

Mr President,
Apostolic Nuncio, Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps,
Your Excellences,

I warmly welcome you to the online New Year's diplomatic reception.

The year that has passed was a year of great challenge. All the countries in the world were tackling the pandemic and all the dimensions of its consequences – security, economic, social and psychological. The crisis showed us how vulnerable we are, and also powerless as individuals. We rediscovered the value of belonging and the necessity of mutual responsibility. These bonds build mutual trust that enables cooperation. Resilience depends on the strength of these bonds. It is not possible to effectively tackle the epidemic without cooperation and solidarity I would like to single out the dedication and sacrifice of all healthcare professionals and other workers, as well as all people who respect and understand the need for the measures for curbing the spread of infections. They provided an irreplaceable support to the efforts of the Government, whose main concern in this situation is and remains protecting lives and health and striving for the well-being of citizens, which is why we proposed the (already) eight package of measures for remedying the consequences of the epidemic.

In tackling the pandemic, seeking assistance and solving many issues, trust, cooperation and solidarity have proven to be key values and principles both at the level of neighbourly relations as well as on a broader, regional level. Experiencing interdependence and mutual assistance when tackling the common crisis strengthened neighbourly and regional relations. This is an important experience that consolidates the belief in the benefits of cooperation and integration.

The pandemic was also a great challenge for our broader homeland, the European Union. After the initial shock, our joint institutions reacted with important measures and the intensity of coordination of Member States' efforts increased. The adoptions of the multiannual financial framework and the EU recovery fund were only possible because of great mutual understanding and solidarity. A common approach to financing the development and production of vaccines and their distribution among Member States on the basis of equality is also a result of enhanced sense of mutual solidarity.

Slovenia was actively engaged in seeking consensus among the Member States about a historic decision on the EU recovery fund and was also actively involved in the discussion of further strengthening the respect for the rule of law in the EU. In the search for viable approaches, Slovenia highlighted that the monitoring of the implementation of the rule of law should be transparent, using uniform criteria and reliable and comparable sources, based on legal

assessment and taking into account the specific features of the Member States and structural barriers to the rule of law, which can also be historically determined.

I would like to stress the importance of good neighbourly relations. I am pleased about the great understanding and solidarity between us. I welcome both symbolic gestures of the President Borut Pahor and the Presidents of Italy and Austria. The year 2020 marked two historical events: the return of the National Hall in Trieste and the President of the Italian Republic and the President of the Republic of Slovenia paying their respects at the memorials to the victims of Fascism and Communism, and the apology of the President of Republic of Austria in Slovenian language on the occasion of 100th anniversary of the Carinthian plebiscite. We wish to further develop the good economic relations with all our neighbours by building new infrastructure connections, which are necessary for the digital and green breakthrough of all EU countries. We are also in an intensive dialogue with the neighbouring countries on current EU affairs and regional issues. It should be highlighted that 2020 marks the beginning of the dialogue among three coastal countries on the management of the Adriatic.

Within the EU, closer attention was paid to Central Europe, which is our natural, cultural, historical and geographical environment. Through enhanced cooperation in the Three Seas Initiative and in the new, informal group of five Central European countries, C5, we set ambitious plans in the field of infrastructural cooperation, where this part of the European Union is still lagging behind. We also strengthened cooperation within the other dimension of our foreign policy identity – the Mediterranean.

I would also like to highlight the bilateral relations with the USA. In 2020, Slovenia turned words into actions. We strengthened our relations, including by exchanging visits at the ministerial level and collaborating under the cooperation agreements in the fields of cyber and energy security. By entering into a strategic dialogue with the USA, we laid a solid foundation for further bilateral cooperation.

The Government also strived to strike a balance between the economic and other vital interests of the state and the national security system and the strengthening of Slovenia's political and security position. By doing so, Slovenia followed the goals and interests of its allies and partners, while contributing to the good relations with the neighbouring countries in averting threats and ensuring and strengthening peace. It did not neglect the protection against natural and other disasters and migrant issues. In the area of defence and military, the National Assembly adopted the Act Governing the Provision of Funds for Investments in the Slovenian Armed Forces for the period from 2021 to 2026.

As the year begins, we contemplate the tasks and challenges before us, and all these experiences give us hope and confidence that together, by joining all our forces, we will overcome this crisis. Based on the experience of collaboration, the fortification of mutual trust and solidarity, we will build our policy in 2021. For us, the EU and NATO are the anchors of the global political West. We want to contribute to a further strengthening and protection of its fundamental values and interests. This will be at the forefront of our minds, particularly this year, when we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of declaring our independence. The efforts of the Slovenian nation to gain freedom and independence were successfully realised within the framework outlined and strengthened by European integration. The fall of the European communist totalitarian regimes made it possible to realise an integrated and free Europe that is in peace with itself. This goal has still not been fully realised and is the responsibility of our political generation.

Our main task will be the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2021. I would like to highlight two key priorities – preparedness for and resilience to crises. The pandemic made us aware that the EU must jointly develop ways to quickly and effectively face and manage crises. It has also become clear how important is the resilience of social systems, which have become even more exposed due to accelerated digitalisation. Therefore, the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU will be to improve pandemic resilience and preparedness, as well as cyber resilience. The countries of the Western Balkans and the realisation of their European perspective will also be high on our agenda.

The stabilisation of the European Union will be a key word, in particular its consolidation after Brexit and Covid. Current situation requires the consolidation and stabilisation of the existing Lisbon framework and a focus on key topics and challenges, on improving the efficiency of European Union in specific areas. The internal market and the European Economic and Monetary Union must be fully operational and long-term stable, so that they can contribute to the stability of the entire European Union. Efforts should be made to enlarge the euro and the Schengen areas, in accordance with the treaty provisions. In a very important sense the EU will not be consolidated and stable until its external borders are also the borders of the Schengen Area.

The EU can be strong and united if in our collaboration we respect the subsidiarity and freedom of every European nation to realise the European principles, values and policies in its own way, in accordance with its history, culture and social specifics, while respecting the rule of law. As the EU citizens we know that we can face any crisis if we stay free and united and show solidarity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

allow me to take this opportunity to thank you sincerely for strengthening friendly relations between the countries you represent and Slovenia. I would also like to thank everyone who helped us in any way during the pandemic crisis. My sincere thank you for your solidarity. Before us is a year full of challenges. However, the experience of solidarity and cooperation give us firm hope that we will rise to the occasion. I wish you and the countries and nations you represent an abundance of health, happiness and prosperity, and that the ties of friendship binding us together become even stronger this year.