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# Press Release

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**PRESS RELEASE BY THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT**

*Speech delivered by President of Malta George Vella on the occasion of Republic Day*

Honourable Prime Minister  
Honourable Speaker  
His Grace Monsignor Archbishop  
Honourable Leader of the Opposition  
Colleagues Presidents Emeriti  
Excellencies  
Distinguished Guests

This time last year, I was prepared to deliver a Republic Day speech, which I thought would be the most challenging speech of my political career.

Once it was over, I felt relieved as if from a heavy burden and hoped that that chapter would be closed and become history.

Time proved me wrong.

At that time no one imagined what was in store for the People of Malta in the months that followed.

Just having a look around us today, we can easily tell how our lives have changed.

Our faces are covered by masks.

We are respecting social distancing.

We avoid handling objects out of fear of contracting a virus which though invisible has challenged our public health system, the way we interact socially, and our economy.

Our lifestyle has been thrown into disarray.

The only consolation at hand, if we may speak of one, is that this upheaval is affecting the whole world.

On behalf of the People of Malta and Gozo, today I salute, as I have done on previous occasions, the memory of all those who have lost their lives to the virus.

**Attachments: none**

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In this same spirit, I convey my heartfelt sympathies to their families and loved ones, who at a time when they were most needed, could not tend to their sick relatives. They were precluded from doing this for fear of spreading the virus.

I also want to convey my heartfelt appreciation to all those who work in the health sector, without any distinction of ranks and responsibilities, who worked so tirelessly to assist patients and those taken ill especially those in residential homes for the elderly, and who with an outstanding sense of altruism faced perilous situations to their own health did all they could to save our loved ones from the jaws of death.

My same deepfelt sentiments of respect and appreciation, on behalf of all of us, go to all those who through their daily work kept us healthy, ensured for us a clean environment, enforced regulations, did voluntary work, and safeguarded the most vulnerable among us.

To all of these I feel indebted.

This Pandemic, which unfortunately is still hovering in our midst, disrupted our lifestyle and social norms, and negatively affected our economy.

Tourism, on which depends a large share of our economy, has slowed down drastically, and with it all the other commercial activities normally associated with this sector.

Businesses, big and small, have seen a downturn, and many places of work were and still are in jeopardy.

Quality of life, for most of us, has been noticeably transformed.

A particular sector which has been very badly hit is that of our children's education.

Let us hope that the momentum lost is gradually regained, and that no negative long-term consequences ensue.

At this point, I wish to pay tribute to teachers and educators, who despite the unconventional circumstances and personal risks entailed, continue to meet the obligations and responsibilities entrusted to them.

One overlying negative effect during the period of this Pandemic is that on the mental well-being of people from different walks of life.

Children had their schooling routine and classroom instruction disrupted. Young adults faced a reduction in work opportunities. Workers saw their revenues threatened, as business sales went down.

Not to mention the conditions faced by our front liners – as already mentioned. Last, but definitely not least, our elderly, who apart from the fears linked to their vulnerability, also had to suffer isolation in many instances.

All of this is bound to leave a mark on the collective mental well-being of practically all strata of Maltese society.

There is a shared hope in all countries affected by the Pandemic that an effective vaccine will be available soon. A remedy that can benefit one and all, helping us to bring down the incidence of infections, and help us back on the road to normality.

I welcome the news that such a vaccine will be available to us in a couple of weeks. If the vaccination programme proceeds as planned, in a matter of months we would be well on the road to normality.

It saddens me to have to start off today's Speech on a negative and low-spirited note, though this is lightened somewhat by the news that a vaccine is now available.

I would have preferred to have the occasion to take you back forty-six years, to recall how only ten years after proclaiming our Independence – with foreign forces still stationed on our islands – we declared Malta a Republic, with a Constitution that duly reflected this newly-found political status. This would have been an opportune moment to reflect on how we steadily managed to diversify our economy from one that relied heavily on the income from the military bases present in our country, to an open economy based on manufacturing, services, and other sectors.

We would have ideally recollected how successive governments, each at their own pace and method, worked to secure economic growth and improve our quality of life.

On this occasion, it would have been appropriate to appreciate together how the road ahead was not always a smooth one. We had our ups and downs. On the political front, we would have been far better off had certain episodes in our history not taken place.

We lived through turbulent times. Thanks to the wisdom of those who kept our country's best interest in mind, peaceful discussions took place which led culminated in amendments to the Constitution, which guaranteed that certain anomalies emanating from the electoral system would not be repeated. I could have taken this occasion to remind ourselves of an important political development that took place in the late Eighties. Seen against the backdrop of the prevailing international political scenario of that time, one appreciates how wise was the decision to adopt a policy of Neutrality, a status still enshrined in our Constitution till this very day.

A look back at the 1990s would also have been opportune to remember how throughout most of those years, we were engrossed in a debate which was heated, well informed, and above all civil and democratic, making maximum use of all available means of communication, Parliamentary debates, and civil society, concerning the shape and form of our future relations with the European Union.

I would also have liked to recall how, despite very strong and passionate arguments on both sides, ultimately the will of the People won the day. All political forces duly bowed their heads to the will of the majority and our country's democratic credentials prevailed.

On this day, it would have been fitting to acknowledge the tacit consensus that exists that though membership of the European Union did create pressures on certain structures and certain industries, at the same time it also opened the way and created new opportunities, in sectors we were previously not familiar with before accession. EU Cohesion and Structural Funds gave a strong forward push to the infrastructural development and economy of our country.

There is widespread agreement that Malta has become fully integrated in the EU institutional system, particularly the Parliamentary system, which following the Treaty of Lisbon has acquired additional powers and rights.

When commemorating ‘Republic Day’ of a sovereign country like ours, it would have been a pleasure to elaborate on the commitment with which we took up the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, during the first half of 2017. I would have gladly explained what those months of hard work and collective efforts meant to all of us, and how they benefitted greatly our country. However, I decided to focus instead, on what we went through this past year, where we are today, and speak – as far as it is possible – on what awaits us in the months and years to come.

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,

The year that is about to end brought with it unprecedented changes.  
Not only because of COVID-19.

Political activism by a number of Civil Society representatives who called for political transparency, accountability in Public Administration, legislative change that better reflect the rule of law, institutions that are more autonomous and independent in the way they operate, as well as a call for justice in relation to the assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia left a strong impact on the political and social environment of our country.

At the same time, the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe was upping the ante on the need for certain changes to the Constitution, particularly on the separation of powers between the Executive and the Judiciary, to be adopted the soonest possible.

The resignation of a Prime Minister, mid-way through the legislature, at the beginning of the year, and the appointment of a new Prime Minister thereafter, are not common occurrences in the Maltese political context.

Equally unusual was the contested removal, through an internal and democratic vote, of the Leader of the Opposition also mid-way through the legislature, for another new Leader to be appointed.

These two developments extensively involved the Presidency and stimulated an animated debate on how far the powers of the President of the Republic can and should go, in the first instance, and on the interpretation of Articles in the Constitution, in the second.

Above all of this came the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its disastrous effects on people’s health, social norms as we know them and its negative consequences on the country’s economy.

Our country is being faced by critical challenges it has to overcome.  
We must also reach certain goals.

We are also presented with opportunities, that with wisdom and a strong political will, based on internal unity and a national vision, can be capitalised upon for the common good.

Our country’s first and primary challenge is that, the soonest possible and within the requisite parameters of judicial correctness, justice is done with those found guilty of having in any way participated in the atrocious assassination of journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia.

Allegations of criminality and dubious connections have to be investigated in the most professional way possible, and those involved in this crime brought to justice without delay or favour.

We have to restore our country's image abroad.

This does not happen by trying to forget what happened, but by showing genuine remorse about what happened, and be persuasive in our conviction that nothing of the sort will ever happen again.

I should here mention that substantial change has already taken place in some areas.

It is my firm belief that the implementation of the rule of law has to be effective and above any suspicion.

It needs to be ensured that executive, judicial, and regulatory institutions are duly given the space and authority to work in full independence.

It is in this context that I gladly welcome the changes introduced recently, agreed to by both sides of the House of Representatives, to legislation that is Constitutional in nature, and which is in line with the guidelines of the Venice Commission and in the interest of the rule of law in our country.

The political will that led to these reforms encourages and motivates me further to expect and anticipate that the political maturity manifested over the past months, be also demonstrated during discussions on upcoming proposed reforms.

I am referring both to legislation that has already been presented to the House of Representatives, as well as to the lengthier and more complex process of the Constitutional Convention, which I intend to push forward in the coming months.

Considerable progress has already been registered, notably an open consultation exercise with the general public, which identified the elements it wishes to see amended, and those which it insists should be retained in the present Constitution.

The Venice Commission, in its latest Report, also showed an interest in this democratic and constitutional process.

My appeal to all is to give the space required to draw up, first and foremost, the structure that will lead this Convention, the way it is going to function, and decide who will be participating, before criticism kicks in.

I promised, and I will see to it that discussion during the Constitutional Convention will not be dominated or overpowered by political parties.

I undertook, and will implement the undertaking, that Civil Society will have all the space and time it needs to make its voice heard.

Another challenge that our country has to face is the regeneration of our economy.

I spoke earlier about the ways in which the economy could be severely impacted as a result of the Pandemic.

There was very little we could do to prevent this.

There is, however, another aspect related to the future of our economy, and whether it will get worse or not.

I am referring to the trust that our country must maintain and strengthen in order to attract investment.

By this I mean trust in regulatory authorities, trust in the integrity and competence of those leading our investment schemes, trust in the competencies of the Maltese worker, and trust in the just implementation of financial laws of our country.

We need to do all it takes to meet the expectations and scrutiny of supranational bodies entrusted with this kind of monitoring and whose judgement – positive or negative – will have a bearing on which way our country's economic future goes.

One other challenge that we are presently facing and which unfortunately will be with us for the foreseeable future, is the preservation of the environment.

There is growing realisation that protection of the environment is of crucial relevance, especially in small countries like ours where territory is very limited, and the population density is very high.

This not only holds from an aesthetic viewpoint, but also in relation to the mental health of the people, who rightly expect clean air and an unpolluted environment.

Statistics show that this is a primary concern of the Maltese people.

It is paradoxical that an ever-rising standard of living has brought with it factors that contributed towards the destruction of the environment we all share.

We are producing more waste, that somehow we need to dispose of without harming further the environment.

We are experiencing pollution by plastics of our seas and oceans.

We are exposed to pollution resulting from an exaggerated number of heavy equipment and transport vehicles, for which we do not have an adequate infrastructure.

There is above all else, the need for stricter safeguards so that construction, be it for domestic dwellings as well as that for the tourism and entertainment industry, does not hamper the delicate balance that should be respected between the natural and the developed environment.

I do fear we are close to losing this balance. In this regard, I reiterate my appeal to environment regulatory bodies, those responsible for the issuance of development permits and environment pressure groups, to insist on the strict abidance with regulations and place the national interest before that of the developer.

We cannot afford to lose our country's beauty to unsightly buildings, with little or no architectural value or typical Maltese characteristics, which will be our architectural legacy to future generations.

This jars greatly with the rich cultural heritage that our country is endowed with.

Ours is a unique heritage, most of which is also World Heritage.

Our country, blessed by its geography and history, since time immemorial, encountered different civilisations that left their own contributions towards the cultural heritage we boast of today.

Let us not be the ones who uglify our heritage and devalue it.

We must ensure sustainable development and remind ourselves of the frequent promises we make to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, or of the commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 55% in ten years' time and eliminate them completely by 2050.

Much more work needs to be done to meet the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals as outlined by the United Nations.

I equally feel the need to upgrade our efforts to counter the negative effects of climate change, to generate more alternative or renewable energy, and to reduce waste, especially plastic waste.

Our country's size is what it is. If we allow excessive urban development to take place, we would be endangering our health and that of our children – especially our mental well-being.

Another challenge faced by the Republic of Malta is that of irregular migration.

We have striven, and continue to strive, for the launching of projects and action plans to assist the development of countries of origin of irregular migrants reaching us, as well as taken a leading position amongst European Union countries in favour of more solidarity and further cooperation.

No individual country can face this problem alone.

Even more so, if the country is a small one like ours, and geographically positioned right on the routes taken by these migrants to Europe.

What we can continue doing is forging alliances and continue persuading other EU Member States that are still reluctant to assist EU frontline countries like Malta, that the notion and promise of solidarity are not just a superficial concept, but the very basis upon which the reciprocal trust that binds European Union Member States rests.

I very much regret that I do not see as yet an end in sight to this phenomenon. This being said, the latest developments in Libya, where the fighting has stopped and dialogue is underway to stabilise the country, could very well result in the government's control of human traffickers, who are an important part of this phenomenon.

At the same time, I commend the efforts underway and plans of action that the European Union has taken, to address this phenomenon, and sincerely hope that the exchanges and discussions underway between Member States will somehow succeed in convincing Member States that are up to now obstinate, to change their positions.

Globalisation has changed the world into a global village. No one country, however big, is capable of facing up by itself what has by now achieved global extent and effects.

This is why today there is a strong case to be made for multilateralism; more space for organisations that bring together a number of countries that are willing to work jointly so that together they can overcome what any individual country by itself cannot achieve.

Multilateralism is beneficial to countries like ours. Such association with and participation in these international organisations provide larger platforms for where their voices can be heard and given greater attention, as well as serve as a forum where relations with like-minded countries can be built.

The key to success in these organisations is cooperation and solidarity, especially when needed.

Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,

Having thrown a glance back to our past, and a look at the present, it is only fitting that I share with you my wishes for our country's future.

What we have come to refer to as the 'Post-Covid' world, once we manage to take control of the situation through vaccination, is not going to be an easy one.

The economy will need to be rebuilt gradually.

Tourism will need to regain its critical role in our economy. We will need to revert back to a normal social routine.

I am confident in the capabilities of the People of Malta and Gozo, to rise on their own two feet in no time.

I am also confident that the important lessons we learned during the pandemic will be retained, utilised, and valued.

I would like to see us maturing into a more considerate and empathetic society, particularly with the elderly, the more vulnerable, our children - and one that fully acknowledges how crucial their education is.

We also have to ensure that more women make it to leadership roles and ascertain that no category in our society gets discriminated or gets side-lined.

This is the only path to achieve harmony and social peace.

I strongly believe that we should do all we can to see that we actively remove and control the damage done by hate speech, especially on social media.

While I strongly believe in the need for free journalism in a democratic society, I am equally convinced of the damage done by journalism which is purely speculative.

We cannot be credible were we to preach peace to others, if we do not first of all find peace among ourselves.



As a nation we are capable. We have enough talent.

It is not a problem having divergent opinions as long as we respect one another. If we are not united, we will get weaker.

We can only thrive if we stand united.

Unity is the key to our country's success.

How ironic is it that since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed a sense of unity and solidarity that we did not have before?

Rightly so, we have helped each other and stood by each other.

My question is 'Do we need to have such emergencies to come together?'.

Likewise, do we have to go through traumatic experiences in politics to realise that though politics is important, we should not allow politics to sow division amongst us?

We have to realise that no matter how successful we become economically, if division takes root amongst us, we will become poorer and not richer.

It is useless prospecting about developments in the educational sector, if we harbour prejudice amongst us.

It is equally futile to talk about unity if we continue to speak with contempt towards certain categories of people.

It is only through unity that we can be a source of peace.

It is only then that we become credible and can preach to others to avoid fighting and division.

Malta is neither a political power, nor an economic one. Our strength in the international field lies in our coherent policies, the consistency of our positions and the respect we garnered through competence along the years in the international political field.

It is precisely these values that we are promising to defend and respect in carrying out our nation's international policies, and which we will be honouring were we, hopefully, to be chosen to occupy a non-Permanent seat at the UN Security Council for the years 2023-2024.

We will strengthen peace by further endorsing our neutrality, which also incidentally consolidates our sovereignty.

Peace will be strengthened further if we continue to promote it in our neighbourhood and beyond.

It will be strengthened even more if we campaign actively against the proliferation of armaments. Against discrimination.

Against racism.  
Against xenophobia.  
Against anything that is divisive.

Excellencies,  
Distinguished guests,

I conclude by congratulating all those who are being honoured in this Ceremony today.  
This is the best way by which our country collectively gives praise to those who distinguished themselves in rendering a service towards the best interests of our cherished Republic.  
Congratulations.

Viva Malta Repubblika.