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***OPENING ADDRESS***

***by the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovenia
Tanja Fajon at the Bled Strategic Forum 2023***

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon!

Preparing a speech about solidarity, the underpinning theme of this year’s Bled Strategic Forum, is not a difficult task at a time when we are under the impression of the recent floods in Slovenia, the biggest natural disaster in Slovenia’s recent history. At the outset, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to all individuals and institutions, in Slovenia and abroad, who helped our country and our people in these difficult moments. You are all our heroes!

To show solidarity with the people whose homes were flooded, belongings destroyed, factories, farmland and crops ruined, we felt it was inevitable to adjust the programme of this forum. Under the slogan “BSF Stands in Solidarity”, we are giving every participant of this year’s Bled Strategic Forum an opportunity to help those affected by the floods. Your kind gesture will be very much appreciated.

At the same time, we understand that it is equally important to proceed with the Bled Strategic Forum, so that we can discuss, brainstorm and seek possible solutions to some of the most pertinent global problems affecting us all.

The Bled Strategic Forum is of particular significance for Slovenian politicians and diplomats, who will engage in discussions and actions aimed at strengthening international peace and security during Slovenia’s tenure in the UN Security Council in the 2024–2025 term. Since we perfectly understand that cooperation and solidarity lead to overall betterment, Slovenia will remain committed to its UN Security Council campaign slogan “Building Trust-Securing the Future”.

No global challenge can be properly addressed without global action, and no global action can be prepared and carried out without solidarity and compromise.

With the war in Ukraine and other armed conflicts around the world, global food and energy supply disruptions, poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic, the world calls for our joint action. Rather than making us fall into defeatism about the problems looming on the horizon, we must act now.

If we do not start solving problems urgently, our generation and generations to come will collectively pay a huge price. This world will change dramatically in an uncontrolled fashion, also through natural disasters and armed conflicts. It is our duty to ensure that such scenarios be avoided.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I stand today on this podium not only as Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Slovenia, but also as a social democrat – fully committed to what is called “enlightened solidarity”, based on the understanding that solidarity is not only a moral and human imperative, but also our investment for the common benefit.

In my capacities, I envision a just global system, where poverty is eradicated, where income balance and gender balance are the norm, where the world successfully combats climate change and implements transition to green energy sources, where we promote human rights and so on. Equally important are the rule of law, media freedom, and honouring international commitments and principles, such as the respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states as well as the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

To me, global inequality is a particular concern, in conflict with my political and personal view that all people should have equal opportunities. According to the *World Inequality Report* *2022*, the richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of the global income and owns 76% of all world’s wealth. Here, one should bear in mind a conclusion of the report: that inequality is a political choice, not an inevitability!

The biggest potential obstacle to global solidarity and security in the future is populism. A political method that includes distorting and faking facts; a political method that, among others, purposely creates tensions within our societies and internationally for pre-calculated political gains; a political method that represents a challenge to science and common sense, as well as to our core values.

By way of illustration. Imagine how difficult it is to fight climate change if it “doesn’t exist”, as some populists wrongly and deliberately claim. Or, how difficult it is to integrate legal migrants if populists automatically consider them a threat to their traditional lifestyle and as intruders in their homes. And also, what damage artificial intelligence can do if used by wrong hands.

Therefore, the least we can do to ensure stability and solidarity is to forge a strong international coalition supporting international organisations and institutions. It is equally important to regulate the fight against disinformation and fake news, and thus take away the critical tool of the populists. We must also properly regulate artificial intelligence.

Without addressing those phenomena, solidarity-based actions and – even worse – the entire concept of solidarity are seriously hampered, and, consequently, the world may slide into chaos.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In its essence, international solidarity is as strong as multilateralism – and *vice versa*. In fact, the strengthening of international solidarity and security also, if not mostly, depends on an effective multilateral system.

That is why we must collectively and wholeheartedly support the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which are an embodiment of cooperation and represent, at the same time, an indispensable stabilisation instrument. Urgent actions are necessary to implement the goals of no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, and so on.

The times are unfortunately less than ideal for the implementation of these noble Sustainable Development Goals, which are often side-lined due to other challenges. Today, we probably live in the most dynamic period since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 – in a period of rapid changes. The war in Ukraine accelerated polarisation, China and United States have been competing to prevail politically and economically in Indo-Pacific and Africa. And the EU and US have been trying to adjust to these new realities, including by building and expanding a global network of partnerships.

There are two main priorities for Slovenia. First, to stop the war in Ukraine. And second, to use the momentum and enlarge the European Union to the Western Balkans, as we speak about the membership of the Eastern European countries to the EU. Value based approach can help us significantly in this respect.

Regardless of the changing power relations, we must conduct well‑managed reforms of international institutions. In fact, discussions about the reform of the UN Security Council have been ongoing – probably for too long. My African colleagues have been repeatedly stressing a valid argument that Africa should have a permanent seat on the Security Council, since some 70% of the Council’s agenda is about Africa; its absence, indeed, seems illogical and this should be amended.

Re-balancing of the international financial system, what we know as the Bretton-Woods arrangement, is also necessary to enable the developing countries to finance development reforms with sustainable costs. The UN Secretary General has already spoken publicly about this.

Despite the evident deficiencies of the existing multilateral system and existing tensions in the international community, I remain optimistic. There is simply no alternative to multilateral global cooperation. Last year, I talked to around 150 colleagues from all continents, and they all supported strong multilateral institutions and cooperation. I am proud of the fact that Slovenia received such high international recognition by the UN Security Council vote, back in June.

Time is not on the side of humanity. Not only with regard to matters such as environment protection, but also with regard to many other global challenges. This notion should only motivate us to act immediately and decisively.

Ladies and gentlemen,

According to the *Armed Conflict Survey 2022*, there are 33 active conflicts in the world, but we speak above all about Ukraine due to the impact of this conflict on the world order. We support Ukraine and show solidarity with this country because we would like to see peace restored on our continent as soon as possible. We would like to see Ukraine having a fair chance of finalising a lasting and just peace at the negotiating table. In addition, we would like to see peace turning into a different kind of solidarity – to collaborate on the reconstruction of Ukraine and finally, to renew the security architecture in Europe that will guarantee a lasting peace in this part of the world.

Overall, Europeans should feel lucky to live in prosperity. To live on the continent with the smallest differences among states. To live in the EU community, which implements solidarity through regional and structural funds and other mechanisms. These instruments have narrowed income and development gaps between Eastern and Western Europe since the re-unification of the continent. Indeed, we are the lucky part of the World.

I was saddened because of the floods in our country, but also very proud to be a Slovenian and a European – because of our solidarity!

I must say that I am satisfied to be a European citizen for yet another reason. The EU is the biggest donor of international aid, providing more than 50 billion euros per year to so-called third countries. This is an enormous contribution to fighting poverty and encouraging development. It is our collective contribution to international stability through solidarity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to end my opening remarks with an invitation to all of you to show solidarity with the organisers and other participants – by joining in the discussions, and arguing your positions with eagerness and candour. As we speak, heavy rains are hitting Slovenia, and our people fear the worst again.

I cannot leave the podium without thanking profoundly Secretary General Peter Grk and his team for putting together the most substantial and the most up-to-date Bled Strategic Forum by now. I look forward to participating in search for global solidarity to unlock the solutions for our common future – in peace with nature and ourselves.

By way of conclusion, let me again recall that you can donate to those affected by the floods in Slovenia.

I sincerely thank you for your attention, understanding and solidarity, and wish you all many good ideas, plenty of inspiration, numerous new friendships, and a memorable stay in Slovenia.