

Dear President Cassis,

Dear Federal Councillors,

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Being the first state visit, for the Slovak head of state to Switzerland, this truly is a historic visit, and an honour for me and my country. Although our relations have already been excellent for years.

One sees, it in the number of our bilateral and multilateral exchanges or contacts between our businesses or scientists and researchers. But most importantly, at the level of vibrant personal links and connections.

Our bilateral relations go way back. One of our best scientists, Aurel Stodola, taught at ETH almost a century ago – and this is where he became friends with Albert Einstein. And we will never forget your solidarity and hospitality for those of our compatriots fleeing the 1968 Soviet invasion, of then Czechoslovakia. You welcomed them, with open arms and open hearts – and we are grateful for that. Next year, Slovakia marks the 30th anniversary of its independence. Since 1993, we have passed a long, even if sometimes bumpy road.

We had to rebuild our state and our institutions, so distorted by decades of totalitarianism. This transition was not just about institution-building, or the adoption of norms of the European Union. It was about our maturing as a society, our transformation from those controlled by the state, to active citizens and guardians of democracy.

Our path has been everything but straightforward, with trials and errors – in the 1990s, we missed out on the first wave of NATO enlargement. But every such hesitation has sparked a mobilisation of our civil society. That has kept us on the right path. Today, Slovakia is a proud member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance.

Today, we indeed meet under special circumstances. After having to postpone the visit due to the pandemic, we now meet in the shadow of Russia's unprovoked and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine. This is just Vladimir Putin's attempt to destroy a neighbouring country. It is an attack on the very principles of the European security order. An order that has enabled any European country, big or small, Slovakia or Switzerland, to freely choose their alliances and peacefully pursue their destiny.

This is what is at stake on the battlefields of Donbas, in Kharkiv or Sumy. We must do everything we can to force Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine.

For Slovakia, as Ukraine's neighbour, this war is too close. Mr Putin's actions are a threat to Slovakia - if he prevails in Ukraine, we have a new, aggressive neighbor right on our borders. More than 400,000 Ukrainians have crossed our border, fleeing the war. I am proud, that my compatriots, have opened their hearts and their homes to these Ukrainians, mostly women and children. Yet we know, that humanitarian aid and

refugee relief alone will not stop this war. Our military assistance to Ukraine is the largest in our history.

Just as the rest of the European Union, we have adopted sanctions on Russia, the strongest ever imposed on any developed economy. In this regard, I would like to appreciate Switzerland's historic decision to join these sanctions. It proves that neutrality doesn't mean indifference, as you President Cassis rightly said. And it also shows that the democratic world stands by Ukraine and international law.

Our countries may have chosen different modes of relations with the EU or NATO. But we share a similar approach – and not just on Ukraine. Both our countries are committed to addressing the climate crisis, one of the biggest challenges humankind is facing today. With 2050 as our goal for climate neutrality, we must speed up, the green transition of our economies, and our societies, because our planet is running out of time. And, let's admit it, we are running out of excuses, why not to act.

In Slovakia, we have decided to embrace the climate crisis as an opportunity and follow Switzerland's author Max Frisch's words: "a crisis is a productive state and we simply have to get-rid-of its aftertaste of catastrophe". Our two countries can be an inspiration to each other, when it comes to green transition. This is why I come to Switzerland with a delegation of Slovak scientists, entrepreneurs, and start-up leaders, keen to establish new partnerships.

Our countries are also equally committed to the values of liberal democracy and the rule of law. We know that for any democracy to survive, it must become a never-ending process of self-improvement, nurtured by active and involved citizens.

This couldn't be more important today, when our societies face not just external security risks, but also internal ones. Democratic tools are used by extremists, populists and autocrats to destroy democracy itself.

We see divisions, inequalities, or polarisation, often amplified by social media platforms and giving rise to the extremism. It is our shared task, the task of all Europeans, to restore balance on our continent. A balance between our democratic rights, and responsibility - because they must come hand in hand. Democracy needs to defend itself against abuses, because it might be abused to bring-about autocracy. This is our joint task - we must build unity based on our shared values, whilst preserving mutual respect and diversity of opinions.

Irrespective of what some say, liberal democracy can have many faces. It can accommodate social conservatives, liberals, or progressives. Europe and its diverse polities, are the best evidence of it – and Switzerland perfectly proves the point. Your unique way of governance, knowledge economy, as well as multilingualism and cultural diversity embodied by the phenomenon of 'Swissness' is a source of manifold inspiration.

Dear Swiss friends,

It is a real privilege to be with you today to celebrate the Slovak-Swiss partnership and open, through this visit, yet another successful chapter of our relations.

Thank you.