

Your Majesties, Members of the Jury, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by expressing my deepest thanks to the European Journalists Association, to the Cerecedo prize jurors, to BBVA, the sponsors of this evening's dinner, and to all of you who have taken the time to come here tonight to celebrate the possibility of communication across borders, between people who speak different languages. The reason that I am so flattered, and so grateful, to receive this award is precisely because it is a Spanish award, and yet I am not Spanish.

But I am a writer who has tried, in different ways, to bring Spanish stories to other audiences – American, British, Polish – and, of course, to bring American, British, Polish and other stories to Spain: Russian stories, Ukrainian stories, histories of the past and reporting from the present.

Too often, nowadays, we take this possibility for granted. It seems that it should be so easy, in the era of Google Translate, instant communications and 24-hour news, to understand what is going on in the town next door or on the other side of the world. But true understanding requires much more than a glance at your cellphone. It requires time, effort, concentration, as well as the tough reporting and the difficult editorial work done by many of the people sitting here in this room, and by our colleagues in Europe and around the world.

And this reporting and editorial work is more important than ever before. Things that happen far away can now have an immediate impact on our lives; things that happen here can have an echo on the other side of the world too. In recent years, so many crises that seemed very distant have made a big difference to our lives. The Syrian war seemed far away to Europeans, until a refugee wave from Syria altered European politics. Russian experiments with mass disinformation seemed an exotic problem to Americans, until it affected an American election. As the covid pandemic taught us, our world is now deeply integrated, whether we like it or not.

Understanding, interpreting and explaining foreign events is no simple task, even for those working in this beautiful, peaceful city. Elsewhere, conditions are often much worse. Some of our fellow journalists must do their jobs while living in dictatorships, fighting wars or experiencing natural disasters. Some of them pay an enormous personal price, even inside the European Union. In recent years, journalists have been assassinated by political-criminal groups in Slovakia and Malta; not much farther away, journalists are jailed and persecuted in Belarus and Turkey. In Russia, one of Europe's neighbors, the most recent Nobel Peace Prize was given to a newspaper editor whose journalists have been attacked, poisoned and gunned down for their reporting. Still, he and his team keep going, because they know how important it is to

write the first draft of history, to inform their fellow citizens and the rest of the world what is happening around them.

There are other kinds of pressure too. Never before in history have so many tools been available, to both dictators and democrats, to shape and manipulate the information people receive. Of course autocrats have long understood that control of information can help keep them in power. In the 20th century, several governments on this continent used censorship to ensure that people had access only to information approved by the state. The government of China still operates in the same way, using censors as well as artificial intelligence to control what Chinese citizens can see on the internet. Other autocracies and illiberal states – Russia, Turkey, even Brazil – use bots and trolls to shape online conversations, and to steer people away from independent media and towards the information controlled by the state.

More recently, some political leaders, even in democracies, have come to believe that they don't need to control the media in order to shape political views, they simply need to undermine trust in the media. National leaders like Donald Trump or Viktor Orban mock independent journalists and news organizations. They turn press conferences into farcical events. Sometimes that kind of mockery and aggression slides into real violence, but even when it doesn't, it can be very powerful. It can convince millions of people not to take life-saving vaccines, for example. It can convince them to turn against democratic institutions, or against the electoral system itself.

Denigration of journalism can also convince people to ignore evidence of real corruption, or of broken laws. Indeed it is no accident that corruption, autocracy and weak media so often go together. It is much easier to get away with crimes when there is no press, no reporters and no journalism to reveal them. Autocrats, and those who would like to be autocrats, know this very well.

Let me conclude by observing that we are living at an unusual moment. On the one hand, the independent press has never been so necessary. In order to understand a complicated world, we need people who are willing to spend the time to gather information, to organize that information, and to present it in ways that help people to understand it. In Spain, in America, in Russia, everywhere, we need journalists who can pursue the public interest, independently, now more than ever.

At the same time, the independent press has never been so endangered. It is under threat from politicians who try to censor journalism and undermine journalists. It has to maintain standards even as its sources of revenue shrink. It has to compete for attention with the disinformation campaigns and emotional messages that spread so quickly on social media. It has to win the trust of readers in the face of mockery and aggression.

So let me end by expressing my gratitude for this award - but not because you have given it to me. Thank you for supporting journalism, for supporting professionalism, and for supporting expertise. Without good information, diplomacy, commerce and democracy itself

will become impossible. Civilization depends upon the rational conversation and civil debate that journalism inspires. Organizations like this one, evenings like this one, remind all of us of the importance of independent writing, independent broadcasting and independent thinking to our civic institutions, even to our way of life. Thank you all again.