

ICPS newsletter[®]

Slovenia's presidency: New Member States learn to run the EU

For the first time since the huge enlargement of the European Union in 2004, the EU presidency was held by a New Member State, Slovenia. Slovenia took the torch from Portugal, which had managed to take an important step towards completing internal reform in the Union. What are Slovenia's plans for the next half-year? What will it manage to achieve over this time in internal policy and how will Slovenia represent the EU on the international stage? The answers to these questions by ICPS analyst Olha Shumylo were published on the Euro-Atlantic Ukraine website

Slovenia was one of the first New EU Member States to introduce the euro and joined the Schengen area. And Ljubljana is the first to preside over the EU. During a presidency lasting from 1 January to 1 July 2008, Slovenia will be "the face and voice" of the European Union.

A full schedule

Each country that presides over the EU establishes objectives that are dictated by its interests, experience and opportunities. First of all, Slovenia is viewed as a "bridge" between the EU and the Balkan countries, especially at a time when the issue of Kosovo's independence is being decided.

At the technical level, the president's country will need to hold some 150 meetings on its territory, including 14 at the ministerial level. All other EU events taking place during this period will be held in Brussels or in Luxembourg.

Among the main objectives of the presiding country is organizing and holding meetings of the European Council and the Council of the European Union and preparing meetings for committees and working groups. Slovenia will also represent the Council in its work and contacts with other EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. In addition, Slovenia will represent the EU at international organizations and will maintain relations with countries that are outside the Union's borders.

The German–Portuguese–Slovenian Troika

Clearly, the lack of experience and, even more so, of human resources for such an important objective means that Slovenia will require assistance from other EU Member States and more active attention from the European Commission. Back in 2005, Germany proposed the practice of running presidencies in "Troikas." Based on the rotation process, size and geographical location, three countries can team up for the sake of a joint and consistent presidency over an 18-month period.

Thus, without violating EU rules in any way, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia decided to preside in the Troika format and to offer each other support based on a joint program. Firstly, this practice helped coordinate the actions of several countries and ensure consistent internal development and foreign policy.

The main issues identified by this Troika were — to continue EU reform, especially, in terms of completing the constitutional process, to implement the updated Lisbon Strategy, and to complete the formation of a European area of freedom, security and internal affairs (justice). The next development in the EU's common foreign policy was determined as the main priority for the next 18 months. Based on the Troika's general program, each of the participating countries developed its own sub-program for its presidency.

In addition to joint work on the Troika's program, the countries also agreed to cooperate in the process of its fulfillment. Indeed, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia began to use this Troika to strengthen bilateral cooperation through joint cultural projects, training programs and exchange of specialists.

Priorities for Slovenia's presidency

1. Ratifying the Lisbon Agreement.

The success of Germany and Portugal in the rapid coordination and signing of a new agreement has prompted Slovenia to work with Member States to ensure the swift ratification of this document over 2008. Moreover, Slovenia wants to serve as an example for other Member States and ratify the agreement at the start of the year, immediately after Hungary. The country is even prepared to run an informational campaign among the legislatures of Member States that are to ratify the agreement.

At the moment, the completion of institutional reform is one of the priority priorities for the Union. The 2004 expansion added new Member States to the EU without changing the rules of the game that were developed for the original 15 Member States. If ratified, the new agreement will make it possible to resolve a number of internal and external issues.

In the first place, the Lisbon Strategy has to be viewed as "an agreement to reform" and not as a document to replace the ill-fated EU Constitution. This agreement proposes institutional changes such as: expanding the category of common decisions in foreign and security policy that may be made by a simple majority and not unanimously, with the right of veto; replacing the six-month rotation of Member States in the presidency

with a longer term that will be held by individuals appointed by EU Governments, and so on.

2. Implementing the Lisbon Strategy.

The implementation of the Lisbon Strategy is a no-less-important priority for Slovenia's term in the presidency. The European Commission has given good marks to the fulfillment of the first cycle of this strategy and called it one that has made it possible to lay the foundation for improving indicators in jobs creation and ensuring Union-wide sustainable growth.

Slovenia plans to launch the second cycle of the updated strategy during a meeting of the European Council in Spring 2008. The objective for this next cycle is implementing priorities that were planned earlier and strictly fulfilling commitments undertaken by EU Member States. Slovenia will pay attention to four aspects of this strategy:

- investing in research, knowledge and innovations and developing a competitive business environment;
- adjusting the labor market in response to demographic changes;
- energy policy;
- climate change.

There is a threat that the relatively liberal proposals in the second cycle, put together by bureaucrats from the European Commission, could face resistance among well-known EU protectionists, especially France and Germany. However, nobody expects Slovenia to manage to settle the conflict between these giants. Usually, similar issues in the EU are resolved at a different level. This means that leaders of EU Member States will seek a common language with the European Commission outside the context of Slovenia's presidency.

3. Environmental issues and EU energy policy. Issues in EU's energy policy and climate change are getting special attention in the Union and are reflected not only in the Lisbon Strategy. For the period of its presidency, Slovenia has set the goal of initiating negotiations among Member States on a package of issues related to climate change and energy policy. This document, prepared by the European Commission, contains proposals for integrating climate change issues and EU energy policy.

During its six months at the helm, Slovenia will not propose any of its own initiatives, but has set itself a fairly ambitious objective: to set the conditions for seeking consensus among all Members regarding this document by the end of 2008 or beginning of 2009. The country also plans to get involved in the development of an action plan to achieve earlier identified EU indicators related to trading emissions and spreading the use of renewable energy.

As for EU energy policy, Slovenia will continue discussing further liberalization of internal markets among Member States and how to reduce dependence on Russian energy. However, the latest actions of some EU Member States, such as Bulgaria, are making it likely that Slovenia will not make much progress on these issues and that decisions related to energy policy will continue to be the purview of individual Member States.

4. Prospects for the Western Balkans.

It is no secret that each Member State presiding over the EU hopes to emphasize those aspects of EU foreign policy that reflect to its own priorities. Slovenia is no exception. It has stated that its foreign political priority is to confirm European prospects for the Western Balkans. Moreover, Slovenia plans to propose the introduction of a visa-free regime for these countries.

The Western Balkan countries differ in terms of their level of development and are at different stages of readiness to accede to the EU. Slovenia says that confirming the prospect of "open doors" will show recognition of the achievements of those countries that are successfully implementing painful reforms and adjusting to EU standards and rules—as well as a spur to those countries that still lag in the integration process.

Certainly, the status of Kosovo will not be neglected during Slovenia's presidency. At the moment, there is no consensus within the EU regarding the status of this territory. So far, only 20 Member States are prepared to recognize its independence: Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Slovakia and Romania continue to seriously oppose this idea.

Like no other country within the EU, Slovenia understands the problems and the origins of conflicts on the territories of former Yugoslavia. This is why, unlike

other small countries that are mostly preoccupied with routine issues during their presidency, Slovenia will not be able to stand aside during consultations on forming a common EU position regarding Kosovo's independence. Slovenia could become the "interpreter" of events that are taking place in the Balkans and contribute to formulating a common coordinated EU position when the time comes to make a decision on recognizing Kosovo's independence or the prospects for Serbia's membership.

Slovenia's presidency: Prospects for Ukraine

Despite the fact that the EU's foreign political focus has shifted to the Balkans, relations between Ukraine and the EU will develop at a rapid pace. At the end of January, there was another round of negotiations regarding a new enhanced agreement. Also, after Ukraine's accession to the World Trade Organization, the parties will begin negotiations to set up a free trade area between Ukraine and the EU.

In this context, as a country that has achieved success in democratizing and modernizing its economy, Slovenia could become Ukraine's advocate. Moreover, the participation of Slovenian politicians in summits and negotiations with Ukraine provides a unique opportunity to establish contacts to form a pro-Ukrainian lobby in the "new" EU. Notably, the decision to offer prospects of membership to any country is made unanimously in the EU and each vote at the meeting of the Council matters.

Finally, Slovenia can serve as an example for Ukraine, showing that limited resources and lack of experience are no hindrance to a country's participation in Pan-European initiatives, such as the Lisbon Strategy or the struggle against global warming. It makes sense for Ukraine to join these initiatives. In this sense, Slovenia can also assist this country. ■

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For additional information, contact Project Manager Olha Shumilo by telephone at (380-44) 484-4400 or via e-mail at oshumilo@icps.Kiev.ua.

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icps newsletter editor Olha Lvova (olvova@icps.kiev.ua). Phone: (380-44) 484-4400.

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