

**STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS OF
THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

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NATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE EU IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Skopje, 19 June 2019

Good morning

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Osmani, Dear Minister Dimitrov, Excellencies, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a big pleasure to be here again.

I have been to your country many times, but it is actually the first time I am visiting the Republic of North Macedonia.

And the fact is that just a few days ago we commemorated one-year anniversary of the Prespa Agreement, and I sincerely congratulate you.

You know I hold a special fondness for your country and the whole region.

I have spent some of the most interesting years of my life and met some of the most memorable people here.

And it is the sincere wish of me and my country to see a peaceful, prosperous and successful future for North Macedonia.

And I believe that future is in the European Union.

Slovakia supports the Western Balkans countries when they set out a vision for a peaceful and democratic region.

A vision anchored in European values and systems.

It is a long way, but North Macedonia has already travelled a considerable distance.

For Slovakia, a very useful tool used to pave this way was the National Convention.

Our goal was always to bring people together, talk, share ideas and together design the path we thought best for our country.

We have since offered to pass on the experiences and lessons we learned from steering this project.

It has been successful in a number of countries of the region ... in Serbia, but also in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro and we are happy that in 2017, the National Convention started here, in North Macedonia.

And it's great that it did.

Because commitments to integration to Euro-Atlantic structures cannot remain in declarations.

They have to be filled with substance.

And here is where the National Convention helps. For **three** main reasons.

Firstly, it nurtures inclusive public discourse about the European integration

The aim is to institutionalize the public debate on the EU - based on the partnership of all parts of society.

In this way - it connects and boosts all levels of decision-making.

And I am very glad to hear that you have been using this tool well and frequently.

So, congratulation to both the European Movement as the local implementing body, as well as the Slovak Foreign Policy Association for their hard work and progress achieved so far.

There is still more visibility and engagement needed in order to make it “THE address” – where the whole society comes together to present their ideas on meeting the accession requirements.

Secondly, it strengthens the expert capacities

The Convention proceedings help to sharp up negotiators of EU integration – so far within the four working groups – one more to be added next year.

The desired outcome is of course that the recommendations developed in working groups are included into the national legislation.

For that, it’s important that all levels of society contribute; so here I want to once again invite all relevant actors in North Macedonia - NGOs, academia, religious communities, interest groups, local government, economic and cultural spheres, political parties, members of parliament to join the debate.

Thirdly, most importantly, it ensures the public ownership of the integration process

The textbook will say that we, the European Union, are a political and economic union.

True, but first of all, the European Union is a union of people.

They shape it - and they need to own it, feel it and trust it.

Ant this is something we need to work on long after the pre-accession period.

Because there are many negative trends and tendencies out there, that put in danger the EU project.

Disinformation, hybrid warfare, populism ... leading to a lack of trust and decline in confidence.

That’s why in Slovakia, 15 years after accession, we still continue to organize National Conventions.

To create space for an open debate in our society, to educate our youth on EU values and place in the world, to improve awareness, to get feedback from citizens, to remind them of the benefits of EU integration – and most importantly – to let them feel that the European Union is THEIR project, that we all share a common European identity.

And - don’t get me wrong here.

I am not saying that the EU is perfect.

There is a number of challenges we are trying to wrap our heads around.

In the past 10 years, we went from crises to crises. Financial, migration ... and I could go on.

We have spent “ages” trying to figure out our relationship with the United Kingdom after Brexit. And we still don't know.

You would not believe how much time and effort our best people spent dealing with someone who wants to leave the European Union.

I told my colleagues that if we devoted the same amount of capacities towards those who actually want to join us – I can only imagine the lengths we could go to.

Sometimes, we get so caught up in our internal struggle that we spend most of our days in our own kitchen and forget to look outside the window.

And I know it can be frustrating - for both sides.

I know this feeling very well.

Slovakia was neglected for a long time, our accession was delayed, we were labelled as the “black hole” of Europe.

And I know it is difficult for you, as the “front runner” in the region.

You should always keep in mind that the EU is a complex organism. With 28 countries around one table, the bases of your approach must always be compromise that accommodates ambitions of some and worries of others.

I am very optimistic about positive developments and opening the accession talks by October.

So today, I want to encourage you to continue and tell you that you are not alone.

You have friends.

I have heard them speaking up in favour of your country yesterday in Luxembourg.

And my country, Slovakia, will continue to support you on your way to the EU.

Because despite the challenges, EU is the best alternative for this region and this continent.

And the European Union will never be finished and whole - without Western Balkans as its part.

That's why Slovakia is happy to continue to support the National Convention, together with the USAID.

So, let's work together with partners in North Macedonia – Slovakia and the United States on further developing this project, to facilitate the journey of the North Macedonia to the full-fledged membership in the EU.

I wish us all energy, patience, spirit of compromise and all the success on this journey.

Thank you