

Ivan Korčok: Slovak EU Council presidency to be engine of positivity

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Interviews

As Slovakia takes the helm of the EU Council presidency for the first time, Ivan Korčok talks to the Parliament Magazine about why the country will work to be an engine of positivity, and how it plans to unite a fragmented Europe.



Ivan Korčok | *Photo credit: Office of Ivan Korčok*

With so many different challenges facing the EU, which key policy areas and dossiers will the Slovak presidency concentrate on and why?

Slovakia assumes its Council presidency role at a time when the European Union finds itself in an unprecedented situation. The negative outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU has presented us with a new challenge. For the first time, we have to deal with a member state leaving the EU.

This comes amid number of other challenges that affect the EU's overall shape and a certain sense of

political fragmentation. This is worrying because fragmentation makes us vulnerable - internally and externally.

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The Slovak presidency is therefore set to approach current challenges from a positive angle. Our priorities will centre around four ambitions: to make the European economy stronger; to modernise and broaden the single market in areas such as energy and digital economy; to work towards sustainable migration and asylum policy; and to become more engaged with our external environment, namely through strong trade and enlargement policy. There is a clear common denominator for these priority areas.

Firstly, it is our aim to overcome fragmentation by being an engine of positivity and an advocate of long-term solutions that unite us and work on the ground.

Secondly, we are determined to deliver tangible results for our citizens - something that could help strengthen their connection to the EU.

At this juncture, it is vital that the EU engages in reflection. We have to work harder to strengthen people's confidence in the European project. Whatever the critics say, there is no better alternative to mutual cooperation.

How will the Slovak presidency push the agenda on economic growth and how important is a capital markets union and economic and monetary union in achieving this goal?

We want to boost investments by focusing on a triangle, the European fund for strategic investments (EFSI) - the CMU - the EU budget.

Investment in the EU is still well below its pre-crisis average. The investment gap is about 1.7 per cent of GDP for the EU. The EFSI has surpassed expectations and therefore, when a mid-term review takes place, the Slovak presidency will be ready to take up any proposal to further foster or reinforce the EFSI.

Another flagship project is the capital markets union, a true single market for capital. It would, among other things, unlock new sources of cross-border funding for business, including SMEs - the backbone of our economies - which remain heavily dependent on the banking sector. In practice, this means we are set to finish the job on the prospectus regulation, we also aim at making progress in the field of European venture capital funds and money market funds.

With the digital economy seen as vital for Europe's future economic development, what role will the presidency play in encouraging the establishment of a digital single market? What policies will be put forward to deal with issues like geo-blocking and data portability?

Europe is at a crossroads and citizens' trust in the viability of the project has been dented. We are clearly in need of a comprehensive positive agenda for our citizens and businesses. Following years of economic stagnation and digital divide, they want to see improvements in their quality of life and in the work delivered by the EU.

Therefore we believe that whatever we do or do not end up doing in terms of the digital single market, will be a strategic choice, with an impact that will continue to be felt throughout the coming years.

The digital single market is built on data economy and its various applications. This is the new gold of the 21st century. To accommodate skyrocketing data traffic, we need to ensure enough frequency spectrum is harmonised at EU level and allocated to mobile internet services.

The Slovak presidency will work towards a deal on the 700MHz proposal which will enable harmonisation of this key spectrum frequency band for the purposes of wireless broadband and will pave the way for 5G services.

We will also invite ministers to discuss ways to improve rules on spectrum assignment in general, under the review of the telecommunications framework. To bring tangible benefits for consumers, we will work towards ensuring that as of 15 June 2017 EU citizens can roam without additional fees, including for mobile data services, in Europe.

Cross-border portability of films or music is also one of the potential visible achievements. We will push for negotiations with the European Parliament. Measures to deal with the practice of unjustified geo blocking constitutes a top priority for us in unlocking the benefits of a huge market for all. We will have to navigate through consumers' interests and traders' obligations.

This will have to be coupled by strengthened market surveillance. The end result will be a balancing act and we aim at achieving a Council position during our presidency.

Another market the presidency wants to see progress on is developing Europe's energy union. What do you believe have been the key challenges and what are the presidency plans for enhancing a competitive single market in energy?

The energy union offers an exceptional framework to unite the member states in their diversity, be it regarding their energy mix, their industries or households. The most pressing challenge is shared by the whole Union, climate change. The Paris agreement is our cursor.

Building the energy union will deliver various solutions and we must pay close attention to the effects these could have on energy security, the competitiveness of our industry and households.

Our presidency will aim for a balanced approach that makes good use of our climate targets to spur employment, new technologies and to ensure secure and affordable supply of energy.

Concretely, we will work on several fronts. To achieve energy security, the presidency will press for agreements with Parliament on security of supply and intergovernmental gas agreements. A pragmatic compromise on these proposals would contribute substantially to compliance with EU law and increase transparency on the market.

Energy efficiency is the other side of the same coin as energy security, a well-established framework helps savings and promotes competitiveness of our energy dependent economies while contributing to energy security.

Our presidency is set to achieve an overall agreement with regards to labelling and will prepare grounds for discussions on energy efficiency overall and energy efficient buildings.

To further cut greenhouse gases and to promote low carbon economy, we will strive to achieve the ratification of the Paris agreement at EU level. The presidency will also discuss the reform of the emission trading scheme to achieve a position of the Council at the end of this year.

A solid and predictable functioning scheme is the best guarantee for our economy. Yet all sectors have to contribute proposals to cut emissions in transport or construction will equally merit our full attention.

In short, the presidency is happy to breathe life into the energy union and bring a number of its proposals forward until the end of the year.

How important for the future of the EU is it that an agreement is reached by all member states on dealing with the refugee crisis?

Everyone can be sure that the Slovak presidency will be an honest broker, a credible and constructive manager, negotiator and mediator. However, let us avoid dangerous simplifications.

The presidency cannot be narrowed down to a single area, namely migration and at the same time, this one single area cannot be narrowed down to one single file, the revision of the Dublin regulation.

There still is a great deal of unfinished business. Continuing controls at several internal border crossings are the greatest reminder of this. Therefore, we must do what it takes to return to a proper functioning of Schengen. The Dutch presidency has done a great job of creating the European border guards.

However, it is one thing to have it on paper and it is another to make it operational. This is our task. We are also set to put a lot of effort into the smart borders package to modernise the Schengen's external borders.

Moreover, we need to establish effective cooperation with third countries of origin and transit. The EU-Turkey agreement remains an important part of this.

Speaking of the common European asylum system, there will be some seven legislative proposals on our table in July. Nothing is going to be shelved nor frozen. However we believe a complex, thorough examination is needed, with less divisive elements at first, perhaps.

As a country viewed as pro-enlargement, do you believe there is a real appetite among

European citizens for further expansion. Which countries have the best chance of joining?

The credible enlargement process is one of the presidency priorities. Given our experience, we are convinced that enlargement should not be neglected as it remains a key instrument to stabilise our neighbourhood.

We believe that this process should be credible on both sides, which means that we also actively communicate that the path towards the EU leads via rigorous reforms.

The presidency is glad that already, on 5 July we have succeeded in opening chapters linked to the rule of law - chapters 23 and 24 - with Serbia. Serbia had done its homework and met conditions for opening these two chapters.

About the author

Ivan Korčok is State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

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