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AT THE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL & EUROPEAN AFFAIRS**

SLOVAK PERSPECTIVE OF THE FUTURE OF THE EU27

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Excellencies, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, many thanks to The Institute of International and European Affairs for this invitation!

I am glad to have the possibility to share with you our perspective of the Future of the EU. Though it has been getting quite difficult lately, since I am not a fortune teller.

And events ahead of us truly have unpredictability as a common denominator.

But this should not bring us to skepticism. As Eamon de Valera said “All history is man’s efforts to *realize ideals*”.

And that is exactly what we have started 60 years ago in Europe. Realizing ideals of peace, prosperity and purpose.

And our Union brought us success. Especially to smaller countries like Slovakia or Ireland. It allowed us to punch above our weight. Economically, politically, fiscally.

And Ireland is a perfect example of fully utilizing EU-membership. You have been an inspiration for Slovakia for the past 3 decades. And I am confident to say we were successful.

Slovakia is a proud member and supporter of the European integration. EU is the only realistic alternative for us. We are not looking for any experiments.

We are prepared to bear an adequate burden of responsibility in the EU – and also contribute to a discussion on its future.

To do so, I will break down the issue into 3 main questions today: (1) *Where are we now?* (2) *Where do we want to go?* (3) *And how do we get there?*

To deliberate on prospects of future (of anything), we must always start with self-reflection.

So first, we must ask:

I. Where are we now?

We live in a world of dramatic and not always favorable changes. We are surrounded by challenges coming from all the directions – inside and outside.

We are at a point in history characterized by a search for a new global balance and the reshuffling of the centers of power. The rise of unilateralism in international relations and attempts to resolve disputes by force, economic or military, is alarming. The international order based on respect for written and unwritten rules is under threat.

Sometimes we feel as if things do not make sense.

1/ we are feeling insecurity and vulnerability, be it from terrorism or disinformation and hybrid threats.

2/ Isolationism and protectionism hamper free trade. We are facing (new) great power competition based on unhealthy winner-takes-all approach.

3/ We see that alternative offers for governance are gaining on popularity, but we are unable to react. Trust in established institutions and rules declines. Apathy and aggression grow.

Sanctions, restrictions, proxy-conflicts, information or psychological campaigns signal an increase in global tensions, at least in the short-term perspective.

No democratic country is immune to these developments.

And we are facing many challenges coming from inside of European societies. And challenges coming from inside are always worse.

Practically since the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2009, through the migration challenge in 2015, we have been struggling with internal crises and problems. And we *survived* them, rather than *resolved* them.

Monetary union is still unfinished, single market incomplete and Dublin not yet reformed. We were unable to find effective solution to migration crises for several years now. I have just returned from New York after serving as the President of the 72nd UNGA. And at the United Nations, 192 states agreed on the text of the Global Compact on Migration.

Yes, it represents mere political declaration. But I felt the spirit of cooperation and search for common ground much more intensively than in the EU, in the community of 28 “like-minded”.

When our people don't see solutions. When the public debate is dominated by bickering. When what they see in media is mostly reporting on our internal struggle ... we cannot be surprised that they lose their trust.

Many political leaders are further deteriorating the discourse, presenting victories as national success and defeats as the responsibility of the EU.

We forgot to talk to our citizens. They do not feel the ownership enough, they do not feel the identity enough, and they do not feel the relevance and urgency.

And when they do not hear the answers from us, they turn elsewhere.

A striking example of this loss of confidence was Brexit.

Brexit was definitely an alarm clock for the EU. That people want different approach to solving problems and they want to see tangible results. Brexit is a British decision, which we regret but respect. Now we have to finish a “good divorce” with the UK.

We want to have the best possible relations with Brits also after Brexit. However, it must be clear that a country, which is not a member of the EU, simply cannot have better conditions than member states.

And from this place I want to assure you, that for Slovakia a deal on the Irish border remains the primary issue of any agreement with the UK.

I do not think any of us is satisfied with the picture I just painted. But here we are. So my second question is -

II. Where do we want to go?

Toward *realizing the ideals*. We want to see the EU

1/ united, prosperous, and secure – and at the top of the scientific and technological progress.

2/ The EU, which plays important global role in world politics including defense matters, adequate to its economic power.

3/ EU as a community promoting values of freedom, democracy, human rights. Open to international cooperation and forging partnerships. Welcoming new member states and opening doors for the return of those that once left.

4/ EU where decisions are agreed on in consensus and mutual respect (between MS, MS and Institutions).

5/ EU that provides an identity. Because there is something about the EU that is also personal. But not to abolish nationhood, or to make countries give up any part of their own national identity. Our unity must be a unity of spirit within the diversity of our national, regional and local cultures.

III. So how do we get there?

1. Only if we stay united.

I think the unity Member States have shown after Brexit is testament to the strength of bonds of EU27. Quite a paradox, that we show a greatest unity, perhaps ever, towards the one who is leaving us. I wish we could show the same level of unity externally.

2. Only if we complete the main integration projects.

We need to complete the Single Market. In terms of Energy, Capital and Digital.

We know that the Energy Union is crucial for our security and for an ambitious climate policy. We need to protect the 4 freedoms and favorable conditions for consumers, employees and enterprises.

We need to restore Schengen. That of course requires full protection of the external borders in order to keep internal borders without controls.

We need to complete and strengthen the Eurozone. To sustain other potential economic crises and to make euro more resilient.

It is obvious that fulfilment of these strategic priorities is not free of charge. We need an ambitious EU budget. (In an average state, the national budget is on the level of 40-60 % of the country's GDP. Today the EU budget represents only 1% of the EU GDP.)

3. Only if we are equal.

We cannot preserve the political unity without reaching sufficient socio-economic convergence and cohesion in the EU. As Seán Lemass said: “A rising tide lifts all boats”. In other words: We should use the prosperity for the benefit of all.

But for Europe to further prosper, we must stay atop of tech modernization. Not just catch a train of technological innovations. But navigate it.

EU is the best example of human progress. But we must well embrace innovations, make them contribute to our industrial base. Otherwise we might find ourselves on the periphery in a new global order.

4. Only if we provide vision outside our borders.

If we want to survive, we must be able to build a strong Union as a global actor in political and defence affairs. The EU can build up lasting global respect only if it stabilizes its neighbourhood. The EU must invest maximum effort in these regions, part of which is a credible enlargement process.

Our economic power allows us to materialize this vision. The vision of Europe united and whole. Because we are facing global challenges and megatrends that no European nation will be able to withstand alone. *Be it terrorism, climate change, hybrid threats or unmanaged migration.*

Divided Europe is not only weak, but it upsets the geopolitical balance. Global atmosphere today is characterized by raise of new economic and cultural powers; and by leadership vacuums. We need Europe capable to fill them.

We need Europe positioned alongside the US, China, Russia and other emerging players. Not between them! Only in this role can Europe do its job, not only for itself, but also for equilibrium of international power. If we are pinned against each other within our own space – major powers are swift to seize the opportunity. And that will be detrimental not just to Europe, but to global political balance.

5. Only if we speak honestly with our citizens.

We cannot promise our citizens a life without problems, hard work and challenges. But we can present them a credible vision of our future and also materialize it by tangible deeds.

We need to make our citizens feel the ownership of the EU. Make them understand that it is not US – Bratislava or Dublin, and THEM – Brussels. EU is us. We are EU.

And we need to confront the false prophets who tell them otherwise. Ignoring them or ridiculing them is not a solution. They need to be challenged. By presenting a vision. By exposing the doomsayers, conspirators and populists. By showing that they offer no viable alternative.

We have the European Parliament elections coming up. Elections are always an ultimate test of any leadership. This is the time we need to mobilize. Make people feel the urgency. Talk to them about the importance of the EU for their everyday lives. Make them understand that the elections matter. That it's the only way they can steer the EU. They should not let others speak for themselves.

To conclude... Just one more observation from the UN.

In the General Assembly, it does not matter how big is the economic power, the population or geographical area of a state. Everyone has one – equal voice. And I experienced how loud and valuable that voice can be. That even small countries, like *Slovakia or Ireland*, have a big role to play in our multilateral architecture. I know that Ireland has big plans, running for its seat on the Security Council.

And so I want to end with one more appeal. An appeal for multilateralism.

At the beginning, I described the state of international affairs as uncertain. And in change and uncertainty, it is tempting to go alone. To focus on one's own prosperity. But we have a responsibility to the international community. The best way forward is the system based on rules. It has worked well so far. For all of us.

Let us not try to fix what is not broken.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your attention and I am looking forward to your questions.