**WELCOME ADDRESS**

**BY**

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**OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA**

**AT THE 2022 BLED STRATEGIC FORUM**

Mr President,

Madam President of the European Commission,

Prime Ministers,

Fellow Ministers,

Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A warm welcome to Slovenia! Welcome to Bled! Welcome to the Bled Strategic Forum!

Each time I visit Bled, I wonder:

Why don’t we build cities in the countryside where the air is much cleaner? *(pause)*

I have to confess that I borrowed this one from the Collected Jokes of Slavoj Žižek, the renowned Slovenian philosopher, who is one of our guest speakers and who will share his reflections on Europe and the challenges of our time. We are delighted that we have managed to attract so many distinguished guests to this year’s event at such short notice. Thank you to each and every one of you for joining us in Bled.

The new Slovenian Government took office on 1 June this year, at the height of preparations for the Bled Strategic Forum, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Bled Strategic Forum for organising this event so excellently and for all their hard work!

This year’s Forum takes place amid very challenging times for Europe and the entire world. And it will not be the first time this is the case. The last two forums took place with restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We probably all anticipated that once the pandemic was over, the world would return to normal. But we did not anticipate that war on European soil would become the new reality. This new reality has chosen the main topics of this year’s event for us: the strategic consequences and the challenges it has created for Europe, the European Union and the world.

Allow me to highlight a few of the challenges:

First of all, we should all be concerned with the fact that the decades-long project of re-uniting Europe after the World War II has been halted with Ukraine. We do not want to see another Iron Curtain in Europe, but unfortunately, there is little that we can do to prevent it at this very moment. The post–Cold War European security architecture has been seriously shaken and may collapse.

What is important, however, is that we do not close all the doors to emergency communication. The recent worrying developments at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant have clearly shown the importance of maintaining open communication channels and functional international organisations – in this case the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Secondly, it is vital that the existing divisions are not exported to the global level. To some extent, this is already happening: countries have started to position themselves and alliances have been forged. Crisis situations, like the recent one in the Taiwan Strait region, begin to occur. New informal international formats are also expected to emerge, while the existing formal multilateral formats and mechanisms might become dysfunctional. That said, some new formats have proven to be very valuable, like the one bringing together Ukraine, Russia, Türkiye and the United Nations; their agreement resulting in exports of fertiliser and grain from the Black Sea ports is highly valuable, particularly for underdeveloped countries.

Overall, to say the least, the situation is very worrying for – I believe – the vast majority of countries in the world, which do not have the strength and the capacity to shape the reality. These countries, the majority of us that are destined to mostly accept the developments, want a functional rules-based international order. In fact, we desperately need a much more effective multilateral system to deal with global challenges such as poverty, inequality, polarisation, climate change, and many other problems.

Slovenia is among the countries that are fully committed to multilateralism and continuously promote cooperation within the UN system. With this in mind, we are running for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2024–2025 term.

On top of that, and this is my third point, we, the EU members and institutions, have to do our homework within the European Union. While we advocate against divisions in Europe and the world, we are bound to pledge unity within the Union. I appeal from this podium to sovereignists and populists across Europe not to trade EU unity, solidarity, compromise and joint efficiency for egoism and cheap political points in domestic political arenas. EU unity and solidarity is of shared importance for all of us – the EU institutions and every single member state – particularly during the current crisis.

Furthermore, it is important to note that a fully functional, prosperous European Union cannot be built exclusively as the lowest common denominator of national interests. The EU requires a glue – the shared values of the rule of law, human rights freedom of the media – to solidify its structure. It is not only prosperity, but also these values that make Europe such an attractive place to live for its citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our economies, just bouncing back from the devastating blows of the pandemic, are facing new insecurities – these ones perpetrated by rising supply and energy costs. Our citizens, exhausted by the COVID-19 restrictions, are also facing new fears related to growing food and energy prices.

Energy diversification – finding alternative gas and oil sources to prevent potential energy shortages in the winter – is an absolute priority for most of the European governments.

To clarify, while we will continue to rely on polluting energy sources this winter out of necessity, we remain fully committed to green transition. In other words, green transition is not only our political commitment; we are firmly convinced that it is the most important investment in the future.

Related to this, let me proudly inform you that last month – on the initiative of five countries, including Slovenia – the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable living environment and extending the scope of human rights protection to address some of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not everything is so gloomy. Indeed, we might have more questions than answers, but undoubtedly, we will find solutions – including with the assistance of the Bled Strategic Forum. I am sure your discussions will help us find a positive way forward.

While there is solidarity, there is hope. And this year, we have witnessed many manifestations of solidarity – supporting a country under attack, implementing sanctions even though we know that they will hurt our economies, countries helping each other tackle fires and natural disasters, people reaching out with humanitarian assistance to their neighbours, refugees, those less fortunate and many others.

In Slovenia and elsewhere, we have experienced a rain free summer, a time of extreme drought and water scarcity, when fires have raged across Europe. We have seen cooperation, unselfishness and the helping hand of our people, which makes me a very proud citizen of this country.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must remain united in responding to our common challenges.

The quote "United we stand, divided we fall", which has been used many times in the past, is not just empty words. As the United Nations summarised the importance of achieving Sustainable Development Goals in Agenda 2030, our ultimate goal must be and remain to leave no one behind.

One final thought before the end of my address. Do not leave Bled without trying the soft power of this place – the sweet cake called "kremšnita", without swimming in the lake and without enjoying a walk around its perimeter. All this is part of the experience called the Bled Strategic Forum.

I wish you plenty of interesting debates and a very enjoyable stay in Slovenia.

Thank you for your attention.