



Predsednica Republike Slovenije

**NATAŠA PIRC MUSAR**

**Address by the President of the Republic of Slovenia,  
Nataša Pirc Musar,  
at the Forum for Dialogue and Peace in the Balkans**

Koper, 17 June 2023

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*Your Eminence, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State of the Holy See,  
Dear Slovenian Bishops,  
Your Excellencies and other distinguished guests,*

*Concern for fellow human beings and solidarity are inextricably linked with every religion in every environment. Even and perhaps particularly in the Western Balkans. This region is as much a reflection of harmony and tolerance as it is an example of severe friction, war and unrest. It was here that the First World War began. The testimonies of bloodshed cannot be counted. It is also necessary to speak frankly about some of the individuals, former politicians and generals from this area who have been proven to have committed serious crimes against humanity during the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. History is dealing with them, but resentments remain. We still hear today how people of different nationalities and religions live in peace – but that now and then there are those who have weapons stashed in their cellars, because “you never know when they might come in handy”.*

*The stories of conflicts and wars in the Western Balkans also tell of moments when these politicians and generals attended services in religious institutions, sought support from religious leaders and from religion itself. The question of how to understand their presence in religious institutions is not rhetorical. The mission of a religious institution is to help the believer build a better life. To help him keep what is sacred to all of us, regardless of our beliefs or our religion: dignity.*

*Given the acute political instability in the Western Balkans, the crimes that took place in the region at the turn of the 21st century and the breakdown of democracy that we are witnessing everywhere today, the timing of this interfaith meeting could not be more appropriate. The question of how to move forward is more pressing than ever.*

*And indeed – how to move forward? We talk a lot in politics about the European perspective of the Western Balkans. This is, of course, only a first step, but it is far from being, or should not be, a platitude. When we talk about a “European perspective” for the Western Balkans, this must mean that we sincerely want the Western Balkans to become part of the European Union. The people there must also feel this – that they are wanted and, of course, that they themselves want this. I myself very much want this. I also want the leaders of these countries to realise that they will be stronger if they are part of European integration and that this sometimes requires giving up certain things. Every candidate, including Slovenia, has been put to the test in this way. The fact is that we have had to make certain compromises in moving towards the European Union and that this has paid off in many ways. In every respect, Slovenia is today incomparably richer than it was when it was not an EU Member State.*

*Scepticism about making compromises and the fear of losing privileges in the event of European Union membership can have disastrous consequences. Not for those who are sceptical and afraid – they will keep their power and privileges. I am concerned for those who want to make progress and achieve their career dreams. Their message is visible in the statistics. Hundreds of thousands of young people are migrating at an accelerating pace from virtually all parts of the Western Balkans. Empty houses are becoming an integral part of the Western Balkan landscape. The story of a teacher from one of these countries, who sadly remarked that he would not get to teach many of the children playing in the city because their parents were learning German at a rapid pace in order to leave, is just one of the many being written in this region.*

*But there should not have been such sad stories. The Western Balkans is mainly discussed in public discourse as a problem and less as a region of opportunity. I do not hear much about the natural features of the Western Balkans. About the beautiful rivers, about the canyons. About the friendly people who open their doors wide to the casual traveller. About the excellent cuisine. About unspoilt nature, an oasis in the middle of Europe, which is ravaged by climate change. Last but not least, about the coexistence and mutual acceptance of people who may differ in their ethnic, linguistic or religious identity.*

*I want a Western Balkans where such beautiful, human stories prevail. And that is where you, dear guests, can make a huge difference. Interfaith dialogue means cooperation – cooperation in areas that are common to all of us – for the good of all of us. And there are quite a few such areas. As I have said, youth emigration is certainly an issue that affects the whole region. The same applies to climate change. We need*

*to talk to and educate the population about these threats to the region and to humanity as a whole. The more there are such conversations, joint projects addressing these issues, the less intolerance there will be, and there will be a greater understanding that the way forward is peace, not conflict, and that it must be guided by the power of argument, not by the argument of power.*

*Ladies and Gentlemen,*

*I am aware that there are still many challenges ahead, often very great ones. Divisions and exclusion, including on religious grounds, are still present. Towns, villages, even schools and hospitals, are divided. In places where such divisions are present, the concept of two schools under one roof is taken literally – members of different ethnic communities go to school separately and they practically do not meet. Or they are divided by divided curricula that do not focus on a diverse society as a whole, but rather on one ethnic community, one language and one religion. This is not the Europe we want.*

*If anyone, it is you who can take a big, even decisive, step towards cooperation, mutual understanding, the elimination of divisions, the acceptance of difference and diversity as an integral part of our societies, and the understanding of an inclusive vision of the future.*

*We agree that there is only one God and that His first message is one of peace. It is your mission and ours to create the conditions for people to not only live in peace, but to live in a secure environment that is conducive to progress. To create the conditions in which, rather than linger on the past, we will be able to face the real challenges of our time. Technological progress is by far the first such challenge, not least because in the wrong hands it may have devastating consequences for individuals, for communities and for the region as a whole. Let us not forget: the horrors in the Western Balkans in the 1990s were mainly the result of disinformation. And it is much easier to spread disinformation today than it was three decades ago. A frank, trusting conversation with everyone, believer or not, in your environment is the best tool to prevent this harmful, potentially deadly virus that spreads so easily through the media and social networks. All of us leaders have a particularly responsible role to play – you too are called to help the whole region move towards a path of forgiveness, acceptance of diversity and an inclusive future.*

*Thank you very much for inviting me to this important meeting. I am confident that, after the meeting, we will all be even more determined that the Western Balkans deserves to be at the heart of Europe in every respect. Material and immaterial. There is still a long path ahead of us. But determined as we are in these parts, I believe that we can walk it together. Together with you and each for himself, but with the whole of society in mind, the whole of the Western Balkans. Only together, on the basis of*

*acceptance of diversity, not only tolerance of it, with a culture of dialogue, and in the spirit of acknowledgement of past mistakes and forgiveness, will we be able to escape the shackles of the past and the present. Only then will we be able to look forward and create all the conditions for peace, for the dignity of all, for the inclusion of all, including the most marginalised and vulnerable, for the return of those who had to leave. For the Western Balkans that we all want.*

*Thank you.*