



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Remarks of EVP Vestager at the acceptance ceremony of the LutherRose award of the International Martin Luther Foundation.

Rotterdam, 11 November 2022

Good evening, everyone. And thank you.

I am deeply honoured by this award, and I feel especially privileged to be able to receive it here, in this beautiful place. It gives a sense of peace - that is something we very much need these days. It is also an invitation to reflect on our deeper purpose.

For me, that means reflecting on the work we are doing in Brussels. And when I do, it takes me all the way back to the beginning. All the way back to the Book of Genesis.

In this story, Adam and Eve defy God's command when they partake of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The book tells us that this angers God - He banishes them and makes them know sorrow.

But sorrow isn't the only thing God gives to them: He also gives them clothes, a symbol of their self-awareness. He says that 'man is become as one of us, to know good and evil'.

All the moral lessons in the rest of the Bible are based on this : that we humans are uniquely self-aware, in the image of God. That we are able to know and separate good from evil, which allows us to choose between them. In other words, our free will is the basis of our morality, because if someone is not free to do evil, she also cannot choose to do good.

This line of thinking inspires our most basic liberal doctrines. We cherish individual rights and liberties because we believe that when free, a person is best placed to do and choose good. She can better serve herself, and she can also serve the interests of her community. In economics, the idea of a 'free market' follows logically from this.

We know from classical economics that the free market creates prosperity like no other system can. Even the best central planner cannot hope to direct investment as well as when the market functions on its own. But this does not mean that we should leave markets to operate entirely on their own. Because just as old as Adam and Eve is the notion of greed. The idea that when you have a lot, you want more. That was already true for many businesses offline. It is also very true in the digital world. That's why we have come with new rules to regulate what large digital platforms can and can't do.

Because for all of us to feel that we belong in our social market economy, we need two things: a wide choice of affordable options. And fairness and trust in our markets.

With our Digital Markets Act, we put responsibility on the powerful. We set in stone once and for all that with power comes responsibility. To do so, the DMA imposes new obligations on the large platforms sitting on the gates of digital markets - that's why we call them gatekeepers. So that they don't steal choices away from users. And so that they keep a space on the digital market for everyone, not just themselves.

For instance, they can no longer rank their own products or services higher. So we can see the full range of possibilities; not just a few. They will have to make it possible for us to download or buy other services than their own. Like another app store.

We also ask them to inform us about other companies they plan to buy. Just to make sure they don't stifle competition before it even exists.

And there's more.

History has taught us that the free market economy is the best model to serve consumers. History has also taught us that democracy is the best way to provide accountability and stability.

But democracy only thrives in open spaces. Where we can argue, disagree, contradict each other without fearing to be discriminated or manipulated.

That is why in the EU we want a plurality of voices in every public debate. Today, we see a risk that

large digital platforms may be fragmenting our democracy into small, private places. Our own social media feed. Our own messaging groups.

So here again, we come with rules for digital markets to be made by our democratic institutions, according to the will of the European people. Not according to the whims of tech billionaires.

We do this with the Digital Services Act. With new obligations for platforms to respect our freedom of speech, while protecting us from illegal or harmful content. Freedom of speech is fundamental. As fundamental as prohibiting hate speech or incitement to terror.

We also hold platforms accountable to a certain degree of transparency. Because we can only get in control of our digital lives if we know how these platforms operate. So we ask platforms to share how their algorithms work. Not to reveal them, rather to clarify how they select the content that we see. This will give us a better idea of who is trying to influence us and how. And then we decide whether we want to trust this or not.

We apply the same logic to artificial intelligence. We don't regulate AI in itself. Only the use of AI. So when we see that an AI system poses risks to our fundamental rights or safety, we are entitled to good explanations as to how these systems work. What data they have been trained with, how reliable they are, and what they are used for. The higher the risk of an AI system, the more we insist that these risks are properly mitigated.

We are not alone in these efforts. We have partners. This is why we are intensifying our efforts to build and nurture our relationships with democratic partners across the world. It is why we must defend the principles of free exchange against the tide of protectionism and economic nationalism. This tide seems to be rising these days. And it is why we must make sure new technologies are never used in ways that breach our fundamental rights.

Dear friends, some modern liberals love to quote the Scottish economist Adam Smith when they speak of the benefits of a free market. But they rarely mention that before he wrote the 'Wealth of Nations', Smith wrote 'Theory of Moral Sentiments', which he himself considered his best work.

In it, Smith argues that for us to benefit from free commerce, we must first learn sympathy and compassion. We must seek the good path, and we must strive to stay on that path. For this, our work as policymakers can only get us so far. To be sure, our policies can create opportunities for us to follow our dreams with respect for other humans. Our policies can welcome immigrants and give them a chance to contribute to and enrich our societies. They can support women in their quest for true equality. They can help to provide a social safety net that frees the most vulnerable from want and despair.

Tolerance, kindness, empathy - and teaching others to do good in turn. These things are not something any government can deliver. Not in Brussels. Not in the Hague. Not in Berlin.

This work must be done in every home. In every community centre. In every church. In every synagogue and every mosque. By all of us. And as your job is providing the guidance all of us need to put ourselves on that good path. So when I look at what we are up against - naked military aggression, online hatred, anxiety and deep political divisions - I have to say you do not have an easy task.

Therefore, I can only accept this prize with great humility. And with the promise that I will do what I can to help make your noble task a little bit easier.

Thank you.