



Strengthening US-Slovak Cooperation and the Transatlantic Partnership: Opportunities and Challenges in Today's World

The 9th Annual Freedom Lecture Delivered by Jan Kubis, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic in Washington, D.C.

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Jan Kubis is Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic spoke at the 9th Annual Czech and Slovak Freedom Lecture, held on November 21, 2008. The event was co-sponsored by the Friends of Slovakia, the American Friends of the Czech Republic and the Embassies of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The following is the transcript of his speech.

Transcript

For Slovakia and our friend and neighbor the Czech Republic, autumn is a good time to balance out, commemorating and remembering many common historical events that determined the future for both of our countries. This particular autumn is marked by a growing number of global challenges, including the global financial crisis and recession which require bold and comprehensive global solutions. At the same time, for the USA and the whole world, this autumn is a time of much hope and expectation, given the presidential elections and accession of the new U.S. administration in January 2009. Today's Slovakia is an integral part of all global processes and efforts and shares with others its part of global responsibility. I say this with a feeling of pride because I represent a country that, less than 20 years ago, was part of Czechoslovakia but broke free from communism and began to build a democratic future for its citizens as an independent country.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, you have been able to follow the radical transformation

of Slovakia and the Czech Republic and their efforts to build democratic societies that respect fundamental rights and freedoms, to build market economies, and to find their rightful place among the most developed and progressive nations of the world. You know that for Slovakia, it has not been, and it is not a simple or straightforward process. But I maintain that all these trials and tribulations, problems, failures as well as the achievements and victories have made us stronger and more mature in the short period that we have existed as an independent country, and thus have quickly caught up with others.

For both Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the years ending with the number eight have a special significance—we often talk about “the magic eight” in our history. From the last century, 1918, 1938, 1948, 1968, were significant years. For Slovakia, 2008 is particularly special, since it is the year when Slovakia became a full member of the Schengen area’s freedom of travel, and when we achieved visa-free travel with the U.S. This year, Slovakia became the first truly post-communist country to have joined the eurozone—well ahead of our Visegrad neighbors.

From the historical perspective, in 2008, we are commemorating the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic, the emergence of which we owe to the U.S. and President Woodrow Wilson, as well as to the Slovaks and Czechs living in the United States. We are grateful to the Slovaks that were present at the birth of the Cleveland and Pittsburgh agreements and who supported the founding of Czechoslovakia as a democratic state of two equal nations. The founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 has helped reinforce and, indeed save the Slovaks as a nation. It helped to create the political, economic, and social basis for the successful future of both nations and has strengthened the identity of both our peoples.

Nor can I overlook 1968, the year of the invasion of the then-socialist Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops. This invasion put an end to the illusion that the communist system could be reformed, which saved us from harboring any illusions in and after 1989 when communism finally collapsed also in Czechoslovakia. The events of 1968 sowed the seeds for the profound societal changes that began on November 17, 1989. The events of 1968 and the 20 years of darkness that followed reinforced in the minds of a majority of the citizens of Czechoslovakia that communism means a future without perspective, life in an isolated and closed society, without personal and social freedom, without access to unbiased information, with very limited opportunities to travel abroad, with weak possibilities for professional and intellectual development and success, and primarily without a chance to choose one’s own future and destiny. This feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness led many to make a fundamental life decision to leave their country, friends,

and family, in order to start a new life in an unknown, foreign but democratic environment, such as the U.S.

Those who remained in Czechoslovakia were not often able to imagine how difficult it was to begin in a new place, but how rewarding it was in comparison with the reality of communism. Many of those who witnessed someone dear to them go beyond the iron curtain, but who were unable or unwilling to follow, often wondered which side was better. History ultimately solved that dilemma but let us pay tribute to both those who left in 1968 and to our fellow Slovaks and Czechs from older waves of emigration as well as to all those who stayed in Czechoslovakia and longed and worked for democratic change.

In Slovakia, we also commemorated the 20th anniversary of the mass candlelight Christian demonstration for human rights and civic freedoms, which was in March 1988 in Bratislava. The communist regime managed to put out the candles on the square in front of the Slovak National Theatre with water hoses, but the light of freedom continued to burn. Only one year later, on November 17, 1989, the participants in that candlelight demonstration, who longed for the fall of the totalitarian regime and strove to build a free society, saw their dreams and prayers come true. It is because of them and many others that I feel great pride and satisfaction that November 17 is marked in Slovakia as the National Day of the fight for freedom and democracy.

After the peaceful division of Czechoslovakia on the eve of 1993, Slovakia launched an independent path of transformation to an open, democratic society and a socially oriented market economy. From the beginning, membership in the EU and NATO was the driving force for political developments in Slovakia. Notably, in the 1990s, when the path became a thorny and, at times, painful road of failed experiments and errors, it was not as simple as it may look today. At that time, there were deliberate attempts to divert us from that path. Due to the courage of the majority of the citizens of Slovakia and an increasingly mature civil society, Slovakia made it through this test and came out of it stronger. By 2004, we joined the EU and NATO as a truly democratic country. The transition from a totalitarian system to a democratic one for Slovakia was thus rather complicated. One important external factor was the role of the United States. Thanks to the U.S.'s support and trust in our people, Slovakia, together with the Central European region, joined the community of democratic countries. In a broader context, it can be said that thanks to transatlantic relations and America's interest in our fate, it was possible to build a more integrated, freer, and more peaceful Europe: a Europe whole and free, with the U.S. as its strategic ally and partner. Slovakia and the U.S. enjoy excellent bilateral relations. They have significantly expanded since Slovakia joined NATO five years ago. Political and security cooperation,

economic and cultural ties, expanding contacts of our citizens, and common engagement in operations such as KFOR and Afghanistan, represent parts of this strategic relationship. As recently as last month, Slovak President Ivan Gasparovic and President George Bush confirmed this partnership when they met in Washington.

I am extraordinarily pleased that today, a few days after the 19th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, I can state that our partnership has also been expressed through the inclusion of Slovakia in the visa waiver program. We view this as a gesture of trust and recognition of our partnership and equality between good friends. I would like to thank all of you, most notably the Friends of Slovakia, for your assistance on this issue. Your efforts here in Washington helped a lot.

Today's Slovakia is a success story. But because of our rather complicated path, we consider it our responsibility to share our experience with those who wish to learn from it. The transformation of Slovakia is a fascinating story that has great potential to inspire and motivate. From a country that received democratic tutoring and foreign development assistance, we have become a country that shares its democratic experience and wealth in the spirit of solidarity with others. We strive to contribute to positive developments in countries where we have historic ties, and our story carries weight: in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, but also Cuba. From the humanitarian and development perspective, we try to help in Africa and Asia as well.

To effectively promote democracy in another state, it is necessary to cultivate suitable political, social, cultural, and economic conditions. One cannot export or import democracy but can continuously work for democratic change by engaging ourselves not only with states but also with civil societies. From our experience, we know that transformation to democracy through the development of civic freedoms and the rule of law pays dividends because it empowers people, makes people's lives more authentic, and provides them with better opportunities. Slovakia began engaging more deeply in support for democratic change in the Western Balkans in 1999 when a series of conferences and workshops attended by the pro-democratic representatives of political opposition parties, media, and civil society from and in the former Yugoslavia was launched within the framework of what is known as the Bratislava process. Later, with the purpose of supporting civil society, renewing infrastructure, enhancing regional development, and supporting EU and NATO integration, the Bratislava-Belgrade Fund was established as a part of direct Slovak development assistance. In a similar vein, we have worked with civil society in Ukraine, Belarus, and Cuba.

After the EU accession talks were opened with Croatia, Slovakia carried out a series of expert meetings to provide its knowledge of the accession process. Similarly, we work with Serbia and other Western Balkan countries to support their EU membership ambitions. Slovakia also supports Ukraine's efforts to become closer to the EU, among other things, with a governmental action plan for achieving the goals of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). To help the countries east of the EU's borders to build a closer association with the EU, we promote a new EU policy of Eastern Partnership. The Slovak Embassy in Kyiv is NATO's official Contact Point Embassy, and its role is to inform the Ukrainian population about the opportunities that exist for deepening cooperation with NATO, with a view to diminishing the bias against the Alliance that still exists in a large part of Ukrainian society. Slovakia fully supports Croatia's and Albania's entry into NATO and the relevant documents have already been ratified by the Slovak Republic. We equally support NATO membership for Macedonia, as well as offering the map for Ukraine and Georgia. By this account, I wanted to confirm that the notions of freedom and democracy, which accompanied the birth of Czechoslovakia in the year 1918 and were also the foundation of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, are at the core of the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic and our efforts to spread the zone of democratic stability in Europe.

Slovakia's EU and NATO memberships mean that we have assumed all the obligations arising from membership. The Slovak Republic entered the EU and adopted its *acquis* with a strategy for a rapid introduction of all the internal rules governing the EU, including the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital, with as few transitional restrictions as possible. We continued implementing this strategy by joining the Schengen area, which allows for free travel without checks at the internal borders of the Schengen member states. This was achieved near the end of 2007. In a few weeks, the process of our European integration will be completed, as Slovakia accedes to the eurozone. The Slovak koruna will cease to be the legal tender as of January 1, 2009, when the euro will take over as Slovakia's currency. We in Slovakia are convinced that this is a means to ensure more stable economic development and greater social security for Slovak citizens. At the same time, it is a means to improve the competitiveness of the Slovak economy and make it more attractive for foreign investors, especially in the context of the current global financial crisis and recession. Although we will not be spared some of its negative consequences, I am convinced that it will not have a dramatic impact on the still very favorable economic growth of our country. This prediction, supported by the European Commission and International Monetary Fund, indicates that in the coming years, Slovakia will remain the fastest-growing economy in the EU and the eurozone, with an annual GDP growth between 4.5%- 5 %. For further illustration, in the third quarter of 2008, we registered a GDP growth of 7.1 %, and for the entire year of 2008, the growth is likely to be well above 7%.

The source of our optimism is the competitiveness and growing productivity of the Slovak labor force, with its ability to produce high-quality goods and master technology-intensive processes. For this reason, we do not expect any substantial downsizing in the activities of major foreign investors such as Volkswagen, KIA, Peugeot-Citroen, Sony, Samsung, US Steel, and others.

As a currency, the euro also has psychological and social dimensions. The introduction of the euro makes Slovak citizens feel truly European, equal with others as members of this exclusive club of the most developed European countries that make up the eurozone. This is not a minor achievement for a country that lived under communism for more than 40 years and that started its independent history less than 16 years ago. Internationally, Slovakia acts as a responsible partner. We are actively engaged in a number of peacekeeping operations under the UN, NATO, and EU umbrella. Our diplomats serve in top international positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Central Asia. This year, Slovakia successfully chaired the Council of Europe, and in 2006-2007 we served with honors as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, where we closely cooperated with the U.S. and our EU partners at the service of the international community.

At this point, it is appropriate to express my great appreciation for the solidarity, help, and understanding of our main regional partners—above all, our friends from the Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. It has helped us a lot not to be alone in the process of transition, and it has been and is fundamentally important for Slovakia and for stability and prosperity in the entire Central European region that we have good cooperation between neighbors. This does not mean that there are no challenges to political, economic, and social development in our country or the other countries of the region. It is evident that our rapid transformation has brought hardships, notably to older generations and to people with limited social mobility. Democracy is not a simple system. Rather, it is more complicated than the authoritarian system of government, to which many generations had grown accustomed. The market economy, with its competition and limited social security, is far more complicated as well. Too many people long for easy solutions to social ills. Within the nearly 20 years since the totalitarian regimes were crushed, some wish they had achieved larger social dividends for themselves. Our citizens witnessed successions of center-right and center-left governments take power, waves of privatization under conditions that were less than transparent, instances of grave corruption, and growing social inequality, all accompanied by too many promises of politicians, many of which were soon forgotten. The result is a tangible disappointment with “traditional” policies and politicians, and a readiness to accept simple slogans, populist rhetoric, and radicalism. Globalization and its accompanying insecurity, the rapid disappearance of traditional

ways of life, and growing economically motivated migration have given rise to a similar phenomenon throughout Europe. New radicalism finds an easy marriage with nationalism and intolerance in too many EU countries, old and new, Slovakia included. And all of this is being exacerbated by the current financial crisis.

Another major problem, at least from our perspective, is the rise of aggressive nationalism, which strives for revision of the existing borders, chauvinism, extremism (including neo-Nazism and neo-fascism) as well as anti-Semitism. In Slovakia, the government has a policy of “zero tolerance” for such ideologies and implements it. In the past weeks, the government proposed several amendments to strengthen the laws against extremism and intolerance. But as recently as three weeks ago, a uniformed group of such neo-Nazis from Hungary crossed into the territory of Slovakia to commemorate the Munich Treaty-linked Vienna Arbitrage that in 1938 deprived Slovakia of a major part of its territory, including Kosice. This was an outrage! A positive sign has come from a meeting between Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany in Komarno, Slovakia, where they declared their readiness to take measures against extremism and aggressive nationalism, as well as hate speech. Thus, in spite of all the successes of democratic transformation in our region, there are new challenges emerging that require our attention and action. Promoting and protecting democracy is obviously a never-ending process.

Transatlantic relations are the foundation of Slovakia’s security, and we also believe in furthering the development of global security and stability. In the face of urgent global challenges, it is imperative to recognize their importance and to give increased attention to their development on both sides of the Atlantic. This is why we are building Slovak-US and EU-US relations on the principles of mutual trust, responsibility and understanding.

The world is facing a number of old and new threats. New emerging economies in the developing world do not always share our values and approaches, and the value system of international relations and international law itself are being frequently challenged. There has been an upsurge of nationalism and fundamentalism, an undiminished threat of terrorism, a threat of irreversible environmental damage and the financial and monetary world is in the grips of a crisis. No country in the world can cope with these challenges alone, nor can the transatlantic community that is in disarray. This calls for the rallying of all countries that adhere to our shared values and objectives, and for stronger and more effective transatlantic links. This is why we have sent our soldiers in the south of Afghanistan: it is vital to demonstrate the strong impact of our joint endeavors and the capacity to be a genuine factor for democratic change, security and stability as a

prerequisite for sustainable development.

Now, after the elections in the United States, what do we expect from President-elect Barack Obama? The world and, in particular, Europe expect the expression of a strong political will for genuine partnership, broad and intensive dialogue, a change in the style of foreign policy, a departure from unilateralism, and a restoration of the U.S.'s high moral ground. It will be important to seek out the most effective modes of communication between the transatlantic allies, creating an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation. We want to work with the United States in searching for answers to the challenges we face in these turbulent times, through a strengthened strategic character of the transatlantic partnership.

We understand the U.S.'s insistence that the EU assume a greater share of responsibility in addressing common problems. The EU should indeed be ready to do this. We know that for the EU, failure in this area could mean risking the loss, not only of the confidence of its transatlantic ally but also the respect of a large part of the international community. And without that, we cannot expect to improve cooperation in global affairs. The alliance with the United States through NATO constitutes the only real security guarantee for Slovakia. Article 5 of the Treaty has been the mainstay of our security. NATO will have to continue to be ready to fulfill its key mandate and tasks vis-à-vis its allies and partners in the future. Security guarantees of the Alliance and its members must remain absolutely credible and indivisible: we must indeed return to the basics. The Alliance must also be serious about its obligations, which involves determining where and how far to extend the reach of our enhanced engagement and cooperation and NATO's security guarantees. We might be called upon to deliver, and we must understand this when engaging with other countries. We must be serious about our commitments to our allies and partners. In my view, the key prerequisite for a stable and effective system of international relations is strict compliance with international legal norms and standards and with the internal rules of international organizations and integration structures. This attitude is extremely important for all the countries to share, but it is particularly vital for small and medium-sized countries, especially in terms of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are concerned about the erosion of this respect as illustrated by the cases of Kosovo, South Ossetia, or Abkhazia, and believe that it is necessary to stop the spread of these tendencies. I also believe that it is extremely dangerous to distort the exercise of collective rights of minorities or ethnic groups as an argument for violating the territorial integrity of internationally recognized states. For example, Russia justifies its stance on South Ossetia and Abkhazia by invoking the protection of its citizens' rights abroad. We need only remember what aggressive nationalism and chauvinism brought to the nations of the

Western Balkans in the 1990s.

The changing conditions in the world call for a coordinated response by the EU and the United States. In this regard, I also consider it advisable to forge stronger links between the activities and the plans of NATO and those of the EU. Revision of the security concepts of the two structures offers a great opportunity in this regard. In my view, another potential opportunity for strengthening the transatlantic link is offered by the rapid expansion of transatlantic economic integration. The Transatlantic Economic Council (TEC) created at the June 2007 EU-US summit is a promising endeavor. I believe that it is necessary to make progress in the areas of regulation, innovation, protection of intellectual property and financial markets in order to gradually build a barrier-free transatlantic market. Only jointly can we effectively address these and other crucial issues of international security, including important priorities such as climate change and energy security. Energy security and the related development of regional cooperation within the Baltic Sea, Caspian Sea, and Central Asian regions should continue to be an important theme for EU-US cooperation. If the EU and the United States want to reduce their dependency on hydro-carbon energy imports, the only option is to jointly explore alternative sources of energy and new technologies, which would enable more efficient use of our resources. As a hotly debated issue during the U.S. presidential campaign, the world expects the new administration to strongly support innovation. For Slovakia, nuclear energy is one way to achieve energy independence and to reduce carbon emissions. Here again, we have to find an agreement with the United States concerning the post-Kyoto arrangements on carbon emissions. If the new administration does not take an active position on this issue, we will probably end up again with unfulfilled ambitions and commitments. In addition, this global problem must be addressed jointly with other emerging global economies such as India and China. Naturally, there are also other important issues to be discussed with the United States, such as combating terrorism, solving the Middle East and other conflicts, the Iranian nuclear program, improving NATO's capabilities in the area of ballistic missiles, and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Of special relevance for Slovakia is addressing the issue of how to work with the new, assertive Russia. It is imperative to define a common approach to forming relations with this ambitious country, although this could lead occasionally to nervous reactions. Russia is a country with which the EU and the United States share a number of common concerns and interests. mainly in connection with the resolution of regional crises and conflicts, energy security, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and others. Slovakia is committed to maintaining an open dialogue and cooperation with the Russian Federation on political, economic, security, human rights, cultural, and other issues, and on

establishing a new EU-Russia framework agreement. This offer of a close partnership and critical dialogue is a desirable objective that is possible only if Russia is dissuaded from reviving historical rivalries.

A conscientious attitude on the part of India, China, and Brazil and effective cooperation in the G-20 format will be essential for effective multilateralism. The transatlantic dialogue must, therefore also include the issue of these countries' growing influence. Together we must address global poverty and growing inequality, by taking the necessary steps to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals. The United States and Europe can indeed become a decisive force in the service of the general good. However, they need to unite over a common vision for a safe and successful future.

A strong transatlantic partnership is the best answer to the global challenges we face. We can act together to safeguard and strengthen our common values. Let us begin by working together on finding solutions for urgent issues without delay after the new administration takes office. Let us lead the way to a more responsible and just international political, economic, and financial system. To have a stabilizing effect, it must be based on respect for international law and the role of the U.N. Let us take advantage of a global atmosphere of positive expectations. Let us use the global crisis as an opportunity to build healthier global relations and healthier economies, and a better life of increased equality and dignity for citizens of the world. This is what they rightly expect us to do.