

**The Foreign Policy of Slovakia and current
challenges for the European Union**

Speech delivered by

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the organisers of this meeting from the Austrian-Slovak Society for the opportunity to address this honourable audience. I am glad to be here for several reasons, but allow me mention only the two main ones: first – we are living as neighbours so close next to each other for centuries, but still do not have enough knowledge of one another today. Both our nations are undergoing their own stories side by side, with their joys and sorrows, phobias and prejudice; they both are part of the same integration area, but our convergence and getting to know each other is rather slow. We are members of the same European Union, but we live in our own separate worlds and fear sometimes to open it up to anyone else – even a neighbour.

Fortunately, there are people like Dietmar Grieser, journalist and novelist whose latest bestseller entitled “Onkel aus Pressburg” (The Uncle from Bratislava) opens the door wide to Slovakia for Austrians; or former Austrian ambassadors to Slovakia, Maximilian Pammer and Gabriele Matzner-Holzer, as well as your organisation and other organisations and individuals including the Slovak Institute in Vienna who have contributed and are contributing considerably to the shaping of a more daring and detailed view among Austrians of their Slovak neighbour. Yet this is exactly what I think should be the true meaning of European convergence and integration efforts. We are too interdependent, we are too much affected by the problems of any one of us to limit for any reasons our relations. Therefore, I really appreciate the meaningful activities performed by you Mr. Fasslabend and your association.

The second reason is a symbolic one – twenty-one years ago, Austria was the first country of the “Western World” that all of us wanted to quickly get familiar with. For us, and Bratislava citizens in particular, a trip to Wolfsthal and Hainburg was the tangible symbol of the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Hainburg was our West Berlin.

Against the backdrop of these memorable events and in a discussion with you, I will try and provide you now with a picture of the Slovak foreign policy in the context of the challenges, which my country, as well as the European union, has to face, including a brief assessment of the Slovak-Austrian relations.

In terms of strategic priorities, our utmost interest can be defined as: prosperous Slovakia in a safe and democratic world. I can observe with satisfaction today that, by joining the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance, Slovakia has irreversibly resolved the **strategic issue of its future direction and security** – this is the cornerstone which determines everything else. Slovakia finds itself in a relatively favourable security environment today. I wish to emphasise, however, that even though we have accomplished our key integration priorities, we care a lot about becoming a relevant actor in these influential integration organisations.

Today no one in Slovakia doubts that entry into the EU increased the political and economic prestige of our country. Living standards have increased; people’s purchasing power has risen. Having adopted the euro on 1 January 2009, the Slovak Republic practically fully accomplished its integration into the EU. Slovakia joined a “prestigious club” and assumed its part of responsibility for development and stability of Europe.

The life of the EU in the foreseeable future, under the presidency of Spain, Belgium and Hungary, will be influenced primarily by the substantial consequences of the

implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. European Union has entered another chapter of its history - new EU institutions are getting underway, with new composition of the European Parliament and new EU Commissioners appointed, etc.

The **Treaty of Lisbon** is generally expected to improve the quality of decision-making, simplify and streamline EU procedures. The Union simply needs to take a deeper breath, finally. However, we would be completely misled if we thought that by sheer adopting of the Lisbon Treaty we finally accomplished this process. On the contrary, by its adoption all is just beginning. The Treaty itself is not and has never been the aim. It is a tool, on one hand offering extraordinary opportunities, on the other depending on us how we will succeed to bring it into life. If we are to achieve transparent functioning of the institutions and better outward visibility of Europe, we must pay close attention to the correctness of the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, and to prevent it from falling victim to particular institutional, or national interests.

This equally and fully applies to the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**, which we expect to raise the global profile of the EU beyond its borders. This presumes, from our point of view, that the EEAS be vested with real tasks, including those within consular assistance to the citizens, as well as political area. It is absolutely crucial, that the EEAS is jointly owned by the Member States and institutions and, above all, that it represents an added value compared to the situation prior to the Lisbon Treaty. I am convinced, that only a strong and united Union can have a substantially positive effect on the quality of the EEAS, not vice-versa. To put it another way, the EEAS in international scene will be only as influential as the Union and its Member States will allow it to be.

The **EU as a global actor** has to tackle with constantly greater and more demanding tasks. Although the Lisbon Treaty represents a true milestone, it is only our inner cohesion and capability to agree on clear common vision that can achieve true international relevance for the Union. Today, many think of us as being attractive due to our stability and prosperity, but with little global relevance in terms of policy and strategy. I think we would benefit from being less preoccupied with ourselves, and more with the world that surrounds us.

Extended cooperation between **the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance**, as well as between the United States and the EU, is within Slovakia's utmost interest. I am convinced that this tandem is crucial for the fragile balance of present international relations. We expect intensifying of Euro-Atlantic relations, more effective communication, as well as increasing of the Europe's share of responsibility for global stability and security. We also expect the notion of enhanced Euro-Atlantic cooperation to appear in the Alliance's new strategic concept, on which we are now jointly working within the Alliance.

Slovakia is interested in further **EU enlargement**. I believe that the EU enlargement is one of the most successful political projects of the Union, and it is of utmost importance for further stable development in Europe. Enlargement should be perceived as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Slovakia, as one of the countries that only recently have undergone the whole accession process, is fully aware of the benefits of this process not only for our country, but also for the whole of Europe. EU enlargement is supported by more than two thirds of Slovak citizens - considerably more than the EU-wide average. We are convinced that the enlargement process, together with enhancing of the European Neighbourhood Policy,

should carry on because it remains to be one of the most effective instruments of stabilisation of the immediate surroundings of the EU.

Understandably, our priorities include Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in particular. Slovakia therefore supports the process of enlarging the Union by the countries of the Western Balkans in line with the conclusions of the Thessaloniki European Council, including the accomplishment of the accession talks of Croatia by the end of 2010, and beginning of the accession process of other candidate countries, subject to the fulfilment of the required criteria - something I don't have to emphasize, I believe. By no means is our support at the cost of watering down the criteria of accession. On the other hand, frankly speaking, the integration process is considerably more difficult for these countries due to several factors: much more intricate internal problems; economic crisis affecting their economies probably more intensively than us; as well as internal EU processes.

Why do I so often and specifically pinpoint the **Western Balkan** region and countries to the east of us? Because they represent the geopolitical space of major interest for us – Slovakia as well as Austria. Anything that happens in this space sooner or later affects our vital interests in a positive or negative way.

The current situation in the Western Balkans calls for strong European engagement, but far greater responsibility must be borne also by the countries of the region themselves. Although the commitment of Thessaloniki of 2003 remains valid, it seems that in spite of the efforts made so far, the EU integration process of the Western Balkan countries is slowing down, or even has come to a standstill. To put it bluntly, the situation in the Balkans has not been improving as fast as we expected.

I am quite familiar with this region and it seems to me that political elites of some of the Western Balkan countries fail to fully realise what a unique opportunity they have been offered by the European Union – a meaningful and real prospect of peace; an immense opportunity to get out from the muddle of their past, and to return to a normal life in Europe, to a world of stability and clear rules of a civilised game. This is the road that the Central European countries set out on 20 years ago and which has brought with it indisputable results.

The project of the **Eastern Partnership** is, in my opinion, an excellent and appropriate instrument of the Union's external policy. It offers good prospects of modernisation for the partner countries¹ to the east of the EU border, based on mutual benefit and with the aim of convergence. I consider the Eastern Partnership to be a long-term and open-ended project, which means that it does not automatically lead to EU membership, but basically, it doesn't rule it out, either.

I believe it is in our own interest to have such countries for eastern neighbours, which seek to live according to similar principles as the EU. Some consider it as competition with Russia for influence in the so-called "post-Soviet zone". Rather than competition, I believe, it is an offer of a well-tried model of functioning of society, public governance, and sort of culture of cooperation typical for the Union. It is up to our eastern partners how they accept this offer. By the way, Russia is also seeking a viable and more attractive model for its society.

¹ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine

In my opinion, full and sustainable stabilisation of Europe requires that Russia and other third countries also be engaged in selected projects of the Eastern Partnership. But we emphasise that no third country has the right of veto in this process.

The underlying premise for this opinion is that **Russia** is an integral part of the European civilisation. Relationship between the Union and Russia needs not to be demonised; it should be perceived and developed as prospectively value-based, mutually rewarding strategic partnership. At the same time, it is true that every partnership calls for commitment and agreement from both sides.

We are aware of the fact that Russia is extremely suspicious of the Eastern Partnership policy, considering it a “Trojan horse” of European interests in the area that it deems a sphere of its own interests. It is our task to work patiently in order to change this mindset. Slovakia rejects the imposition of obsolete concepts of hostility or blocs in Europe. We know that the partnership between the European Union and Russia will never be simple. We can hardly expect to fully agree on all the issues, but Russia’s real national interest clearly lies in a long-term strategic partnership with the European Union.

Slovakia has good relations with **Ukraine**, but they could be even better if the country became more consolidated after its presidential elections, and if its internal developments were foreseeable over a longer time period.

We wish to see Russia and Ukraine be involved in addressing global problems and security issues, because without their reliable participation it will be more than difficult for Europe to adopt sustainable solutions. Reliability of Russia and Ukraine has suffered a hard blow after the gas crisis early in 2009, which brought to the forefront discussion on energy security issues. This development should not, however, lead to an erroneous conclusion that Europe will not count Russia and Ukraine in. Quite the opposite. One of the outcomes should be an effort to establish the firmest possible contractual and legal framework for supplies of raw energy materials from Russia (through Ukraine) to EU Member States.

Enhancing **regional cooperation** in various formats is, in my view, an effective way to respond to global challenges at the regional level. I am increasingly more aware of how much interconnected are the countries of the wider Central European region. Regional cooperation is an excellent school of communication for all of us, it teaches us to patiently discuss, engage in dialogue and find compromises. This is where our strength lies and translates into a more relevant international standing for any one of us. It is with deep satisfaction that I say that the Visegrad Four is able to communicate in such a positive way even under the V4+ format, where your country has for several years been an important partner to the V4 in this dialogue. We are at the beginning of another European regional initiative – the Danube Strategy, which we consider to be a promising regional project if focused on very concrete, tangible areas of cooperation within its three main pillars (transport, water, social-economic development).

I would like to touch briefly upon bilateral **Slovak-Hungarian relations**. Being our immediate neighbour, Hungary is one of our crucial partners with whom we share common interests in vast majority of issues. Therefore, I always regret when I see how one controversial minority issue often overshadows largely prevailing positive aspects in our mutual relations. The root cause of these problems lies in communication, which too often falls victim to disinformation, half-truths, prejudice and particular interests of marginal

groupings. It is up to us, leaders of both nations, to show the willingness to put aside these often fictitious obstacles, and begin to communicate straightforwardly, to the point, with a cool head, and focus on substance, on what we have in common.

Last year it cost us enormous effort to ease our bilateral relations and to bring our partners to the negotiating table on the issue of the disputed interpretation of the law on the use of the state language in the territory of the Slovak Republic. Only one very brief illustrative explanation using Austria as an example: the aim would be to ensure that German-speaking Austrians could understand in German public announcements of municipal authorities in Austrian border towns such as Klingenbach, Pamhagen, Frauenkirchen or Nickelsdorf, where Hungarian speaking minority communities live.

I wish to stress with particular emphasis, that this law does not impose any restrictions at all on the use of Hungarian language in any communication with and among members of the Hungarian minority. Its only aim is solely to ensure that citizens speaking only Slovak and living on linguistically mixed territories of the Slovak Republic, would not become second-class citizens.

One of the vital challenges which the EU will have to put up with in the upcoming future is **energy security** – primarily to seek how to diminish its dependence on imported energy supplies and prevent any catastrophic results of their eventual failure. Slovakia further promotes the idea of national energy mix including the use of nuclear energy as one of the facilitating elements of transition towards low-carbon economy. At the same time Slovakia will step up its efforts in the field of renewable energy resources. Timely implementation of projects leading to actual diversification of energy routes and sources is of utmost importance for Slovakia. These projects must be geographically balanced and reflect the need to alleviate the dependence of the central and eastern European countries on one dominant supplier. That is what we discussed during the V4+ summit in Budapest few days ago. Seeing the effect of gas supply crisis of January 2009 it is clear that energy security, stabile, predictable and transparent energy market environment constitutes the very basis of sustainable development in consumer, transit and also producer countries.

I would like to conclude my overview with the most pressing priority of Slovak foreign policy, that is, combating the impacts of the global economic crisis on Slovakia. Naturally, diplomatic efforts are relevant only if they manage to respond to the most urgent problems of today. Therefore, I have placed the **economic diplomacy** agenda to the very forefront of the Slovak foreign policy strategic priorities. After all, it is useful to perceive the current economic and financial crisis also as an opportunity to learn, to seek new forms of cooperation and economic development.

With its open, export-oriented economy, Slovakia has no other way than to make the best use of all instruments at its disposal, including the Foreign Service, in order to support positive economic developments in the country. We set out on the good road in this respect in 2009 and will continue along that road this year as well.

Concurrently with the global economic crisis at its peak, we were introducing the common European currency in Slovakia. Today we can say, that despite the limited possibilities of using monetary instruments to combat the crisis, the euro has stabilised our economic monetary system and simplified financial flows between Slovakia and majority of EU countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speaking of **Slovak-Austrian relations**, they represent an important component of our foreign policy priorities.

It is proven by the intensity of high-level bilateral meetings (presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers are meeting officially at least once a year, unofficially dozens more times, not to speak about frequent contacts of other cabinets members), bilaterally intensive work on cross-border cooperation projects and a number of infrastructure projects (*such as: preparations for linking oil refineries in Schwechat and Bratislava's Slovnaft, a gas distribution network connection between Slovakia and Baumgarten, planned electrification and the laying of a second track on the railway line to Devínska Nová Ves by 2012, construction of an S8 motorway section connecting north Vienna with the D2 motorway to the north of Devínska Nová Ves by 2018, construction of bridges across the Morava River*). Austria is one of Slovakia's major trade partners. Ranking 7th in mutual turnover and 3rd in total investments (following the Netherlands and Germany), Austria has invested EUR 3.8 billion altogether in Slovakia since 1989, which accounts for 15% of all foreign investments. Austria is the largest investor in Slovakia's banking sector (controlling 50% of the market). According to a study by the Vienna Economic Chamber prepared in the autumn 2008, 90% percent of Austrian companies that have already invested in Slovakia would do so again.

Of course, not everything is absolutely flawless, but the trend is important, and it is positive. Austria is becoming commonplace to us as a neighbour, turning into an absolutely natural part of our surroundings, which is good. I would be pleased if our Austrian friends had the same feeling. We know that it will take still some time to remove social disparities. Decades of lagging behind cannot be erased in five years. Yet I still believe that the progress we have made over the past twenty years since the radical change of the regime is exceptional. The sheer fact that I can pay with the same currency on Obchodná ulica ("Trade Street") in Bratislava as on Vienna's Kärntnerstrasse is fascinating!

Municipal and regional initiatives are equally encouraging – we watch them with satisfaction, their interest in direct cooperation and full use of EU funds on projects focused on infrastructure, the signing of cross-border cooperation agreements between Lower Austria, the Bratislava and Trnava regions and the capital of Bratislava (15 April 2009), bilateral conferences on regional cooperation (such as the most recent one held in Trnava), or the first session of the Joint Slovak-Austrian Committee on Spatial Planning, Territorial Arrangement and Regional Policy. I appreciate the numerous excellent events we organised in cooperation with our Austrian friends to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in the former Czechoslovakia. I attended some of them in person.

(V prípade prítomnosti predsedu krajinskej vlády E.Prölla:) After all, the importance of the cross-border cooperation between Slovak regions and Lower Austria is underlined also by the presence of *Landeshauptmann* Erwin Pröll, whom I would like greet now. I believe, that results of your meeting with the Governor of the Bratislava region Mr. Pavol Frešo last week (3.3.2010) can only confirm my positive evaluation.

I would be glad to say that bilateral relations between Slovakia and the Republic of Austria are clear of any substantial problems, but it would not be quite true because there is one issue where our opinions differ – the use of **nuclear energy**. Our experience, global

developments in the area of low-emission electricity production technologies, and sustainable economic and environmental development, have convinced us that nuclear energy may be a comparatively reliable source of energy. Of course, putting an absolute emphasis on strengthening nuclear safety, rigorous compliance with international commitments and preserving transparency and mutual respect and dialogue is a must.

We appreciate cooperation in **culture and education** – continuity of the project of the academic exchange programmes for Slovak students at Austrian secondary schools, Slovak language classes at the University of Vienna, several thousands of Slovaks studying at Austrian universities, exchanges of artistic ensembles and cultural events.

Does all this mean I am absolutely satisfied with the current situation in our relations? No, I am not. Let me return to the opening of my address and reiterate that I cannot be satisfied if two neighbouring nations, sharing such a rich common history, are getting to know each other again at such a slow pace at a time of globalisation and revolution in communication. It is in a very shy and discreet way that ordinary Austrians are learning that these countries are trying to eliminate the decades of their lagging behind they had suffered under the isolated Communist regime, which devastated the values of a dignified life (so common for Austrians). These countries are getting over it only at the cost of considerable social sacrifices and with their utmost effort. Indeed, our way to a more dignified life is too fast; we had to fulfil too many demanding tasks at once, for which Austria had more time; even today, not everyone respects all the rules of a democratic game, but the trend is good and the chosen path is the only one that can be rewarding and beneficial for all countries of the region. In fact, the past 20 years have already proven its benefits for the entire region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It was not my intention to explore the Austrian and Slovak mind, but I could not avoid at least a very brief insight. If we are to trust more each other, we have to be frank, in both good and bad. If we want to prove that this region is able to cooperate, free of historical complexes, we must first show that we can understand and respect each other – not only because of our geographical and historical bonds, but mainly for the sake of a better future for the citizens of the entire region. Our future can only be peaceful if there is peace and understanding among Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Warsaw and Prague and wider.

Thank you for your attention.