Dear Commissioner Lenarčič,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first thank the European Commission, and INTPA (International Partnerships) in particular, for organising the conference and inviting Slovenia to co-host it. I would also take this opportunity to express my best wishes to the Portuguese Presidency, as well as commend the excellent cooperation within the Trio Presidencies, together with Germany.

Water is the only natural resource that has no substitute: the only substitute for water is water. It is renewable but not unlimited, and it is unevenly distributed. Yet, compared to other natural resources, it is undervalued.

As a strategic asset, water requires a well thought-through and comprehensive approach that would synchronise all relevant policies, resulting in better synergies in responses to water related challenges.

I would like to thank INTPA for recognizing the importance of water and organizing this seminar. I am deeply convinced that the 4-days multi-stakeholder dialogue will bring tangible results in terms of better synergies and responses, while strengthening the role of the EU in the global water landscape.

The EU is well positioned for a leading role at regional and global level in addressing those challenges, basing its actions on the Green Deal, Global Strategy, European Consensus on Development and European Consensus on Humanitarian Assistance.

Water affects every aspect of our lives, economies and societies – a horizontal issue *par excellence* that defies compartmentalisation. Water-related challenges are often complex and interrelated with other challenges, be it governance, development, climate change, education, gender, nutrition or health. Interdependent challenges need integrated solutions, based on an equitable, comprehensive and inclusive approach. This is the only possible way to build healthy and resilient societies, green our economies, and prevent conflicts.

What we need to do, and what Slovenia will be striving for during its Presidency of the Council in the second half of this year, is to embed water systematically and comprehensively across all aspects and facets of EU's external action. We need to mainstream water, but at the same time, it is of utmost importance to highlight water as an issue in its own right. The new programming cycle, including the Team Europe Initiatives, is a good opportunity to give water the attention it deserves.

Continued efforts are needed to reach SDG6, which aims to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”. However, the crosscutting nature of water reminds us that sustainable water resource management is a precondition for reaching all other SDGs.

There are many challenges ahead of us: human, environmental, geopolitical. The pandemic reminded us that water is a major public health issue. Access to basic social services and foremost to safe drinking water needs to remain a priority. At the same time, food and nutrition security calls for a closer look at the agricultural consumption of water. A lot has been said and done in terms of water efficiency. However, we also have to think about water effectiveness. Should we be supporting production of food staples intended for export in regions with high water scarcity?

Climate change and various disruptions of water circle are affecting the quality of life in each and every country, regardless of its GDP. Scarcity and poor management of water resources not only deepen social inequalities but can also trigger and deepen social, economic and political instabilities. In view of increasing water scarcity, the competing needs for water use coupled with dramatically growing demands are likely to exacerbate water-related security challenges.

The majority of the planet’s freshwater resources are transboundary. Transboundary water governance is an imperative from an environmental perspective, but even more importantly, from a security perspective. By promoting good water governance and transboundary water cooperation, water diplomacy is crucial in enabling peace and security as well as all-round development of our partner countries. Throughout history, active engagement in water cooperation has proven to be one of the most important factors in avoiding conflicts.

We must continue to pursue legal frameworks and joint management for the transboundary water resources, particularly on groundwater, where the legal frameworks are least developed. Globalisation of the UNECE Water Convention is a worthy effort to pursue in this regard.

Water represents a good basis for a dynamic approach to conflict prevention, conflict transformation, peace building and resilience as well as to sustainable, inclusive development and regional cooperation. Conflict analyses have shown that disregarding environmental factors and natural resources, including water, in peace processes substantially raises the risks for recurrence of the conflict.

I am glad to share the keynote speech (ali: the virtual floor) with the Commissioner Lenarčič as water has a special place in humanitarian response and in the humanitarian-development nexus. Allow me to stress the importance of access to safe drinking water and protection of water resources and installations as a vital element in protecting populations in fragile situations. The COVID pandemic has highlighted this issue even further, as the access to the water has a major impact on curbing the pandemic.

There is ample space for the EU water diplomacy to play a stronger role in promoting sustainable inclusive water management and cooperation, mediating and helping to prevent water related conflicts, as well as contributing to post-conflict resilience by assuring that water is taken into consideration in the peace processes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The pandemic caused many setbacks and put many challenges ahead of us. However, there should be no doubt, what the main lesson is: we need to strengthen the focus on human development.

We are all striving for one final goal: a water-secure world where every person's right to water is fulfilled and our planet is preserved for future generations.