Mr Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic,

Mr Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic,

Members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic,

Members of the government of the Slovak Republic,

Distinguished guests,

Dear fellow citizens,

fifteen months ago, when I delivered my first state of the republic address, I made a wish that we would not go back to the pre-coronavirus state of a polarised and divided society.

As I stand here today, we face even wider social divisions. Dear citizens, I will try to sum up the most important elements in the state of our republic. Dear political representatives, I speak today as one of you, an elected representative of the people. I want to speak of things as they really are, which means I cannot avoid criticism because these are complicated times. But I also hope to remain objective, to create as little division as possible, and I invite every one of you who cares about the good of Slovakia to join me.

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I gave my last state of the republic address, we were one of the most successful countries in the world in managing the fight against the pandemic. Peter Pellegrini’s outgoing government and Igor Matovič’s incoming government took the right decisions at key moments, and this was one of the reasons why our country had a relatively low number of COVID-19 fatalities even compared to our neighbours. We took quick and decisive measures in response to the first wave, which our citizens respected and complied with.

By the end of August 2020, the situation was different. The fears of the scientific community began to be realised with high numbers of infections, large numbers of hospitalisations and also many deaths. The threat that should have united us became the source of our most intense conflicts.

I would consider it disrespectful to the victims and the suffering that we have undergone if, at this point, I failed to mention the basic facts of our experience in the last year and how it came about.

In the second wave of the pandemic, we had the highest ratio of deaths to population in the world for several weeks. According to official statistics, more than 12,500 people have died of COVID in Slovakia. This number of direct and counted deaths cannot, unfortunately, be considered definitive because, like other countries, we encountered a wave of excess deaths. The total death rate for January 2021 was over eighty percent higher than the average rate for the previous five years.

Our health system was extremely overloaded because we had more than four thousand severely ill patients with COVID in hospital at once. Experts estimate that every sixth person who needed artificial respiration was unable to receive it, and every sixth person who needed treatment for another acute condition was unable to receive it. In the last moments of their lives, the dying saw only the personnel who were treating them, dressed in overalls that even made it impossible to see their faces. We lost loved ones without being able to be with them at their last moment, say goodbye to them and bury them with dignity. We lived through a year of trauma and thousands of bereaved survivors will bear lifelong scars.

Like every serious crisis, the pandemic crisis showed us where we are most vulnerable. Crisis management and crisis communications did not solve problems but became a part of the problem. We also encountered deficits in civil defence, healthcare and social care for seniors. In spite of this, the people working on the front line in healthcare, the public health authorities, rescue services and many other jobs did incredible work and all deserve once again our heartfelt thanks.

The fact that our health system did not entirely collapse in the autumn and winter months was due mainly to the great dedication and sacrifice of our medical professionals. Unfortunately, they have paid a high price for this. Because they were treating patients at a time when vaccines were still not available, thousands of them were infected and dozens of them lost their lives to the disease.

In the aftermath of the second wave, their mental health paid a toll from months of being under extreme stress. A survey by Slovak psychologists found that eighty percent of the people who worked in COVID wards suffered symptoms of depression or burn-out. And now they must return to action to save people, including those who decided to ignore COVID. Fears that people will quit the health sector are neither unjustified nor exaggerated because nearly eight hundred nurses and midwives have left the profession, just using figures from the start of this year. We have long known that the health sector is understaffed and that the average age of workers is high. Personnel stabilisation in the sector must therefore be one of our key priorities, otherwise the consequences could be fatal for all of us.

It is not possible to stabilise the personnel situation overnight, but we have to deal with the third wave now. Readiness for reprofiling, clear rules in the COVID automat and comprehensible communication from the Ministry of Health indicate that lessons have been learned from the very difficult months in the winter.

Healthcare was not the only sector to face a challenging ordeal. Many of the workers in social service homes now suffer from acute stress disorder, having gone through the same traumatic period as healthcare workers. The strain on their resilience was all the greater because social service facilities in Slovakia were short-staffed by about a quarter even before the pandemic. A functional system of long-term senior care with enough beds and an adequate staff of care workers receiving decent pay must become a reality in the maximum possible extent as soon as possible.

Another large group who suffered greatly from the pandemic were children and adolescents. Many of them became completely cut from their usual way of life. They suffered not just because they could no longer get a proper education but also because their social ties were cut off overnight. Despite the frequently repeated slogan that schools should be the last to close and the first to reopen in a pandemic, Slovakia was one of the three OECD countries with the longest school closures in 2020 – only Costa Rica and Colombia stayed closed longer. From February 2020 to March 2021, there were only 28 days when all nurseries, elementary schools and secondary schools were open. I therefore want to praise the change in approach to COVID measures in the current school year.

The situation was especially hard for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who faced inequalities in education even before the pandemic. In the school year 2020/2021, nearly every fifth child in the second stage of elementary school [lower secondary] was unable to connect to online learning and one in ten took no part in distance learning.

As a result of these changes and the trauma that society suffered, the number of children with anxiety or depression has grown alarmingly. What children and adolescents now need most of all is a period of psychosocial convalescence. If, for whatever reason, we do not allow them it or fail to provide it, these effects could mark a whole generation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Employees whose workplaces were closed lost their livelihood and many lost even the last remnants of minimal stability in life. But there were also people who kept their jobs but got into a state of permanent stress, living with a constant sense of threat and anxiety. For many months, fear became the dominant social emotion, and as psychologists have long known, fear discharges itself as anger. Fear and anger are the emotions which have predominated in many people’s reactions to the pandemic crisis.

These emptions, especially as they apply to vaccination, are dividing our society, sometimes even separating families, colleagues in the workplace and neighbours. My positive attitude to vaccination is well known and I consider it the most effective route out of the pandemic. I also think we should remember that the mere fact of not being vaccinated does not make a person bad or stupid. I can understand why people are afraid because fear is a deep human emotion.

What is not a deep human emotion is the deliberate abuse or exploitation of anger and fear to direct hatred against other people and then to try to capitalise on this wave of hatred. People who do this have no desire to bring people together and no interest in earning trust. All they are interested in is undermining our faith in everything. In public service, in institutions, science, medicine. At the same time, it is entirely legitimate to criticise the errors that have been made in managing the pandemic. Objective criticism intended to save lives is even desirable. If, however, someone thinks that they can ride on a wave of hatred or turn it to their advantage, they are mistaken. History has shown us over and over again that hatred creates nothing, only destroys, even those who create it. And now we need to save the world and our Slovakia within it.

There are countries in Europe that are already dismantling their anti-COVID rules. They do so, however, when they already have a high rate of vaccination. We are still a long way from that target and instead of motivating the public to strive for it, we are setting people against each other.

We are unable to agree, not only on basic solutions for dealing with the pandemic but even on the question of justice or necessary reforms. People’s reaction to this situation is very clear – public opinion polls report that 71% of people believe that Slovak society is not moving in the right direction. This is twenty percent higher than in the previous year. We must take note of this state of dissatisfaction and do everything to change it for the better.

In this context, I cannot avoid mentioning the referendum. The constitution states that the president’s role in holding a referendum is not just to count signatures but to bear responsibility for the constitutionality of a referendum that is held. If there are any doubts – and discussion in the expert community clearly indicated that there were grounds for doubt – it is appropriate for the president to ask the Constitutional Court to review the question before the referendum is held. It is precisely because such situations can arise that you, the members of the legislature, gave such a competence to the president and the Constitutional Court.

The counterarguments heard in this chamber, that referendums with the same question had already been held twice, are out of place. There has never been a question with the same wording and the same consequences as the present referendum. From the decision of the Constitutional Court, we now know that if a referendum had been held with the proposed question at the request of eligible subjects, the Constitutional Court would have cancelled the result.

However, you members of the National Council have the possibility to amend the constitution and then request a referendum that is in accordance with the constitution. As I have repeatedly and publicly emphasised, I would call such a referendum without delay.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The outbreak of the pandemic caused the largest economic collapse in modern history. The decline in the world economy was twice that in the financial crisis of 2009. Despite this, the economic and social situation in Slovakia is better than originally expected because, for example, unemployment did not immediately shoot upwards as it did during the financial crisis.

The stable situation not just in Slovakia but throughout the European Union is the result of the strong action taken by European Commission and the European Central Bank. Thanks to an active monetary policy and the creation of a massive financial package in the form of the Recovery and Resilience Plan, we avoided an increase in business uncertainty and the crippling of our economies. The Union has learned from the mistakes made in the financial and debt crises of the last decade and it is a good sign for the continued functioning of the European Union.

It is important to recognise the steps that the government has taken to remedy the economic effects of the pandemic. At the same time, however, we must also admit that there have been many shortcomings. Many citizens fell through the social safety net in the first months. There was frequent confusion in the assistance and compensation for businesses that could not operate during the pandemic, for example, restaurants, hotels and culture, and the amounts provided were amongst the lowest in the EU.

What we do now will determine whether we succeed in creating conditions for continued economic development. It is for us to choose whether our standard of living will continue to catch up with that of western countries or whether it will stagnate. No government in the history of Slovakia has ever had so many resources at its disposal as we do now. Funding from the EU funds and the Recovery Plan is sufficient to modernise our society, increase the productivity and sustainability of our economy and create conditions for a rise in living standards.

To achieve this goal, we have to start taking seriously the issue of poverty and regional differences, and stop ignoring the fact that in southern and eastern Slovakia there are ethnic aspects to such problems. Although macroeconomic indicators point to a positive trend, we must not lose sight of the growing divide between such facts and reality as people experience it every day. We must not turn away from the plight of divided families, in which mothers or fathers are forced to travel abroad for work, leaving their children behind, because they cannot find work with decent pay at home.

Single-parent families and families with many children remain at high risk of poverty. More than a third of single-parent families live below the poverty line and in the cases of families with many children, this number reaches nearly forty percent. Children are the people most at risk of poverty and there is a risk that even completing education will cease to be a guaranteed route out of social risks. Children’s talents are stifled by the material deprivation of their parents. The pandemic has only intensified this problem. We must do our very best to give every child a chance to succeed at school and develop their talents regardless of their social origin.

In the same way, we need to tackle the rise in prices linked to the post-pandemic revival in the global economy. The prices of goods and services are rising as an effect of deferred consumption and the disruption in the supply chain caused by the pandemic. Food and energy prices will rise, and this will mainly hurt families on low incomes. It is therefore worth considering reasonable, targeted compensation.

It is also crucial to invest in infrastructure and programmes for regional and rural development. Rural areas in Slovakia should be pillars of the local economy providing jobs, sustainable landscapes and high-quality, harmonious living. In the past year, however, our farmers have faced concerns that the Agricultural Paying Agency could lose its accreditation as well as great uncertainty resulting from the lack of an intervention strategy in agriculture, which has put some producers, especially young farmers, at risk of losing their livelihoods. I now see signs of progress on both issues. At this very moment, the ministry of agriculture is conducting an audit to determine the Agricultural Paying Agency’s material readiness for the next period. I believe that the outcome will be positive because there is no acceptable alternative.

With regard to the environment, I appreciate the support in the sector for ambitious climate targets. I also appreciate the support for an effective circular economy with an emphasis on deposits for PET bottles and cans, which our country will introduce next year as the first in our region. I am also glad that a debate is now happening about the reform of national parks and biodiversity protection.

We need to significantly accelerate the remediation of contaminated sites because of their severe risks and their effects on people’s health. We have not even managed to get started in the most prominent cases such as the petrochemical contamination at Predajná, and the removal of PCBs in eastern Slovakia. Another persistent problem in the related area of air quality, which causes several thousand premature deaths of our fellow citizens in Slovakia every year, has led to the European Commission prosecuting our country with the risk of our country having to pay a heavy fine. The challenges of creating a carbon-free future or conserving water in the country place unprecedented demands on our generation and will require fundamental changes in the functioning of our society and our economy.

The government entered into its service for Slovakia with a strong anti-corruption ethos and the expectation of implementing major reforms. It must be noted that reforms were held up for a while by the pandemic and many of them have been incorporated into the Recovery Plan, which we were amongst the first countries in the European Union to adopt as well as the first in the Visegrad Four region. We need to begin implementing the reforms as soon as possible and thus ensure the most effective use of EU funds.

Since April this year, I have seen government representatives present unified standpoints on most of the key foreign policy issues facing us. I see it in respect of the need defend common values and the rule of law in the European Union, in our support and solidarity for our closest neighbour, Czechia, in connection with the attack at Vrbětice, and in all relevant international forums.

Our standpoints and consistency have not gone unnoticed in the EU and in NATO. On the contrary, the experiences of our diplomats and many of my personal interactions with representatives of the European Union, Germany, Austria, Denmark, the USA and others clearly indicate that our positions on values in foreign policy are more highly appreciated than we may be aware of at home. The important thing about consistency and predictability is not that others praise us for them but that they open practical opportunities for better negotiating positions and the promotion of our interests and priorities.

The efforts of our armed forces in recent months also deserve praise. I want to thank the members of our armed forces for their indispensable assistance in fighting the pandemic and the many other tasks that they carry out in the defence of our country and on foreign missions. Conditions for service in the armed forces can improve only if defence spending is stable and sustainable in future. For many years, Slovakia has followed a tradition where the armed forces are the first to be called upon in time of need but also the first to face cuts when there is demand for savings.

I would like to highlight especially the courage and dedication that the members of our armed forces showed when evacuating our citizens and those with close ties to our republic from Kabul. We all know that this took place in very grave danger during the allies’ chaotic withdrawal from the country.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There has been much discussion of justice in recent months and it has been highly topical in the last few weeks. I would like to begin my discussion of this area by praising several changes in the justice system such as the creation of the Supreme Administrative Court which will handle not only the current agenda of the administrative bench but also, very importantly, disciplinary cases brought against judges and prosecutors. Other important changes were **the reform of membership of the Judicial Council,** **background checks of judges** and checks of judicial competence.

Discussions of justice have not focused on these changes in the system, however, but on the investigation of major corruption cases. I am sure that we can all agree that for a functional society at any time, there is no room in public service for people who are not only unable to bear the responsibility of power, but who abuse it for their personal gain. I also believe we will agree that any healing process in society, including tackling corruption, must be conducted in a lawful manner.

In normal circumstances, we would be able to follow the cleansing process with confidence as investigation untangles once case after another, the police gather evidence and the courts make objective decisions with reference to their findings. Instead, we now find ourselves witnessing two factions in the security forces turning their metaphorical weapons of their powers against each other. We notice the absence of transparency, various interpretations of reality, the predominance of emotion over objectivity and abuse of the issue. This is to some extent understandable because there is a lot at stake. More than twenty people have admitted their guilt and given evidence of a parallel world where they could steal from the common goods without being punished. They have described the schemes they created, for which nobody has yet taken responsibility. What is thus at stake is the personal freedom of those under investigation and the healing and the future character of our state.

The fact that it is understandable does not mean that it is right. Politicians, which is what we all are, cannot and should not be able to interfere in ongoing investigations. We must respect the division of power and the ongoing activity of the law enforcement agencies. Even I, the president of the republic, only know what the media have reported about specific cases, and this is as it should be. I will therefore refrain from using this podium to issue judgements in place of the courts. I want to have confidence in justice and that if there are errors in investigations, the courts are able to assess the evidence and the legality of its acquisition. We should respect the division of powers not just in our actions but also in our words, which have the potential to undermine what remains of public trust in the state and its institutions.

For years we have been hearing about the need to sort out control of the information services in Slovakia. I have been hearing both expert and political debate about the need for changes in the police inspection for over ten years. For at least ten years, we have been discussing the need for changes in the prosecution service in Slovakia, which is mainly organised according to the principles of Roman law but still retains traces of the Soviet model, unfortunately. Analyses, legislative proposals and conferences on these issues come around at regular intervals. Thirty years after the Velvet Revolution, we are still stumbling over the same issues in the functioning of law enforcement agencies and the security services. This is our political responsibility. This must be the focus of our attention, energy and work. Years of apathy towards essential changes and reforms cannot, even with the best will in the world, be remedied by the work of a single commission. We must be aware of the risk that quick fixes designed to address one exceptional situation could just make things worse.

Regarding the cases under investigation, we must remember that it is not only important that the investigations be fair and reliable, but that they also show themselves to be so. It is legitimate to ask this of judicial authorities – to provide us, the public, with as much information as they can without threatening the investigation. Like us political representatives, they too serve the public.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I said in my introduction, I am addressing you, the elected representatives of the people, as one of you, as someone who has been elected to take responsibility for the leadership of our state. We have different powers and responsibilities, but all of us are in the service of Slovakia.

The crisis has put us under increased pressure, but we have to live together, and we cannot do that without mutual understanding. This is especially the duty of the parties in the governing coalition, who have taken on the largest share of responsibility for the leadership of the state and who need to show unity and a clear wish to cooperate if they want to continue in power. Feuding with each other will only deepen public mistrust.

It naturally applies to the opposition too, who contribute to the social atmosphere, participate in setting the level of political culture and thus also bear responsibility for Slovakia’s fraying social cohesion. Overall, political debate has plunged to depths never seen before. Lies, vulgarity and ad hominem attacks have become commonplace. It would be naive to think that such behaviour ends in this chamber or affects only the recipients of insults. No, we shape our society together and every expression of hatred indicates to the people who elected us that we care more about our personal feuds than about people’s real concerns.

Today, the Slovak Republic is a wounded country that needs to get through the global health crisis while also coping with the other challenges that we are facing. As political leaders, we have a duty to carry out these tasks for the benefit of all citizens and to try to live up to the standard of the best-managed countries in the world. This requires mutual respect and cooperation. I strongly wish for us to meet this historic challenge successfully, otherwise history will show us no mercy.

Today Slovakia is in desperate need of stability. Clear and united leadership. Peace based on truth and justice, but also matter-of-factness and solidarity. We can achieve that only by working together and I believe that it is a goal that unites most of us.

Thank you for your attention!