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Speech by Mr Dragutin Mate,
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AT THE XXXIXth MEETING OF THE COSAC
Brdo pri Kranju, 7 May 2008

**»Cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkan Countries i
n the Field of Home Affairs«**

Distinguished members of parliaments, dear guests,

Allow me, too, to welcome you at today's meeting of COSAC in Slovenia.

I am pleased that we have an opportunity today to discuss, among other topics, also internal security in the European Union. As the threats brought about by the modern world, especially terrorism and organised crime, increased, so did the cooperation between Member States as regards internal security. Our citizens find that their safety does not only depend on the home affairs minister and the national police but that we are faced with new phenomena that can only be countered by joint activity of all Member States.

The European Union has brought us free movement within the common area, which improves relations among our citizens, enhances our economy and development, while on the other hand it enables criminal organisations to expand their activities across national borders.

Within the framework of The Hague Programme, which has been implemented since 2005, the European Union activities have been focused on three key axes: active migration policy, surveillance of the external border and strengthened police cooperation.

In the area of migration, we are in the phase of building a common European immigration policy.

We are working in two directions: stemming irregular immigration and facilitating legal migration. In practice, we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. Our economy needs labour force and according to demographic calculations in twenty years the European Union will require more workers than it will have available, therefore immigrants will be urgently needed. This need is already evident today as illegal migrants who come to Europe get work easily. Those that we see in the streets are a minority compared to the numbers of migrants working behind factory walls.

These workers are slaves of the modern era. They risk their lives and everything they own to get to Europe, only to work here illegally, without documents, without insurance, without minimal guarantees.

In the EU Council we are just discussing a directive that will introduce sanctions for undeclared employment of illegal migrants, and a directive that will govern minimum rights of migrants to be returned by Member States. Thus we will reduce the elements contributing to illegal migration.

At the same time, more possibilities to enter the EU legally are opening up. By means of the blue card directive, which will enable highly-qualified foreign workers to look for work all over the European Union, legal bases for the future of our labour markets are being prepared. Another directive, which is under discussion, will unify the rights and status of migrant workers in the European Union, for it would not be fair to invite workers to the EU and then they would have better conditions in some Member States than others.

The process is gradual. The Commission presented the proposals of these two directives in October last year, and Slovenia plans to complete the first revision of both texts at the expert level.

According to the political vision that the Commission presented for the coming decade, the needs for migrants should first be coordinated in Brussels and then agreements would be concluded at the level of the EU with individual third countries on the conditions for the admission of their nationals.

At the conference on legal migration held in Lisbon in October last year I suggested that these agreements should contain solutions on how to enable migrants to return to their home country after a certain period of time and retain some minimum pension. In this way we would contribute to economic growth of developing countries. But as I said, this is something we are slowly working on. The first step will be made next month when we sign a partnership agreement with Moldova and Cape Verde. On the basis of these pilot projects we will have a better idea of how to solve such problems in the future.

The second axis of our work is the external border. Let me first mention the enlargement of the Schengen area to include nine new countries on 21 December last year. After the enlargement of the European Union this was the next great success, which finally abolished internal borders in Europe. Slovenia sees this enlargement as a success and my colleagues, home affairs ministers of other Member States, agree with this assessment. The black scenario that some sceptics had forecast did not take place and we can say that after about four months now having no borders is very much part of our everyday life.

Since 1 September last year, when we joined the Schengen Information System, the Slovenian police checked over 10 million passengers. This information also gives us a better picture as to how many people travel across the territory of the Republic of Slovenia. We refused entry to 3400 persons, arrested 85 persons on the basis of the European arrest warrant, found 33 missing adults, 10 minors and 420 vehicles.

The process will continue. Switzerland is getting ready to join Schengen before the end of this year, to be followed by Liechtenstein soon and then Romania and Bulgaria. Their target date is 2012, provided, of course, that they are adequately prepared. Slovenia organised a ministerial conference on future external border management, which was held here at Brdo on 12 March. At the conference three Commission communications were discussed – on the future of the Agency for the management of external borders - Frontex, on the future use of modern technologies in the surveillance of blue and green border and on the future systems for recording entry and exit of third-country nationals.

Slovenia welcomes this development, while supporting the development of possibilities which in addition to controlling illegal crossing of the border also facilitate efficient passenger control. This is connected to the use of information systems such as the Schengen Information System. Today's system is based on textual information. The next generation, SIS II, will support the inclusion of photographs, fingerprints and other functionalities. Also as regards SIS II, Slovenia is striving for as much progress as possible to be made on this project and for it to be completed by the end of September 2009.

The third axis is police cooperation. Until the beginning of this decade, good bilateral cooperation seemed to have been enough to maintain control over cross-border crime. Organised groups were mainly limited to a certain region. This last decade saw the development of transport services and communications, and the opening of financial and economic markets, which has resulted in terrorists and criminals operating in the entire European Union and beyond. Bilateral cooperation is no longer enough, so an adequate European response had to be found.

I think that the crucial moment in the transition from regional to European cooperation happened during our Presidency. Three weeks ago the Council approved the text of the new Decision establishing Europol, which will transform this organisation into a European agency and give it more flexibility and adaptability for the fight against modern crime and terrorism.

Another important element is the transposition of the Treaty of Prüm into the *acquis communautaire*. The adoption of this text in the Council is planned for the next month. The act will provide a legal basis for the exchange of data from national databases, including DNA profiles, fingerprints and licence plates. Thus the foundation will be set for police cooperation in the European Union in the coming decade.

Security in the European Union also depends on the performance of police authorities in the neighbouring countries. Home affairs ministers have established stable cooperation with Russia, Ukraine, the Western Balkan countries and the USA. Today, I should like to present you our cooperation with the Western Balkans since this area has been the main source of criminal routes of trafficking in illicit drugs, human beings and arms. That is why this region is one of the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency.

Slovenia is closely related to the Western Balkans in terms of its geographical position and common history. Most common points of interest represent economic, cultural and development opportunities but also some security risks.

The biggest challenge for Slovenia and other countries is organised crime; it is not only a national issue but also a regional, continental and sometimes even a global one. The Balkan route stretching across Southeast Europe comprises established channels for trafficking in drugs, arms and human beings in one direction and in stolen vehicles, stolen construction machines and similar in the other direction.

Another important security challenge is illegal migration. Over the last years, illegal migration flows via the Western Balkans have changed in terms of structure and quantity. The Balkan route is still very popular with illegal immigrants from the Western Balkans, the Middle East and Asia.

For those reasons and taking into consideration the fact that combating terrorism is a big global challenge, Slovenia promotes cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans.

It also supports visa liberalisation with the Western Balkans that will speed up the development of the region; the same positions and criteria need to be used for all the countries of the region. The Western Balkans should focus on the fight against illegal migration and cross-border crime.

After the tragic events that occurred in that region, the countries of the Western Balkans are intensively building reciprocal ties on a sound foundation and in mutual respect. Closer cooperation in economic, cultural, information and other fields is followed by increased cooperation in combating all forms of crime and terrorism. This cross-border police cooperation has already passed from an individual level based on cooperation between individuals to an institutional level. The countries in the region have already concluded a number of agreements on cross-border police cooperation and have even progressed beyond that. I believe that the switch from bilateral cross-border cooperation to regional cross-border cooperation is of great significance. The signing of a modern and comprehensive Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe means genuine progress, not only benefiting the populations of the contracting parties but with much wider favourable effects.

The Slovenian Presidency has proposed the Southeast Europe Organized Crime Threat Assessment, known as SEE OCTA. The project aims to transfer good practices to the Western Balkans and to assess the state of play on criminal associations there. It represents great added value to the existing EU OCTA. To that end, we have already carried out intensive training for analysts from that region together with Europol.

In terms of police cooperation and combating cross-border crime, Slovenia supports the implementation of the Vienna Convention on Police Cooperation for Southeast Europe. The Convention has already been ratified by all the signatory parties (that is by all the countries of the Western Balkans, by Moldova and Romania but not by Croatia). In this field, Slovenia has been actively cooperating with Austria, Switzerland and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF).

In February 2008, I was given a mandate by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia to sign an agreement on cooperation between the Ministry of the Interior and DCAF since we support police and cross-border police cooperation through our active participation in the projects of the Centre.

Furthermore, Slovenia is intensively involved in negotiations on the SELEC Convention that is to replace the SECI Centre. The coordinator for the SELEC Convention is a representative of Slovenia's Ministry of the Interior. In addition, my country is presiding over the EU SECI/SELEC support group. Our main goal is to strengthen operational cooperation in combating cross-border crime in the Western Balkans while assuring the protection of personal data.

Slovenia and Austria have applied for the ILECUS project proposed by the European Commission with a view to improving forms of cross-border police cooperation in the Western Balkans. An official final decision on the award of the project has not been made yet. My Ministry is striving hard to be awarded this project because its good results would have extremely positive effects on the security situation in Slovenia.

We have also initiated and carried out activities aimed to create a network of EU liaison officers in the Western Balkans. Our efforts have resulted in the establishment of the Liaison Officer Network. Currently, Slovenia has its liaison officers deployed in Croatia and Serbia, and is also going to second one to Montenegro, who will be appointed head of liaison officer network for Montenegro.

Every year, my Ministry organises a ministerial meeting called the Brdo Process, which is held at Brdo in Slovenia and attended by ministers of some EU Member States and Western Balkan countries. This year's meeting will be the 8th and will probably focus on current issues and enhancing cooperation.

We have a number of bilateral contacts and organised activities with the Western Balkan countries. Almost all countries of the region are interested in study visits to Slovenia.

By way of conclusion, I wish to state that the European Union has been successful in the area of internal security. In fact, our actions are mainly motivated by the development of crime in our societies; in the field concerning the very essence of national sovereignty, it is difficult to reach a consensus on actions to be taken in order to tackle future issues.

Our achievements so far constitute a solid basis for pursuing our efforts in the year ahead, hopefully building on the new Lisbon Treaty.

Thank you.