

The Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments Bratislava, 26 May 2007

UKRAINE, THE EASTERN NEIGHBOUR OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Speech by Mr. Pavol Paška, Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic

Distinguished Speakers, Chairman Moroz, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I open the last panel of our conference, I would like to appreciate the constructive spirit of our discussions and thank you all for the inspiring contributions you have made to our previous panel discussions. I am indeed proud that this parliamentary forum in Bratislava – another in the series of the joint meetings of the heads of legislative assemblies – proves that the leaders of the joint European project continue to have the will and energy to discuss the most important aspects of our future, and that the dynamics of the European Union development resound so prominently in our talks and deliberations. The conference gives me the impression that the European Union has taken a new breath and is ready to embark on giant new projects aimed at intensifying our mutual cooperation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The future of Europe will be largely shaped by our ability to deepen the process of integration and define the conditions for any further enlargement of the European family of 27. In this connection, I was particularly impressed by the initiative of the preceding Danish presidency when Denmark, as the hosting country of the supreme European parliamentary forum, invited their close neighbours and friends from Norway to take part. I am very pleased to have a similar opportunity and welcome to the Bratislava Summit the representatives of a country, which is a strategic neighbour and partner of the Slovak Republic – the representatives of Ukraine.

I am convinced that we cannot discuss the future of Europe in occlusion, we must also talk about those countries of Europe that – although not EU members at present – have the potential to participate, in one way or another, in the ongoing project of the European integration. Ukraine is undoubtedly one of those countries and thus the presence of the representatives of the Ukrainian Parliament at the Bratislava Summit is not only perfectly justified, but also highly topical.

To start off with, let me emphasise that the Slovak-Ukrainian cooperation has always been very friendly, steering clear of any negative historical reminiscences. This is also why Slovakia has and will continue to support the Ukrainian endeavours aimed at finding the optimum path for their journey towards prosperity and stability, with the formation and building of the Ukrainian civil society being an intrinsic part of that process. Without a doubt, dialogue is the basis of any cooperation. If we want to develop our relations with the Ukraine and foster its integration ambitions, we have to commit time for a discussion about the Ukrainian vision in respect of the European Union. The Bratislava Summit opens an opportunity for such a discussion and I am confident that we will make good use of this time.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ukraine is standing on the crossroads, wondering perhaps which of the ways ahead is the right one. I am convinced that we, in the European Union, have a clear stance on this and that we have no difficulty in expressing our support to the integration ambitions of Ukraine. We all understand that prosperity, stability and peace for the nations of Europe hinge on both the viability of the EU project and the development behind its external borders. I have no doubt that the European Union shares common interests with its neighbours and, therefore, would like to see them politically stabile, prosperous and well governed. Let me emphasise in this connection that common values can only be upheld and developed through mutual dialogue. Only mutual dialogue opens the door towards deeper cooperation!

Moreover, I am of the view that any country that shares the common values of the European family should enjoy the right to a full-fledged membership in our community. We, on the "Old Continent", should not allow the raising of new insurmountable barriers. After all, EU enlargement is the strongest tool we have in stabilising the regions that border on the EU. Certainly, enlargement is fully conditional on the ability of the Union to further deepen its integration and strengthen its constitutional framework. Most importantly, however, we've got to make sure that Europe continues to look forward so as not to fall victim to its own success.

It goes without saying, Ladies and Gentlemen, that the Ukraine took up a specific and indeed important geopolitical position after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Ukraine of today has standard relations with its neighbours. Ukraine has taken important steps towards building its civil society and democracy. In this connection, let me underline that Ukraine has real potential to become a source of stability in the region and, by the same token, a political, cultural and ideological bridge between the European Union and Eastern Europe.

I am sure that the signing of the Ukraine–EU Action Plan, which laid down the basic framework for cooperation with the Ukraine, was welcomed by the then EU-25 very positively. What pleases us even more is the fact that the Ukrainian integration ambitions go beyond the framework of cooperation laid down in the European Neighbourhood Policy and that the European Union has extended to the largest eastern neighbour of Slovakia the most important offer – the European prospect.

When the cabinet of Prime Minister Yanukovich took office, Ukrainian leaders declared their determination not to change the country's foreign policy objectives, which was received with great satisfaction. Let me therefore express my hope that the development in the Ukraine will allow us to continue talking about the "European future" for the Ukraine.

When talking about the European prospect for the Ukraine, and our guest, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of the Ukraine, will tell us more about it soon, we should not avoid mentioning the largest neighbour of the European Union – Russia. It goes without saying that we do not want to and cannot ignore the positions and interests of Russia. The Ukraine is oftentimes put into the position of a country that is expected to choose between either good cooperation with the EU or good cooperation with Russia. I am nevertheless convinced that these two vectors of cooperation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the triangle spanning the European Union, Ukraine and Russia is exceptionally promising in terms of future cooperation. This is one of the reasons why we attach utmost importance to cooperation with the Ukraine. And this is why we wish to keep an open ear to the Ukrainian plans and visions concerning its future, as presented at important international fora.

I believe that the formulation of a clear European prospect gives the Ukraine a strong motivation to undertake reforms that are not only necessary to ensure compliance with the criteria for EU accession, but are also ultimately beneficial to the Ukrainian society and the people of the Ukraine in particular. One of the main goals of enlargement is to reinforce the internal stability of young democracies and strengthen international security. A case in point is our first-hand experience – the experience that Slovakia made in the process of becoming a member of the European family. We are ready to share our experience and help advance the integration aspirations of other countries in transition that have declared their interest in EU membership.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

The European Union is a challenge; a challenge to build bridges – not only within, but also beyond our borders. However, the process of European integration is not only a challenge for the EU Member States, but also for the countries whose integration ambitions have not yet run their course. I therefore firmly believe that even those political leaders of the Ukraine, who presently feel some degree of

uncertainty regarding the integration ambitions of their country, will not slacken their effort or give up on their vision and instead will continue to tap into the potential and ideas that benefit not only the Ukrainian people, but also the entire European Union.

If the Bratislava Summit succeeds in swaying – even by just one jot – the way we perceive Ukraine's integration ambitions, I will see it as our joint historic achievement. That is because I believe that the more European democratic countries eventually join our Union, the more European our Union will be. But before we can add another storey to our common European home, we have to make sure we understand the vision and objectives of our partners. It is therefore with great pleasure that I now turn the floor over to the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Mr Oleksandr Moroz, who will now present the Ukrainian perspective with regard to the European Union and maybe help us find the answers to some of the questions that have emerged in the recent period.

Please Mr. Chairman, the floor is yours.