



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Minister of Foreign & European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

H.E. Miroslav LAJČÁK

Future of the European Union and the V4

Hungarian Ambassadors Meeting

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Dear Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you a good day

Thank you for inviting me. I am glad to be here with the best of the Hungarian diplomacy and my fellow V4 ministers.

Minister, *Péter*, I wonder if you really managed to summon all your Ambassadors during these hot summer days. Based on your Olympic Games medal standing it looks like many other summer activities are more popular in this country☺...so let me sincerely congratulate Hungary on winning the unofficial V4 medal contest and on the overall 12th standing with 15 medals. And more importantly, you have collected more gold medals (8) than the rest of the V4 together (5)...

Dear colleagues,

Some visits are said to be historical – by chance, or not – my visit indeed takes place on quite a historic date. Today we commemorate the 490th anniversary of the Mohács battle when the solitary army of Hungarian King *Louis II* was defeated by the Ottomans.

Consequences of the battle profoundly shaped 150 years of our history. But only until this entire region rose up and joined forces to defeat them at Vienna in 1683. A lesson from the past events today is that we can achieve much more together – and not only in Central Europe.

So, many years later we are together facing a new set of huge challenges. It looks like crisis became a buzzword. But the answer does not lie in spreading pessimism, embracing fragmentation and accepting radicalization or extremism. We need mutual empathy, the will to compromise and a pragmatic response to the discontent of our citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our Presidency program certainly does not even pretend to contain a miraculous prescription for all EU problems. But a European citizen is in the heart of our program.

And we are aware that the current situation requires us 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.

We are working hard to achieve progress in four priority areas:

1/ To make European economy stronger through support for European-level investments,

2/ To modernize and broaden the Single Market through achieving safe and functional digital economy and safeguarding energy security,

3/ To work towards sustainable migration and asylum policy based on effective management of our external borders with a fully operational Schengen. Migration is certainly our top Presidency priority. We intend to approach it as an honest broker toward finding common and sustainable European solutions.

However, it is obvious that migration is not a short term seasonal and regional problem. It is a very complex generational issue that needs true world-wide attention. It is absolutely crucial to wake up the entire international community. We have to work much more actively with governments and regional organizations at origins of migration flows.

The upcoming migration summit in New York on 19 September is a great opportunity not to be missed. We all know that migration does not have a European solution only. But at the same time we must realize that Europe must be the key part of a new global approach.

4/ Finally, we want to support globally engaged Europe, including free trade as a significant contributor to internal and external stability of the EU.

We hope for the progress in all these areas to reduce the gap between people and EU elites. It should also reduce fear of losing jobs, cultural identity and personal safety.

Maintaining the UK as close as possible along with building a sound partnership with the UK after it leaves form another key part of this progress. While we all agree no negotiations can be launched before the notification, we cannot afford the uncertainty to last for long. Once they start, they must be carried out in good will and with no inclination towards any punishment. The result shall be a balanced agreement with both parties feeling comfortable and satisfied.

There is no doubt that Brexit represents a reflection of voters' dissatisfaction with the current EU. But it is not the UK's issue only. It concerns us all – we witness similar fragmenting tendencies in other Member States too. They might have been temporarily weakened after the UK referendum, but a threat of further disintegration persists.

And this is something we clearly want to avoid. I am sure that my V4 colleagues will agree with me that further fragmentation and crumbling into small clubs is undesirable. Our countries have profited enormously from European integration. We are thus very cautious when ideas like opening of founding treaties or creating new dividing lines in Europe are floated.

By building a strong and respected V4 brand we do not want to create any new division lines. On the contrary, the full use of one of the guiding principles of the EU – subsidiarity – represents also the basis of the Visegrad cooperation. We believe that this grouping has to be at the heart of discussions about key issues of the future Union. Our voice must be heard aloud no matter how critical or simply different we might be.

For example, on migration: The voice of the V4 helped the EU leaders realize that if we fail to improve protection of external borders and reduce the influx of migrants, the situation can spin out of control. It is in V4's natural interest to maintain fully functional Schengen system and preserve the right of free movement of people with all economic and social benefits.

The V4 has a legitimate role in the EU supported by the noticeable trend towards regionalization. It has experience in intensifying mutual cooperation through concrete projects (*e.g. V4 innovation task force, V4 battle group, Visegrad patent office, V4 as a tool for sharing transformation know-how in the neighborhood*). It also has a good sense of strategic vision because after 25 years the project is fully viable. All this can provide a valuable input into EU's reflection process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure we all agree that the EU needs a new and uniting vision which reinforces the EU's strengths and eliminates its weaknesses. A vision which takes into account history, diversity and real capabilities of individual Member States. A vision which

will bring to life a more functional Europe. A Europe of its origins – the one we all identified with and admired ourselves at the beginning. I hope for more concrete ideas for EU's future to be outlined before March 2017 which will mark 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties.

The first big step in this direction will be an informal summit of EU leaders on 16 September in Bratislava.

At the Summit, the Slovak Presidency wishes to start the process of reaching the consensus on EU's strategic priorities. The Summit will bring about a difficult but vital discussion on EU's major problems. It will have to deal with the most urgent areas in the coming weeks and months and obviously look beyond our Presidency. I hope that its future results will be mirrored in a common EU27 position on the future direction of the EU.

The preparations are fully in competence of the European Council. However, as a fair mediator, we wish to contribute to the Summit's positive ambiance and outcome. We must be ambitious but at the same time realistic and effectively manage expectations.

Constructive and open dialogue about the challenges the EU is currently facing has never been more needed. Brexit should not dominate the Summit discussions. We want to focus on security in all its forms – economic security and employment and internal security and terrorism - but also the gap of communication between the EU institutions and citizens.

As a promoter of positive European agenda, we would like to focus foremost on issues and projects which connect us rather than divide us. Still, we should not end up in a vicious circle of endless discussion about EU's problems. We do not want to contribute to spreading even greater pessimism. Quite to the contrary. We must send a clear message that the EU27 is still strong, able to reach an agreement and ready to deliver improvements to lives of our citizens.

In order to move forward, we will have to ask uneasy but essential questions:

- Are we able to agree on new long term and short term projects in the EU while managing national goals and priorities in such way that they do not spoil the whole effort?
- What concrete projects and goals do we want to focus on?
- How far can we go in discussions about improving the competencies of EU institutions? And vice versa what is necessary to be left in MS competencies?
- What do we have to do to bring the EU and its citizens closer together and increase public confidence in european project?

- How can we better communicate the EU policies to our citizens?

Addressing the last issue is particularly important. We failed in communicating benefits of the Union to our citizens. We should not hide behind complicated language but rather talk simply and clearly. We must talk the language of ordinary people not the language of bureaucrats.

We should also think of new and more attractive forms of engaging wider public in the EU affairs. Our communication strategy must be tailor-made depending on situation and audience.

The EU is not only formed by Brussels and its institutions but first and foremost by its Member States and their capitals. Therefore, the main driving force behind the EU's renovation process shall be EU Member States.

In an open and honest dialogue with the EU institutions, we should adopt strategic decisions accepted across wider political spectrum. Because it is about Member States understanding best what their citizens need.

And at the end of the day, it is exactly the needs of Europeans that build the EU. So the EU either serves their needs or it falls into one final crisis. We have to focus and fully grasp what EU citizens really care about, why they do not trust the EU and why fragmentation and euroscepticism are on the rise.

I believe that all of us in this room know that the EU is a solution and not a problem. And that it has no alternative whatsoever despite its malfunctions. But we need to find ways how to convince those unconvinced – our many fellow citizens outside this room.

Thank you for your attention!