



**Speech by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Slovenia, Janez Janša,
at the memorial ceremony at the Russian Chapel under Vršič Pass**

Dear Visitors,

Dear Head of the delegation of the Council of Federation of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Mr Yuri Leonidovich Vorobiev,

Dear Head of the Delegation of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Mr Sergey Vladimirovich Zheleznyak,

Dear His Holiness Bishop Voskresenskiy Sava, dear Church Dignitaries,

Dear representatives of the Russian Federation and of the Republic of Slovenia, dear representatives of the European Parliament,

Your Excellencies, members of the diplomatic corps,

Dear members of the Slovenian-Russian Society, dear Host and Mayor of Kranjska Gora,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to address you also this year as the patron of honour of this ceremony. I have accepted this role for the second time with great pleasure.

Let me first recall the touching words published about the construction of the Vršič road in the Slovenian *Jutro* newspaper in 1932: *"Forty thousand pairs of hands moved in desperate rhythm, forty thousand pairs of hands grabbed their shovels, forty thousand pairs of hands swung their picks... The resounding noise of exploding shells mixed with the beat of shovels and picks. And mingled with the sighs of the dying... The road kept rising, reached the top and joined the road coming up from the Trenta Valley.. And the winter was almost gone by. Oh, spring! At the very beginning, you were greeted by another 250 victims of the road. You have dug them a grave, far too deep and snowy. You have required too high a toll."*

This text, published eighty years ago, points out a message that is still nowadays conveyed to us by this road and the Russian Chapel and reminds us of the cruel times of war. The construction involved forced labour, the use of simple tools and took place in inhospitable circumstances, claiming the lives of several thousand people. It also calls attention to the unpredictable and untamable character of nature that sometimes claims a high toll. Unfortunately, it was the Russian people again that confronted this truth during the recent floods that took so many precious human lives. I convey my sincerest condolences to the representatives of Russia now present in this place.

This assembly today is gathered to celebrate a brighter message conveyed to us by the road and chapel built by Russian war prisoners. This Orthodox Chapel was built by Tsarist Russia's soldiers taken prisoners of war as a temple of hope and comfort in the hardest trials of life. Truth to be told, it should be added that Austro-Hungarian military authorities still showed respect for some fundamental civilisation values by permitting the prisoners of war to build this chapel and find at least some spiritual comfort. However, this right was generally denied to the victims of the various totalitarian regimes that ravaged Europe in the subsequent decades. This humble chapel, built as a refuge for individuals is today a symbol of friendship between the Slovenian and the Russian people. Today's celebration continues the twenty-year old tradition that has become a significant element of the strengthening of relations between Slovenia and Russia.

I would also, therefore, like to extend my thanks once more to the initiators of these gatherings and celebrations. I remember the visit paid 20 years ago by Messrs. Saša Slavec in Dr Ljubo Sirc to the Ministry of Defence which I then ran. They presented to me the idea to resuscitate the energy that lies dormant in this symbolic place and to use it to invigorate the friendly cooperation between the Slovenian and the Russian people. This idea has evolved into a genuine institution that has paved the way for friendly relations and mutual benefits in many areas.

I should also like to thank the residents and the municipal authorities of Kranjska Gora for their generous support in the organisation of the annual memorial ceremonies and restoration works on the chapel. We highly appreciate the longstanding efforts of the Slovenian-Russian Society and the kindness of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Ljubljana who are the main organisers of these annual memorial ceremonies in cooperation with the Municipality of Kranjska Gora every year.

Regretfully, the Russian Chapel was seriously vandalised last winter. We strongly condemn this act of desecration. In our efforts to keep the chapel's appearance as a well cared for monument, we joined our forces this year and succeeded in completing the restoration of the chapel and its surroundings. We are grateful that a Russian non-profit organisation also participated in clearing up the surroundings.

The chapel is situated in an area of high interest for tourists. The Russian-built road is used by more than 1200 motor vehicles every day during the high season. Many domestic and foreign tourists make a stop at the chapel. They visit the site, read the information boards and become acquainted with the fate of those to whom the site is dedicated. I am very pleased that Slovenia is also visited by a growing number of Russian tourists. I am convinced that the Russian Chapel greatly contributes to the recognisability of Slovenia in Russia. Last year alone, the number of Russian visitors increased by one fourth.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Slovenia is also proud of the tradition of presenting the Slavic cultural heritage to the other European countries. "In the middle of the 16th century, Žiga Herberstein, a Hapsburg diplomat of Slovenian origin, described the conditions and the history of Russia in his work *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii (Notes from Moscow)* to a broader European public. A good 450 years later Slovenia assumed the EU presidency as the first Slavic country. This opportunity was also used to promote its rich Slavic cultural heritage and, simultaneously, to promote the EU's relationship with the Russian Federation. We have been able to harmonise our views on the mandate to start negotiations for the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia.

Our knowledge of each other and our mutual relationship have been significantly enhanced through cultural cooperation. Therefore, I welcome the activity of the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Ljubljana. Slovenia's Government is also considering the possibilities of opening a special scientific and cultural representation office in Moscow. Next year will mark the 1150th anniversary since the missionaries Cyril and Methodius began spreading the Christian faith and literacy among the Slavic peoples in the 9th century. Their motto was "*the sun shines and the rain falls alike on all*". They claimed it unjust to "*extol only three languages and treat the speakers of other languages as blind and deaf*".

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Slovenia and Russia have maintained friendly relations for twenty years. The Russian Federation is one of Slovenia's major trading partners. The total volume of trade between the two countries exceeds EUR 1.1 billion. The bulk of Slovenia's exports to Russia consist of medicinal products, and imports mainly energy from Russia. Economic cooperation between the two countries is healthy and vigorous, which bodes well for expansion into other areas. In these times, we are particularly delighted at the volume of Russian investment in Slovenia and would like to see it grow further. I am convinced that investment will be encouraged by the recently adopted government measures that will contribute to the improvement of Slovenia's business environment, particularly the reduction of fiscal and some unnecessary administrative barriers. The Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Mr Vladimir Putin, signed last week an act ratifying Russia's accession to the World Trade Organisation. In this way, all key global economies have become members of this global economic community. The Russian Federation's full membership in the World Trade Organisation will also strengthen our future mutual cooperation.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Russian Chapel under Vršič Pass has gained an additional, symbolic meaning ever since Slovenia joined the EU. It is not only a token of friendly relations between the Slovenian and the Russian people, but it also bears witness to the hard lesson of the past and calls for a strategic partnership between the EU as a whole and the Russian Federation. Establishing and strengthening this partnership is one of the most important tasks of the political leaders of all nations of our continent. The completion of its unification hopefully represents one of the key guarantees of peace, stability and prosperity of our nations and, simultaneously, a guarantee for preserving our common civilisation values in our globalised world.

Thank you.