

**CONTRIBUTION BY THE SPEAKER
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„RAISING EUROPEAN NATIONAL AWARENESS“**

Distinguished Speakers, dear colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to welcome the decision of our host Mr. Paška, the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament, and to congratulate him for the excellent choice of topics for this Conference.

Indeed, raising European national awareness is nowadays the main European issue and is in the focus of national debates in all European countries.

This issue is reflected in my country, Croatia, in a particularly specific way. Primarily because of our recent past, I am sure you understand. After stepping out of a multinational union seventeen years ago, Croatia was building both its national and European identity. To confirm one's national identity and to simultaneously adopt the European system of values in such a short period is by no means an easy task.

In the last couple of years, Croatia has made a decisive step forward as regards its membership of the EU and has been systematically adopting the European values and standards, which are being incorporated into all structures of our society. Croatia's integration into the large European community of states and peoples has been defined as our main foreign policy goal, and a consensus thereon among all major political forces in the country has been reached. Issues pertaining to Croatia's accession to the EU permeate all spheres of our social life.

In that process, the Croatian Government and Parliament are continuously facing the issue of how to bring European issues closer to citizens. Although much has been achieved in this field, and a communication strategy for raising the awareness of the Croatian public has been developed and implemented, we know that a lot of work still lies ahead. Our basic goal is to achieve the highest possible transparency of the negotiating process. Against this background, a bigger involvement of the media, institutions, civil society and all other components of the Croatian social corpus is required.

The majority of Croatian citizens are in favour of Croatia's accession to the EU. Reasons for this are simple and expected: they see the Union as a chance to

confirm their affiliation to the European civilisation, they see a network of values which they wish to share with other European peoples, and they see opportunities for development and prosperity.

To put it briefly, Croatia regard its membership of the EU as an opportunity to enrich its national identity and to preserve and strengthen its national interests. We hold the view that our cultural diversity is compatible with European experience as regards unity in diversity.

Furthermore, the strengthening of our European identity assists us in shaping our own better future. And vice versa, the adoption of the European legal, political and economic system strengthens our European identity.

The debate about the future of the European Union has been in the focus of attention of the European public lately. Croatia is, on the other hand, interested in the effects of the debate about institutional arrangements, but also in other issues relevant for the future functioning of the EU. Croatia is confident that the EU shall find a solution to key issues, which shall both enable its internal efficient functioning and strengthen the EU internationally. Croatia endorses all solutions which shall be conducive to the strengthening of the European Union.

European identity has been built in the last couple of decades. It started with the establishment of institutions, but it started even earlier, with the establishment of a new political culture. In parallel, the awareness of Europeans about a common identity as a product of this new political culture was growing. I believe that perhaps the discussion is sometimes more a discussion about institutional arrangements and less about European identity. Nevertheless, precisely this topic may become one of the issues which will determine the European future. In 2007, when we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome which laid the foundations of the EU, and in the light of current debates about the institutional restructuring of the EU, this issue has more significance and symbolism than ever.

Croatia is facing parliamentary elections this year. It is our goal that all matters related to Croatia's accession to the European Union do not become a topic on which political parties will win or lose points in the forthcoming elections. Our efforts will focus primarily on raising the awareness of Croatian citizens about the EU as an opportunity to improve their standard of living and to strengthen the country at political, economic, cultural and social levels.

Thank you.