



Slovensko predsedstvo EU 2008
Slovenian Presidency of the EU 2008
La Présidence slovène de l'UE 2008

ADDRESS

**BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
AND PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL JANEZ JANŠA
AT THE JOINT PARLIAMENTARY MEETING FOCUSED ON THE WESTERN BALKANS
*Brussels, 27 May 2008***

*Mr President of the European Parliament, Mr Hans-Gert Pöttering,
Mr President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, Mr France Cukjati,
Mr President of the European Commission, Mr José Manuel Barroso,
Honourable Members of Parliament,*

I was most delighted to receive the invitation to attend this event. A number of joint initiatives taken by the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the EU Member States testify to the vitality of European parliamentary life, to which the Lisbon Treaty will shortly add a new dimension.

Joint parliamentary meetings are a fairly new and particularly appropriate formula for an open discussion of the key challenges that lie ahead for European integration.

Meetings held hitherto have focused on the Lisbon Strategy and the future of Europe and have greatly enhanced the discussion of the two topics that the Slovenian EU Council Presidency placed at the forefront of attention in the first half of 2008. Parliaments have significantly contributed to the launch of the second cycle of the Lisbon Strategy; their contribution has been crucial to the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which is already more than half complete.

The Slovenian EU Council Presidency is particularly pleased to welcome the decision to discuss, for the first time at this forum, the Western Balkans, another of the Slovenian Presidency priorities. It is in the interest of everyone involved that the representatives of the parliaments of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey participate in this discussion. Allow me, at this point, to extend a particularly warm welcome to them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

EU policy towards the Western Balkans has all along been guided by two fundamental beliefs: firstly, that the security and stability of Europe as a whole is inextricably linked to the security and stability of this region; and, secondly, that a future in Europe is the only positive alternative for the Western Balkans. The foundation for this was consolidated by the Thessaloniki Agenda in June 2003.

Five years on, considerable progress has been made. The Slovenian Presidency hopes that, in this respect, the June European Council will round off the positive period of the "new focus on the Western Balkans".

Indeed, we hope to see confirmation of a shift forward that would not be possible without substantial assistance from the European Commission, the European Parliament, and, of course, also the Member States.

On 1 January 2008, the Slovenian Presidency inherited two candidate countries and an incomplete network of Stabilisation and Association Agreements.

With Croatia's accession negotiations already well under way, we hope to see the EU open negotiations as soon as possible also with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. A positive message from the June Council meeting would encourage the reform efforts that will have to be redoubled after the early elections at the beginning of next month.

The conditions that will be crucial for the European Commission to issue a favourable report in autumn and, thus, for the next stage in the pre-accession process have been known for a long time. The resolution of bilateral issues, in particular the name issue, must aim at a win-win situation, with full respect for issues of identity and the importance of regional stability.

The signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Serbia was a fundamental step towards granting this country candidate status. The Slovenian Presidency will be looking forward to signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina on 16 June. This will round off this phase of the Thessaloniki Agenda.

The treaty basis of relations with the EU adds a new quality to the process of bringing the countries of the region closer to the EU – predictability and irreversibility. It also strengthens the conditional nature of the whole process: progress remains linked to the fulfilment of known criteria. The Slovenian Presidency hopes that the parliaments, the august assemblies that you are representing here today, will strengthen reciprocal commitments by ratifying the agreements as soon as possible.

The new spirit brought to the EU Strategy for the Western Balkans by the Thessaloniki Agenda is best appreciated in the form of the initiatives which, in line with facilitating association with the European Union, have been gradually including the Western Balkan countries in common European policies. This is all the more true in the case of the key strategic European policies. At the beginning of this year, the Slovenian Presidency inherited a model of good practice: the establishment of the Energy Community in South-East Europe with the first example of transposition of the *acquis* into the legislation of the countries of the region. Our joint efforts must be directed towards even more effective implementation.

It is our hope that progress in the field of transport will soon be rounded off with the conclusion of a transport agreement with the countries of the region.

Considerable efforts have been made with respect to strengthening cooperation in the field of justice and security: the June European Council will be able to welcome tangible progress under the initiative Organised Crime Threat Assessment for South-East Europe.

We are making every effort to see that the special attention that the EU and also the Slovenian Presidency have been devoting to education and research will also enrich cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans. The inclusion of the region in the European Research Area is a good example of enlarging the 'fifth freedom' and providing new opportunities to further develop the 'Ljubljana Process'.

Strengthening regional cooperation is a constant of European policy in the Western Balkan region. The establishment of the new framework concluded during the Slovenian EU Presidency represents a new stage. In the Regional Cooperation Council, the lion's share of responsibility is assumed by the countries of the region themselves.

The Slovenian Presidency is especially pleased with progress in the area of person-to-person contacts, in which the European Commission has played an important role. The very beginning of the Slovenian Presidency, which coincided with the introduction of a simplified and less costly visa regime for the Western Balkan countries, was very promising.

Five months later, we have even more to show. Yesterday saw the launch of the last dialogue on visa liberalisation that the EU has started with the countries of the region; our objectives are now set even higher.

From the perspective of the citizens of the Western Balkans, our objective of abolishing visas is not only of practical but also of important symbolic value. This is especially true for the younger generation of today who represent the backbone of modern pro-European forces of the Western Balkan countries. The announcements by the European Commission and certain Member States about increasing the number of scholarships for students from the region are very encouraging for young people.

In the area of economic and social development, the Western Balkan countries have made significant progress in fulfilling the Copenhagen economic criteria since the Thessaloniki Agenda. In this respect, it is ever more important that external support is well-coordinated and effective. That is why the Slovenian Presidency has welcomed the agreement between the European Commission and the key European development banks on establishing a comprehensive Investment framework for the Western Balkans.

Acknowledging the central role of good governance in the utilisation of human capital for harmonious economic and social development, initiatives such as the Regional School for Public Administration are especially valuable. It also offers added value in that it strengthens the principle of regional cooperation. Following the decision on the siting of its headquarters in January, the Slovenian Presidency is supporting efforts to accomplish the objective of finally establishing the school at the beginning of the next year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When we take stock of the Western Balkan dossier at the June European Council, we will also have to take account of Kosovo. This is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive challenges facing the European Union. The December European Council, which defined the key guidelines at EU level, endeavoured to influence the course of developments in such a way as to avoid destabilising the region.

The European Union was thus expecting and prepared for developments when they became more intense in mid-February. Gloomy predictions of ethnically motivated violence did not materialise. Quite the opposite, in the intervening period, Kosovo, which has so far been recognised by 20 EU Member States, has enshrined standards of inter-ethnic coexistence in its constitution.

The entry into force of the Kosovo constitution on 15 June will bring about a new situation, to which international players will have to adapt as well. I am convinced that, through dialogue with the United

Nations, the European Union will be able to work out a solution enabling it to assume the leading role which we jointly predicted for it in December last year.

In this regard, it is especially important that the Serbian Community in Kosovo recognises that it has an interest in the presence of the EULEX mission. This mission, UNMIK and KFOR are in Kosovo in order to provide short-term and long-term stability and protection of minorities. In the current situation, nobody else can provide it in their stead.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Never before has the European Union so clearly seen its common future in the global context, beyond Europe's borders. This is where the key challenges of the twenty-first century come from. In this respect, the present-day generation of Europeans has a historic opportunity to prepare Europe for its role of one of the key global players. We will be able to fully seize this opportunity only if we discharge our historical responsibility to conclude our project here, in Europe.

Today, the Western Balkans is the central focus of EU enlargement policy and, as such, constitutes an inevitable chapter in any serious debate on the future of Europe. This is also for this reason that the tradition of joint parliamentary meetings on the topic of the European perspective for the region should build on the experience of this meeting here in the European Parliament.

At the time when the paths of the European Union and the Western Balkans will become increasingly intertwined, every contribution will be welcome. I would also like to thank you on behalf of the Council of the European Union for your contributions yesterday and today.

Thank you.