

JD Vance on the Munich Security Conference 2025

Munic Security Conference, 2025

JD Vance

Opening Remarks

Thank you, and thanks to all the gathered delegates, luminaries, and media professionals. Thanks especially to the host of the Munich Security Conference for being able to put on such an incredible event. We are, of course, thrilled to be here—happy to be here—and one of the things that I wanted to talk about today is, of course, our shared values.

It's great to be back in Germany. As you heard earlier, I was here last year as a United States Senator. I saw Foreign Secretary David Lamy 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.

Reflections on My Time in Germany

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

I just want to say that we are 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.

(I hope that's not the last bit of applause that I get!)

Defining the Conference's Purpose

We gather at this conference, of course, to discuss security. Normally, we mean threats to our external security. I see many great military leaders gathered here today. While the Trump Administration is very concerned with European security—and believes that we can come to a reasonable settlement between Russia and Ukraine—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 defense.

However, the threat that I worry about the most vis-à-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.

The Threat from Within

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. 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 defense of democracy. But when we see European courts canceling elections, and senior officials threatening to cancel others, we ought to ask whether we're holding ourselves to an appropriately high standard.

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**. Within living memory of many in this room, the Cold War positioned defenders of democracy against much more tyrannical forces on this continent. Consider the side in that fight that censored dissidents, that closed churches, that canceled elections—were they the good guys? Certainly not. And thank God they lost. They lost because they neither valued nor respected the extraordinary blessings of liberty: the freedom to surprise, to make mistakes, to 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.

Unfortunately, when I look at Europe today, it's sometimes not so clear what happened to some of the Cold War's winners. I look to Brussels, where EU 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,” a so-called Day of Action.

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. 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.”

Perhaps most concerning, 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-Connor, a 51-year-old physiotherapist and an army veteran, with the heinous crime of standing 50 meters 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 that it was on behalf of the unborn son he and his former girlfriend had aborted years before.

The officers were not moved. Adam was found guilty of breaking the government's new “buffer zones” law, which criminalizes silent prayer and other actions that could influence a person's decision within 200 meters of an abortion facility. He was sentenced to pay thousands of pounds in legal costs to the prosecution.

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 citizen suspected guilty of thought crime.

In Britain and across Europe, free speech, I fear, is in retreat.

The Danger of Censorship—at Home and Abroad

In the interest of comity, 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 the 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. Just as the Biden administration seemed desperate to silence people for speaking their minds, 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, agree or disagree.

Elections, Disinformation, and Democratic Mandates

We’re at the point, of course, that the situation has gotten so bad that this December, Romania straight up canceled the results of a presidential election based on the flimsy suspicions of an intelligence agency and enormous pressure from its continental neighbors. 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 dollars of digital advertising from a foreign country, then it wasn’t very strong to begin with.

The good news is that I happen to think your democracies are substantially less brittle than many people apparently fear. 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 organizers of this very conference have banned lawmakers representing populist parties on both the left and the right from participating in these conversations. 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.

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.

What Are We Defending?

This is a security conference, and I'm sure you all came here prepared to talk about how exactly you would tend to increased defense spending over the next few years, in line with some new target. 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. 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 great conversations with many people gathered here—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 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.

The Urgency of Addressing Mass Migration

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 these things. 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.

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 has gotten much higher since.

We know the situation didn't materialize 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 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.

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-twenties, already known to police—rams a car into a crowd and shatters a community. How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilization 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. More and more, all over Europe, they're voting for political leaders who promise to put an end to out-of-control migration.

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. They're smart. Contrary to what you might hear a couple mountains over in Davos, the citizens of all our nations don't generally think of themselves as “educated animals” or as interchangeable cogs of a global economy. It's hardly surprising that they don't want to be shuffled about or relentlessly ignored by their leaders. It is the business of democracy to adjudicate these big questions at the ballot box.

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.

A Call for Openness and Dialogue

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. Trust me—I say this with all humor—if American democracy can survive ten years of Greta Thunberg's scolding, you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk.

But what German democracy—indeed, what *any* democracy, American or European—will not 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's no room for firewalls: you either uphold that principle, or you don't.

Europeans, the people have a voice; European leaders have a choice. My strong belief is that we do not need to be afraid of the future. You can 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 confidence, knowing that the nation stands behind each of you.

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 have built together as a shared society. To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice. If we refuse to listen to that voice, even our most successful fights will secure very little.

As Pope John Paul II—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.

Closing Thoughts

Thank you all. Good luck to all of you. God bless you.