

Prejav ministra M.Lajčáka na pracovných raňajkách Centra pre európsku politiku k vízii a prioritám slovenského predsedníctva v Rade Európskej únie.

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It is my pleasure to be here with you this morning once again. The European Policy Centre has always been an excellent platform to discuss European politics from various angles. In the past, as you know, I have already been part of a number of different EPC events. Be it on the Eastern partnership, regional security or conflict resolution.

But today, I have a unique opportunity to present you my thoughts on upcoming Slovak EU Presidency priorities.

We are exactly a month away from taking over our first-ever Presidency. It represents both a great opportunity and a major commitment. But also honor and responsibility.

Why? Slovakia has walked a rather complicated way to get here. The European integration has long been the main driving force behind our hard work and efforts. Indeed, “*Back to Europe*” was one of the Velvet Revolution’s principal credos. It was an expression of wish for freedom, civil liberties but also a voice of our European identity.

Today, we call the EU our home, the euro our currency and Schengen our area. The Presidency is the culmination of our integration journey. We are in the core of Europe. And we are grateful for that because we were given a lot. It’s time to give back.

So after 12 years of EU membership we will be honored to lead the Union. Yet it also includes responsibility as the EU struggles with many internal and external challenges.

As for preparations, we are in the final stages. Still, the program will only be adopted after the British referendum. The Slovak government will formally endorse it on 30 June.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no need to say that Slovakia is assuming its Presidency role in very challenging times. In the past couple of years, the Union has faced a number of serious crises. They have undoubtedly impacted its overall shape but also formed moods of EU population.

The economic and financial crisis shattered our trust in the euro and our economic foundations.

Passion for EU membership has been replaced by enlargement fatigue or even euroskepticism.

The gap has risen between common citizens and EU elites but also mainstream politics.

Spill-overs of Daesh brutality in European capitals spread fears never seen here before.

And, of course, migration reopened philosophical questions like multiculturalism, tolerance, solidarity, safety. It even touched upon our humanism and capacity to help the rest of the world.

As a result, we observe a certain sense of political fragmentation. And this is my primary and greatest concern. Fragmentation makes us vulnerable – internally as well as externally.

However, Slovakia is not going to spread defeatism. On the contrary, we want to approach current challenges from a positive angle. The fact that the EU is being tested does not mean at all it is failing! We have to continue investing in the European project. This is the only viable alternative for this continent. Its failure is not an option. I personally am a deep Euro optimist.

Of course, we are also aware of uncertainties at this point. Apart of the challenges that I mentioned earlier, the UK referendum is still ahead of us. It truly has potential to change the entire European project and to some extent even wider international environment. But we hope that we will not be consumed by crisis management only.

The EU needs long-term solutions. And we intend to be:

Pragmatic - we need to deliver tangible results. So we will concentrate on common European projects with direct benefits for daily lives of citizens.

Uniting - we want to overcome fragmentation in Europe. Therefore, we will try to find solutions acceptable for all Member States and beneficial for the Union as a whole.

People's voice - we will focus on the needs of citizens in order to restore their trust in the EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To achieve this, we have four ambitions:

- 1/ to make European economy stronger
- 2/ to modernise 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 pay attention to our external environment, namely trade deals and enlargement policy

1/ Let me start with European economy. We will support the environment favourable to investment, further economic growth and job creation. We will thus focus on a triangle - the European Fund for Strategic Investment (EFSI), the Capital Markets Union and the EU budget.

We will work on the deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union. The Euro zone has developed some mechanisms since the euro crisis. And without any doubt it is now much better

equipped to manage the future crises. However, significant gaps in the EMU architecture still remain. The sooner we close them, the better for all. Only then we will finally secure stability, prosperity and full credibility of the Euro zone.

The Capital Markets Union is our other focus. A true single market for capital would unlock new sources of cross-border funding. It would make life easier for businesses heavily dependent on the banking sector. We are ready to continue the efforts of the Dutch Presidency on this agenda and move on with key legislative initiatives.

We will also deal with the mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the EU Budget 2017. They both must better reflect EU priorities and have strengthened capacities to help resolve latest challenges.

2/ Let me now turn to our second priority basket – to boost the potential of the Single Market. Surely, the Single Market is a success story. Yet we believe that it needs to be enriched by two new pillars – the Digital Single Market and the Energy Union.

Digitalization and e-commerce open up a completely new pool of opportunities. However, the market potential is still untapped. In 2014, the share of e-commerce in the total retail sector in Europe was slightly over 7%. In the US, it was almost 12%. As many as 57% of companies say they would start or increase their online sales in EU member states. But for that to happen they need same e-commerce rules to apply in the whole EU.

Let me also welcome the adoption of a Digital Single Market package (*last week, 25 May*). The Slovak Presidency will diligently work on its effective implementation. We consider it to be an excellent opportunity to overcome fragmentation in digital space. And so removing the barriers of data portability, geographic blocking and international roaming will be our focus.

Our other ambition is to significantly contribute to building a reliable and competitive Energy Union. Strengthened internal energy security, improved regional cooperation and reinforced solidarity are the essential tools to reduce energy dependence of Europe.

Centrepiece of the Energy Union is diversification of resources, suppliers and transit routes.

We also want to pursue an ambitious climate and efficient recycling policy. These are two inseparable parts of the Energy Union.

We understand that the Cohesion Policy plays a key role in delivering on these objectives. Our goal will be to reflect on the reform of the Cohesion Policy. We also have to evaluate the impact of its new elements and look at the possibilities of its simplification after 2020.

3/ No surprise, a sustainable migration and asylum policy will belong to our top priorities.

It is obvious to us all that migration will remain an urgent issue during our Presidency. It represents a long-term historic phenomenon. But Europe has been dealing with unprecedented migration flows only since last year. They put immense pressure on EU's external borders as well as the asylum systems of Member States. We all know how utterly sensitive it remains to us all and to migrants too.

I have said it on multiple occasions. We can resolve it only through joint EU wide efforts. And during our Presidency, we do not want to reduce our role to being just a crisis manager. We will promote comprehensive solutions linking up all relevant internal and external aspects.

We must return to a proper functioning of the Schengen area. In this respect, it is essential to make the European Border and Coast Guards operational. To me it still looks like more on paper than fully functional. This will be our task.

Our Presidency will put a lot of effort into the smart borders package. The entry-exit system will give us a better overview of third-country nationals entering and leaving the EU territory. Including irregular migrants.

The effective cooperation with third countries of origin and transit also needs to be established. The EU-Turkey agreement remains one of its crucial parts.

Speaking of asylum policy alone, let's not narrow it to a single initiative - the distribution of refugees under the Dublin regulation. The Commission will soon table a second Common European Asylum System reform package. So we will have altogether seven proposals. And we are ready to work on them.

Besides that, we will also tackle the issue of legal migration. For example, by attracting highly qualified migrants wherever they are needed for our growing economies.

4/ Last but not least we must continue to pay attention to our external environment. I speak of trade agreements and enlargement policy.

Free trade is a significant contributor to internal and external stability of the EU. Slovakia is an open economy supportive of soundly negotiated free trade agreements. And we believe that TTIP is a major opportunity for Europe. It could have positive impact on growth, employment and overall well-being. So we stand ready to support the EU Commission to reach an ambitious, comprehensive and balanced agreement.

However, the final text must safeguard the high level of EU standards. We should take seriously the critical voices and have an open discussion about the consequences. Yet it must avoid unfounded and unproven allegations, anti-globalization or anti-American moods.

The new European global strategy for common foreign and security policy should become our tool to co-shape rapidly changing world. After its release, we should work together on its

implementation. Our key objectives are protection of international order, strengthening security and facilitating peaceful and durable solutions to crises.

At the same time, we will remain a vocal advocate of more effective and preventive European Neighbourhood Policy. To the East, we wish to make strong emphasis on stabilisation and reform processes. The latest implies also implementing association agreements - where present - and visa liberalisation track. To the South, we would like to focus *inter alia* on countries contributing to migration flow to Europe. This includes working through High level dialogues, negotiating or implementing readmissions and providing development or humanitarian aid.

Given our own experience, the enlargement policy is one of the most effective transformation tools. It is thus a key instrument for stabilising our neighbourhood. We want to actively communicate that the path towards the EU leads via doing own homework.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is one lesson learnt after previous crises and in the midst of those on-going ones. None of them can be resolved at a national level alone. No country in the EU is powerful enough to manage it on its own. And no prescribed administrative proposal will work for all of us either. We know it all too well now.

The magnitude and nature of today's challenges simply requires a common European response – and our common European sense too. The crises certainly are the most serious emergency events since Slovakia joined the club. We are realistic and do understand how limited Presidency's possibilities are.

Nevertheless, we have an ambition to contribute to sustainable and widely accepted solutions. We ourselves wish to see concrete results in those priority areas that I have just laid out to you.

Finally, let me assure you that in pursuing our vision and priorities, Slovakia will be an honest broker, a credible player, a visionary manager, an unbiased negotiator and a fair mediator.

I can assure you that we will be “thinking Europe”. Even though, it is not always easy.

Thank you for your attention!