



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA

OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER

OPENING ADDRESS
BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA JANEZ JANŠA
AT THE GREEK-SLOVENIAN BUSINESS CONFERENCE
Athens, 23 April 2007

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year marks fifteen years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Greece and Slovenia. During this period our two countries have developed excellent bilateral, multilateral and regional co-operation. The purpose of my official visit, today's business conference and Slovenian days in Athens is to further strengthen the bilateral ties.

Athens will always be remembered by Slovenia as the venue where Slovenia signed the Accession Treaty to the EU. Now, four years later and as a member of the Euro-Group, Slovenia is prepared to assume the presidency of the Council of the European Union. In this respect, Slovenia counts on the rich experience of Greece. Especially since our countries by rule share similar positions. In particular, when issues affecting the present and the future of the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans require special sensitivity.

Life along the Mediterranean coast has not only shaped Greeks and Slovenians into nations of the sea. We also share a unique heritage of lively trade as well exchange of ideas with other Mediterranean nations. This tradition is especially valuable in topical discussions on relations between cultures and civilisations. Slovenia wants to contribute to this dialogue and to the dynamic coexistence in the region through initiatives such as the Mediterranean University.

Slovenia and Greece also share the concern for the development of the Western Balkans. The attention devoted by Greece during its presidency in 2003 to the European perspective of these countries sent them an important signal. In the first half of 2008, Slovenia, along with its European partners, will make every effort to bring the Thessaloniki commitments as close as possible to their realisation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Independent Slovenia is a success story. Last year's economic growth of 5.2 per cent exceeded the ten-year average of 4.1 per cent. The forecast of 4.7 per cent for 2007 is above the EU average again. With its GDP per capita on purchasing power parity, which by our estimate exceeded 20,000 euros in 2006, Slovenia is catching up with the average development in the EU at a steady pace.

This goes hand in hand with an increase in the quality of life and welfare. Labour productivity and real wages are growing. As is the employment rate that is for the third year above the EU average. Our unemployment rate and the risk of poverty are still among the lowest in the EU.

Optimistic forecasts have also been confirmed by the International Monetary Fund, which ranks Slovenia in the category of developed economies. The smooth transition to the euro also contributed to this. After the first three months, as many as 95 per cent of Slovenians consider the adoption of euro a success. This is underscored by continuing low inflation. Furthermore, the introduction of the euro has strengthened Slovenia's position among the most open economies. Its exports accounted for 70 per cent of GDP in 2006.

The Government is determined to implement structural reforms. These are already yielding results. Measures aimed at simplifying and modernising the tax system are already in force. The path to a more flexible labour market will soon be outlined. European Commission and national business federations rank Slovenia in the group of six member states following the leading Ireland and Denmark in terms of reform progress.

Competitive power today depends increasingly on state's ability to bring up, attract and retain talented individuals. The Berlin Declaration states: "Europe's wealth lies in the knowledge and ability of its people; that is the key to growth, employment and social cohesion." Slovenia and Greece are both expanding the university and research area as well as opening its doors to the private initiative. Competitiveness is the very thing that enables young people to continuously demand better knowledge.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The economic delegation accompanying me on this visit comprises more than 70 businessmen. Its size and diversity prove that the interests of the Slovenian economy surpass the present level of co-operation with our Greek partners.

Economic co-operation between Slovenia and Greece is currently primarily limited to trade. And this trade is unbalanced: last year, Slovenian imports of Greek goods accounted for 202.5 million euros out of a total of 261 million euros in trade. However, the growth of trade in services exceeding 12 per cent and totalling 44 million euros last year is encouraging.

Investment flows between our two countries are modest with total value of 5 million euros. Greek investments in Slovenia prevail. Slovenian companies are interested in co-operation in the construction of infrastructure and energy facilities in Greece, as well as in participation in projects for the privatisation of the Greek economy.

Slovenia as a new partner in the euro area would like to see more Greek investment. Its favourable geographic location, developed infrastructure, high quality of life, educated labour force and a wide network of business contacts in the region, have attracted 6,13 billion euro foreign direct investment by the end of 2006. Progress in the privatisation of the economy also offers new opportunities.

Slovenia provides numerous possibilities for active holidays in unspoilt nature and relaxation in spas and wellness centres. Considering that Greece is an extremely popular destination among Slovenian tourists, we look forward to welcoming more Greek tourists to Slovenia.

Slovenia is also becoming an increasingly important distribution and logistics centre. The Port of Koper has extensive experience with Greek partners and would like to further enhance this co-operation. The Slovenian Government welcomes the interest expressed by the partners from both sides in exploiting the potential of new transport channels establishing closer logistical connections between our economies.

When considering Greek-Slovenian synergy in third markets, the Western Balkans immediately spring to mind. Slovenian and Greek business ambitions in the region are bold, and both countries are individually successful in their realisation. In the past fifteen years the Slovenian economy alone has invested some 2.6 billion euros in the region, contributed to the establishment of some 1,000 enterprises and helped generate around 16,000 jobs. By joining forces we could achieve more. Slovenia is interested in co-operation in the field of energy, where Greece plays the role of regional leader.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish all the participants of this conference fruitful and successful discussions. On behalf of the entire Slovenian delegation, I would like to thank the organisers, in particular the President of the Slovenian-Hellenic Chamber of Commerce, Dr Evangelos Tziavos. Thank you.