



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

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Chairman, Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I first commend highly that the *Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft* to pay such a tribute to the Slovenian EU Presidency. Let me also express my sincere thanks to my colleague Minister Gernot Erler.

You will also have to bear with me this afternoon as Minister Dr Rupel was forced to make a last minute change in his schedule due to another pressing engagement. He asked me to express his sincere apologies.

So what can I say about Slovenia's neighbourhood to the south – the so-called Western Balkans – and Slovenia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the first half of this year?

When drafting the EU Presidency Western Balkans agenda, and the Western Balkans sub agenda, our goals were certainly very ambitious. I have to admit that this raised a few eyebrows in some quarters, but most EU partners and even Brussels did seem to have certain expectations. Down in the Region, ambitions were welcome too. I guess it was mostly us that had been worrying about fulfilling them.

Today, I can say that we are looking back with pride – and, I admit, also some relief. Our aim of a “new focus on the Western Balkans” has been largely upheld.

In the first place, the region is now – with the exception of Kosovo – fully covered with the safety net of the SAA network.

Secondly, we equipped the countries of the region with the roadmaps of visa liberalisation, a powerful tool, able to move countries out of the visa gap back to the visa-free status. One that – let us not forget – these countries already enjoyed before the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

In addition, the Commission, in consultation with the Presidency, launched a package of practical measures to keep the EU perspective tangible.

Perhaps most notable are the beginning of negotiations on a Transport Treaty with the region, a common investment framework for the Western Balkans, more scholarships as well as plans for joint efforts to combat fires in the nature.

Our Presidency reminded us also of the stark contrast between Slovenia and with the fate of most of the region: in seventeen years time we moved from a status of a constituent federal republic to full EU, NATO, Eurozone and Schengen Membership and then for half a year the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

While this was much more than pure luck, we always understood it as mission to share our experience with EU aspiring countries of our neighbouring region and support them in what is often an uphill struggle.

We continue to see the Western Balkans as unfinished business from making Europe whole and free. It was because of the war in the former Yugoslavia that the EU somehow lost appetite for the Balkans and forgot about comparative advantages of the former Yugoslavia.

Besides, every source of political instability, a piece of nationalistic rhetoric, or ethnically motivated incidents could first be felt in Slovenia – and other EU countries in the neighbourhood. Slovenia continues to be the key investor in the region and, e.g. makes – relative to its size – one of the biggest military contributions in Kosovo.

We continue to believe that the European perspective is the most powerful tool for the implementation of political, economic and social reforms in the region. While meeting criteria in full is essential, political aspects of the process cannot be ignored.

Turning to the Presidency, it is no secret that one of its most challenging chapters was finding political consensus on signing the SAA with Serbia. Having done concurrently the job of the political director I can vouch for that. After long discussions, sometimes day and night, a belief prevailed that such a move would not only serve as incentive to the pro-European forces in Serbia – something that became evident at the time of the general elections – but that it would also help create the necessary atmosphere, conducive to Serbia intensifying its co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. This proved correct, Karadžić is in the Hague, and Serbia has rediscovered Europe.

A few months earlier something similar had been happening in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a sophisticated choreography of EU incentives led to a political agreement and paved the way for the signing of the SAA with Bosnia-Herzegovina. The ball is now in Bosnia-Herzegovina's court.

The Slovenian EU Presidency was also marked by the Kosovo case. Despite the differences over details, and we all know the devil is in the detail, the Council in February agreed on some basic principles and enabled the way forward. Kosovars have shown a remarkable degree of restraint, sometimes akin to passiveness.

Peace has been retained with a minor exception of the March Mitrovica events, when international community defended it with resolve. At Gymnich in March, both the Serbian and Kosovo delegations sat at the same table and the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs

was a special guest at the meeting of the EU27: Slovenia demonstrated its ability to bring together.

We should not have the ambition to offer a piece of advice to the current French Presidency and the forthcoming Czech Presidency. However, they can remember that Slovenia can offer added value when it comes to the question of the Western Balkans. Let me list a few ideas:

Firstly, I do hope that the EU focus on the region will continue. In our view, the Union's internal consolidation and further enlargement are two parallel processes. We are confident that by the time the new entrants are fully ready, the EU will be ready too. And we should not shy away from internal discussion about the road to candidate status for the EU hopefuls.

Saying that, we remain fully aware of conditions for membership – and those take time to be met. The key, however, is that countries are engaged in a meaningful process where the voters push for more Europe and the politicians are eager to deliver by steering the wheels of civil service. We must help local leaders to be able to sell Europe.

We should also be looking forward and assisting whenever we can in countries of the region, meeting the visa roadmaps requirements. The region has long ago ceased to be a threat. We should grant the young voters of the region the same opportunity of visa-free travel that their parents enjoyed in what was two decades ago Communist Yugoslavia. Few other things are as tangible as travel to Europe.

Serbia is now on a good way back to the European future. The Serbian parliament – not without some domestic political controversy – ratified the SAA earlier this week and now wants the Interim Agreement to go ahead. In our view, renewed Serbian efforts to come to terms with its past through the ICTY cooperation should now be recognised by the EU.

But we should equally expect that Serbia recognises the value of EULEX and the rest of the EU presence in Kosovo. What is encouraging is that an increasing number of Kosovo Serbs in the enclaves and in the north are beginning to recognise that value.

Moving Serbia up the EU ladder will bring positive momentum to the region, where other countries are now in the process of considering their own further steps. We should carefully consider our reaction to that, judging them by their own merits. I am thinking here of Montenegro in the first place.

I also hope that our French and Czech friends will pay continued and particular attention to Macedonia. Apart of Croatia, this is the only candidate country we have in the region. A comparative advantage of Macedonia is that its Government enjoys a very broad support. This must be used wisely by our Macedonian friends. EU representatives have recently rightfully called on the leaders there to maintain political stability and dialogue. But we also believe that it is the Euro-Atlantic perspective that holds the cohesion power necessary to help the country to continue contributing to the regional stability. Theirs is a much needed contribution.

As for Kosovo, its continued inclusion in the regional co-operation remains a challenge. In any event, we should not accept a situation where the new Kosovo has fewer links with its neighbours that the old Kosovo under the UN protectorate had. The EU unity on Kosovo must be further strengthened in order to make the EU missions there a success. Additional recognitions would serve the interests of peace and stability, while uncertainty can fuel radical emotions. In Kosovo, the EU has shown a qualitatively different approach to handling difficult issues than we have seen recently in another part of the world, and we must ensure that this will be the case in the future too.

Last but not least, let me say a word about the economic perspective of the Western Balkans. EU assistance and the European Commission's measures have already been targeting the transport and energy infrastructure. Albania is one of those countries of the region that are beginning to address the issue of electric energy insufficiency. Energy potentials are there, as there are economic opportunities. Let us see the region as an opportunity above all.

The Yugoslav crisis, if I can still call it that, is finally coming to an end.

Slovenia is pleased that its Presidency has helped in that process. We are glad that the Western Balkans portfolio is now in the capable hands of countries which are equally passionate about the Western Balkans: France, the Czech Republic and Sweden.

Thank you.