

Dear President Djukanović, Dear President Vučić,

Dear President von der Leyen,

Dear Prime Ministers, Ministers, Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Two days ago, I was standing among the ruins of apartment buildings in Irpin, outside Kyiv. What I saw was suffering and destruction caused by Putin's tanks and missiles. And I asked myself a question. *What right does Russia have to do this to Ukraine? How could this happen in Europe, in the 21st century?*

For decades, "never again to war" was the rule. Yes, there were failures, such as the Balkan wars, but in general, "never again to war" was more than an aspiration. It was a reality for most of us on the continent. So what happened? How did the European security order fall apart and, how do we repair it?

I have no instant answers today, but I would like to offer some ideas on where we can start to "survive and prosper", as this year's Globsec asks. We must start by recognising what the real challenge is. Because we can only protect ourselves effectively if we understand the nature of what we are facing.

As for the nature of the challenge, our peaceful European order hasn't been turned upside down in a day. Warning signals appeared long before February 24th and we misread them: – for example in Georgia in 2008 or in Ukraine in 2014. We saw them as unrelated episodes rather than symptoms of a bigger challenge. That was a mistake.

Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which started exactly 99 days ago today, leaves no doubt that the Russian president is not just fighting our eastern neighbour. Ukraine was attacked for daring to be different from Putin's Russia. For improving the rule of law and democracy, for fighting corruption or having an open society.

The Russian regime is waging a war on our democratic values, and the rules that have secured peace on our continent for decades. And that is true nature of the challenge we are facing today.

History teaches us that if an aggressor opposes your values and your way of life, giving up territory is probably not going to stop him. The Slovaks and Czechs have our own experience. In 1938 in Munich, the world powers thought they could secure peace with Adolf Hitler by granting him part of our territory. In less than a year, “the peace for our time” turned into a total war. Let’s not repeat the same mistake.

To restore peace in Europe, we must continue our support for Ukraine, so in its negotiations with Russia, it can decide on the nature of its relations with Moscow freely, and not under the barrel of the gun.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Vladimir Putin’s fantasy about a world, in which bigger nations can attack smaller ones just because they dare to be different, must fail.

Slovakia has already become a frontline country, welcoming tens of thousands of Ukrainians, women and children fleeing the war. Yet humanitarian aid alone won’t help Ukraine expel the aggressor. Slovakia is already among the most significant providers of military support on a per capita basis. But the situation on the battlefield is serious, and all of us must do more to help.

Ukraine’s reconstruction cannot wait until the aggression is over. This will be a huge task, but also an investment into our shared prosperity. As a direct neighbour, Slovakia will take an active part in Ukraine’s reconstruction.

And, the EU will also play a critical role, and not just in post-war recovery. Dear Madam President, we know that the Commission will submit its assessment of Ukraine’s application to join the EU soon. And I trust, that the next European Council will formalise Kyiv’s EU candidate status. Because the past twenty years show that leaving countries “in between” the EU and Russia leads to more instability. This is a strategic political and security decision, which we must take.

Dear all,

My last point is about ourselves. If we are to stand up to these challenges, we must strengthen our resilience. The slow post-pandemic recovery, and underinvestment into diversification of our energy supplies have made us even more vulnerable. We must therefore invest into a greener and more sustainable development and in reducing energy dependence on Russia. This is not a choice, it is a necessity.

More than ever in our lifetimes, we realise that peace and freedom are not for free. That our defence budgets cannot be the first to be cut and the last to go up. At NATO summit in Madrid, we should all come prepared to spend at least 2% of GDP on our defence, even before the originally-planned 2024. And we should further reinforce the eastern flank, with forward presence becoming a well-equipped forward defence. NATO's new strategic concept must reflect the new reality: that Russia is a threat and collective defence should be the Alliance's main purpose.

Talking about resilience, we cannot ignore the risk disinformation and propaganda pose to our democracies and our security. Social media platforms are becoming a dominant source of news for our citizens. Our expectations when it comes to their responsibility must also increase.

As the EU, we have taken some steps in this direction. But we must do even more to increase the responsibility of the platforms themselves for content they provide. I am sorry to see that the freedom of speech is often used as an excuse for inaction on our side. Should we take propaganda based on lies as just another harmless opinion? I don't think so. Our democratic tools – including the freedom of speech – cannot be used to destroy democracy itself.

Dear all,

We are now living a new reality, in which peace can't be taken for granted. Our decisions today will shape our reality of tomorrow. Let us jointly make it better, so that our "never again" becomes a statement, not a question.

Thank you.