

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC,
MIKULÁŠ DZURINDA, AT A MEETING WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF
THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS ACCREDITED IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC.
24TH OCTOBER 2002**

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased that, shortly after the formation of a new government that reflects the results of the recent parliamentary elections, I have the opportunity to share a number of ideas with you in regard to the direction of the Slovak Republic in the near future.

The primary task of my government in 1998 was to lift Slovakia out of its increasing international isolation. This necessitated the democratisation of domestic policy and the approval of economic and social reforms, which returned Slovakia to the path of integration. It meant not only implementing these reforms, but also persuading the citizens of Slovakia that domestic and foreign policy are closely linked. We called for a halt to the era of insincerity, where the words of Slovakia's representatives abroad did not match their deeds at home. For this, we received a mandate from our citizens in the general election, and this undoubtedly provided a powerful bond that held together what was perhaps the most broad-ranging government coalition in the history of Central Europe.

Our task was to bridge the gap that had grown between ourselves and our neighbours, whose goals were either similar or identical. Slovakia wished to become a member of the OECD, NATO, and the EU. Thanks to domestic reforms, which brought about macroeconomic stability and also attracted much-needed foreign investment, our country is now the thirtieth member of the OECD. In our view, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation represents a key factor for the stability of the trans-Atlantic arena. We support the establishment of the European Security and Defence Policy. We support a Europe that is both able and prepared to undertake a greater share of the responsibility for its own security. However, we also regard the American presence as vital. The destinies of both continents are connected by an umbilical cord. We must approach this issue with the utmost responsibility.

We see membership of the European Union as an instrument for overcoming the artificial division of Europe, which resulted from the rise of communism and the emergence of the iron curtain. Day by day, the vision of a free, united, and indivisible Europe is becoming more of a reality. Smoothing out the differences will undoubtedly prove to be a long-term process. However, the political process must triumph over the technicalities. The enlargement of the European Union represents a source of great hope for the Old Continent, and of great motivation for those who are now setting out on a similar path.

The extension of a friendly hand by our neighbours after the 1998 elections in Slovakia provided us with great encouragement. A traditional Slovak proverb, handed down from ancient times, is "sweep your own doorstep first". This precept was reflected in relations with our neighbours and our support for Visegrad cooperation. Our principal ambition was to achieve a regular and friendly atmosphere in our mutual relations. And I believe that we were successful in every respect.

We achieved a historic settlement with the Czech Republic and completed the sharing out of former federal property. We also attained a completely new level of relations with

Hungary, of which possibly the most powerful symbol is the renovated Mária Valéria Bridge, connecting the historical towns of Štúrovo and Esztergom. Poland represents a strategic partner for us, Austria a gateway to the European Union, and Ukraine, our largest neighbour, represents enormous opportunities in the area of economic and political cooperation. In recent years, the Visegrad group of countries has brought about a strengthening of regional stability; it has become appealing to other countries in transition and a credible partner for EU and NATO member states.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The elections are over in Slovakia. The preceding period has shown that Slovakia can only profit from patience and a principled approach. Our citizens have recognised this, which is why they have opted for continuity. I hold no illusions that they all came to the ballot box with a great deal of enthusiasm. I have stated this a number of times. However, this rationality, reflected in to the results of the recent elections, indicates to what extent Slovakia has mentally become closer to western democracies. Our citizens clearly declared where they wish to belong, and demonstrated that they understand the 'rules of the club'.

The newly elected government is a government of reforms. In the area of foreign policy, it represents both continuity and also the ability to respond to new challenges. The new electoral term will see the face of Slovakia change radically. We anticipate that we shall become full members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union over the course of this electoral term. The dream will become a reality!

We want to conclude negotiations on European Union accession by the end of the year. We are expecting to receive an invitation for membership at the NATO Summit in Prague. However, we are aware that this is not an end in itself. On the contrary – we will subsequently enter a new, even more demanding phase. We are already looking beyond the horizon of the Prague Summit, and we will endeavour, together with our neighbours, to seek out the optimum level of integration within the framework of the alliance. We want to specialise, and to have a cohesive influence in the Central European region. We shall seek out space for our active engagement in the planned Rapid Response Force. I believe that Visegrad cooperation can also play a vital role in these endeavors.

Slovakia also wishes to continue in its role as a stabilising element in the Central European region. Our neighbours are, and will continue to be, our key partners. Each of them possesses enormous potential for development, and Visegrad cooperation clearly demonstrates the benefits of combining this potential. I think that we all understand this. However, the relatively clear Central European sky is still darkened by a single cloud, which it would be in the interests of us all to dispel. I want to briefly mention this problem I see in Hungarian Status Law.

I am quite worried by this piece of legislation because as it stands now it would mean interference into our affairs and it would mean discrimination of groups of citizens on an ethnic basis. A situation where children grow up side-by-side on the same street, of which some receive payments from a neighbouring country simply because they attend a school with Hungarian as the language of tuition, cannot be permitted to exist. The end of this year is about to come soon and I shall certainly use my excellent relations with the Hungarian Prime Minister so that we reach amicable and advantageous settlement for both countries. I have shown a great deal of patience both before the parliamentary

elections and local elections in Hungary, but now there is the time to really take care of this cloud which hung over our heads and we would like to dispel this cloud which still brings the shadow over the Central European region.

Over the previous electoral term, we demonstrated our very strong resolve to further improve conditions for the development of minority cultures. And we will continue with this trend in the electoral term ahead. We have agreed upon the establishment of a university where the language of tuition will be Hungarian. We have adopted a number of measures for strengthening the cultural identity of minorities. There is no doubt whatsoever that national minorities in Slovakia enjoy favourable conditions for their development and we will certainly do our best to support this development. We shall also do our best to integrate the Roma community into the overall community of our nation.

We shall do our best to cut down corruption in this country. And we shall do our best in order to attain a better, if I may say, marketing of Slovakia. Recently, I have often heard it said that “you are doing it well, but you can’t sell it”. We will play an active role in expounding Slovakia’s attributes and the achievements that our people are capable of. This is something which should enhance the influx of foreign investment into our country and also the more vigorous development of tourism and trade.

The stabilisation of Slovakia resulting from membership of the EU and NATO will create favourable conditions for more active and objective foreign policy in relation to other countries. We, together with our partners in the Visegrad 4, wish to assist in guiding Ukraine towards Western democratic structures. We want to play an active role in the further stabilisation of the countries of South-Eastern Europe. We are also taking a pragmatic look at the enormous potential of developing relations with the Russian Federation, particularly in economic areas. Slovakia, like the other countries of the Visegrad group – which are also set to become members of the European Union – can contribute its specific experiences and expertise in relation to neighbouring and nearby non-member states.

We have received a mandate from our people to take Slovakia further along the road upon which we set out in 1998. Their vote has even eased many disputes. I greatly appreciate this.

We have never been, and are still not, complacent; we are aware of our inherent limits, and moreover, we are aware of the opportunities that we must now use to the full. We do not want to overstretch ourselves, but to employ the human and economic potential of Slovakia effectively – potential that we, with your help and with the help of the countries you represent, have created. The Slovakia of today is more self-assured; it is richer in experience and amenable to cooperation in the spirit of partnership.

In conclusion, please allow me to thank you for very good cooperation in recent four years and I am very glad that we will have an opportunity to meet and actively cooperate also in upcoming years.

Thank you for your attention.

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