

General position adopted by the Slovak Republic on the accession negotiations (15 February 2000)

Caption: On 15 February 2000, the Slovak Government defines its position on the Slovak Republic's negotiations for accession to the European Union.

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General Position of the Slovak Republic on Accession Negotiations (15 February 2000)

1. The decision of the Helsinki summit to open negotiations with the Slovak Republic and other candidate countries has a far-reaching and truly historic impact on the development of individual applicants for membership and the entire continent. We consider the Presidency Conclusions on enlargement to be an important step in the chain of events that shaped Europe in the last decade. The strategy adopted by the Member States is another significant contribution towards building a continent on the basis of security, stability and prosperity. We are encouraged by the fact that Slovakia has today the chance to embark on the decisive stage of its road to become a member of the community of countries with whom we share history, civilisation and values.
2. During the last ten years Slovakia went through a complicated and, to a certain degree, specific development. Accession to the European Union was set as a foreign policy priority after fundamental political and social changes took place in the former Czecho-Slovakia in 1989. In January 1993, this objective was immediately reaffirmed in the foreign policy of the independent Slovak Republic. This orientation is supported by an overwhelming majority of the Slovak population in the long run.
3. The Europe Agreement signed in October 1993 and effective from February 1995 provides a good base for development of relations between the Slovak Republic and the European Union. The subsequent step in the process of integration into the Union was submission of our application for membership in June 1995 in which Slovakia declared its interest to join the Union. The Slovak Republic then started to implement the pre-accession strategy defined at the Essen summit in December 1994 and to introduce the necessary measures for integration into the Union's internal market, based on the White Paper adopted at the Cannes summit in June 1995. The implementation of these strategic documents, further developed and combined into a comprehensive framework of the reinforced pre-accession strategy at the Luxembourg summit, has served as the basis for Slovakia's progression towards the European Union.
4. Despite its good starting position, the potential comparable with the neighbouring countries of the Visegrad group, relatively favourable assessment of the fulfilment of economic criteria, and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, our country failed to meet the Copenhagen political criteria at the time when the European Commission prepared its Opinion. Therefore, Slovakia was not invited to start accession negotiations at the Luxembourg summit in December 1997.
5. The preparations for membership of the European Union gained a new momentum after the 1998 parliamentary elections. Following the proposal by the European Commission, a special body was established between the European Commission and the Slovak Republic - the High Level Working Group. Establishing of the Group marked the beginning of new quality of relations between the Union and Slovakia. At the same time, it played an important part in fulfilling the Accession Partnership priorities and in stepping up the progress of the country in the EU direction. Our preparation for accession was also accelerated by the screening process which enabled comparing the Slovak legislation with the *acquis communautaire* even before launching of negotiations.
6. The decision of the Helsinki summit to open negotiations with the Slovak Republic is a recognition of the progress attained by Slovakia in the recent period and it also represents a commitment to intensify our integration efforts. In our view, the opening of the Accession Conference is the beginning of a new stage in our relations which will result in our membership of the Union in a foreseeable future. We are convinced that the outcome of this process will be mutually enriching for both sides, the Union and Slovakia alike.
7. We understand that the European integration process is based primarily on the idea of co-existence of the countries and nations which share and implement common values and principles of their political, economic and social life. The European integration is a unique project not only in this century but, at a broader scale, within development of modern civilisation. It is natural that Slovakia and its citizens want to contribute to common endeavours of the nations of Europe aimed at safeguarding the peace, freedom, stability and prosperity on our continent.
In our view, which reflects also our own historical experience, the European integration is a complex

process which involves a number of mutually interlinked elements. Therefore, in parallel with seeking integration into the EU, we are also striving for membership of NATO, the WEU and the OECD. This is the background for formulation and implementation of our security policy and strategy in the area of international economic relations.

8. In the accession process we attach great significance to further deepening of co-operation within the Visegrad grouping. The objectives of the V-4 countries which include close mutual co-operation, strengthening the cohesion of the Central European region and support for Euro-Atlantic integration have already become a firm pillar of the European stability, and contribute to the successful development of the entire continent.

9. The results of the 1998 parliamentary elections in Slovakia brought about a fundamental change on its internal political scene, primarily as regards the style of exercising political power. The Copenhagen political criteria were fulfilled in a relatively short time, thus opening the possibility for launching the negotiations. The prospect of EU membership was one of the decisive factors behind the determination of the Slovak citizens to bring the country back on the road of democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for minority rights. The strengthening of democracy is a continuous process which must be permanently shaped and safeguarded. We committed ourselves to constantly strengthening the democratic principles in our society. We are convinced that the process of accession to the Union will have a positive impact on the stability of political environment in Slovakia.

10. Besides the political criteria of the European Union membership, Slovakia is giving full attention to the fulfilment of the economic criteria. These include, in particular, the deepening of economic reforms and improving of our country's competitiveness on a global scale, restoration of macro-economic stability and support for sustainable development. At present, our efforts are concentrated on the process of restructuring the banking and enterprise sector and on the completion of the privatisation process which pave the way to being a fully functioning market economy.

11. The Slovak Republic makes gradual progress in the full transposition of the *acquis communautaire*, especially through fulfilling the priorities of the Accession Partnership and tasks set out in the National Programme of the Adoption of the *Acquis*. Our National Programme is regularly revised, and we are currently preparing its third updated version. The objective is to harmonise the legislation of the Slovak Republic with the *acquis* and to build the necessary administrative capacities by the end of 2002. We are aware that the success in our negotiations is based on a conscientious preparation for membership and hard work at home. The actual negotiations will necessarily reflect the level of preparedness for membership. However, we are confident that the process of negotiations which we are launching today will represent a new impetus and incentive for intensifying our preparations for accession.

12. The Slovak Republic fully accepts the objectives of the Amsterdam Treaty, defined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. At the same time we accept the rights and responsibilities arising for the Member States from *acquis communautaire* of the Union. Slovakia will be able to fully accept the *acquis* to the extent applicable at the time of its accession to the Union.

13. The Objective of the Slovak Republic is to integrate into the Single Market and all Community policies. The attainment of full compatibility with EU Member States in the shortest possible time is a great challenge for Slovakia, as it is a prerequisite for a successful economic and social development of our country. After the fulfilment of the convergence criteria, Slovakia is interested in joining the Economic and Monetary Union.

14. The Slovak Government approved new concept of employment policy together with the National Employment Plan until 2002. Social partners are also involved in the implementation of this Plan. At the same time, Slovakia prepares itself to join the European Social Fund. Slovak programme of social sphere reform was prepared, which reflects changes of economic, social and demographic conditions taking into account the sustainability of social security system. Comprehensive programme of social insurance reform, which was also publicly discussed, was drawn up.

15. The Slovak Republic shares the objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and participates in its formulation to the extent allowed by its current candidate status. We are interested in taking part in the definition and formulation of the European Security and Defence Policy. We already actively participate in the enhanced political dialogue with the EU and a number of practical steps prove that Slovakia can significantly contribute to these policies. Slovakia has an ambition to make a positive contribution to the Union with its clear foreign policy orientation, friendly relations with neighbours and active involvement in the work of international organisations and regional groupings.

16. The Slovak Republic accepts the *acquis* in the area of Justice and Home Affairs. After its accession, the part of Slovak boundaries will form the external border of the Union. Therefore, we are interested in deepening co-operation relating to border control, asylum law and migration, as well as the fight against organised crime, terrorism and drug smuggling already at this stage of our preparation for EU membership.

17. The Slovak Republic will not request any derogation from the implementation of *acquis communautaire*. We will request transition periods only in a limited number of areas, mainly where it is necessary to improve the performance of the Slovak economy or to make large capital investments. We will duly justify the requests for transition periods and specify the realistic plan of necessary steps for alignment with the *acquis*. This will also include the calculation of costs involved in the attainment of compatibility, and the specification of resources for financing the expenditures.

18. Based on our discussions with the European Union to date we can already outline key areas which, in our view, will be significant from the aspect of substantive negotiations. Naturally, in the course of negotiations, individual requirements will be modified or new may emerge as a result of the developments in the Community legislation and of the specific experience with the process of negotiations.

Internal Market

We recognise the internal market as the key instrument for effective functioning of the European Union. Possible requests for transitional periods will concern mainly those areas where the current performance of the Slovak economy does not permit to adequately fulfil the European Union legislation. These include such areas as deposit guarantee schemes, investor compensation schemes, release of short-term capital and operations using money market instruments. Another sensitive area in the internal market is the acquisition of agricultural and forest land as well as the purchase of real estate by non-residents where mutually acceptable solutions will have to be sought. The Slovak Republic will probably ask for transition periods in certain tax-related areas.

Agriculture

Like in the case of other candidate countries, negotiations under the agriculture chapter will be very important and sensitive. However, we consider it as essential that both as regards the share of agriculture in the GDP, as well as the share of employment in this sector, Slovakia is comparable with the EU average. Agriculture plays an important role due to its production functions but, in particular, in preserving rural settlement and protecting environment and landscape. In our view, the existing differences with the Member States, especially those related to size and structure of farms do not represent an obstacle for the accession. On the contrary, we perceive them as a comparative advantage from the long-term perspective. We wish to emphasise that the agricultural sector in Slovakia is not export-oriented. We expect that integration of Slovakia into the Common Agricultural Policy - which should not present a heavy burden for the EU - will bring positive effects, in particular on consolidating the production, improving the competitiveness of Slovak products and preserving the rural character of our typical regions. Equal participation of Slovakia in the Common Agricultural Policy is considered a natural part of our membership.

Transport

Integration in the transport area is viewed as an important part of our accession to the European Union.

Transport infrastructure of the Slovak Republic will become a part of the European transport network. The central location of Slovakia on the continent obliges us to make considerable investment into the development of transport infrastructure and all types of transport. The most sensitive point in the harmonisation of legislation in this area is the fulfilment of the requirement for financial standing of domestic carriers.

Environment

We expect the environment chapter to be among the most demanding ones where Slovakia will request several transition periods. However, in the formulation of our positions we support the positions of the European Union within the international framework and we will respect the need to apply strict standards of environmental protection. Our objective is to transpose the entire environmental legislation of the Union without any derogation. However, in view of the actual situation, we will not be able to fully implement the legislation by the envisaged date of accession. This is due, in particular, to high investment needs and to complex technical solutions involved in reaching European standards. This regards, above all, air protection, waste management, water protection, industrial pollution control and risk management, chemicals and genetically modified organisms.

Regional Policy and Co-ordination of Structural Instruments

We view the EU structural instruments which are designed to reduce the disparities between the development of individual regions of the Union as one of the main pillars for functioning of the Union. Slovakia expects the EU to continue applying its structural and cohesion policy based on the principle of solidarity also after its enlargement. We are ready to meet all the requirements to absorb the funds allocated for regional and structural development.

Slovakia has welcomed the decisions of the Union to increase the pre-accession assistance under the 2000-2006 budget through the PHARE, ISPA and SAPARD programmes. We regard full participation in these programmes as a crucial element in our pre-accession process and also in the preparation for effective use of structural instruments of the Union in future.

Energy

We expect that the negotiations in the energy sector will concentrate on the liberalisation of electricity and gas markets. Another issue is the fulfilment of the obligation of compulsory oil reserve stocks, as the building of the capacities for these purposes requires large investments.

The Slovak Republic attaches great importance to maintaining a high standard of nuclear safety. This is evident also from the volume of investments made into this area in the recent period. Ensuring a high standard of nuclear safety is a priority for the Slovak Government. Slovakia was the first country with nuclear installations that ratified the Nuclear Safety Convention. Taking into account our current energy resources and the results of negotiations with the European Commission, the Slovak Government made a forthcoming decision to close down two units of V-1 nuclear power plant at Jaslovské Bohunice in 2006 and 2008, i.e. before the end of their designed lifetime.

19. The Slovak Republic closely follows the discussions conducted within the framework of the Intergovernmental Conference on institutional reform. We hope that this reform will prepare the Union for enlargement by all candidate countries. We expect the Conference to improve the effectiveness of the decision-making process, while considering the interests of Member States. We are confident that after accession of Slovakia to the European Union proportional representation in individual institutions of the Union will be granted.

20. Being a democratic country, Slovakia puts emphasis on cultural development both the Slovak nation and the national minorities living on its territory. We believe that, after the accession, the Slovak language will become one of the official languages of the Union. European cultural diversity will be thus enriched by Slovak contribution and, vice versa, our participation in the community of other European nations will enrich our own culture.

21. The Slovak Republic is ready to accept and implement *acquis communautaire* by 1 January 2004, being set by the Slovak Government as the reference date of our accession to the Union. This date reflects both the realistic approach and ambitions of Slovakia. It is based on the assumption that after ratification of the results of the Intergovernmental Conference by the end of 2002 the Union will be in a position to welcome new members. By that time we want to be ready to close the Accession Conference and to start the ratification process which could be completed within one year.

22. The Helsinki summit conclusions relating to negotiations with the countries which are opening the negotiation process today have been encouraging. We expect that the Union will apply the principle of differentiation both as regards the opening of individual chapters and the conduct of negotiations. Slovakia is ready to open and subsequently close negotiations in a higher number of chapters. It is our ambition to have all the negotiation chapters gradually opened by the end of 2001. Such approach would be in harmony with the decisions of the Helsinki summit and would offer the candidates, who are now starting negotiations, a real possibility to catch up, within reasonable time, with the countries already negotiating, provided they make the sufficient progress in their preparations.

23. According to the Constitution of the Slovak Republic a ratification referendum by means of which the citizens of Slovakia will declare their will to enter the EU is to be held. We want to use the time needed for completing the ratification process to reinforce the implementation of the adopted *acquis*.

24. Enlargement of the Union represents a new stage of its development. At the beginning of a new millennium this process constitutes both a great challenge and chance. The citizens with their needs and concerns are decisive element of this process. We attach a particular importance to making our population understand the purpose and the objective of EU membership in order to obtain the widest possible support for this idea. Over the long-term, the support for accession of Slovakia to the EU among our citizens is within a 60-70% range. However, we are of the opinion that maintaining this pro-integration attitude - also in connection with the foreseen referendum - is an integral part of the accession process. The Government adopted and implements a strategy of preparing the population for accession. On the other hand, the representatives of the European Union and its Member States should also take an active role in explaining the process of enlargement to their own citizens so as to avoid the spreading of unfounded fears from the negative effects of enlargement. We are convinced that through concerted efforts we can handle this challenge.

25. In last decade a strong and viable civil society emerged in Slovakia. European integration process is not only a government affair but it concerns all the citizens of the country. Active involvement of all segments of the society in the process of preparation for Union membership is therefore a priority of the government. At the same time, Slovakia supports the development of local and regional initiatives in line with the implementation of the subsidiarity principle.

26. We expect that co-operation at the parliamentary level between the European Parliament and the National Council of the Slovak Republic will also make an important contribution to the success of negotiations. Membership of the EU is endorsed by all the political forces represented within the Slovak Parliament. They demonstrated their support also by the declaration of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on the integration of the Slovak Republic into the EU of December 1998.

27. Slovakia will approach negotiations in a constructive way and with an understanding that they are being conducted between partners who will soon become part of the same community. The tasks we are faced with in connection with our accession to the Union are our common challenges, and their successful fulfilment will bring benefits and satisfaction to both the citizens of Slovakia and those of the Union. The enlargement of the Union calls for a strong political commitment of all the involved parties. The Slovak Republic is firmly determined to move on the road which it has commenced.