

“Vision for Europe” Award speech by Mr. Mikuláš Dzurinda

Allow me to thank the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, the Institute of International Relations, but also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the helm with Minister Tomas Petricek for giving me a chance to enjoy these beautiful moments being awarded for my effort in the past.

This is true: I wanted a lot to break my Country out of isolation and to bring it to the re-united Europe. All the more when our neighbours, including the Czech republic, had already been negotiating their EU and NATO membership.

Thanks to great effort of all relevant stakeholders our dream has become our reality. However compelling it may be to reminisce, the crucial universal question for politicians remains: how can we respond to current, upcoming and potential challenges ?

15 years ago the Western World was rejoicing. Euphoria reign in Dublin when our flags were proudly raised on mast together with those of the other member states. In these days the spirit among people is different. Last weekend, at the European election, we avoided catastrophe. But there is not so much to celebrate - the recent polls done by the Eurobarometer and ECFR show, that the support for EU membership is at a record high: two-thirds of Europeans currently believe EU membership is a good thing. This is the largest share since 1983

But at the same time majority of EU citizens also fear that the EU might collapse. In the most optimistic EU country - in Spain - 40 % of citizens think it is likely the EU will fall apart in 10 to 20 years. But in Germany it is 50 %, in Italy and Poland 57 %, in France 58 %, in Slovakia 66 %. The results show, that 50 % of EU citizens believe the EU in general and their country in particular are not evolving in the right direction - so, how to understand such a contradiction ?

I believe, people perceive the last decade as a period of growing uncertainties . The origin of this perception is related not only with terrorism, with the global financial crisis and massive immigration, but also with momentous developments within and out of the EU. It is mainly external conditions, which have been changed dramatically over the last decade. Aggressiveness of Russia has resulted to annexation of Crimea and hybrid war against Ukraine, to its huge disinformation campaign worldwide. We all know that within ten years China will become the biggest economy in the world. The assertiveness of China is in permanent raise. And not only in economy, but globally.

We face very unstable situation in the Middle East and Africa. And should that not have been enough, we have a very special situation in the US. But also in our own European family. After over forty-five years, we are set to lose one of the biggest and most influential members - the UK. Rule of law - the backbone of our western civilisation- is at stake in some EU countries.



At the same time populism, nationalism and extremism have gained ground in most member states and power in several of them - the current situation and all major relevant trends call for a courageous, bold attitude and decisions. The EU needs to succeed in the global, overall competition. The EU needs to promote and defend its legitimate interests . The EU needs to strengthen the feeling of security and certainty of its citizens. And last but not least the EU must enjoy greater respect and authority. Both - inside and also outside the EU.

The ambition of Europe for the years and decades to come should consist in gradually reforming to match the economic and military strength of both - the US and China - as a political and economic union. Europe should promote such a vision: to become the third, equally firm and strong pillar of a new, global geopolitical tripod - the US, China and the EU.

Slovakia represents a success story thanks to deep, profound and bold reform. I feel very strongly that now we need reforms also in Europe. Our challenge is to outline a model of European unity, in which a strong but strictly limited federal centre coexists with equally strong member states preserving most of their autonomy. The current EU institutions have extraordinarily managed to be too intrusive and too weak at once, which helps to explain their unpopularity. Let me outline four core ideas for EU reform: 1) - European integration should be progressively refocused so as to concentrate on the core areas of TRADITIONAL FEDERAL COMPETENCE - the supranational institutions should take on more responsibility for defence, foreign policy and border control, and eventually acquire some limited treasury functions. The EU (communitarian) level should also continue to safeguard the unity and completion of the internal market by strictly enforcing the free circulation of goods, services, capital and people, as well as the prohibition of state aid.

Within this broad framework , two areas of traditional federal competence stand out: defence and migration; we need to take an action in both areas - a few weeks ago Jean Claude Juncker in his interview carried out for media from Visegrad countries got a question: 'Under current circumstances can we still believe the United States ? ' His answer was: "Yes, we can. But we have to act as if we could not". The consequence of such understanding is obvious: we have to launch and develop the European Defence Union with the European Army as a final stage.

Management of immigration to the EU should be acknowledged as a federal competence, including the readmission of persons not granted asylum or a residence permit. Nonetheless, the competence to accept migrants and asylum seekers should remain at the national level, as this touches upon the deepest issues of culture and identity. The member states should be incentivised, but not forced to take on migrants. The need of solidarity of all member states is indisputable.



II) - Outside the strategic areas where integration is needed, the EU should encourage **DECENTRALISATION** and **COMPETITION**, not **CENTRALISATION** and **HARMONISATION**. We want to have strong and respected EU institutions, but also strong and respected member states. We can achieve such a goal only by the strictest interpretation of subsidiarity.

III) The political economy of EUROZONE COUNTRIES is ill-sited to a decentralised monetary union and in need of deep reforms. A transition towards a more sustainable Union requires a drastic reduction of public debt and more market-oriented paradigms for the provision of public services in countries that adopted the euro. The primary loci of policies for social inclusion should remain member states, regions and local communities.

Instead of evolving towards a bureaucratically centralised confederation, the Eurozone should become a union whose member states would be subject to a strict no-bailout rule and characterised by low levels of public debt, the competitive provision of public services and economic openness.

IV) We should keep the debate on Europe's identity alive while rigorously defending subsidiarity in regard to cultural issues. Common European institutions should not be expected to invent and promote an artificial European cultural identity; rather they should eliminate causes of friction and violent conflicts while respecting national and regional cultural differences and diversity. On such sensitive issues as family structures, gay marriage and the role of religious symbols in public life we should strongly defend the prerogatives of member states against EU encroachment;

Conclusion: - For many years I have been listening to calls that we need 'more Europe', or we have to create and develop an 'ever closer Europe'. These days, after a decade of growing uncertainties (relating also to rapid technological development), given my personal experience, but also the raise of populism, nationalism and extremism I would modify these slogans. What we need is **as much Union as necessary, but as little Union as possible**.

Reform in the EU is badly needed. What is not needed, even allowed to be negotiated is the rule of law, the values, tenets and principles of liberal democracy at the helm with freedom, responsibility and the system of checks and balances. Talks of illiberal democracy are misguided and unacceptable. Liberal democracy, especially checks and balances, free media and a vibrant civil society is part and parcel of the EU's identity and the basis of the entire integration project.

A few years ago Petr Pithart spoke with a nostalgia about former Czechoslovakia. He mentioned that in his eyes the Czechoslovakia had constituted something as a clinch (jointer) holding whole Europe (West and East) together. It would be great if the V4 region could play such a role.



But it requires two things on the side of Visegrad counties: unwavering allegiance to the rule of law and implementation of the single currency by the remaining V4 countries.

Doing so the region of V 4 would be compatible again with the best preconditions to become a driving force of further reforms and positive future of the EU.

At the very end I want to thank you once again from the bottom of my heart for being invited and awarded. Thank you for your attention, I wish you a very successful and inspiring Prague European Summit !

