

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

I'm glad to see you again here in Bratislava. Conference like this is a great opportunity to discuss many issues, that we are facing today and for good decision-making. I would like to thank Globsec for organizing this event.

The title of last year's Globsec was "Survive and Prosper". No wonder: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was in its third month. Many people feared that Ukrainians' courage won't be matched by our collective military support. Energy prices across Europe were rising. We all remember the fears of high inflation and gas shortages over winter.

After one year, we have more than survived. Gas levels in European storages are at historic highs and inflation is slowly going down. To our east, Ukraine is fighting back and Russia controls less territory in Ukraine, than a year ago.

We should draw a clear lesson from all of this: we are far more resilient than we expected a year ago. And, we are stronger than our opponents. We're capable of both addressing our internal challenges and helping our partners such as Ukraine.

Of course, we are still facing many internal and external risks. But my point is simple. To prevail, we need to stay the course. Continue what we are doing, and do it better. And, to succeed, we mustn't fear. As Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself".

There are concrete reasons why we are in a better position today than a year ago. The first one is our unity. Our united and collective action, and our joint gas purchases, helped us through the winter.

Our unity on sanctions has had a real effect on Russia's economy. And Moscow has fewer resources to produce or buy sophisticated weapons.

Of course, our unity, is already tested. By those who say that our measures aren't working, or that we must only focus on narrow national interests. The developments of the past two years already prove, that these critics are wrong.

Secondly, it was our solidarity which improved our position. Solidarity amongst the EU and NATO, but also with our partners. In response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO Allies reinforced their military presence on the eastern flank. And we will continue to do so, also through the decisions we take at the NATO Vilnius summit next month. To reassure our citizens and send a clear message to our opponents, that every inch of NATO territory is and will be defended. We already welcomed Finland as a NATO member and expect Sweden to join very soon.

Our solidarity with our partners has benefits for our own security. By helping the Ukrainians, we are helping to keep the Russian aggressor further away from our borders.

But, let's remember that, Ukraine is doing so at enormous cost. No one would imagine that Europe in the 21st century would have places such as the Ukrainian village of Jahidne. I was there a month ago and I spoke with survivors of the 26 days of terror. 367 people, including children and the elderly were held in a local school's underground in horrible conditions. The Russian army set up a command centre above them. Yes, the civilians were used as a human shield. 11 of them died. We don't know how many more Jahidnes are on the occupied territories. But it is our duty under the UN Charter to help ensure, that none remains. And that those who committed such crimes are held accountable.

Finally, we must match our unity and solidarity with long-term resolve and determination. Because our opponents hope that with enough time and a huge dose of disinformation, public opinion in our countries will shift and governments will change the course.

Yes, this is where we are at a disadvantage. Extremists are using democratic rights against democracy itself. For example freedom of speech, one of the most important democratic rights is often used as a cover for spreading disinformation and hate speech. We must better protect our democracy, including through balanced regulation, and not be naive about what is happening. We should enforce the already existing national legislation. At the EU level, evaluate the effectiveness of our regulation and be ready to strengthen it if needed. And at global level, we should increase the accountability of the owners of social media platforms for the content that is posted.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The events since the Russian aggression show that time and history are on the side of democracy. Let's make sure that we can not only build a zone of democracy and freedom in Europe, but we can also keep it.

I wish you all very good and fruitful discussions.

Thank you.