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**The Slovak Republic
on its Way
into the European Union**

Discussion Paper

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The Slovak Republic on its Way into the European Union

Our new government, functioning as a coalition, has been in office for three months now. It is not important to contemplate whether this has been a short or a long time, but I find it very significant that our government started to act very decisively, resolutely and with determination right after it was appointed, realising its responsibility for the fate of the Slovak Republic in this enormously important period for our country. After the new government took over, first of all it was necessary to assess and analyse the situation in which our country found itself – in internal, economic and institutional areas as well as with regard to meeting its foreign policy objectives. However, following this, our government started to pay attention to setting both short-term and long-term goals and how to achieve them.

In foreign policy, the new Slovak government has set the Slovak Republic's membership of the European Union and the North-Atlantic Alliance as its key goals. We see entrance to these two integration groupings as a way to guarantee the Slovak Republic's future optimal development. There is simply no other alternative for Slovakia. With the aim of meeting this objective, the government is taking steps in internal and economic areas, as well as in the democratisation of institutions. We are extraordinarily interested in intensifying relations with all EU and NATO countries. Evidence of this includes my current visit to the Federal Republic of Germany, my visits to Washington and London last week and to Copenhagen in the next few days. Other Slovak representatives are doing like-

wise – Prime Minister Dzurinda's first visit abroad was to the EU and NATO headquarters in Brussels. Our coalition government is united in opinion about Slovakia's European future and considers its membership in the EU and NATO to be a strategic priority.

The project for the unification of Europe is a challenge common to all countries on our continent. This integration process is seen as natural and even inevitable. It is a unique opportunity for Europe to gain greater weight and a responsible position on the international scene as one of the key elements of world development in the new millennium and to be able to face growing world competition in the conditions of increasing globalisation. We also see an integrated Europe as a guarantee of the peaceful, secure and stable development of our continent. For Slovakia, the current development is a historic chance to become permanently one of the developed European democracies with which our country is closely connected, geographically, historically, culturally and, in particular, with regard to values. Slovakia has not always been on the sunny side and more events have happened to us than we have made happen. But that was in the past; now Slovakia lives for today and especially for the future.

The Slovak Republic wants to be a part of the future integrated Europe. Those who have been watching the developments in the Slovak Republic know that our foreign policy's strategic goal – to join the European integration process and become a European Union member – is not a new one. This objective was set as early as the establishment of the Slovak Republic in 1993. The Slovak Republic originally left on the train to European integration along with the other countries of the Central European region. Although it pulled off so promisingly, it was slowed down in recent years and did not reach the halfway point together with our neighbouring countries: the Slovak Republic was not, despite progress achieved on the road to integration in all spheres, invited into the first group of associated countries which the European Union started negotiations with on accession last year. The former Slovak government's ambiguous pro-integration policy and underestimation of the influence of in-

ternal politics on meeting foreign policy objectives can be identified as reasons for this. However, in the parliamentary elections in September last year, the citizens of the Slovak Republic expressed very clearly and unambiguously that they do not desire the policy of Slovakia's diversion from integration into Western structures to continue, but they see Slovakia's future in the family of democratic countries sharing the same values and co-operating with each other. The fact that the voter turnout at the elections was 84% in itself proves that Slovaks do care about their country's fate and future. Therefore I would describe the September elections as a decisive milestone in our country's development. The message our public sent in the elections formed the basis of our new coalition government's programme.

Our government has laid out an ambitious plan to achieve the strategic goal to secure the Slovak Republic's membership in the European Union: we want to do our best to quickly remove the obstacles that prevented Slovakia from being included in the group of EU candidates with which negotiations on accession have already started and meet all conditions laid down in line with the Copenhagen criteria before the Cologne EU Summit in June this year. We believe that Slovakia is at a stage of preparation for accession comparable to that of the countries which form the first group. The former Slovak government's unclear and ambiguous policy and especially its steps in internal politics prevented us from being among them today. Our current government believes that the Slovak Republic has the potential to catch up. But we need support and trust on this journey.

Our government's first steps were aimed at the swift removal of the political reservations that blocked the commencement of bilateral talks on Slovakia's accession to the EU. Today, I can state with pleasure that we have already managed to meet a great number of the requirements for internal politics. For illustration I could mention the free and democratic nature of the municipal elections in December last year, the representation of opposition parties in parliamentary and non-parliamentary bodies, the change in attitude towards national minorities – representatives of the

hungarian national minority are present in the government today - or the current government's keeping of its pre-election promise by recently adopting an act on direct presidential elections. Soon, the completion and approval of the Act on the Use of Languages of National Minorities is expected. Our government is also taking rapid steps in other areas: it has adopted a package of economic measures to strengthen the foundations of our open market economy. With the aim of increasing the inflow of foreign direct investment into the Slovak economy and liberalising the environment for foreign investors, concrete steps have started to be taken to strengthen the financial sector. Let me also mention that according to purchase power parity, calculated from the GDP per capita indicator, the Slovak Republic is the third most successful of the associated countries, after Slovenia and the Czech Republic, and is relatively far ahead of Hungary, Poland and the Baltic states. Compared to other associated countries, agriculture has a low share in GDP in Slovakia - 5-6%. Special bodies and structures have been established to co-ordinate and realise the process of our country's preparation for accession to the EU in all areas. An office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Integration has been created and the structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been adjusted. The Slovak Republic's legislation is already at an advanced stage of approximation to Union law. We are paying very close attention to the adoption and application of the *acquis* and the Accession Partnership priorities resulting from it. We do not expect Slovakia's integration into the European Union to place a substantial burden on structural or cohesion funds.

Our government would very much welcome the support of EU member countries and, in particular, from the key country - Germany, in this endeavour and in meeting the set objectives. The European Council Vienna Summit in December last year encouraged us in this endeavour. We welcome the summit's confirmation of Slovakia's leading position in the accession process and the inclusivity of this process. I would also like to draw attention to the European Parliament's resolution from December last year, which invited the Union's Member States to take a flexible ap-

proach to Slovakia. We welcome the European Commission's flexible approach to Slovakia, which was, for example, reflected in the prompt establishment of the so-called EC-Slovakia High Level Working Group. In particular, this group discusses the Partnership's short-term priorities and helps to accelerate work within the framework of pre-accession preparation. I would like to express my belief that following the preparation of a new evaluation report on Slovakia by the European Commission this year, the Slovak Republic will be invited to negotiations on accession at the Helsinki summit at the end of the year at the latest – but I do not deny that we would be happy if such a step were taken earlier, at the Cologne summit. This is based on our belief that EU Member States will bear the principles of an individual approach and inclusivity of the enlargement process in mind and that they will look at the Slovak Republic's endeavour and results objectively and assess us using the same criteria as those used for the associated countries with which negotiations have already started.

I would like to use this opportunity to express my appreciation for Germany's activity in the European integration process. On January 1 this year, the Federal Republic of Germany took over the presidency of the European Council. It is a very responsible role in a very important period, in which the dynamics of the whole development and future prospects of this European integration group will be decided. The ambitions of the German presidency are extraordinarily high: internal reinforcement and development of the EU by the completion of negotiations on Agenda 2000 at the March summit in Berlin, increasing the efficiency of the Common Foreign and Security Policy mechanism, achieving progress in employment policy, agreements on immigration policy, countering trans-boundary crime and achieving progress in the discussion on the financing of the EU budget. Moreover, in the first half of 1999, the process of ratification of the Amsterdam Treaty should be completed, through which this important document will enter into force.

The Slovak Republic applauds the Federal Republic of Germany's intention to achieve substantial progress in the European Union's internal reform during its presidency. We know that many EU member countries consider resolving the issues of the Union's internal functioning to be a precondition for its further enlargement. Despite this, I would like to express my hope that the European Union and its current leadership will not lose sight of the Union's enlargement process and my belief that increasing the degree of integration within the EU will not stand in the way of the process of its enlargement by associated countries. In this context, we welcome the statements from the highest representatives of the Federal Republic of Germany that their country remains an "advocate" of the Central and Eastern European EU membership candidate countries. I would like to emphasise that we place extraordinary importance on the German presidency and we hope that it will succeed in meeting the set priorities, in particular, through the completion of discussions on Agenda 2000. We agree with the opinion that a reasonable compromise on the Agenda 2000 issue would greatly contribute to EU enlargement. In our opinion, it is precisely Germany, which, being the most aware of the EU Member States of the conditions in Central and Eastern Europe, could help to start negotiations on Slovakia's accession to the EU this year through the thorough enforcement of the individual approach, since the differences between Slovakia and the first group of candidate countries in the standards achieved in economic, legislative, political and administrative areas are minimal. I will go as far as to say that the opposite case would not only be an underestimation of the Slovak government's effort, but especially a disappointment for Slovak citizens.

In our opinion, maintaining or deepening the distances between associated countries of the Central European region would have a negative impact on the natural co-operation that is taking place between these countries and that we want to develop further. Our neighbours, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, with which negotiations on accession to the European Union have already started, expressed their interest in restoring co-operation within the Visegrad Four after the government was changed in

the Slovak Republic, which we have welcomed. The Slovak Republic has proposed a whole series of common meetings and activities – for example a common approach to visa policy. Co-operation between the countries of the Central and Eastern European region within CEFTA is also developing successfully. From regional trans-boundary co-operation can grow a real integrated Europe. Therefore I claim that separating Slovakia from the countries of the Central European region, where it geographically, historically and culturally belongs, would neither be beneficial for Slovakia nor its neighbouring countries and the European integration project. At the end of the day, it is enough to think of the increasing problems which all European countries have to face, such as illegal cross-boundary migration, drug trafficking and terrorism.

The Slovak Republic neither wants the integration process to be accelerated nor stages to be omitted. We are responsibly preparing for EU membership. In doing so, we are building on the Luxembourg EU summit conclusions, which defined Union enlargement as a comprehensive, inclusive and continuous process. I would like to assure you that Slovakia understands the reasons why it is not possible to set an exact date for the acceptance of new members to the EU at present. In the current situation it is most important to utilise the time to prepare ourselves as well as possible for smooth accession to and existence in the EU. Similarly, the EU also has to be prepared for the enlargement. But we have to prepare for the fact that the date for EU enlargement will have to be set one day, otherwise the whole process will lose credibility. Sometimes there is an impression that the comprehensive issue of EU enlargement is often narrowed down to the topic of costs, while the indisputable benefits to both sides connected with EU enlargement are forgotten. And these are not only benefits to security and politics, but also economic ones.

Just as the year 1999 is important for the Federal Republic of Germany as the country holding the EU presidency, it is a great challenge for the Slovak Republic, too: we believe that it will not only bring political stability and the first fruits of the economic measures that our government has ad-

opted, but will be dominated by our country's regaining of its lost position in the leading group of associated countries. Our government is not setting out on an easy road. It is important though, that it is aware of this and does not lack determination. We also can not overlook the fact that it can rely on the support of the electorate and the endeavour of all coalition parties to maintain and reinforce the coalition government's cohesion. I would like to express my belief that the Federal Republic of Germany will be our advocate and will continue to support the process of European Union enlargement.

To conclude, I would like to say: let's together use our unique chance, which we were given after the fall of the bipolar system and removal of the iron curtain, and let's work together on the unique project for an integrated Europe. This is a chance to secure peaceful conditions for development, mutually beneficial co-operation and economic prosperity for all European countries. Let's together make Europe strong!

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