



Predsednica Republike Slovenije

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**Address by the President of the Republic of Slovenia
Nataša Pirc Musar
to the Parliamentary Assembly of the of the Council of Europe**

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Check against delivery.

Distinguished President,
Deputy Secretary General and Members of Parliamentary Assembly,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation for giving me the opportunity to discuss the European and global challenges of our time. Over the course of 70 years, the Council of Europe has become Europe's preeminent body for protecting human rights and the rule of law.

By addressing the crisis of multilateralism today I shall try to make a case for the Council of Europe as a vital part in seeking solutions to not only regional but also our global challenges.

And I am particularly pleased to be able to engage in this exchange of views with you, dear President and Members of the Assembly, as we celebrate 30 years of Slovenia's membership in the Council of Europe. This is an important milestone, as it allows us not only to look back but, empowered with past experience, to plan well for the future.

We met last month for only the Fourth Council of Europe Summit in Reykjavik, which I attended myself. We expressed there our united support for our friends in Ukraine, who are fighting not only for their lives and land but also for our shared European values. I shall return to this later in my address. In Reykjavik, we also reaffirmed our unity behind these shared values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. These fundamental values have guided Slovenia into our independence, and ever since joining the Council of Europe.

You will remember that after declaring our independence, Slovenia was attacked by the then Yugoslav army and had to fight a war to win its independence. I recall this in a message of solidarity to our Ukrainian friends. Ex-Yugoslavia lived through its share

of bloody wars. In some of its parts, the scars of many such wounds are still cut deep. However, and this is important, the aggressor was defeated and finally we were allowed to breathe freely, liberated of the hegemony of the former Yugoslavia. And I trust this day will come for Ukraine as well and we in Slovenia are doing our best to help our Ukrainian friends win the war.

So, dear excellences, when Slovenia joined the Council of Europe thirty years ago on 14 May, it was a moment of national celebration and pride. Because membership in this organization validated and crowned the national aspirations for respecting human rights and freedoms.

I believe Slovenia's membership and cooperation with the Council of Europe is a big success story.

They say it takes two to tango and I am delighted to say that we have danced together with much brilliance and gusto, and I am much looking forward to staying on the dance floor together!

Let me add here, that our predecessors, the founders of European institutions, were dreaming about Europe as One and the torch is now in our hands to make this dream a reality. The Council of Europe's door must be open for new members. I trust, Mr President, that the Parliamentary Assembly will embark soon on its task to assess Kosovo's readiness to become the 47th member of this organization.

On this note, allow me a small comment. Recent events in both Serbia and Kosovo show how fragile the situation is in this part of the Western Balkan region. During my recent visit to Serbia and call with the Kosovan president, I encouraged both sides to return to dialogue and to take steps to ease tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Dialogue, courage, vision, and strong will are needed to implement the agreements adopted by both sides, aimed at normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

In this regard, I fully intend to continue to co-chair, together with my Croatian counterpart, the Brdo-Brijuni Process, in order to facilitate dialogue at the highest political level. I expect the Process to be primarily focused on topics that concern us all. One of those topics is the massive brain drain in the region. Young people in particular are eager to leave. And they leave in hundreds of thousands! This is why I visited the European Youth Centre today. I shall never tire of spreading the important message to the region and to the world: that the young people of the Western Balkans must be provided a European perspective.

Dear Members of the Assembly.

We must learn from the past so that we can inform ourselves on how to best go about the future. And the current state of affairs in the international community gives too many reasons for concern. Above all, we are in the midst of a crisis of multilateralism.

We need to speed up our combined efforts against the climate crisis, as the clock is ticking dangerously close to too late. We, human beings, cannot live without nature. And from today's point of view, we are losing and nature is winning in its own scientifically proven and predictable way.

The geopolitical polarization among the 'Big Powers' is deepening. As a result, the block mentality is returning and is hindering us from progressing for the benefit of all. Small and intermediate states make up the majority of the Council of Europe's membership. We should be worried that the international decision-making process is moving behind and away from the lit stages. We want to participate with our voice fully, according to the principle of sovereign equality, towards the resolution of global challenges. And we are concerned as history teaches us clearly that the **power of might should not take over the might of right**.

So, what can be done? And in particular, **how can the Council of Europe help strengthen the multilateral way of solving global problems? Who can help the Council of Europe do so? I see four avenues for action.**

The first one is related to the role also Slovenia can play as an advocate of Council of Europe's values in the global arena. Slovenia's strong commitment to multilateralism has been validated by our recent election, earlier this month, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations for the term 2024-2025. I believe this election is recognition by a vast majority of the UN membership in support of multilateral diplomacy and at the same time a rejection of the block mentality.

We want to use our 2-year term to contribute to the Security Council's work for the maintenance of international peace and security on behalf and for the benefit of the wider UN membership. We would like to continue working on climate security. Climate change is not only aggravating existing armed conflicts but is increasingly becoming a security threat in many states, such as Small Island States threatened to be drowned by the ocean or some African states threatened to be overcome by desertification.

We know there is no planet B. The recent Covid pandemic was a stark reminder that we are only as strong as our weakest link. We will either stand united in the face of the triple planetary crisis of pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change, or we shall fall together, big and small, rich and poor states. All!

I am a firm believer in our need for solidarity, particularly with those that have contributed the least to the climate crisis, but are threatened existentially by it. Very soon we will be faced with waves of climate refugees. Are we ready for this in Europe? Extremists are, as migration is the fuel that drives them. Tragedies such as the recently sunk packed vessel in the Mediterranean Sea should not be merely one-day news. Where is our humanity?

Allow me thus to make the case for the Council of Europe to engage actively in climate justice. Slovenia can and is willing to help. With some states from all the world's regions we have been working hard for the global **recognition of the human right to a clean and healthy environment**. I keep emphasising that the important thing now is to implement this right. May I use this opportunity to commend you, Mr. President and the members of PACE, for your proactive stance and for putting forward strong proposals in furthering the right to a clean and healthy environment, which I hope member states will act upon sooner rather than later.

Secondly,

Now more than ever we need to reject attempts at blatant violations of international law. Russian aggression on Ukraine, a sovereign country is an undeniable violation of the UN Charter.

We in Slovenia as I am sure all of you here were shocked by the atrocities committed in Bucha, Borodjanka and Irpin, as well as by the disastrous attack on the Ukrainian dam, said to have unleashed the worst ecological disaster in the country since the meltdown of Chernobyl.

I am also particularly appalled by the sexual violence and unlawful transfer of thousands of children, the consequent dangers of human trafficking, of exploitation and forced deportations. The Council of Europe's cooperation with all other international stakeholders in addressing these issues is and will be crucial for many years ahead of us.

The Russian aggression is an attack against the world order as we know it, against the democratic values we hold dear. It is in the interest of all peace-loving states to reject such flagrant aggression against the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine. For this reason, the Russian Federation no longer sits on the Council of Europe.

I support all efforts that would pave the road to a lasting and just peace in Ukraine, but I also want to be clear: not a single meter of that road can be built without Ukraine itself.

I also firmly believe that those responsible for aggression and perpetrators of these heinous crimes should not get away with impunity. In this regard, I welcome the warrant of the International Criminal Court for the arrest of Russian President Putin for the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children. I also wish to encourage Ukraine to accede to the Rome Statute. This step would add to the legitimacy of the ongoing prosecution procedures for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Ukraine.

And I wish to recall that, in Reykjavik, we took some very concrete steps towards helping seek a sense of justice after this war. Slovenia joined the register of damage resulting from the Russian aggression against Ukraine immediately after its adoption as a full participant and will participate in the first conference thereon in a couple of days.

You may be familiar with the event that is relevant to my discussion here. Parallel to the Fourth Summit, Slovenia hosted a diplomatic conference for the Adoption of the Convention on International Cooperation in the Investigation and Prosecution of Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes and Other International Crimes. Also named the "Ljubljana – The Hague Convention," it is a major step towards enhancing state co-operation in the fight to end impunity for core crimes. The convention will be open for signature early next year. Once in force, it will provide a global legal framework against impunity and for justice for the victims of most serious crimes.

Last but most certainly not least, what happens after the war in Ukraine is important too. Ukraine will go through a massive rebuilding in so many ways, from reconstruction of infrastructure to reconstruction of relations with minorities living in Ukraine. Trust-building will be a slow and painful process – but without trust we cannot have security. How safe a place is, depends on how much people trust each other. I dare say, if that lack of trust – especially between majorities and minorities in individual member states – is not addressed, the risk of conflict, including of a major one, will persist.

Thirdly,

While I see the UN and the OSCE as conflict resolution organisations and NATO as a security one, I see the Council of Europe primarily and most importantly as the **legal bedrock** of Europe. In other words, the Council of Europe is the **legal spine** that holds the body of Europe upright and functioning. Take away this legal foundation and Europe as we know it will collapse.

The Council of Europe is also our continent's **watchdog on human rights** and the **rule of law**, the two basic tenets of thriving democracies.

Council of Europe's attractiveness beyond Europe is proven by the accession of a number of non-European states to its legal instruments. This is the best contribution the Council of Europe can make to global governance and the rule of law.

I strongly believe that the Council of Europe must remain a **global standard-bearer** in addressing new and evolving human rights challenges. New technologies and artificial intelligence are getting ahead of us and it is high time for the regulation of their use in a manner that respects human rights. If we fail to act now, the consequences may be quite devastating for our enjoyment of human rights.

Your colleagues in the European Parliament have just given a green light to the EU Member States to move forward with the EU AI Act. This is good news and it is an opportunity. As a member of both organizations, I see very good potential for synergy among the two with a potential global reach.

I therefore call on the Council of Europe to seize this opportunity and set robust standards regarding **Artificial Intelligence's** ethical and responsible development and use. We must ensure that such are in compliance with human rights principles, and that adequate safeguards are in place to prevent misuse or abuse. I therefore very much hope to see the swift completion of the Council of Europe's framework convention on artificial intelligence.

I must stress the importance of the Council of Europe's **co-operation with the European Union** in the broadest sense. We share the same flag and anthem. Sharing the same values makes our combined voice stronger and louder.

As the EU will continue to enlarge, this will provide an opportunity for a detailed review of the respect for democracy, the rule of law, human rights and minority rights as the four political conditions for EU membership. The Council of Europe is to date the only organisation that has managed to establish binding legal standards on minority rights. This year marks 25 years since both the Framework Convention for the Protection of

National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages came into force. I put it to you that the protection of minorities and vulnerable groups, is the best indicator of the health of every society.

The Lisbon Treaty obliged the European Union to accede to the European Convention on Human Rights. For a long time, the negotiations on the EU's accession to the ECHR were stalled; however, recently an important breakthrough was made. Today, the European Union is the Council's main institutional, political, legal and financial partner. **The EU's accession to the European Convention on Human Rights** will raise this to a new level.

I applaud the **EU's recent accession to the Istanbul Convention**. Violence against women and domestic violence are unacceptable phenomena in all our countries. The Istanbul Convention is a catalyst of positive development regionally and is an internationally recognised instrument in our efforts towards global standards in fighting violence against women and domestic violence. We can observe an improvement in the effective implementation of the Convention's standards, even if the progress is slow. We cannot deny that the Convention's standards help improve lives of many women in Europe and indeed around the world. I very much hope that the EU's accession will encourage those states still hesitant to go ahead and ratify the convention.

Widening the circle of States Parties will strengthen our fight against this particularly appalling form of violence, hidden behind the closed doors. With this as with other human rights violations the Council of Europe's monitoring bodies offer us, states, their expert and independent advice both in helping us spot such violations in a timely manner and how best to resolve them.

And this brings me to the **fourth and final point** regarding the Council of Europe's role in the global multilateral architecture. Here I want to make a case for the Council of Europe as an irreplaceable and critical part of the overall multilateral architecture.

We are observing the widespread backsliding of democracy, the rise of human rights violations, and the weakening of the rule of law and democratic institutions in Europe and elsewhere. We thought this phenomenon belonged to the past.

On the contrary, populism is on the rise in Europe, questioning achievements reached in gender equality and spurring homophobia. We can see how the politicians' targeting the LGBTIQ+ is translating into very concrete hostile acts against members of this community.

The Council of Europe's legal regime is an important part of the European stability. By its open instruments it also is an important contribution to the international rule of law.

Later this year we will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is perhaps the best legacy the United Nations has given to humanity in the aftermath of the Second World War: the **universality of human rights**. Time has more than validated the Universal Declaration, as well as that of its European daughter, the European Convention of Human Rights.

Human rights and the rule of law are best invention of us humans against the Hobbesian rule of *Homo homini lupus*. These values in fact hold together our multilateral system and they are essential for its survival into the future. If you take human rights and the rule of law out of the multilateral equation, Ladies and Gentlemen, we are back to the future of the land-and-resources-grab.

Dear Members of the Assembly, you carry the most important responsibility in the elections of new judges of the European Court of Human Rights. I appeal to you to choose the best possible candidates. And in doing please do not shy from choosing excellent female candidates, as the Court's gender balance is still lacking.

Now turning to us member states, the most critical obligation that all our states share is the **full and timely implementations of the Court's judgements**. This is the very basis of the rule of law and thus an absolute obligation.

I must observe, that the growing trend of the non-execution of the Court's judgements is deeply concerning and unacceptable. The rules apply to all equally. This is an area where there should be no backsliding.

In summing up, Mr President, members of the Parliamentary Assembly:

I see **diversity and respect for all individuals and communities**, as this is the essence of our European way of life. As I remarked in the beginning, that's exactly what we were fighting for all these years ago leading to our independence. That is what the universality of human rights is all about: **we all have all human rights**.

I believe we need more multilateralism nowadays, certainly not less. I further believe the Council of Europe plays a very important part in serving as the legal bedrock of Europe, and it can and should provide inspiration and guidance globally in setting up new norms to respond to new and evolving human rights challenges. But we shall only be credible insofar as we ourselves abide by the principle of equality and of the universality of human rights in our own backyards.

I have tried to present to you my views and my vision on how the Council of Europe fits firmly into the European and international multilateral architecture. Thank you for giving me this opportunity in the Agora of Europe, as one of the very key Council of Europe bodies. You represent a direct link to the people in our 46 member states. We should all aim at progress and work together. We do not need to agree always and we certainly shall not always, but this is the essence of the parliamentary democracy.

Before listening to your questions and remarks, kindly allow me to remind you all of our National Day reception later tonight. I will invite you to raise a glass of Slovenian wine in salute to the first 30 years of Slovenia in the Council of Europe and to the continuation of this wonderful friendship and collaboration in the time to come.

I thank you all.