**Introductory remarks of the Head of Delegation**

**(UPR Slovakia, 6. 5. 2024)**

Mme Vice-President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be here today to lead the Slovak delegation to the 4th cycle of the Universal Periodic Review.

I am joined by representatives of various government institutions who, for the last 5 years, have played an active role in implementing the recommendations addressed to Slovakia in the course of the third UPR review in 2019.

Slovakia deeply values the constructive engagement of the international community in the Universal Periodic Review.

We see the UPR process as a constant dialogue among the UN Member States:

it is a platform where we can talk to each other and listen to each other – all in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Mme Vice-President,

I would like to begin my presentation by thanking all the Member States that have sent us their questions in advance, and by directly answering the questions raised by Germany and Portugal, related to the preparation of the National Report and the implementation of accepted recommendations.

The National Report was drafted in close cooperation with all relevant Government Institutions.

Similarly, they will thoroughly review all the recommendations we receive today.

An important role in this process will be played by the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality, which is an advisory body of state representatives, social partners, the national human rights institution, academia, and non-governmental organisations.

The Council is chaired by the Minister of Justice.

In general terms - whenever a human rights related issue is submitted to the Government, the Council is consulted as part of the process.

Mme Vice-President,

After introductory remarks concerning the process, let me proceed to the National Report itself and present to the distinguished Delegates the main achievements of the Slovak Republic in the field of human rights.

Slovakia ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

The legislation allows relevant national institutions to inspect the places where persons deprived of liberty are present.

The amendment to the Act on Victims of Crime fundamentally changed the philosophy of compensation to crime victims.

Victims of violent or hate crimes can apply for State compensation once criminal prosecution has started.

The purpose of this amendment is to simplify victims' access to compensation and protect them from further victimisation.

It also regulates the establishment and functioning of intervention centres for victims of domestic violence.

Currently, 36 organisations have been accredited, 10 of which are also intervention centres.

The construction of 17 specialised interrogation rooms for child victims, victims of domestic and gender-based violence, and victims of human trafficking, was an important step.

Another 8 such rooms will be set up shortly.

In 2023, the National Strategy *“Childhood Without Violence for All Children”* was adopted by the Government.

The Strategy promotes cooperation among Government bodies, academic and research institutions, and NGOs, promotes children's participation in policy-making, and plans the construction of a Comprehensive Assistance Home for Children at Risk of Violence (according to the so called Barnhaus model).

In April 2023, the Strategy for the Prevention of Crime and Other Anti-Social Activities by 2028 was approved, which includes the monitoring of threats against journalists.

An important practical step within the Conceptual Framework for Countering Radicalisation, Extremism, Discrimination, and Racism, was the creation of "Information Offices" as of the 1st of February 2023.

These offices carry out preventive activities for youth, focusing on such topics as antisemitism, hate speech, media literacy – hoaxes, disinformation, and fake news.

They also provide first aid to victims of crime, and work closely with Intervention Centres, providing specialised professional assistance to victims of domestic and gender-based violence.

There are currently 16 such Offices in Slovakia.

The Information Offices also proved useful after the war in Ukraine broke out, followed by an influx of refugees - mostly women, children, and the older persons.

They provided necessary information as well as protection against human trafficking.

Slovakia has done its utmost to assist people fleeing the war, giving them immediate access to employment, healthcare, the social system, and education.

Integration and inclusion of the children of foreigners, especially children from Ukraine, is one of the main tasks in the education sector.

To continue on the topic of education, the most pressing issues in Slovakia are the access to and improvement of education at all levels, and the elimination of segregation practices, especially in marginalized Roma communities.

In 2023, the Ministry of Education prepared the Programme of Changes, containing 39 points, which aim to improve the quality of education in Slovakia.

In 2021, the Government approved the Strategy for an inclusive approach in education and training, and prepared action plans, to be drawn up in 3-year cycles.

The 1st Action Plan covered such important issues as eliminating segregation, stigmatisation, and barriers to attending schools.

The legal definition of segregation became part of the Education Act in 2023.

Changes in the Education Act include the adoption of a right to support measures in education and training, with a special focus on pupils from socially disadvantaged environments.

The amendment to the Education Act establishes the right to pre-primary education in kindergartens when a child reaches the age of 3.

The funds of the Recovery and Resilience Plan finance the gradual elimination of the 2-session operation of primary schools (morning and afternoon sessions) and increase the number of places available in kindergartens and primary schools.

Another important initiative is the creation of school support teams including school psychologists, special needs educators, assistant teachers, and social workers.

Mme Vice-President,

Let me now briefly address the situation of persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, including the Roma.

2 central bodies of the state administration are responsible for implementing relevant policies and strategies;

namely, the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for Roma communities and the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for National Minorities.

The leading representatives of both institutions are here today, to present to you their achievements as well as the challenges they face.

I will briefly mention the most important points:

In November 2021, the Government apologized for sterilizing women in violation of Slovak law and their human rights.

Efforts to compensate the victims have not yet been fulfilled.

In June 2021, the Government apologized for the way the Police Force intervened in Moldava nad Bodvou in 2013.

In September 2022, the Slovak Parliament adopted an important Resolution on the working definition of anti-gypsyism developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

The working definition of antisemitism had already been adopted in 2018.

In 2021 the Government approved the Action Plan for the Protection of the Rights of Persons belonging to National Minorities and Ethnic Groups for 2021-25.

The Plan is aimed at combating discrimination, racism, and xenophobia faced by ethnic minorities, in particular the Roma.

In 2021, the Government approved the Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation up to 2030.

Action plans for 2022-24 have also been approved.

A draft bill of the Act on National Minorities has been approved by the Council of the Government for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality.

In 2023, the Government recognized the Vietnamese minority as the 14th official national minority in Slovakia.

The Vietnamese minority has been included in relevant decision-making processes.

As part of the fight against discrimination and racism, the Slovak Republic established the Senior Police Officers for work in the Communities project, with more than 300 specially trained police officers.

The aim is to bring about a change in Roma settlements, so that every resident has equal access to all the benefits and activities commonly available in the village.

Mme Vice-President,

In the context of the fight against corruption, the important process of creating the National Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2024 – 29 is currently underway.

Its aim is to improve the quality of the legal environment, promote transparency, protect the public interest, reduce opportunities for corruption, and strengthen the culture of integrity within society.

I would like to also mention a new anti-corruption project entitled "Improving the integrity of public administration" which builds on previous similar projects mentioned in our National Report.

To briefly touch upon the judiciary:

A new judicial map came into force in 2023 with the objective of increasing the credibility, quality, and performance of the judiciary.

The specialisation of judges should ensure that their expertise is increased, speed up court proceedings, and improve the quality of court decisions.

Mme Vice-President,

Particular attention has been paid to the issue of gender equality.

The Strategy for equality between women and men and equal opportunities for 2021-27 with its related Action Plan are 2 important documents drafted in accordance with the EU strategy on gender equality and reflecting the recommendations of UN committees.

Another strategic document is the National Action Plan for Women's Employment 2022-30, which is the 1st of its kind and contains measures aimed at reducing inequalities.

The National Project Prevention and Elimination of Gender Discrimination was implemented between 2019 and 2023.

A National 24-hour Hotline for women experiencing violence is part of this activity.

The coordinated response to all forms of violence against women at a national level is covered by the National Action Plan for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women for 2022-2027, which prioritizes protecting women experiencing violence and their children, preventing domestic violence, integrating policies and data collection, and enforcing effective sanctions.

To briefly touch upon the question from Slovenia concerning the human rights of older persons:

Slovakia has been implementing the National Programme for Active Ageing since 2021.

Its aim is to create conditions for building a sustainable society by supporting the potential of people of all ages.

In the field of health, there were no changes to the legal regulation of abortion, nor in the adoption of a comprehensive national program for the protection of sexual and reproductive health.

Be assured that despite this, the protection and support of the reproductive health of women and mothers is a priority of the Ministry of Health.

Sexual and reproductive health is a politically sensitive topic in Slovakia, and in some cases a consensus can be reached on a professional level but not on a political one.

However, the Ministry of Health has established the organization Healthy Regions which has improved the health of socially excluded groups.

Projects such as Healthy Communities and Health Support Assistants in hospitals are aimed at improving the availability of regular health services to marginalized Roma communities, with additional help provided by trained assistants.

This is a unique project which can significantly contribute to overcoming barriers in the provision of health care.

Mme Vice-President, Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,

This was the short overview of the human rights situation in Slovakia, outlining the main developments and matters that might raise questions from the human rights point of view.

We look forward to a fruitful and constructive dialogue today and are keen to follow-up on questions and recommendations put forward by member States.

I thank you, Mme Vice-President.