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Let me thank all the team of The New York Times for organizing yet another successful Athens Democracy Forum. It is an honour to be here for the fifth time, and to have been a founder member of this Forum together with you, Mr. Mayor and Achilles Tsaltas. I bring warm greetings from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to all participants.

It is also a pleasure to welcome our keynote speaker Margot Wallström, my compatriot and former UN colleague. Having a Swedish foreign minister with a UN background has become a tradition at this Forum. This is the third time we are honoured by someone with both those attributes.

So here we are again quoting Pericles and Aristotle to each other. When we first launched this Forum back in 2013, Greece was in profound crisis and most other Western democracies felt they were doing relatively well. They wondered why Greece, the cradle of democracy and civilization, had become the sickest man of Europe – and one afflicted by racist violent extremism.

Today, just four years later, the case is almost the opposite. Several supposedly stronger nations are struggling with extremist and xenophobic movements, while Greece has rejected these groups. Perhaps this is because the people of Greece can identify deeply with the hurt being inflicted on migrants and refugees. Because unlike many other Western countries, Greeks acutely remembers their own refugee nightmares, from war and dictatorship, just a few decades ago.

Today around the world, we face turmoil. Some yearn for authoritarian rule as an imagined road to stability. But let me quote to you from the message of Secretary-General Guterres to this Forum. And I quote: “It is time for the entire international community to address one of its most severe shortcomings: our inability to prevent crises. In some countries, a dangerous illusion has taken hold that democracy is in

contradiction to stability or conflict prevention. Quite the contrary: by destroying democratic institutions, by suppressing civil society, by undermining the rule of law and human rights, authoritarian rule creates conditions for extremist ideologies and terrorist activities to thrive. It prevents societies from developing peaceful channels and effective instruments for the resolution of grievances and other challenges.” End quote.

I would add that speaking the truth takes two: one to talk, the other to hear. My work with the UN Democracy Fund has shown me that an open discussion among men and women sitting under a tree can do more for participatory democracy than all the government summits and cabinet meetings in the world. When grass-roots activists, community organizers, labour mobilizers, youth and women leaders, come together at their own initiative, all with a stake in the outcome, they will persevere until all sides have a say.

This inclusive discourse must never end. As important, there must be someone in the capital listening. A confident nation gives citizens a role in the development of their country; the most effective, stable and successful democracies are in fact those where a strong civil society works in partnership with the state, while holding it accountable at the same time. This is what creates a virtuous circle of rights and opportunity under the rule of law, underpinned by a vibrant civil society and an enterprising private sector, backed by efficient and accountable state institutions. Social and economic development is far more likely to take hold if people are given a genuine say in their own governance, and a chance to share in the fruits of progress. Conversely, faced with bleak prospects and unresponsive governments, people will act on their own to reclaim their future.

In other words, democracy is not a spectator sport. And it is more like a marathon than a sprint. It is a long struggle waged by individuals, communities and nations. On this International Day of Democracy, let us commit to playing our part to the full.

Thank you.