

Dear Deputy Chairman of the Slovak National Council, Honorable Members of the Parliamentary Committees for EU Affairs, Ladies and Gentlemen,

**(1) Intro**

It is my pleasure to join you here this morning. The role of the national parliaments and the European Parliament has increased significantly since the Lisbon Treaty. Interparliamentary cooperation is a key ingredient of an accountable European Union. It enhances legitimacy and reduces democratic deficit.

From this sense, I am glad that this meeting in Bratislava is one of the first events of our Presidency. Moreover, it is the first COSAC Meeting in Bratislava at all.

**(2) Long journey home**

After 12 years of EU membership Slovakia is honored to lead the Union. The Presidency is a milestone for us on our long and bumpy journey. But now we have a good story to tell. A story that began by our dream to be part of a free and democratic world. A story that continued by our integration into the European family of nations.

A family we are bound with by rich history, diverse cultures and common values. Indeed, "Back to Europe" was one of the Velvet Revolution's principal credos. It was a voice of our European identity.

Today we are proud to call the EU our home, the euro our currency and Schengen our area. The EU provides us with security, stability and prosperity. And we are grateful for that because we were given a lot. Finishing the story now, it's time to give back. But we won't have it easy.

We joined the Union when Euro optimism was at its peak.

**(3) Now a different Union**

But we took over the Presidency ...

... when passion for EU membership has been replaced by enlargement fatigue and euroscepticism

... when fragmentation and individual approach is winning over unity and joint action

... when radicalism and extremism put pressure on mainstream parties with their easy solutions to complex problems

... after the economic and financial crisis shattered our trust in the euro and our economic foundations

... when our high expectations of brighter future for our Eastern and Southern neighbors seem to be quite distant

... after migration touched upon our humanism and capacity to help the rest of the world

... and ... after one country decided to leave the Union ...

One thing is clear. All this is serious but we must keep calm and act in unity. Not only Brexit, but all ongoing crises are a reminder that the EU and its benefits cannot be taken for granted.

There is no longer enough confidence among Europeans that the EU can deliver. People fear loss of safety, identity, prosperity. Some surveys suggest that the EU does not do well on migration and

economy. What our citizens fear most is that EU elites will not be able to cope with all the challenges we face. It is high time to take a critical look at the Union and ourselves too.

It is obvious that the practical and political consequences of the UK referendum will dominate the EU agenda in the coming months. We want to maintain the best possible relationship with the UK. Although we do not wish to prolong the time of uncertainty, we understand that no negotiations can start without UK's notification of its withdrawal.

Still, we cannot stand idle. Self-reflection has become a must, not an option. There is an urgent need to jointly reflect on the future direction of the Union in 27 format. Our Presidency will therefore convene an informal summit on 16 September in Bratislava.

I am sure what we all want is a modern and forward-looking Europe. A Europe of and for citizens. There is much more that unites us than what divides us. But we must simplify the way we talk. We must be much clearer in explaining our citizens ...

WHY the European Union is a solution and not a problem.

WHY it is a friend and not an enemy.

WHY it has no better alternative.

The Slovak Presidency does not have a prescription for all our European problems. But we want to be pragmatic and realistic. Rome wasn't built in a day. And neither will be a better, more effective and comprehensible Europe. The Schuman declaration already acknowledged this in 1950: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity."

#### **(4) Our Presidency Priorities**

With this aim, our Presidency intends to be:

Pragmatic – because it is time to deliver very concrete and tangible results.

Uniting – since we must overcome fragmentation and individual approach in Europe.

People's voice – as we need to deal with real problems of our people – such as economy, jobs, security, migration, terrorism.

And to achieve this, we have four ambitions:

1/ to make European economy stronger

2/ to modernize and broaden the Single Market in areas such as energy and the digital economy

3/ to work towards sustainable migration and asylum policy and

4/ to pay attention to our external environment, namely trade deals and enlargement policy

1/ Let me start with European economy. We will support the environment favorable to investment, further economic growth and job creation. For that to happen, we will work on the deepening of the

Economic and Monetary Union and the Banking Union. Building the Capital Markets Union will also be our focus.

During our Presidency, we will deal with the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the EU Budget 2017. They both must better reflect EU priorities and have strengthened capacities to help resolve latest challenges.

2/ There is no doubt that the Single Market is a success story. Four freedoms represent an excellent example of very concrete benefits of the EU for its citizens. But in order to keep up with global technological advancement, the Single Market needs two new pillars: the Digital Single Market and the Energy Union.

Free movement of data has the unique potential to remove barriers and create new opportunities for businesses and citizens. Our Presidency welcomes the adoption of a Digital Single Market package (25 May). Now we will work on its implementation.

The Energy Union can contribute to secure supplies of clean energy at affordable prices for industry and citizens. To achieve this goal, our Presidency is ready to work on further enhancing diversification of resources, suppliers and transit routes.

3/ No surprise, a sustainable migration and asylum policy will belong to our top priorities.

It is obvious to us all that migration will remain an urgent issue not only during our Presidency, but also in years to come. It does not represent a seasonal but a global problem.

According to a recent survey by Pew Research Center, a “large-scale involuntary migration” will be the most likely global risk over the next 10 years. We can help resolve it only through joint EU wide efforts. And at the UN summit on migration in September by a one strong and leading voice. For this purpose, the Slovak Presidency will promote comprehensive and sustainable solutions linking up all relevant internal and external aspects.

We must also return to a proper functioning of the Schengen area. We hope that the European Border and Coast Guards will become operational during our Presidency. We will also support initiatives such as smart borders package and the effective cooperation with third countries of origin and transit.

Speaking of asylum policy alone, let’s not narrow it to a single initiative - the distribution of refugees under the Dublin regulation. The Commission will very soon (13 July) table a second Common European Asylum System reform package. So we will have altogether seven proposals. And we are ready to work on them.

Besides that, legal migration should be a means of attracting highly qualified migrants wherever they are needed for our growing economies.

4/ We want the Union to be a strong global player and cannot be inward-looking only. Therefore, we must continue to pay attention to our external environment. I speak of trade agreements and enlargement policy.

Free trade is a significant contributor to internal and external stability of the EU. This is why we support the signature and ratification of the CETA agreement with Canada. We are convinced that the TTIP

would have positive impact on EU's growth, employment and overall well-being. So we stand ready to support the EU Commission to reach a balanced agreement while safeguarding the high level of EU standards. At the same time we must not underestimate critical voices across Europe with regard to this agreement

Our Presidency is ready to work on the implementation of new European global strategy for common foreign and security policy, once adopted. At the same time, we will remain a vocal advocate of more effective and preventive European Neighborhood Policy. To the East, we wish to make strong emphasis on stabilization and reform processes. To the South, we would like to focus inter alia on countries contributing to migration flow to Europe.

We will also try to ensure the credibility of enlargement policy. Given our own experience, the enlargement policy is one of the most effective transformation tools. It is thus a key instrument for stabilising our neighbourhood. We want to actively communicate that the path towards the EU leads via doing own homework – namely deep and comprehensive reforms.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me assure you that in pursuing our priorities, we will be an honest and fair broker.

I do hope in your support to our Presidency. Only in close cooperation with you, the representatives of legislative bodies, we can meet our common goals towards a better Union.