

President of Montenegro
H.E. Jakov Milatović
General debate of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly
New York, September 21st 2023

Mr. Chairman,
Fellow delegates,

It is my true honor to be in this great Hall today and address you on behalf of Montenegro.

This year's General Debate topic depicts the key challenge lying before the United Nations as the rebuilding of trust and global solidarity. It also accelerates action on the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. And indeed, achieving a sustainable and peaceful future requires our full attention and demonstrates our true commitment to a better world.

I reaffirm and reiterate our strong support and commitment to the goals and principles of the United Nations - particularly in times like these when global unity and solidarity are greatly needed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To efficiently address global problems, we need wise leadership. Rather than uniting in joint efforts, most often we share only our joint concerns. Yet, the only way of tackling widespread crises is to be united in action.

I believe we can all agree that the ongoing geopolitical crisis represents a grave challenge to international peace and security,

and an alarming indicator of the need to fully return to the provisions of the UN Charter, respect its binding character and the universality of its goals and principles – civilizational values on which the rule based world order rests.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have assumed the position of the President of Montenegro just four months ago after our citizens made a resounding choice for change in the recent election. This marks an unprecedented level of support for a new era of our country's democratic development.

This leaves me with no doubt about the political direction our citizens want to see: strengthening the rule of law, developing prosperity, ensuring social cohesion and equal opportunities. I am highly aware of how vital these objectives are in safeguarding our young democracy and freedom, especially at a time when de-democratization processes are becoming increasingly apparent worldwide.

Let me particularly emphasize the importance of the rule of law as the key to unlock the economic potential and improve the living standards. Building truly democratic and independent institutions is crucial along that path. Thus we are committed to a zero tolerance on corruption and organized crime.

To better achieve our wider policy goals, we base our foreign policy on three pillars: NUMBER ONE accelerating our integration into the European Union, NUMBER TWO further strengthening the credibility of Montenegro as a NATO member, NUMBER THREE

fostering the best possible relations with all our neighbors in the Balkans.

Montenegro is devoted to safeguarding lasting peace in the Balkans. Therefore, I have commenced my term by strengthening the friendships with our Balkan neighbors. We have also intensified the discussion with the European Union, thus extensively elaborating on the need of Montenegro's speedy accession into the EU, as the best possible signal for all other aspiring states that the EU perspective is still alive.

Following these principles, in the four months' period of my mandate, we opened a meaningful dialogue with the civil society and vulnerable communities, with the aim of pursuing and ultimately achieving a truly inclusive society where nobody is left behind. Creating an environment of equal opportunities where life success is primarily determined by education and hard work is my goal. That is my story, which I believe can become the story of Montenegro.

I belong to a generation that was too young to witness the suffering caused by wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Yet, I think that I bear no less obligation to work on diminishing the still present consequences and thus preventing such tragic events from occurring again. To this end, Montenegro's strong commitment is to address the past without bias, by calling things as they are, as the victims of those tragic events expect them to be called.

Notwithstanding the fact that we in Montenegro, as in many other democratic countries, often diverge on many political issues, we all

agree that peace and prosperity, an equal and just society and friendly relations, particularly with our neighbors, have no alternative. We are proud of our democracy but also grateful to our ancestors for having a state to protect and promote our interests abroad. We truly cherish freedom, and we stay united in this!

The same is what we hope from the world – to ought to be united as ever before in defending democracy, human rights, freedom of choice, the rule of law and ensuring peace and prosperity – but above all, preserving human lives. In this context, I would like to reaffirm Montenegro's clear-cut position in condemning unprovoked and unjustified Russia's aggression, and our firm support to Ukraine.

Besides devastating Ukraine, this war caused an energy, food, and financial crisis that especially harmed the least developed countries in the world. To that extent, and in accordance with the UN Charter and the adopted General Assembly resolutions, we share the desire for comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine.

Dear colleagues,

There are still far too many places in the world where peace, stability, human rights and even basic necessities are not granted. We cannot be proud of this. The international community often emphasizes reactionary humanitarian responses rather than preventive ones. Think just of the heartbreaking migratory crisis in the Mediterranean region.

The confluence of challenges we all face today serves as a formidable obstacle to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite these obstacles, there are constructive ways to move forward.

To speed up progress towards achieving the SDGs, it is necessary to mobilize strong political commitment, improve financial resources and achieve closer cooperation.

I believe we should be honest and admit that the Sustainable Development Goals have proven to be a greater challenge than initially expected, requesting from all our countries additional and greater engagement and commitment.

The international community must increase its efforts to combat climate change with concrete actions. This includes full implementation of the Paris Agreement and addressing the interconnected crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

Dear delegates,

By adopting the Declaration in 1991., Montenegro became the world's first ecological state. The Declaration defined Montenegrin strategic commitment to adopting and implementing the highest standards and norms in the field of environmental protection, nature conservation and sustainable development.

We are proud of the fact that we were among the first countries to bring the SDGs commitment into the national framework through the Strategy of Sustainable Development. Another major step towards speeding up the implementation of the 2030 Development Agenda has been the establishment of the SDG Acceleration Fund.

One particularly important fiscal and labour market reform resulted in the rise of the minimum wage and minimum pension. This was followed by other social security reforms including the provision of free books to primary school students as well as child allowance to all under 18. All those measures supported an environment of equal opportunities, thus tackling of the SDGs that was present in country for a long time – inequality.

Dear colleagues,

In the spirit of the 75th anniversary of the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Montenegro confirms its strong commitment to respecting, protecting and promoting human rights.

As a member of the Human Rights Council during 2022-2024, we are determined to further strengthen the role of this pivotal international forum in responding to situations of serious human rights violations, preserving the universality of international human rights law and the independence of the UN human rights system.

Montenegro as a secular state takes great pride in our diverse and inclusive society, embracing various cultures and religions. Our notable achievement lies in fostering a harmonious and inclusive political environment. And, I am convinced that, in the near future, even the smallest minority groups, such as the Roma population, should secure their seats in the parliament.

Dear colleagues,

We also call for a global response to the refugee and migrant crisis. In this regard we must share responsibility, as committed in the global agreements we adopted. We must cooperate in finding solutions and helping countries of destination as well as countries of origin.

Allow me to remind you that Montenegro gave shelter to over 100,000 refugees and displaced persons during the wars in former Yugoslavia, more than 20 per cent of our entire population. Also

today, we have opened our doors for the biggest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita in Europe.

Let me emphasize that the protection of refugees, including their legal status and our decision to provide them with shelter as they flee from devastating conflicts, has received unanimous support from all political parties. Moreover, Montenegrin society stands united in its commitment to uphold international law in this regard, even in the face of significant social pressure on our healthcare and education infrastructure.

Ladies and gentleman,

Montenegro is firmly committed and determined to actively and constructively contribute and support collective efforts to preserve world peace and security. We strongly advocate for the role and work of UN peacekeeping missions. To this end, we will continue to strongly support a higher presence of Montenegrin military forces in peace missions under the auspices of the United Nations.

We very much welcome the „New Agenda for Peace,” where the Secretary General outlined the very founding stones on which we should rebuild the new international system based on trust and solidarity.

Montenegro remains determined on the course of a Euro-Atlantic future, good neighborly relations and multilateralism. Having this mind, we have launched our candidacy for the non permanent seat of the UN Security Council for the period 2026-27.

To conclude, dear friends,

As a European country, not only geographically, but more importantly in terms of values and principles, we are convinced that the EU accession of Montenegro, as well as of the entire Western Balkan region, will further strengthen our position against the malicious influences of third parties, and ensure the lasting peace and prosperity.

Hence, the accession of Montenegro in the EU, is a story significant not only for Montenegro itself, but it would provide a positive example to all aspiring countries all the way from the Balkans to the East of Europe, that the EU enlargement is alive and still possible.

I thank you for your attention.