

Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic Mr. Miroslav Lajčák on

“The Danube Region within a New Europe – Opportunities and Challenges”

European Forum Wachau, 26 June 2010

Monsignor Luser,
Mr. Commissioner,
Distinguished Ministers
Mr. Governor,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and honour to be here today and to have an opportunity to make a statement on this very topical issue. I would like to thank the organisers for the invitation and to commend Austria for her leadership in promoting the development of the Danube region in general and for initiating, together with Romania, the idea of preparing a European Union Strategy for the Danube Region in particular. I would like to assure you about our support to this initiative, which is in the interest of the countries engaged in the project, as well as the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

To speak about Danube is like speaking about Europe itself. Danube is not just a river. We could even call it the aorta of Europe. Not just because it flows through the heart of Europe. **It also symbolises the course of the European integration.** It springs in Germany – the founding member of the European Communities. Then it flows through Austria that joined in 1995. Danube continues through Slovakia and Hungary – members of the EU since 2004 and finishes its journey through Europe in Bulgaria and Romania – EU members since 2007.

Nevertheless, we can also see a gap on this journey. This gap represents the last wound on the face of Europe. This wound is the remnant of the tragic events of the nineties in the Balkans. We know its reasons, we know its consequences and we know the medicine to heal it. The name of the cure is European integration. I am convinced that one day this wound will disappear and **we will have a chance to say, that Danube does not leave the territory of the European Union.**

In this regard, I am particularly glad to have my Croatian colleague, minister Jandrokovic here. I see his presence, if I may, as a symbol of an early integration of not just Croatia, but of the whole region of Western Balkans to the EU. Because Europe will never be fully united without having Western Balkans on board, without having the whole Danube region fully integrated into the EU.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The countries on the bank of Danube have always recognised its importance and its potential. The Danube region and the river Danube itself represent a unique natural, economic and transport phenomenon. Danube has been a source of wealth for the region in the form of water, energy, transport and trade. At the same time it has also been a source of inspiration for the people living on its banks (let's just recall Strauss and his *An der schönen, blauen Donau*).

We are therefore glad that now the EU has also started recognising the importance of Danube, not just for the Danube region as such, but also for the EU as a whole. Because **this is how we perceive the idea of the Danube Strategy – as a two-way process - the EU supporting the development of the Danube region and the Danube region contributing to the development of the EU as a whole.**

This is why Slovakia has welcomed the decision of the European Council of June 2009 to prepare the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region. We have actively participated in the preparation process of the draft strategy and the action plan, as we consider preparation and implementation of strategies aimed at comprehensive and sustainable development of different EU regions to be an appropriate approach to regional development.

Such an approach provides for the involvement of interested subjects, cities and administrative regions. In this way it promotes local ownership and provides for finding the most appropriate and most effective solutions that fit best to those who are directly affected by their implementation. In this way the Danube Strategy represents an important tool to promote the goals of the European integration through **bringing the spirit, ideals and tools of the European integration closer to its citizens.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have already stated that Europe will never be fully united without having the Western Balkans on board. However, simple formal unification of Europe should not be our final goal. **What we need is not just a united Europe. What we need is an interconnected Europe.** We need Europe that not only guarantees freedom of movement, but Europe that also creates adequate conditions for this movement through developed infrastructure.

We are fully aware of great regional differences. Differences in the level of socio-economic development, differences in the state and quality of infrastructure. We know that there is insufficient network of interconnections within individual parts of the Danube region and in particular between the south-east and north-west part of it. Building and developing integrated infrastructure system should become one of the main ambitions of the Danube strategy. In this way it could **contribute to the fulfilment of an another priority of the European integration – namely to strengthen the cohesion of our continent** through diminishing the gaps between different regions, shrinking the differences in their economic and social development, through making distances shorter and thus eliminating not only legal and political, but also physical barriers between the countries and citizens.

I have mentioned the symbolic link between the West and the East of our continent represented by Danube. However, Danube is not just a symbolic, but also a very concrete, tangible bond between the West and the East. Danube interconnects the Black Sea with the Black Forest and we want to improve and develop this connection. In Slovakia **we see the development of the continuous Danube waterway and measures to ensure the navigability of the Danube in a manner that respects principles of sustainable development as one of the key priorities of the Danube Strategy.**

But the time has come to move even further. We should give a very serious consideration and take concrete actions in order to make the visionary and courageous plans to connect the Black Sea with the North Sea and with the Baltic Sea a reality.

Priority should also be given to multimodal corridors in the Danube region. In this context Slovakia has been elaborating a project of a **Transcontinental Transit Terminal**, creating a hub for all forms of transport: air, rail, road and water.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Besides the transport functions, Danube has a **particular importance in the field of energy security**. It has a particular appeal for our Central-European region, which faced the greatest and unprecedented gas crisis just one and a half year ago. We see a huge potential of Danube as both the source of reliable and renewable energy as well as an important transport corridor for the supply of raw materials for energy production.

The exploitation of Danube must go hand in hand with its protection. At the same time, we should bear in mind also the wider environmental context of the exploitation of Danube. It means to see the exploitation of Danube not just as a burden for the river, but also as a significant contribution to the improvement of the environment in general terms. Water transport is one of the cleanest forms of transport. Multimodal transport is not only a cost-effective solution, but it can also relieve the roads in the region from lorry traffic. Let alone that the scale of the transportation on Rhine river is 10 times bigger than that on Danube, and yet, Rhine is 3 times cleaner than Danube. Similarly the exploitation of Danube as a source of energy means not just an effective means of diversification. It is also a source of clean and renewable energy and thus it helps meeting the commitments for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

There are many other crucial areas that should be included in the Danube Strategy. Under the recent developments in Central Europe I may not omit flood prevention and I could continue with protection of water quality and water sources, sustainable land use, efficient management of water and soil, integrated river management, development of tourism or intercultural dialogue.

In all these consideration proportionality should be the leading principle in finding the appropriate balance between rational exploitation of the Danube resources and its protection. We believe that both goals can be achieved simultaneously and the Danube Strategy should have the ambition to strike an appropriate balance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Regardless of the unquestionable bonds between the different parts of the Danube region, we also have to recognise that we talk about a culturally and socially very diverse region. It is of crucial importance to bear in mind this diversity while planning and adopting decisions

concerning the Danube strategy, when defining its philosophy, methods and approaches. To make the Danube strategy successful it is important to focus on Danube cooperation rather than on „Danube identity“, to concentrate on concrete projects rather than vague ideological concepts.

Citizens will be ready and willing to support such projects that will – in short and medium term - bring concrete results through improvement of their social situation in the form of development of their communities, villages, towns and regions.

To ensure successful development of this diverse Danube region in the conditions of a new Europe it will be crucial to clearly answer certain essential questions. It is not sufficient to accept the three NOs (no new budget, no new legislation, no new institutions). We have to unambiguously define and agree upon transparent rules for long-term financing of the Danube Strategy projects and activities. If we want to avoid failure of certain projects and the subsequent frustration, we should specify the process of approval, operation and administration of the Danube Strategy Action Plan as well as the implementation procedures and the use of financial resources in order to avoid possible misuse of European funds.

We support the EU concept aimed at closer integration of the Danube region and streamlining the use of available financial resources within the framework of the EU regional and cohesion policy. We also agree with the European Commission opinion focusing on an integrated approach taking into account the interests of all the partners involved. To achieve best results it will be equally important to use the Danube Strategy to coordinate a number of smaller regional initiatives tackling different aspects of the Danube cooperation (such as Danube Commission, The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River etc.), to use their experiences and if possible to merge or combine their activities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For Slovakia, Danube has an additional symbolism. It links our capital with two neighbouring capitals – Vienna and Budapest. In particular, the co-operation between Bratislava and Vienna as the two closest capitals in Europe has recently intensified also in the field of development of

the Danube region. That was reflected in the organisation the Third conference devoted to the preparation of the EU Danube Strategy in April this year jointly by Bratislava and Vienna.

We have also noted the idea to bring together the countries of the Baltic and the Danube region in the second half of this year to discuss the possibilities of strengthened communication and cooperation in order to coordinate approaches aimed at successful implementation of the two macroregional strategies. Slovakia is opened to discuss this idea in more detail and offers itself as a host country for such a meeting. Ladies and gentlemen,

I have mentioned how important the Danube strategy is for the Danube region and how it can contribute to achieving the goals of the European Union in at least three areas – enlargement, bringing the Union closer to its citizens and promoting the internal cohesion of the Union.

Slovakia is one of the countries strongly interested in making Danube cleaner and at the same time to make it a real waterway that connects and contributes to the well-being of the countries and the 81 million people living in the Danube region.

I believe the Europe Forum Wachau will provide another tangible impetus and will come up with inspiring new ideas to achieve these noble goals.

I thank you for the opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts and wish the Europa Forum Wachau success.