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“The EU and the Western Balkans: The Objectives of the Slovenian EU Presidency – Implementation and Continuation”

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Panel II: Reform Strategies and Regional Cooperation

What special role can EU member states like HU, BG, RO, SI and GR play in the reform process? How do stability issues and other bilateral concerns hamper regional cooperation, esp. the functioning of the RCC?

We are asked how to connect the neighbouring countries with the Western Balkans. In the first place, our Presidency was inspired by a belief that the Western Balkans are a part of the same geopolitical Eastern Europe, and that they therefore must be offered the same chances that the rest of Eastern Europe had and used so well.

After the Yugoslav wars it was difficult for some to think more positively of the region, but before that, former Yugoslavia was the most open and probably the most prosperous part of Eastern Europe. Let us not forget that the Yugoslavs were able to travel visa free to most European countries, while the Serbs, Bosniaks, Macedonians of today cannot.

At the same time, we believe that EU integration is the best way to reform the region and help solving its security challenges. The EU has in the past already used its appeal to consolidate democracies in Europe through EU membership. Using this in the Balkans is equally legitimate – and we should not doubt about the chances that the Region stands. What some see as concessions, others view as supporting emerging democracies. From that point of view, one could ask: Should we compare the WB rapprochement with that of 2004 enlargement? Or with 2006 enlargement? Or with some enlargements of the 1980's? And also: What can we learn from the 2004 and 2006 enlargements for the next enlargement when it comes?

On the other hand – be it for the legacy of war or other legacies – the region has its own specifics that we have seen in the context of the EU rapprochement process of these countries: they do not respond equally well to the EU treatment that worked so well in classical Eastern Europe. And although the signing and even initialling of the SAA triggered a significant public momentum in Bosnia and had notable influence on national politics in Serbia, the EU prospects do not provide the same incentive for reforms as they did in Central Europe. Is it the problem with approach/tactics/public relations or with strategy?

A part of the answer lies in the fact that while the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of democracies in Central Europe provided an enormous momentum needed for painful reforms, most of the Balkans hopes for an EU future were squandered in the ashes of war, and submerged the region into a cynical apathy.

We had accepted during our Presidency that the issue of strategy should rather not be addressed. The Irish referendum seems to copper-fasten that view. But in Slovenia we believe that we need to think and talk about the strategy too and that while conditions for EU membership cannot be altered, alternative ways to the candidate status could be considered, including early candidate status.

I have already mentioned the comparisons with the 2004 and 2006 enlargement waves. Some would like to use it in negative ways. But the countries of the 2004 and 2006 waves can use their own experience for the benefit of the EU-hopefuls in the region as well as for the benefit of their own standing in the region. E.g. Slovenia used to share a very similar legal system with other countries of former Yugoslavia and can now see through the walls of the region's true difficulties – or excuses – for the less than perfect reform performance of these countries. As such, we are probably best suited to advise the countries of the region on their EU path. Moreover, it became somewhat fashionable in the line ministries in Slovenia for civil servants to participate in trainings offered to their counterparts in the region.

Also, the EU Members in the region now have an additional opportunity to tackle the issue of negative stereotyping of the region, to alter that situation and to point at the region's many potentials. Why not have, e.g. a glossy colour monography about the natural and cultural heritage of the Region?

Even more importantly, the EU members of the region should all remain aware that their own security and economic interests – and these are usually above any other less mundane bilateral concerns – will be affected should the Western Balkans fail to follow the EU path. We must be aware that in several countries of the region, the Euro-Atlantic perspective is the key glue, the crucial cohesive power to hold together former warring parties, different ethnic groups, or simply political blocks arising from the sociology of transition. Should this prospect disappear, centrifugal forces within these countries will be strengthened. In other words, the future prosperity of the arch formed by Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece around the Western Balkans greatly depends on how tangible the European perspective of the

Western Balkans will be. I am particularly thinking of Macedonia, which should not be let disappear from our radars, certainly not from the radars of the future Presidencies.

When we speak about regional cooperation, let me mention how extremely important this is for Kosovo. We cannot accept a situation in which Kosovo in its new reality would enjoy a weaker status in the regional cooperation forums than it did when still under UN administration. This is not necessarily an issue of recognition of Kosovo. Kosovo should be placed in the safety net of regional cooperation for the sake of the region. This is a great challenge in particular for the RCC, for the French and the Czech Presidency, for the EU Member States that are also part of the regional co-operation, but also for Serbia. Serbia has – contrary to the hints persistently given by the previous Government – shown a fair degree of responsibility in relation to Kosovo. But it should not stop there. We should seek pragmatic solutions. And, given some recent developments in other parts of the world, we should show that we can do it differently, and that regional cooperation truly works.

The RCC, as a new evidence of an emancipated local ownership, is a new opportunity for the region. The Western Balkans EU members have a special mission and opportunity there, as we have seen with the Bulgarian chairmanship of the SEECP.

In the context of regional co-operation let me mention one instrument of regional co-operation that is particularly topical at the moment – the SECI Centre in Bucharest for combating trans-border crime. The Centre is now in the concluding phase of drafting its new legal foundation that should make an institutionalised co-operation with EUROPOL easier. We believe that it is very important that we give a boost to this process of institutionalising of co-operation between SECI and EUROPOL in an area that is of such importance for the voters in the EU member states.

Regional co-operation in the sphere of economy will also need to get even more prominence. After successful launch of the Energy Community Treaty, the work on Transport Treaty with the region has now begun. It is good that there is an increased awareness among the countries of the region about these issues. E.g. Montenegro is busily thinking about the Adriatic-Ionian motorway, linking Croatia and Montenegro with Albania and Greece. Both Montenegro and

Albania have plans to improve the electricity supply and even make it available overseas. We should look how to integrate these important regional plans with transport and energy security concerns of the European Union.