's foreign policy launched by this government.