

Conference on Ten Years of Protecting National Minorities and Regional or Minority Languages

Opening Address by Mr. Dušan Čaplovič, Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Knowledge based Society, European Affairs, Human Rights and Minorities

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NATIONAL MINORITY ISSUE – Slovak experiences following 1989 in the context of its future resolution in the European Union

Jean Monet, one of the spiritual leaders the new Europe said that if he was to start again he would begin with culture!

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

The current considerations about the future of Europe greatly emphasize the principle of unity in diversity, meaning the unity between differences, unity between majority and minority communities and cultures, larger and smaller states, nations, nationalities and ethnics. The European Union was built on a pluralist democracy and human rights. Its creators were aware of what it would mean not to embark on minority affairs. Europe has had and I strongly believe still has sufficient historical experience with ethnically motivated conflicts. Conflicts that affected the stability of a particular region and evoke problems in the broader, extra-regional space.

It needs to be appreciated that the concept of cultural diversity has already been adopted by the European Union in the Maastricht Treaty, opening space for the development of the European minority policy. A whole series of standards were adopted in the area of legislation, including the Amsterdam Treaty, which in this thirteenth chapter anchors the ban on any form of discrimination against minorities. At this time, we commemorate the 10th anniversary of the existence of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. I would like to emphasize that the participation principle needs to be brought in to this sensitive political subject. Only the dialogue of all parties concerned, in this case also the representatives of minority communities, may give birth to a high quality legislative agreement that will not only legally but also legitimately guarantee the protection of national, ethnic, linguistic, religious and other minorities. This however requires not only talking about rights but also about the responsibilities of all of the parties concerned.

As regards minority policy, the Slovak Republic, as a stable democratic society and member state of the European Union, fully follows modern European legislation. Psychological barriers in relations between the majority nation and the national and ethnic minorities are gradually being removed. I realise that the forwardness of a democratic society does not only show in the fact of how well it is able to express the will of the majority, but how it is able to secure the protection of even the smallest

minority and the rights of its members. And also how it is able to level the will of the majority with the protection of the minority and its loyalty to the state.

The relationship between civil, national and ethnic awareness, represents the testing indicator of the state of Euro-civil potentials. Specifically, how are the citizens and national political communities prepared for the stage of Pan-European integration. Even though the spirit of unification and cooperation on civil-political principles currently prevails in Europe, the ethnicity in it still represents a potential political weapon and an integral part of various ethnically oriented concepts in society. After all, the foundations of the European states are designed on such ethnic principle. Ethnicity forms a constituent part of the different-level scale of human identity. It "takes part" in creating political awareness, social feeling and emotional as well as existential expressions. For such reason we cannot avoid the reflection of questions related to ethnic or national identity when developing strategic euro-integration projects. But always with empathy and understanding of others. With understanding that even though every one of us is different, we are all human beings!

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

The Slovak Republic comes out of the concept of European citizenship and citizenship of the EU member states, specifically when dealing with the relation of national, ethnic and civil principles, as the absolute category. We consider civil identity to be an absolute category when it comes to the creation of manifold identities, including national and ethnic identity.

The continuation of political dialogue between individual states, nations, ethnic groups and minorities, not only in our Central-European area, but also in the broader European dimension, needs to be considered to be very important for different reasons. Our common civilization goal must be the achievement of a state in which individual state-political societies can act actively towards each other. This, however, requires cooperation. The same necessarily applies to Slovakia and its neighbours, including those partners with whom we hold long-term dialogue on the historical and political dimensions of our state, and our national past and presence. Real cooperation between partners actually means the search for a common project of living in the central-European area. Without any false feeling of political or cultural prevalence over others and without any suspicion of autonomous or governmental intentions. We need to intensify intercultural dialogue in our neighbouring relations for conciliation, and the removal of various traumas, prejudices and torts from our historical conscience. Any other method of artificially regulating this movement may be felt as a knife stab to a live body. And such wound takes a long time to heal. It is also about the position of national minorities in the Central-European area. The current status of all of the national minorities in the Slovak Republic is within this meaning fully compliant with all of the relevant standards valid in the Council of Europe, European Union and the United Nations Organization.

I would consider it to be a contributing factor if the states in our Central-European area, fated by various historical events, could also cooperate on the basis of the development of sound neighbouring relations, for example upon building a knowledge-based society that has assumptions of accumulating sufficient intellectual and social capital. They could thus open the path towards an

environment-oriented economy, an advanced democracy and global responsibility as well as to their own historical awareness and national and civil identity.

Dear friends,

We consider the principle of collective rights for minorities to be a problematic approach to the protection of national minorities. This principle may also be known as the creation of autonomous structures on an ethnic basis. It must be highlighted that all of the relevant European, transatlantic as well as global structures, including major organisations such as the United Nations Organization, the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which refused such approach and consider it to be unacceptable and invading the basic principles of relations between states, meaning the principle of the inviolability of frontiers, respect for integrity and non-interference with internal state affairs. The Council of Europe even prepared the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities that represents the first binding international legal document concerning the protection of national minorities. The document is based on the concept of the individual rights of persons belonging to national minorities. Its preparation was based on the fact that the members of a minority are citizens of the state in which they live, which means the civil principle, before they are members of their ethnic groups. As state citizens they must respect and follow its system of laws. The same rights and obligations apply to them as they do to other state citizens.

It is known that the European specialized terminology differs between the term national minority, which has its own state, and ethnic minority, which does not have its own state. Attention therefore also needs to be paid to this issue. We in Slovakia identify all of the minorities as national minorities, including the Roma and the Ruthenians.

Everybody who is interested in the political situation in the Balkans currently knows an example of a risky political method of resolving national problems. The problem that we currently face in relation to recent and still actual development is that there are not two autonomous principles standing opposite each other – international law protecting regional sovereignty and the rights of people belonging to a national minority that are exactly defined in international documents. None of them defines a right of a national minority to declare national independence without the approval of the state in which such minority lives. The international and political risks that result from the acceptance of very controversial solutions to such situation cannot be underestimated. It may create precedence for the entire world, for other similarly set ethnic disorders throughout the world.

The Slovak Republic meets all of the European and international standards concerning the protection of national minorities and the rights of their members. As it intends to create transparent and open politics, and enforce the system of values of an advanced civil society, it is open to the requirements of its national minorities, which will result in the improvement of minority policy, as well as the political and economic stabilization of the state.

In relation to the minority policy of the European Union and the Slovak Republic, I need to mention the Roma national minority, which is the second largest national

minority in Slovakia. It needs to be said that it currently stands in a very complicated situation of its own ethno-cultural and ethno-emancipating development. A lot of problems in this area have been neglected. I would like to highlight that part of the Roma problem in Slovakia is currently being handled very successfully by the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Issues, which is primarily oriented towards Roma settlements, the solution of social issues and unemployment, education and the re-codification of the Roma language. We are aware that the solution of the Roma issue is also a European problem and that it is a long-term thing.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In the light of the European documents, national legislation and within our limits, we are ready to pay increased attention to all twelve of the national minorities living in the Slovak Republic. Slovakia takes its multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity to be a great asset, which it is prepared to support and develop as much as possible. It is ready for discussion, willing to listen and take part in a tolerant dialogue and professional argument, to gain something and not to fight against someone. We are prepared to react to the new challenges of the era, and to carefully perceive the balance of rights, obligations and responsibilities in a civil society where national minorities are perceived as an enrichment and not a brake to its development. Enabling equal chances for everyone!

Thank you for your attention.