

18TH ANNUAL REVIEW CONFERENCE ON SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY

Remarks by H.E. Mr. Miroslav Lajčák, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic and the President of the 72nd UN General Assembly

Excellencies, colleagues, dear guests,

Today's conference has a special flavor for me. As the President of the United Nations General Assembly, in the recent months I have been able to engage in intensive discussions with partners from around the world and listen to the views from abroad, as well as from domestic experts. I want to take the opportunity to combine these two authentic perspectives today.

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 endangered. The individual interpretation of agreements and rules is not unprecedented. But there was a greater confidence in the system and its guarantors. As the trust in institutions and rules declines, apathy and aggression grow.

There is a sense of impunity for actions against the agreed norms and red lines. The instinct of self-preservation, cultivated by the principle of mutually assured destruction, is being ignored.

New powers are becoming more assertive on the international scene, not without reaction from the traditional hegemony. Instead of multilateralism, the idea of "my country first" is gaining traction.

Protectionism, sanctions, restrictions, proxy-conflicts, information or psychological campaigns signal an increase in global tensions, at least in the short-term perspective. The world has, once again, become polarized, and no democratic country is immune.

Many point out historical parallels, or even openly speak about the beginning of a new Cold War. The world seems to be not only more interconnected, but also more cynical. And ironically, due to the overwhelming influx of (dis)information, it is also becoming an increasingly indifferent place.

Unpredictability has started to define international relations.

How to respond to these trends?

First, by promoting common sense. Critical thinking and respect for science and education are among the greatest achievements of European civilization. In the flood of hoaxes, unverified information and conspiracy theories, they are the means of its survival. We are increasingly dependent on algorithms that exclude critical judgement. They create information bubbles and affect our thinking, or in the worst case, separate us from reality. The Orwellian dark claim that *"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."* does not seem to be a fiction today.

Second, by following rules. Nationalism, protectionism and isolation are not the answer to the negative effects of globalization. The economically interconnected world does not need trade wars. We need rules, and we need to follow them. The most tragic world conflicts have been the result of ignoring rules and avoiding obligations. Today, when global relations are guided by a comprehensive set of rules, we must insist on the existential need for their respect by all. Big and small, weak or strong.

Third, by protecting institutions. International and national institutions and organizations are indispensable to democratic society. On both a domestic and global level, we hear voices promoting extremist ideas and challenging the relevance of institutions we have created. You are certainly confronted with the protagonists or sympathizers of these streams on a daily basis. My recommendation is to ask a loud question: "*What is the alternative? What specifically are you offering?*". None of these new prophets can provide a viable alternative to the system of institutions we have.

Fourth, by leaving stereotypes. We need to stop dividing the world into good west, bad east and poor south. It does not apply anymore.

Economic individualism, nationalization of trade or a short-term view of security undermine the foundations of prosperity and stability. We do not need to present globalization and multiculturalism as a cure for everything; but as a system that removes unhealthy barriers.

Where does the European Union stand?

We Europeans, represent about 7% of the world's population, but 20% of the world's GDP. Although the EU is a global economic player, we cannot conclude the same on the foreign policy and security fronts. If we want this to change, the Union must adapt its approach.

We see new dynamics at the forefront of world events. The optimist would believe that in times of unpredictability, when international rules are losing absolute validity, someone takes the initiative. Because chaos requires certainty and stability.

The EU is a natural candidate. However, practically from the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2010, through the migration challenge in 2015, we have been embroiled in internal agendas and problems. Brexit is a clear confirmation. We invest most of our political energy, expertise and time in defining the relationship with a Member State that has voluntarily opted to leave.

We are concentrating on ourselves, when we should be looking around. Providing vision and solutions where it is expected of us and where our strategic interests lie.

Where we should think strategically, we think technocratically. Where we should act politically, we act bureaucratically.

The EU can build up lasting global respect only if it stabilizes its neighborhood. The EU must invest maximum effort in these regions, part of which is part of a credible enlargement process.

It is time for bold steps and decisions to confront unpredictability. We cannot be surprised by a turn of events, because then we react under stress. We must be able to project development in our neighboring countries. The EU can do much more.

Where does Slovakia stand?

100 years have passed since the First World War. There were 44 countries in the world back then; today the United Nations assembles 193. The vast majority of them are small and medium-sized states with limited human, economic and military potential. Slovakia is one of them. Respect for international law and the principle of sovereign equality of states act as existential guarantees of their independence and development.

In turbulent times, internal politics lean to revolutionary movements. Foreign policy tends to stay conservative. What we see in the internal affairs of many states - loss of trust in institutions, transactional relations, looking for shortcuts - also translates into international affairs. In these unsettled times, we must rely on the pillars that hold up our foreign policy and have brought us success.

Effective multilateralism has always been a pillar of our foreign policy.

It would be unrealistic to think that Slovakia can resolve the Middle East peace process or end the war in Syria. But it would be very irresponsible to turn a blind eye. It is not necessary to explain why the crisis in any distant corner of the planet can have immediate political, economic or security implications for Slovakia. More important is to ask, "*What can we do?*" We are not a political, military or economic power. *Where lies our strength?* Throughout history, the answer was sought by the smaller and weaker (without a feeling of inferiority) in law, institutions and alliances.

As the President of the UN General Assembly, I emphasize that multilateralism is the most powerful tool we have in our hands. These are not empty words. The global challenges and megatrends we are facing are becoming ever more complex. Finding solutions requires consistent and coordinated efforts of the entire international community. No country can face alone the challenges of climate change, terrorism, arms proliferation or irregular migration.

Slovakia has a lot to offer. In addition to our engagement with the UN, we are preparing for the OSCE chairmanship. We have already assumed responsibilities within the leading Troika and we are duly preparing for January.

Another pillar of our foreign policy is the *European Union*.

The peoples of Central and Eastern Europe have long lived on the crossroads of geopolitical interests of big powers and they have repeatedly paid for it. This year, Slovaks and Czechs commemorate the tragedies brought by the Munich Agreement and the catastrophe of Soviet occupation. We are celebrating that we are no longer caught in a geopolitical vacuum and as equal partners form a part of the European Union. That is why I am stunned by a rhetoric of some representatives, especially those from small states, who criticize and "kick" the EU and international institutions, and flamingly speak about "real sovereignty" in the name of national interests.

With all its imperfections, the EU is the best guarantee of peace (which we often consider automatic) and the European way of life. The world is changing and new economic powers with different cultural and historical circumstances are emerging. Fragmented, nationalistic Europe will not be better suited to resist the pressure and preserve the western way of life. Whoever would think so is very deeply mistaken.

Only through our economic strength, our working set of rules, and the example we set of quality of life and political cohesion can we influence the developments in the world.

We are yet to hear a relevant answer to the question: *what is the alternative? When was Slovakia more successful than when we joined the EU, Schengen and the Eurozone?*

It is perhaps a bit of that typical Slovak bad luck, that after these successes came a period of crises - financial and economic, migration and security. However, this is not a reason to question our European direction; rather a reason for reflection and consolidation. We do not need to speak theoretically anymore; we can compare. Is the path of Brexit the alternative? I think the answer is clear.

There is no space to question our European and transatlantic orientation in this uncertain environment. Neither as a neutral country, nor as a bridge between the East and the West will Slovakia have the opportunities and strength which EU and NATO offer. This brings me to the third pillar... *Transatlantic cooperation*.

We did not properly profit from the peace dividends after the fall of the Iron Curtain. We are poorly equipped for conflicts and the challenges of tomorrow, searching for adequate responses to what we perceive as the main threats.

With the individualization of interests on the rise, it is particularly important to strengthen alliances such as the EU or NATO. Although more complicated and rigid in decision-making, they have the most important tools: unity and common action.

This understandably brings more risk and expense. It is thus particularly important to communicate with the public; to explain the state of the world and the importance of partnerships to our people. That is why strategic communication has become one of the priorities of our Ministry in 2017.

The fourth pillar I would like to mention - *good-neighborly relations*.

Slovakia is assuming the V4 presidency in 2018. V4 is in fact better than its image and perception abroad. We aim to use PRES as a platform that will present Central Europe as an attractive part of a strong EU.

I am pleased that today's discussion was again very dynamic and produced many inspiring thoughts. Thank you all for participation and devoting your time to the issue of foreign policy.

I would like to highlight the presence of the Prime Minister, who confirmed the pro-European course of the Slovak Government.

I appreciate the presence of three former foreign ministers in the first panel, who discussed initial and formative years of our foreign service, and their role in it. I fully agree with their message, that in this anniversary year we should not forget about 1998 and the hard way - without shortcuts - that lead to the EU.

They have responsibly touched upon many topics, including V4, relations with Russia and the United States, and the situations in Ukraine and Kosovo. I agree with their assessment that in facing anti-EU rhetoric we must be unified, active in discussions and closer to the public.

The second panel has covered many topics across the foreign policy spectrum – strategic documents, PESCO, Brexit, future of the EU, enlargement, OSCE, regional inequality, lack of communication. It has also recalled the Slovak Presidency in the Council of the EU, which continues to resonate both politically – in continuous references to the Bratislava process - and personally – in immense experience collected by our diplomats. As was rightly pointed out, PRES brought us more sensitivity and assertiveness in European topics, and appetite for further work.

The word “Convention” and the need to communicate with the public across all regions of Slovakia resonated today and the whole third panel was dedicated to these issues. I thank the participants of this panel for the constructive discussion.

Evaluation is usually part of final phases of processes. In our case, we must see evaluation as a starting point. We cannot deny that Slovakia is different today than it was just a few weeks ago.

If I should identify a positive signal in the turn of political events of the past few weeks, it would be that the pro-European and transatlantic orientation of Slovakia has not been called into question. For us, it signals that we must continue in our efforts.

The new Government has been very clear in confirming its pro-European course. Therefore, the work of our Ministry remains consistent.

Our diplomacy has long been cultivating the image of Slovakia as a reliable partner in Europe and in the world. The perception of Slovakia as the most pro-European part of V4 has been shaken. The role of diplomacy will now be even more important. We need to communicate our pro-European course to our partners even more clearly and intensively.

In this room, we do not need to convince each other. We know our values, our abilities and our determination. The real diplomacy is done quietly. But we should be mindful to consistently inform the media and the public about our action. That is the challenging part. Because while only a few note our successes, our failures are felt by everybody.

Thank you for your attention.