



Predsednica Republike Slovenije

NATAŠA PIRC MUSAR

**Speech by the President of the Republic of Slovenia Nataša Pirc Musar
at the
opening ceremony of the 75th Frankfurt Book Fair**

Frankfurt am Main, 17 October 2023

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*Dear President of the Bundesrat of the Federal Republic of Germany Peter Tschentscher,
Dear Minister of State for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth,
Dear Lord Mayor of Frankfurt Mike Josef,
Dear President and CEO of the Frankfurt Book Fair Jürgen Boos,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Books are at the very centre of cultural consciousness of the Slovenian people. Our identity is built on the Slovenian language, which is closely linked to books in our national consciousness. Not just any books, but the first printed book in the Slovenian language, which was published in 1550. In this book, the father of Slovenian literary language, the Protestant priest Primož Trubar, addressed his nation as Slovenians for the first time. With this address, he established a connection that still holds true today: Slovenians are a community determined by its language more so than by the borders of a territory.

That is why literature is the most authentic expression of the Slovenian character, our history, our soul. That is why we value the creators of Slovenian literature, whether they write in the Republic of Slovenia or beyond its borders. That is why there is a statue of a poet in the central square of our capital. That is why we see poets and writers who create in Slovenia in other languages as our own. At this year's fair, you will have the chance to meet many of them, through their work or in person.

We are honoured that Slovenia is this year's Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair. We are proud that so many of our authors have already found publishers abroad that their books have filled the Slovenian pavilion. Already these few dozen authors provide a good insight into the breadth of creativity that enriches the world's treasure trove of literature.

Please allow me to mention just a few. Drago Jančar's novels reveal dark secrets, but also beauty and love in difficult times. Slavoj Žižek is perhaps the most translated Slovenian author and a superstar of world philosophy. Erica Johnson Debeljak writes in English, but considers Slovenia her writing homeland, where her works are popular bestsellers. Alma Karlin was a world traveller a hundred years ago, when women were not yet travelling alone, and she wrote numerous novels in German. You can also get to know her in the exhibition in Haus am Dom. In her Slovene-German voice, the Carinthian writer Maja Haderlap reveals the unknown and difficult sides of Carinthian history. The Trieste-born writer Boris Pahor experienced the worst evils of the 20th century, but throughout his extraordinarily long life, despite being deported to concentration camps, remained faithful to his Slovenian and, with it, European identity. The important message of his Necropolis is that we must never condemn nations, but only dictatorships that have led to the humiliation and insult of individuals and communities in the world.

A message that is all the more relevant in an increasingly tense world – from the war in Ukraine, through Israel and Gaza, to dozens of other hotbeds of conflict.

I am saddened by the number of conflicts around the world. At least 55 of them, and some have been going on for decades. One of them, in Gaza, is very much present with us here in Frankfurt. The massacre committed by the terrorist organisation Hamas ... I am horrified by it and I use every opportunity to condemn it.

However, I want to be clear about something else. What we are seeing in Gaza is also an attack on human dignity. The scenario that is being predicted and is already partly being realised worries me. The number of victims of the insanity of violence is growing. It is even taking its toll among the children. This is unacceptable.

I call for an end to violence and for respect for international humanitarian law and human rights law. Now, and on this occasion, as we celebrate the written word, I would like to emphasise the following. We often hear how important it is to read books. How important it is to be educated and to have the insight that the diversity of literature offers. And how important is the saying that the pen is mightier than the sword. The presence and power of books – the Frankfurt Book Fair is proof that we are a civilisation.

You will notice two special features in the Slovenian pavilion. The first is the large number of poets who are active today. In our country, they have been considered the flag-bearers of linguistic expression ever since France Prešeren, whose poetry represents the high expression of European Romanticism and can be explored in the exhibition at the German Romanticism Museum here in Frankfurt.

For Slovenians, the verses of his Zdravljica are an invaluable sign of respect for all nations, and at the same time not only a spiritual but also a political commitment to a strong national consciousness.

*“God's blessing on all nations,
Who long and work for that bright day,
When o'er earth's habitations
No war, no strife shall hold its sway;*

*Who long to see
That all men free
No more shall foes, but neighbours be.”*

It was precisely because of this message of peace, relevant at the time of its creation and perhaps even more so today, that it was chosen as the text of the Slovenian national anthem at the time of declaring our independence. It is the expressiveness of poetry that is highly valued in Slovenia.

The second special feature of the Slovenian pavilion is the return to the book. The classic, printed, paper book. The flood of audio, visual and textual content in the digital age often leads us to superficial and cursory reading. But reading and understanding are not one and the same thing! That is why the Ljubljana Manifesto on Higher-Level Reading was launched just before the Frankfurt Fair, emphasising that such reading is our most powerful tool for developing analytical and critical thinking.

This is also crucial for the overall functioning of democracy. Only an informed citizen, who critically assesses the available information, can participate fully in democratic processes. In the words of Margaret Atwood, the death of literacy will be the death of democracy.

The Frankfurt Book Fair is a key event where publishers find new authors and vice versa. The Slovenian language has been present here for more than 400 years, when in 1592 a dictionary of four languages, which included not only German, Italian and Latin, but also Slovenian, was entered in the fair catalogue. This is symbolically important, as Slovenia lies at the crossroads of four language groups and four landscape types. Slovenian publishing, like the Slovenian language, has had to be resilient to survive the vicissitudes of history.

Ever since our country's independence, the number of translations has been steadily increasing, and today Slovenia is a guest of honour at the fair. A fair that is well known in Slovenia. In the days of the former state, when foreign specialist books were a rarity in the Slovenian market, we had a sales exhibition called "Frankfurt after Frankfurt".

Frankfurt was the meeting point where some of the deals that traditionally made Germany Slovenia's number one foreign trade partner had been arranged.

The intertwining of the Slovenian and German economies is not only evident in areas such as the automotive industry, engineering and pharmaceuticals, but also in everything related to books. This tradition goes back to the very beginning of the printing industry. Even before there were Slovenian authors, our printers were doing business in Germany and equipping Slovenian printing houses with German printing presses.

The first Slovenian book, which I mentioned at the beginning, was also printed in Germany in 1550. We value these beginnings very highly in Slovenia. Reformation Day, which we will celebrate in two weeks' time, is also considered a celebration of the Slovenian book and language, precisely because it was Protestant writers who established the Slovenian language and books. There is only one printed book in the

Slovenian national register of UNESCO's Memory of the World: the first Slovenian Bible, which was printed in Wittenberg in 1583.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Slovenia has been an independent country for 32 years, but interconnections with Germany in the field of books go back centuries, and even further so in the language. The oldest record of the Slovenian language, and the oldest record of any Slavic language, is over a 1,000 years old. It was found in the library of the Freising Monastery and is now kept in the Bavarian State Library.

We are therefore building on a thousand years of history, and Slovenia's presence at the Frankfurt Book Fair as the Guest of Honour is a step that will surely not be the last. May this week bring new opportunities for Germany to get to know Slovenia, its authors and its literature even better.

Please allow me to conclude with the words of Bertold Brecht, who said: "Hungry man, reach for the book: it is a weapon." As a mother and as a woman, I want children, not only in Germany or Slovenia, but also in Israel and Palestine, to have this opportunity."

Thank you.