



Minister of Foreign & European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

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Exchange of views on SK PRES priorities (enlargement and beyond)

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Herr Vorsitzender, herzlichen Dank für die Einladung!

Dear Honorable Members of the Committee, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me say that I feel very privileged to be here today in the European Parliament and I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to present the priorities of the Slovak Presidency and exchange views on current state of play of the EU enlargement process and other topical international issues.

Let me start by saying that our Presidency comes in a defining moment. Many see the outcome of the UK referendum as a turning point for the Union and its nations. The combination of challenges we are collectively facing is unprecedented by its nature and gravity.

It puts to the test not only the EU as a community, but also the notion of the European identity. Now we need even more mutual empathy and the will to compromise more than ever before. And also to comprehend the message of discontent EU citizens convey to us.

Thus this is more than just a culminating integration milestone for my country, 12 years after our EU accession. It is also about our share of responsibility for the EU future.

During the next six months, the Slovak Presidency will be an honest broker. We want to focus on agendas that can bring results in areas our citizens clearly expect so. That is much needed given the pressing challenges like migration, the euro zone economy, instability in the EU's neighborhood, terrorism and uncertain situation after the UK referendum.

Brexit is not the UK phenomenon only. It is rather a symptom of something deeper. What we observe is the increasing gap between people and EU elites. But also fear of losing job, cultural identity or safety stems from fear that we, the leaders, will fail in dealing with them.

What we thus need today quite urgently is to keep our common project progressing and its popular support along with the trust of citizens rising. And one of key parts of this scenario is to maintain the UK as close as possible along with building a unique partnership if the UK decides to leave. While we all agree no negotiations can be launched before the notification, we cannot afford the uncertainty to last for long.

I am thus glad Bratislava will host an informal summit of EU leaders on 16 September. That should provide us with some guidance on the future direction of our Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Presidency program does not pretend to have a prescription for all EU problems. But a European citizen is in the heart of it. And so the Presidency intends to be:

Pragmatic – because it is high 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.

Thus, our ambition is to achieve progress in four priority areas: 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 support globally engaged Europe.

Mr Chairman, distinguished colleagues,

Now, allow me to present you our long-standing top priority - the EU enlargement policy and Stabilization and Association Process in the Western Balkans.

Our current situation only underlines the importance of integration and close co-operation with Turkey and the Western Balkans. The region, which has always played a key role in shaping the European stability and security.

Let me emphasize that enlargement is the most effective instrument to promote necessary reforms. So there is absolutely no reason to weaken its transformative power. And today it needs to be maintained as a strategic investment in Europe's peace, security and prosperity even more.

We will stick to the principles of conditionality and own merits. Pace of the integration will be determined by the quality not the speed of the reforms. At the same time, we want to make sure that the EU is ready to deliver once the conditions are met. We do need your support on this.

While crucial reforms still lay ahead of the aspirant countries, some have registered good progress. We welcome recent Intergovernmental Conferences with Montenegro and Turkey. It resulted in opening of Chapter 33 with Turkey and Chapters 12 and 13 with Montenegro.

Here I would like to commend the Dutch Presidency for maintaining dynamics in the process.

Let me now briefly comment on individual countries:

On Turkey: It is both a candidate country and a key strategic partner for the EU. At the November summit the EU and Turkey reconfirmed the need to re-energize the accession process.

We wish to continue enhancing cooperation in several key areas of joint interest. They are migration, foreign and security policy, counter-terrorism, energy, economy and trade. We also need to ensure implementation of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. It has proven to be effective tool contributing to mitigation of the migration crisis.

Turkey has made a good progress in many fields of the *acquis*. Yet some domestic developments raise serious concerns. Democracy, the rule of law, and the fundamental rights and freedoms must be respected. Resumption of peace talks to end the violence in South-East, along with a political solution to the Kurdish issue complement the picture.

On Montenegro: It remains the most advanced among the enlargement countries and continues to make further progress with 2 new chapters opened. Major legislative and institutional advances were made on the rule of law. It is of utmost importance that the upcoming elections do not slow down the reform agenda. They must be in line with the new electoral legislation.

If this is the case, a positive signal should be sent to keep the momentum. We should distinguish between those who deliver and those who do not. Otherwise the region will notice that even those working hard are not rewarded. That will further reinforce regional skepticism. A closed chapter would give Podgorica additional motivation.

On Serbia: I am confident its new government will maintain the EU course. I am happy to announce that two crucial chapters 23 and 24 will be opened at the Intergovernmental Conference on Monday next week. We will also continue to pay close attention to the rule of law, Serbia's commitment to normalize relations with Kosovo and to strengthen regional cooperation and good neighborly relations. We will also focus on the progressive alignment with the Union's CFSP. Also Belgrade-Pristina dialogue should continue and both parties will be strongly encouraged to deliver. Own merits principle must be maintained and enable Serbia to advance accordingly.

On the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: I am deeply concerned due to the fragile political situation. Implementation of the June/July political agreements and Urgent Reform Priorities should remain at the core. At the same time conditions for credible and truly inclusive elections need to be met. Also, unhindered work and support to the Special Prosecutor is crucial to reinstate public trust in the political system and bring the country back on the EU path.

Albania has made a steady progress in addressing the five key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations. Further efforts are still needed. We look forward to the swift adoption of the judicial reform package. It would enable sooner start of implementation of this crucial part. If the country delivers it should be reflected in the Commission's Autumn Report. In that case, we would like to enable the next step by December GAC Conclusions on Enlargement.

On Bosnia and Herzegovina: I regret to see that the momentum in the country is fading. The EU is ready to revert to the membership application as a result of meaningful progress in the implementation of the Reform Agenda. The only way forward on the EU path is through the political dialogue.

On Kosovo: We welcome the recent entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement and hope for tangible results in its implementation. Let me underline that the normalization of relations with Belgrade simply has no alternative. Kosovo politicians should develop a constructive political dialogue necessary for establishing the Association of Serb Municipalities and arranging further progress on the EU reform agenda.

On the visa liberalization, the process was declared to be technical rather than political. There are two more outstanding issues. The ratification of the border agreement with Montenegro and solid track record in the fight against corruption and organized crime. The Slovak Presidency does not intend to delay the process once they have been fulfilled.

Mr Chairman, distinguished colleagues,

Now let me add a few more comments on the priorities, where we are ready to contribute to better and visible performance of the EU. That is under the guidance of the HRVP in line with the post-Lisbon competences.

Let me first take a look at the situation to the East of the EU's borders. We see more democracy but less stability. Local conflicts in various stages, democratic deficiencies or deformations, corruption and power abuse and social insecurity. One may think Belarus is the most stable among the six Eastern Partnership countries. This proves that risks attached to the East are not less relevant than from the South. Hybrid warfare, IDPs, political instability and economic turmoil cannot be ignored.

The Eastern Partnership was designed to meet the individual ambitions of its members. It offered an economic association, tools for transformation and modernization. But after the Vilnius and Riga

summits, the project has lost much of its traction. So to regain the initiative, we should start working on a new vision. The revised European Neighborhood Policy provides a solid context to do so.

The Association Agreement/DCFTAs implementation is in the short-run more beneficial for us than for the partners. This makes the visa liberalization now the most prized deliverable for Georgia, which met all the criteria and where important October elections are due. And of course, also for Ukraine. It represents a concrete benefit of their cooperation with the EU.

On Ukraine/Russia/sanctions: Ukraine is Slovakia's only neighbor which is outside both of the EU and NATO. This largely defines our approach to the country that keeps facing severe internal and external challenges. Our partners, but also other players keep watching our ability to stabilize our neighborhoods. In Ukraine it still takes two essential things – peace and reforms.

Peace process has no good alternative. The Minsk agreements and the Normandy format represent the only vehicle we have. Without internationally recognized elections in Donbas, there will be no viable settlement. And no restoration of Kyiv's sovereignty over its borders with Russia. However, the Minsk agreements are far from popular in Ukraine. People there think they would deliver autonomy to Donbas in exchange for lifting of sanctions against Russia.

On reforms in Ukraine, once strong momentum is fading away. While some positive results in energy or police sectors have been achieved, the oligarchic system simply cannot reform itself. The fight against corruption thus remains a top priority.

The recent informal Justice and Home Affairs meeting in Bratislava on the 7th of July has already dealt with some of these problems. The Eastern Partnership ministers of justice debated them with their colleagues from the EU.

And my last comment is on the new European Union Global Strategy. Presented to the EP last week, I strongly believe it is both ambitious and realistic. With other Ministers we will speak at the next FAC, July 18, on realistic follow-up and implementation. I want to assure you that our Presidency will support HRVP's efforts in this regard.

Mr Chairman, dear Members of the European Parliament,

Clearly, an intensive work is ahead of us to make our Europe stronger, more united, resilient to external threats, capable to respond to various challenges. I am kindly asking you to support us in our endeavor.

Thank you very much for your attention. I am looking forward to our discussion.