**Address of the President of the Republic of Slovenia**

**Dr Nataša Pirc Musar**

 **at the reception for the diplomatic corps at the beginning of new year**

Brdo pri Kranju, 30th January 2023

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*Honourable Prime Minister,*

*Honourable Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps,*

*Excellencies,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen, and other distinguished guests.*

*I am delighted and honoured to address you for the first time and to share with you my impressions and expectations regarding our work together. For without excellent diplomacy based on teamwork, it is difficult to steer international relations. It is essential that we listen and hear each other, that we cooperate and work together. Let me start with a few words that I will devote to the general framework of my thinking about the contemporary international community. Then I will address some specific issues, after which I will share with you some more thoughts about the substantive priorities of the President for 2023. What links all three parts is my sincere desire to give concrete substance to this mandate of the President, with your esteemed help.*

*In doing so, I am following the fundamental principle of foreign policy, which presupposes the best possible coordination between the President and the executive and legislative branches of government.*

*I believe that this coordination exists. Where there are slips – and they do happen, as you know – we consult each other, and we unify. Slipping or deviating from a common path is not good for the country. It is not in its interest and its reputation suffers. I will always be committed to ensuring that Slovenia's foreign policy is a reflection of our constitutional order and of the broad strategic foreign (domestic) policy consensus. That is why I am pleased that the Prime Minister is here with me to present the views of the executive branch of government in the area of foreign policy.*

*I am very well aware of the challenges, but also of the problems that surround us. Regarding the challenges, I think there is no doubt in 2023.*

*We are applying to be a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. I agree that this is an important objective for all of us. Ladies and gentlemen, I am here, ready to engage fully in the process of gaining support in the coming months until the elections.*

*Good relations with our neighbours are, of course, in our interest. This is a dynamic part of foreign policy in which challenges never run out; I believe that the will to tackle them never runs out either. International environmental protection, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law are the goals and values that I will represent in my discussions with the leaders not only of our neighbours, but of all countries.*

*Looking at the problems, I would perhaps like to highlight a few briefly, in no particular order. One of them is the implementation of Schengen. I judge that it is still not being fully implemented, because border controls between Schengen countries have not been de facto abolished. Nevertheless, I am very happy for Croatia and its inclusion in Schengen, because this also carries an important message for us – that the European integration process is not dead. It is slower, but it is not dead. And European integration is in our national interest, as is a functioning Schengen.*

*I am also aware of the instability of the situation in the Western Balkans. We are confronted with it on a daily basis – I am worried about all the geopolitics that is going on in the area. I am worried about the flood of fake news produced in the Balkans and beyond, and through the revival of the nationalist rhetoric that characterised the late 1980s and early 1990s. But that is precisely why I do not see the Brdo Brijuni process as a waste of time, as is sometimes viewed in public debates, but as a necessary and unique platform where the leaders of the region talk, even if we do not always agree, and where we can also agree on something. Former President Pahor paved the way here, which I sincerely wish to continue. It is in Slovenia's interest to continue with this initiative, which is a factor of stability in the region.*

*Human rights, as you know, have deeply shaped my career so far. I want to continue to be, and will continue to be, recognised as a fighter for human rights. As I promised when I took the oath of office in the National Assembly last December, I will be at the forefront of civic courage. Today, when freedoms are curtailed all over the world, even in places where they were not a few years ago, the voice of democracy, of reason, of concern for human dignity, is all the more worthy. I am aware that the fight for human rights will sometimes be a fight with windmills. Even in Slovenia, there are many people who do not believe in human rights – some because of fake news and deliberate populism, others out of desperation, because in practice they do not even have access to fundamental rights. And both demand that we all work deliberately so that we can all live a life worth living; so that we can ensure dignity for all, including the most vulnerable.*

*As a lawyer, I have always been committed to the rule of law. As President, I will always be equally committed to the rule of international law. That is why I reject all policies that violate the fundamental principles of international law. This is especially true for the permanent members of the Security Council, who are supposed to be the guarantors of international peace and security.*

*Sooner or later, the Russian authorities will have to come to terms with the fact that war and aggression are not and cannot be a means of achieving foreign policy objectives.*

*This is precisely the main reason why the European Union is largely united when it comes to the Ukrainian issue. Even more than before, the EU needs to establish itself as an independent actor. The aggressor must realise that Europe has the will and the strength to defend the democratic norms and values that lead it to realise Schumann's vision of not only economic but also political unity.*

*For my part, as President, as a lawyer and as someone who believes deeply in the dignity of all, I will always strive to resolve disputes peacefully. That is why it pains me so much to see what is happening in Ukraine. I am deeply aware of the geopolitical dimensions of the war, its economic consequences, its impact on the stability of Europe and the international community as a whole.*

*Allow me, however, at this point, to highlight the purely human dimension of this irrational and incomprehensible war. I want to highlight the suffering of those who are involuntarily involved in it – the suffering of the little people, if you like. War means the painful loss of parents, daughters, sons, it means fleeing away, into the unknown, abroad... That is why I am particularly anxious to see an immediate cessation of hostilities, and I would like to see an agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. But at the same time, I would also like to stress the following.*

*Ukraine's fundamental demand for the opening of negotiations is the restoration of its territorial integrity. As President of Slovenia, a country that has been dissected and humiliated in its recent history, I strongly support this position. History is clear. If we give in to the aggressor, if we sacrifice a weaker country in the hope that its appetites will end, we make a terrible mistake. That mistake was made during both world wars and must not be repeated. But I want to reiterate a position that I have held practically from the first moment I entered the presidential campaign. Ukraine must be an equal member of the negotiations; and not only that.*

*We must never forget that Ukraine was a victim of aggression. Therefore, a deal can only be a deal when Ukraine agrees to it. I particularly emphasised this in in my conversation with President Zelensky on 9 January.*

*The Ukrainian war has fundamentally shaken the European security and political architecture. The NATO alliance has been reminded of the raison d'etre of its existence as a result of Russian aggression. Collective defence, unfortunately, is not a relic of the past, of the Cold War era; it remains the cornerstone of the transatlantic alliance. Unfortunately, the war is preventing much-needed reflection on the future. The Ukrainian war, unfortunately, prevents us from making the necessary reflections. Today's challenges are far more complex than they were just a few decades ago.*

*The current Foreign Policy Strategy and the Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia already recognise the negative dimensions of the explosive development of information technology. This has concrete implications for human rights as well. In the context of human rights, there is a lot of talk about artificial intelligence – of course, because it is already everywhere: in production processes, global chains, logistics, online security, and in our everyday tasks such as searching on web browsers. The right to privacy and the protection of personal data are increasingly violated and threatened. When I look around me, at home and around the world, I see that there is plenty of room for this kind of advocacy.*

*The Prime Minister, Dr Golob, is an energy expert and, as soon as he entered politics, he became one of Europe's most visible leaders. I myself have a lot of professional experience in the field of data protection. I will also use this niche to enforce certain policies and proposals that are beneficial not only for Slovenia, but for the whole world.*

*In this context, I would like to raise one current issue in particular, in relation to technological development.*

*Decent political communication or communication as a value will follow me everywhere, including in foreign policy.*

*Any politician who cares about the people who elected him or her is expected to be responsible with words and information. To insist in his or her discourse that every piece of information must be verified. To expose as unacceptable media that are objectively misleading, deliberately misinterpreting reality.*

*We have already seen in history, not least in the last few years, the severely negative effect that misinformation can have on international relations. Srebrenica would certainly not have happened if it had not been for propaganda and hate speech. The 1994 Rwandan genocide also started with a word, with hate speech. Or the Rohingya tragedy, where responsibility will also have to be sought from social networks and multinationals, which too often care only about profit – without any reflection on the trampling of human dignity that they enable by not regulating the content of social media.*

*Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of any democracy, but it has and must have its limits. It is, above all, limited by the rights of others.*

*These are the topics that I intend to focus on during my Presidency. But they are not the only ones. In the first year, I would like to pay particular attention to two areas that are important for several generations: climate change and gender equality.*

*Both areas have both domestic and international dimensions and importance. Regarding climate change, we simply cannot and must not ignore the legitimate expectations of all, regardless of age. In the case of gender equality, I would like to stress in particular the understanding of the importance of gender in relation to other personal circumstances, such as a poor social and economic situation or a certain age, which further reinforce inequalities in society.*

*As President of Slovenia, I am proud of our exceptionally high biodiversity on a global scale. This makes us one of the most important examples of biodiversity on Earth. We are rich in waters and wetlands, forests and grasslands, and have rightly earned the reputation of being a green country. Yet despite these exceptional circumstances, we are not immune to two global crises – the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis. That is why environmental security, and therefore the call to tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis, is one of the cornerstones of my Presidency.*

*Nature is our green capital! That is why the right to a healthy living environment is a constitutional category in Slovenia, and for good reason: only people who dwell in a healthy environment enjoy conditions in which they can fully live and create. The right to drinking water has also been enshrined in the Constitution. Water is the oil of the future and there are many attempts to privatise it, especially in the wider world, and we have had such attempts in Slovenia.*

*The right to clean drinking water and the right to a healthy and clean environment are human rights! Slovenian diplomacy has played a particularly active role in both rights, which I appreciate very much. The key issue is how to ensure these rights, and this will be my main focus at the UN Water Conference in New York this March, from which I want not just fine words, but as many concrete initiatives and commitments as possible.*

*I see mitigating climate change and halting the decline of biodiversity as the most important – the survival challenge of our time. We are all already feeling the consequences today. International cooperation is essential to achieve the Paris Climate Agreement's goal of no more than a 1.5˚C increase in global warming.*

*We know we are in a race against time and this decade will be critical in turning the greenhouse gas emissions trend downwards. One of the key actions in the fight to mitigate climate change is to halt the decline in biodiversity. But is it achievable? Personally, I would be happy if every human being understood that nature can survive without them, but they cannot survive without nature.*

*That is why biodiversity protection, which had its 'Paris moment' with the landmark agreement reached a month ago in Montreal, should also be commended. By 2030, 30 per cent of nature is to be protected.*

*The destruction and pollution of ecosystems, of planet Earth, is a cancer on modern society. At the same time, there is also the 'pollution' caused by disinformation and manipulation against the need for environmental security. We have to act now in an inclusive way for climate justice and to protect our planet, including for our descendants. Slovenia and the European Union must be clear and decisive in this.*

*When we talk about human rights, we too often note that, very often, the victims are women. As President and as a woman, I am receiving more and more initiatives to do something for gender equality in concrete terms, now that women have taken on quite a lot of political responsibility in the country. I would like to emphasise once again that we must not turn a blind eye to other sources of vulnerability of individuals.*

*Poverty, or poor economic status, is one of the key sources of inequality and unequal opportunities at all stages of life, and poor women, especially if they are older, are very vulnerable. Policies are needed that are not gender-neutral or even blind to socially constructed gender roles, which are often the source of the most serious inequalities and vulnerabilities, including violence. In addition to insidious violence in the family and in the domestic environment, we continue to face political violence against women.*

*I am aware that entrenched stereotypes and patterns cannot be eliminated overnight, even if the state is able to regulate an issue properly in law, as Slovenia has managed to do with its 'yes means yes' approach to the prosecution of the crime of rape. We can be confident in legal terms, but the road to real change is still long, so we cannot be silent. And I will not be. That is why I support the initiative of 2021, when the then President of the United Nations General Assembly convened all the women Heads of Government and State in the framework of the UN Platform of Women Heads of State. The Platform's substantive focus is on reflecting on the priority issues of the contemporary international community and finding solutions to today's difficult and intertwined challenges. I believe that such an institution is necessary, urgent, and I would like to be actively involved in its launch as soon as possible.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*This is how I see myself and this is how I see my work in 2023. Slovenia is not a lonely island in the ocean. Slovenia is part of an international community that is nowadays confronted, above all, with global problems. Therefore, Slovenia feels obliged and responsible to contribute to policies that will tackle these problems. You can always count on me and my team to help. Thank you for your attention.*