

Dear President Duda, President Milanovic,

Dear Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference calls for rebuilding our world better. It is the right call. To talk about recovery is not enough. We need to talk about deep, structural changes.

This goes far beyond the current health crisis. We are beginning strategic discussions about our future as the EU and NATO. We have just launched a Conference on the future of Europe. At NATO summit yesterday, we set the tone for the Alliance's adaptation for the next decade. As we speak, the EU-US summit is discussing the future of our transatlantic partnership.

The pandemic has made these conversations even more relevant. It has shown our strengths and exposed our weaknesses. But it has also offered lessons to learn from. Let me mention three of them, before I talk about, how we can build back better.

The first lesson is simple. To successfully handle any crisis, we first need to acknowledge its existence and have a shared perception of what is happening. It was this globally-shared perception of the pandemic threat and the globally-shared goal of stopping it that mobilised unprecedented scientific and financial resources to protect our citizens and our economies.

The second lesson is the importance of rules and respect for them. Countries successful in handling the pandemic were those that applied clear, understandable rules, which were then enforced. Respecting the rules can literally save lives.

Finally, the pandemic highlighted the importance of prevention, of thinking ahead to prevent the next crisis, of taking action today – such as getting vaccinated or improving our crisis management. Preventive steps taken today will make us resilient to tomorrow's risks.

As we enter strategic debates about the EU's or NATO's future, let's keep these lessons in mind and ask these very same questions. Do we have a shared perception and a shared goal that we can translate into concrete actions? Is our rulebook still valid and respected? And, do we have the right prevention for the next crises?

Let me start with shared reality and common goals.

At yesterday's NATO summit, we agreed that international instability and power competition, misuse of emerging technologies, or the climate crisis can undermine our security.

This perception mustn't stay on paper. We must turn it into concrete actions. To adapt our institutions and even our lifestyles to the challenges ahead of us.

The same goes for the EU, as it addresses the questions of its future. What, or who, do we choose to be? What is our place in the world? Do we have a shared perception of what threats we are facing, internally and externally? Today, some debate whether we are too conservative or too liberal, too federal or not enough European. I trust that the Conference on the future of Europe, citizens' and expert debates, will help forge such shared perception.

The second lesson is that once we reach this shared view, we need rules to guide us. These must be valid and respected. For Slovakia, the EU and NATO, our democratic rules are our main rulebook, at home and abroad.

As the EU we already have the shared perception and the shared goal – our values: democracy, freedom and the rule of law, equality, or the minority rights. We also have rules to ensure that undermining these values has consequences, political or financial. Today, some argue these rules should apply differently. We should certainly discuss whether our rulebook still reflects who we are today. But my plea is simple: until we agree on new rules, we should respect the current ones.

Violations of international rules can endanger everyone, not only those directly affected by it in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria or Myanmar. The latest example is the case of Mr Pratasievič in Belarus involving a forced landing of a plane full of EU citizens under a false pretext.

Expressing grave concern should be our first but not the final step. To protect the rules-based order, we must use our political, diplomatic and economic tools more efficiently. For the EU this also implies adjusting our own foreign policy rules. The unanimity principle in practice often means not having a common EU position, even on clear human rights violations. If we have a broad consensus and a qualified majority, we should be allowed to act.

We must also insure, that our rules don't benefit those who violate them. Our business ties should not fill the coffers of repressive regimes. Holes in our tax systems should not create safe haven for illegal riches.

Let me briefly talk about prevention. We cannot wait until the current trends turn into tomorrow's threats. We must act now.

We can only agree on a shared perception of reality and on rules if we have truthful information and facts. To prevent another infodemic, we need effective governance for the online world, one that strengthens transparency and accountability.

We need to improve our education and help our citizens adapt to the information age. Just as we developed vaccine for covid-19, democratic states must find ways to deliver bigger doses of civic education and resilience to their societies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If we are to rebuild the world better, we need a shared goal, shared rules and actions to prevent future crises. To conclude, let me mention one more part essential for any successful construction: the builders themselves. That is all of us. Here, political leaders bear a special responsibility – because they are the ones to recognise our shared goals, who set the rules, and who should find solutions to prevent future troubles. We need more of such political leadership: responsible, consensus-building and future-oriented.

Thank you.