State Secretary Korčok
Vice-President Hudák

Distinguished guests,

- What’s next for the EU’s further integration?! We have all faced this question at some point, haven’t we?! And therefore, it may not sound entirely new.

- But the context – the context is new. And I am convinced that we are having the right discussion at the right time.

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- Europe is at a crossroads again.

- Not long ago, the EU was in full-on crisis mode – we had to cope with the financial and economic crisis, the migration challenges, a string of terror attacks on our soil, and with a decision of one of our Member States to leave the family.

- No wonder that during those rainy days, people have lost a sense of stability, security and predictability.
• However, things are getting better. Well – yes and no.

• On one hand, we are finally enjoying positive economic news.
  
  o Growth in the EU has outstripped that of the United States over the last two years and it now stands above 2% for the union as a whole.

  o Unemployment is at a nine year low. With 235 million people at work, we are experiencing record-high employment in the EU.

• But these figures – however good they may be – do not paint a full picture. I’m referring to the mood of our citizens that does not necessarily reflect better trends.

  o The national elections of this year alone have seen dissatisfaction, resentment, and even anger expressed by significant portions of our populations. Time after time we hold our breath until the final results – to see nationalist, Eurosceptic and even extreme parties often harvesting votes out of this frustration.

  o Radical ideas that we thought were long gone, are suddenly back at the centre-stage.
Among other things, these voices attempt to undermine the European spirit of cooperation – with sham arguments and destabilising solutions.

- Some put blame on technology and the way social media can twist political discourse – sometimes it is even with interference of external actors.

- Others point at the growing social gap in our societies or the need to reform certain political institutions.

- But whatever the reason, there is a clear sense of urgency to act.

- Let's be clear, the burden of proof rests on our shoulders. It is up to us – all of us in this room and outside this room who share my European conviction – to join and inspire for Europe.

- No need for any additional reason or additional wake-up call.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

- It is in this context that the EU’s future integration is being discussed.

- The start button was pressed at the Bratislava Summit a little over a year ago – in the wake of the UK referendum.

- Since then, the discussion has been evolving and maturing, also thanks to a number of momentous contributions, such as:

  o The European Commission’s White Paper on the Future of Europe;
  o The Rome Declaration;
  o President Juncker’s State of the Union speech;
  o The speech on Europe by French President Macron;
  o And most recently, the Leaders’ Agenda presented by the European Council President Tusk and endorsed by all EU27 leaders.

- Of course, I shall not overlook a re-energized Franco-German engine.
• Yes, these contributions vary here and there, but three things are coming through loud and clear now:

1. The unity is rightly seen as the EU's strongest currency;

2. There is an appetite to move into higher gear in certain areas;

3. We must reconnect with people through tangible results that only EU cooperation can bring.

• Let me explain.

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• Whatever the matter at hand, we should tackle it with a European spirit. And the European spirit means all Member States at the table.

• This should remain our starting point as well as our primary ambition.

• After all, the EU is known for its ability to master the art of compromise or figuratively speaking, to square the circle – there are even numerous jokes about it 😊
• Even on the most difficult files, we have seen the power of finding common ground – posted workers just earlier this week.

• And we see unity at its best during our negotiations with the United Kingdom.

• But don’t get me wrong! It does not mean that the EU should move at the pace of its slowest member.

• In recent words of Donald Tusk, unity cannot be an excuse for stagnation.

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• Certain topics are burning. And there is an appetite – resolve even – to get into higher gear in several areas.

• Faced with a changing environment, internal security and defence are definitely one of them.

  o The EU is set to deepen defence cooperation of those Member States capable and willing to do so. In fact, a first major result is already within reach – the so-called PESCO, Permanent Structured Cooperation, is likely to be launched
by the end of this year. This will open the door to joint security projects of participating Member States.

- Sooner or later, we will need a giant leap in the joint fight against terrorism and cybercrime because they do not know borders.

- Take for instance, President Juncker’s idea of a European intelligence unit to combat foreign fighters and cross-border terrorism. Far too long, we keep repeating that better intelligence-sharing is a must.

- And cyber security – it is simply vital for our private lives, commercial activities and our political systems, our democracies.

- Another area that will see further integration is, no doubt, the Eurozone. A special summit is envisaged this December.

  - The 2008 crisis exposed without mercy the weaknesses in the euro area’s architecture.

  - A full completion of the Banking Union is a must. But it will hardly stop there.
o For instance, we may see a birth certificate of the European Monetary Fund in the near future.

o Academics and policy-makers already debate a fiscal union with some form of fiscal capacity to weather macroeconomic shocks. Although it is clear this will not happen overnight.

o In my view, the Eurozone reform – however intensive in political terms – should be bold in vision and extremely well-thought in concrete steps.

o We need to get it right this time.

- I could list more areas linked with a new or renewed push for further integration, for instance the European Public Prosecutor or the social pillar.

- But last example I'd like to dwell on is trade.

  o Due to a shift in the United States, the EU is boosting its position of an advocate of free and fair trade – we can really profit from this newly-created vacuum.

  o Building on a recent success story of the EU-Canada deal, there are good prospects of an
agreement with Japan, Mercosur, and eventually with Australia or New Zealand.

- But I underline the word “fair” in the phrase free and fair and the word “reciprocity”. The EU’s trade deals must be stronger here.

- While open for business, we have to get what we give. Because trade is also about jobs.

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- These are exactly the kind of tangible results that we need in order to reconnect with citizens.

- We may not have hearts and minds of everyone at the moment, but we cannot abandon our beliefs, harden our rhetoric and put Europe in the back seat.

- On the contrary, we must equip ourselves with even greater patience and vigour – and engage.

- What do I mean?!

  - Encouraging critical thinking – because myths or false information are part of the problem. A few years ago, a claim that the Earth is flat would cause ironic laughter 😊 Today, the Google offers me some 400-thousand results on the phrase flat-
Earthers who spread their arguments better thanks to the internet and social media.

- **Creating a personal link** between respective EU policies and people – because this is often missing.

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- Let me give you **one example where I think it’s already working** – the Energy Union where I’m fortunate enough to lead the European integration.

- The **Energy Union** has brought under one roof our efforts to **provide Europeans with energy** which is secure, competitive, and sustainable.

  - **Secure** – because in 2009, we learned what it means losing the gas supply overnight. We cannot and will not live under such risk anymore.

  - **Competitive** – because it needs to make business sense and help modernise the European economy.

  - **Sustainable** – because natural disasters are no longer images from distant places. They also occur here in Europe, close to our homes.
• During my Energy Union Tours across Europe, I often meet with **the public** and it makes me **happy to see their support** – for the energy transition into a clean economy and in particular, for our climate action.

• You can **hardly be a nationalist to build energy security** or to **fight climate change**. Because it is **bigger than one Member State**, bigger than one generation.

• I truly **enjoy talking to people** about the European cooperation **from various angles of the Energy Union**.

• And I also **find myself inspired** when I get to **touch the future** in this area – full of innovations, full of opportunities.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

• Allow me to **finish on a personal and optimistic note**. Those who know me well can confirm that I **tend to zoom in on the positive 😊**

• **When** my colleagues and **I strived for Slovakia to join the EU**, Schengen, and the Eurozone, I did it
because I strongly believed in the vision of the EU as transformational power.

- And although our country is no longer a new kid on the block, but a well-established member, I feel similar – if not the same – enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility.

- In the debate about the EU’s further integration, Slovakia has chosen to be at its heart – highest political figures of this country confirmed it earlier this week. It is good for Slovakia and for the region.

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- All in all, it is my strongest belief that we will jointly write many more chapters in the book on the EU’s integration.

- It is not a matter of whether, but a matter of how.

- At times, it may not be full-steam integration with giant leaps. But it is also the direction that matters.

- In words of President Juncker, even if we do not go at the same speed, what is important is that we all go in the same direction.
• So as I said at the very beginning, this discussion is the right one and at the right moment.

• And I am sure that the Tatra Summit will, as always, also generate, provide valuable contributions.

• Thank you very much for your attention.