



President of the Republic of Slovenia

NATAŠA PIRC MUSAR

**Address by the President of the Republic of Slovenia
Nataša Pirc Musar at European Forum Alpbach**

30. August 2023

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Dear President, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my utmost pleasure to participate in the opening event of the Austria in Europe Days of the Alpbach Forum, and I genuinely mean it. The Alpbach Forum has done a remarkable job of bringing together a multitude of young individuals who, by attending this forum, demonstrate their unwavering commitment to the European idea. It is not merely the scenic surroundings that have brought us here; it is our shared concern and dedication to Europe that unites us. I extend my gratitude to each one of you.

We find ourselves in a time when superficiality often overshadows substance. Instantaneous falsehoods and disinformation are supplanting scientific truths, and populist quick fixes are favoured over profound deliberations and discussions of the pros and cons. Social media popularity has become more valuable than human lives. This is not the path we aspire to follow. You have chosen to be here at the Alpbach Forum because you genuinely care about shaping your future and the future of Europe.

I accepted Alexander's invitation to participate in this forum because I, too, care deeply. I care about Europe, and I care about our collective future. Despite the challenges we face, I firmly believe that Europe remains the finest place in the world to live and work. Our social system has proven its efficacy. However, we must acknowledge that there are still individuals and groups who feel excluded. Consider recent riots in suburbs triggered by tragic death of a young man in France. Reflect on the persistent presence of homophobia, as indicated by

Human dignity within us, dignity for us all, dignity for the environment surrounding us.

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Eurobarometer surveys. What about the Roma community? What about attacks on Jewish and Muslim communities? Are women in all EU member states content with their rights to make decisions regarding their bodies? And what about refugees seeking safety in Europe? Are we treating them with the care and compassion they deserve?

It is crucial that we identify and address these unacceptable societal issues and work diligently to find solutions. By doing this we can ensure that our social system truly serves all members of society.

The efficacy of our social model hinges upon the ability of our economy to maintain its competitiveness. Collectively, the European Union remains one of the world's largest economies, despite our lack of abundant natural resources and dependence on imported oil, gas, and minerals. Equally important is the preservation of our environment, water, and food. We take great pride in our natural wonders, green cities, and protected rivers, lakes, and seas. Our commitment to upholding the highest global standards for water and air quality is unwavering. Through robust regulatory frameworks and financial support, we ensure that healthy food and beverages grace our tables.

Just few weeks ago, Slovenia witnessed extreme weather conditions, with changes from weeks of extreme heat, to hail storms and extreme rainfall which lead to flash floods. Devastating floods cut off many villages, sparked evacuations, destroyed homes and bridges and closed major roads and rail lines. We witnessed the worst natural disaster in recent Slovenian history. At the same time, the southern Austrian provinces of Carinthia and Styria have been equally heavily affected by torrential rain.

Scientists are saying that extreme weather is our new normal. Some said that the scenes of destroyed roads and bridges by extreme weather are the scenes from the future. What can we do about that? Can individual states address climate change? It is clear that we need global response and we need EU to lead the way.

I came here from Bled, where I attended the Bled Strategic Forum. This year's forum addressed the theme of solidarity for global security. Solidarity was indeed the word of this Summer. Solidarity was seen everywhere you went in Slovenia this August. Solidarity is what Europe is all about. Let me thank here Austria, which together with a number of EU member

states and countries from the region, including Ukraine, Bosnia and Hercegovina and North Macedonia, instantly offered help.

This recent flooding, large wildfires that hit Slovenia, France last year, and Greece, Portugal, Spain this year, melting of ice in the Arctic, rising temperatures and extreme weather, tell us one thing - we must intensify our response to climate change. Europe is at the forefront of the global transition to a sustainable future. This endeavour is neither simple nor inexpensive. However, if not us, then who will lead the way?

We must also consider how we can equitably share the burden, knowing that developed countries like ours will bear the brunt of the costs and assist developing nations. If we lead the charge in the green transition, will our economy suffer in terms of competitiveness?

Moreover, we must not overlook the importance of safety and security. After 25 years of peace in Europe and the end of wars in the Balkans, we witnessed military aggression against a sovereign state within Europe. We had assumed that Europe had moved beyond escalating disagreements into acts of aggression and military conflicts. Unfortunately, we were proven wrong.

The question facing our society is how we navigate these challenges. Some propose a return to nationalism as the solution. Others argue that European integration has gone too far, claiming that "Brussels" wields excessive power. They advocate for the closure of borders by individual member states, limiting the European Union to purely economic matters, and promoting high birth rates among women, believing this will rectify our problems.

This rise of extreme right-wing ideologies in Europe is a pressing issue. In many European countries, the extreme right is gaining ground, even forming governments, and offering simplistic solutions to complex problems. One of their proposed solutions is to "renationalize" decision-making.

I dissent. I firmly believe that what we need today is a stronger Europe. Those who claim that even the largest economies within the EU can successfully compete against rising economic and military superpowers such as China and India are wrong. Let us learn from the lessons of Brexit! Examine the impact of Brexit on the UK economy after its departure from the EU. It

is a simple truth that each of the EU's 27 member states, even the largest among them, would be left vulnerable if isolated.

Only united we are stronger. We have already demonstrated this through our endeavours to combat climate change. In many other domains we are a global player. Just as an example: European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has become a global standard. I am confident that the same will be true in our efforts to combat disinformation and regulate artificial intelligence.

The answer to the challenges we face lies in more Europe—more cooperation, more solidarity, more unity.

My vision is one of a stronger and more united Europe. I aspire to a Europe guided by the values outlined in Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty: a Europe founded on respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities. We must continue to build the Union incrementally: strengthening the single market, deepening integration, enhancing cooperation in the realms of safety and security, restoring the Schengen Area and the free movement of people. Additionally, we must expand the EU by welcoming countries from the Western Balkans.

At Bled I moderated a panel with 3 young professionals from the Western Balkans and 2 presidents participating. After hearing the stories of young people who left Bosnia, left North Macedonia, left Serbia because of lack of opportunities and lack of stability - I cannot but say - the youth from Western Balkans deserve to live in the European Union too. They deserve to live at home. Not to leave their homes in order to live in the EU.

Safe and prosperous future can only be achieved through closer collaboration within the EU. This holds true for all member states, but it is particularly pertinent for smaller nations like Slovenia and Austria.

I am not advocating for a Europe where everyone thinks alike, but rather for a Europe that respects diversity, engages in constructive dialogues, and seeks viable solutions for the benefit of all Europeans.

Thank you.