

Your Excellency Apostolic Nuncio,

Dear Minister Káčer,

Excellences, Dear Guests,

I am very glad to welcome you all again here in the Presidential Palace. I wish you, your loved ones and also your countries, people and the Heads of State all the best for the New Year.

I would like to thank you for all the work you are doing for our good relations. This has already led to many successful initiatives, including bilateral visits and good conversations with many of your Heads of State.

At home, Slovakia has seen a turbulent year as a result of a number of external and internal crises. Many of your countries have a similar experience. What makes the situation here a bit more special is that we are facing these challenges as a relatively young democracy, whose institutions are not always as resilient as in the long-established democracies.

Last year taught us many lessons. I want to talk about those that give me hope for the future. First, many of us are concerned about the ever-louder voices of intolerance and extremism. And rightly so. Ultimately, the terrorist attack, which claimed the lives of two young LGBTBI people last October shows that words can kill. At the same time, the last year's local elections show that the majority of our society wants to be represented by those offering practical solutions and cooperation, not by those who look for conflict and divisions. The reform of the judiciary continued, as did the investigations into wrong-doing of many former high-officials. I see this as a necessary part of the healing process for our society.

Active citizens and our civil society are essential to our democracy. Polarisation and fragmentation are on the rise. But our free media, journalists, activists, NGOs and many ordinary

citizens all remain the guardians of our democracy. The public reaction to the terrorist attack on Zamocka, the spontaneous support and humanitarian aid to those fleeing the war in Ukraine, mobilisation for environmental causes across our regions... all of this shows that our vibrant civil society plays an essential role in our country.

All of this fills me with hope as Slovakia approaches the early parliamentary elections. Just as previously, the elections will once again be a crossroad for our country. I trust that Slovakia will choose a path that respects our democratic values. But this will not happen by itself – it will only happen if democrats start looking at what unites them rather than at what separates them from one another.

Excellencies,

It's clear that 2022 was a year of challenges for all of us. But it's been especially hard for our Ukrainian neighbours, suffering from Russia's full-scale invasion. We will continue helping Ukraine, because supporting their self-defence is the best way to restore just peace and the rules-based international order. Russia's aggression is also a reminder that our addiction to fossil fuels is not only destroying our planet. It is undermining our security. Green transition of our economies is no longer an option – it is also a security imperative. I will continue arguing for a greater use of renewable sources of energy.

The 2022 has shown how strong the EU and NATO are if they act in unity. I am glad that we confirmed that Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina can join the EU one day. And I hope that Finland and Sweden will join this year's Vilnius summit as full-fledged NATO members.

Dear all,

I look forward to our continued cooperation, so when we meet in a year from now, we can say that 2023 was a good one. All the best and cheers to our cooperation.