

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me thank you for giving me opportunity to present you the priorities of the Slovak Presidency as well as our programme in the field of Cohesion Policy.

The Slovak Presidency comes at a time when the European Union finds itself in an unprecedented situation. The outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU has presented us with a **new challenge; for the first time in history, we need to deal with a situation of a Member State leaving the EU.**

Taking over the Presidency in these difficult times, we need to see the opportunity where others see risks and challenges. The European Union needs to become stronger, better, and, where possible, more united. We clearly need to deliver a **positive agenda which is understandable** for the citizens and businesses. I am well aware of the crucial role that national parliaments and the European Parliament play in our democracies. Here the elected representatives of 28 countries are entrusted with legislative, supervisory, and budgetary responsibilities. And that's why I very much look forward to cooperating with you closely over the next few months.

I have already had the privilege to meet several Members of this committee and I will make every effort to facilitate the efficient cooperation among the Council, the Commission and the European Parliament.

Now, let me outline you the **four priority areas of the Slovak Presidency. They are:**

- **Economically strong Europe**
- **Modern Single Market**
- **Sustainable migration and asylum policy**
- **Globally engaged Europe**

I. Economically strong Europe

Despite some signs of recovery of the European economy after the crisis, a full recovery requires further action. Our first priority area is focused on initiatives aimed at creating a supportive environment for the investments and further development of the Union. The Slovak Presidency is convinced that **efficient use of investment instruments, structural**

reforms and a responsible approach to public finances are at the heart of an economically strong Europe.

Budget for 2017 will be another important file on our joint table. The ability to conclude the negotiation on this file is very often the most challenging role of the Presidency in the second semester.

II. Modern Single Market

Single Market is **one of Europe's greatest achievements**. Removing barriers in the single market is a **top priority to our Presidency**. The EU simply needs a vivid Single Market that will be the engine of competitiveness and innovation. **Presidency's vision is to further develop projects such as the Energy Union and the Digital Single Market.**

III. A sustainable migration and asylum policy

Migration is historically an ever-present phenomenon. Current migratory flows, however, are putting extra pressure on the EU's external borders and asylum systems of the Member States. Thus, the ambition of the Slovak Presidency is to **move Europe towards sustainable migration and asylum policy.**

IV. Globally engaged Europe

While we are busy with challenges and developments inside the Union, we cannot neglect our global responsibility in the international arena.

The Presidency will be supporting the reinforcement of the global role of the Union.

In the area of **development cooperation**, the Slovak Presidency will focus on the progress in the implementation of the Agenda 2030.

Being in the committee responsible for regional development, let me focus on this field of our interest.

Cohesion Policy contributes not only to reduction of economic, social and territorial disparities between European regions but also contributes towards smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. We believe that the position of Cohesion Policy as the main EU investment policy should be maintained in future.

Under the Slovak Presidency, work in the Council will continue to have a strong focus on the implementation of cohesion policy. We intend to assess new elements of the reformed Cohesion Policy and set a basis for discussing future perspective. This is time to gather evidence and make sure that future debate is built on firm foundations.

The priority for the Slovak Presidency is to hold discussion on the Commission legislative proposals in the Council – with the European Parliament. The Commission has recently submitted the legislative proposal amending the Common Provisional Regulation as regards the **review of the top-up mechanisms for Greece and Cyprus**. The Council has already started working on this file. There is a broad support from the Member States for Commission's proposal. I believe the Council should be ready to reach its position soon. We are looking forward to working with REGI committee on this file, in view of finalising it under our Presidency.

Furthermore, Council's general approach on **Structural reform support programme** was reached at the end of April. The Slovak Presidency is prepared to start the dialogues with European Parliament in the upcoming months.

Another priority for our Presidency is **simplification** of Cohesion Policy. European Commission established a High Level Group on simplification that has produced a number of recommendations relating to the current programming period.

After the summer break, we expect a legislative proposal on simplification issued by the Commission. We will work efficiently in the Council to put these changes into practice as soon as possible so that Managing Authorities and beneficiaries of EU Funds really see their positive effects in the near future. However, these changes should not undermine the stability of implementation nor cause delays in the programme implementation.

At the same time, we need to launch a forward-looking debate on how to simplify the extensive system of controls and draw more attention to results. We need less administrative burden and more trust among stakeholders.

We will offer a number of opportunities to advance debates regarding our priorities.

In September, we will start with the **Cohesion conference** in Bratislava (15-16 September), with the participation of Commissioner C. Cretu and Madame Chair Mihaylova. In 3 panels, we will discuss various aspects of Cohesion Policy. In the first panel, we want to have an exchange of views on the implementation of the new elements of Cohesion policy in 2014 – 2020 period. Second panel will explore the links between Cohesion policy and European economic governance. In the third panel, we will focus on simplification beyond the current proposals and discuss how far we can go in the future simplification processes.

Simplification was an important topic during the European Summit of Regions and Cities that recently took place in Bratislava and where some members of the European Parliament were present as well. We will continue cooperating with the Committee of the Regions and organize a workshop on simplifying financial instruments (20 September).

Furthermore, we will follow up on the **Urban agenda**. After the political endorsement of the urban policy for EU in Amsterdam, we will focus on practical implementation of the urban agenda. Slovakia together with the city of Vienna is the coordinator for the partnership on housing. We plan to organise 3 meetings on housing. Our priority is to implement existing 4 partnerships but we will support initiatives to start new ones.

As the Slovakia has also taken over the presidency in the Danube Strategy, **the Fifth Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region** will be organized jointly with the European Commission, on 3 and 4 November in Bratislava. Similar to our general priorities of the Presidency, the Annual Forum will also cover issues such as water management, knowledge society, governance of the macroregional strategies or links to the ESI funds.

In the formal session of **General Affairs Council** dedicated to Cohesion policy on 16 November, the Council of ministers will focus on the current legislative files, simplification and assessment of the new elements of the reformed cohesion policy.

We want to listen to the European Parliament really carefully. Therefore, in the autumn of this year, we plan to organize 2 workshops in the European Parliament with you, the Members. One workshop dedicated to the smart cities and energy efficiency and the second one on territorial and cross-border cooperation. We hope this will be a good opportunity to exchange our views with you.

I am very much looking forward to our close cooperation. I believe that this will be a successful 6 months for the benefit of the Union. I can promise to do my best to achieve our common goals.

Thank you for your attention!