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CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: ASSISTING COUNTRIES IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

The Centre for European Perspective, a non-profit, independent institution for assistance to countries in Southeastern Europe and the EU's neighbours on their path towards the EU, was officially inaugurated at the Jable Mansion in Loka near Menges on 23 May. With the centre, Slovenia wants to make a contribution to the EU enlargement process and Euro-Atlantic integration, the Foreign Ministry says. Jable Mansion will also serve as a protocol centre when Slovenia takes over as EU president in the first half of 2008.

Support for the countries from Southeastern Europe will be one of Slovenia's priorities during its EU presidency, and one of the main tasks of the new centre, Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel stressed at the official inauguration ceremony. The centre will provide programming and technical assistance to governments, private institutions and non-governmental organisations in the partner countries through seminars, conferences, panels and other activities. Its aim is to accelerate activities towards the improvement of the dialogue between nations, cultures and religions.

DEFINING PRIORITIES KEY TO SLOVENIA'S STINT AS EU PRESIDENT

Slovenia will be the first among the EU's 2004 newcomers to preside over the bloc in the first half of 2008, the most demanding project after the country gained its independence in 1991. To guarantee the success of its six-month stint as EU chair Slovenia will have to make a correct choice of the priority tasks and institute good cooperation between the parliament and the government, the head of the Government Office for European Affairs (SVEZ) Janez Lenarcic said on 17 May as he presented the country's preparations in parliament.

Lenarcic highlighted the European constitutional treaty and the EU's future, the Western Balkans, the European Neighbourhood Policy, energy and cultural dialogue as the most likely priorities of Slovenia's presidency. Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel added that "Slovenia's chairing the EU will be a time for discussions on the bloc's future and the European constitution". Speaking on Diplomacy Day, 22 May, Rupel said that the issue of the constitution would be difficult to solve without the French, therefore Slovenia will represent a "bridge between Germany and France". Germany, Portugal and Slovenia will constitute what is dubbed a troika, as they will chair the EU in succession.

Slovenia's stint as EU president presents a great honour for the country as well as a large challenge. Government estimates have put the sum needed for the entire project at SIT 13.7bn (EUR 57.2m). The staff has already been chosen and includes 1,100 people, who will have to get sufficient training for chairing more than 4,000 meetings of various working groups. In addition, 30 official ministerial meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg and 10 to 15 informal meetings in Slovenia as well as over 100 meetings with third



Opening of the Centre for European Perspective (Photo: STA)

The opening commenced with the maiden session of the centre's advisory committee, which is made up of distinguished international politicians such as former Estonian Foreign Minister Kristina Ojuland, former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, former US Ambassador to Slovenia Victor Jankovich, former Serbia-Montenegro Foreign Minister Goran Svilanovic, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana and Italian Interior Minister Giuliano Amato. Former Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen chairs the advisory committee.

SLOVENIA GETS GREEN LIGHT FOR EURO SWITCH

On 1 January 2007 Slovenia will become the first among the countries that joined the EU in May 2004 to introduce the euro, thereby causing the eurozone to increase to 13 countries. Following their separate positive assessments, the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) recommended on 16 May that the bloc's members endorse Slovenia's euro bid. The political decision on Slovenia's euro adoption will be taken at the EU summit on 15 and 16 June in Brussels. Meanwhile the legal basis for Slovenia entering the elite economic and monetary union, including setting the official euro-tolar exchange rate, should be passed by EU finance ministers at their 11 July meeting.

countries are planned during Slovenia's stint.



Slovenia's Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel (Photo: STA)

EUROPE DAY - A DAY OF CELEBRATIONS AND INITIATIVES

Europe Day was celebrated on 9 May throughout the continent for the 20th year in a row with a series of events and special projects. All EU members, including Slovenia took part in the celebrations, with many high-profile politicians presenting their views on the process of European integration.

56 years after the Schuman Declaration, Europe is a story of a successful democratic search for a balance between member states with the aim of implementing suitable-for-all joint frameworks on numerous EU activities, the European Commission Representation in Slovenia said. The head of the Government Office for European Affairs (SVEZ) Janez Lenarcic meanwhile wrote in a press release that even though the EU is not a perfect creation, it

"Slovenia meets all the convergence criteria - a result of stable policies and reforms. However, it should be stressed that Slovenia will not have completed all the work by introducing the euro. The euro brings many benefits, but also responsibilities, foremost to retain stability of public finance," European Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs Joaquin Almunia said after announcing the Commission's decision.

Politicians and businesses in Slovenia welcomed the positive assessments, yet at the same time pointed to the need to continue with prudent economic policies. Euro changeover will be a historical event and will have a number of positive effects, Prime Minister Janez Jansa said at a joint press conference with Bank of Slovenia Governor Mitja Gaspari and Finance Minister Andrej Bajuk, after the Commission and ECB's reports were published.



Future Slovenian euro coin (Photo: STA)

SLOVENIA FOCUSED ON ITS FUTURE AS IT CELEBRATES SECOND YEAR IN EU

is currently without an alternative. Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel added in his lecture at the Ljubljana Faculty of Social Sciences that Slovenia can effectively pursue its interests as a member of the bloc, and pointed out that diversity is the glue that holds the EU together.

Various events took place throughout Slovenia during the celebrations, many carried out in the streets. The events were also attended by many young people, who have built European villages in nine Slovenian towns and cities. Café d'Europe was opened in Ljubljana, as well as in 26 other EU capitals. In the coffee bar of Ljubljana's Grand Hotel Union, various politicians and artists wrote a European story from the Slovenian point of view, while tasting the literary and culinary diversity of Europe. The National Assembly hosted a debate on the bloc's energy policy, and the country's capital Ljubljana was visited by members of NGOs from the Western Balkans.

EU PASSES FINAL VERSION OF FINANCIAL PERSPECTIVES FOR 2007-2013 PERIOD

The European Parliament passed on 17 May the EU's financial perspectives for the 2007-2013 period, thereby giving the bloc its final version of the budget in the period. The vote and signing an inter-institutional agreement was the final step in adopting the EUR 864.4bn perspectives.

Slovenia celebrated the second anniversary of EU entry on 1 May. The two years of its EU membership passed without major shocks while the country has proved to be a strong and successful member as well as one of economically more successful newcomers. However, the country remains focused on its future challenges, such as the January 2007 euro adoption, becoming a member of the Schengen zone and being the first of the 2004 newcomers to preside over the EU in the first half of 2008.

Slovenia has "firmly anchored itself in the EU and is an undisputed front-runner among the new member states," said Prime Minister Janez Jansa, pointing out that in the past two years life in Slovenia has not changed significantly and that the majority of Slovenians are still favourably disposed towards the EU. Even though the support for joining the bloc has dropped somewhat in the past three years, the majority of the country's citizens still believe that their standard of living has not decreased.

All ten EU newcomers as well as the EU assessed the 2004 enlargement as successful, as the fears from the pre-accession period, namely of the huge influx of foreign workers, a collapse of the joint budget and the bloc's inability to take joint decisions, have remained just fears. According to the European Commission, the enlargement was an "economic success", benefiting both the old and the new members. However, "two years after" the bloc is suffering from fatigue, which is weakening the political will to continue with the enlargement, while the EU is also lacking a clear vision of its future.



European stall in Ljubljana at Europe day (Photo: STA)

The deal between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council, in line with the division plan for cohesion funds adopted by the EU Council in December, allocates four times as much funds to Slovenia than the country had under the current financial perspectives. Even though the proposal might not be ideal for EU development, it represents a compromise which will enable uninterrupted implementation of EU policies and a full integration of all new member states, the prime minister's office wrote after the budget was passed.

"Only a year ago the EU was in a crisis due to a dispute over its budget," Wolfgang Schuessel, Austria's chancellor and EU president said on 17 May after the perspectives were passed. Financial Programming and Budget Commissioner Dalia Grybauskaitė meanwhile called passing the budget a "historic day for the enlarged Europe". All of Slovenia's MEPs were generally happy with the budget compromise and voted in its favour, yet also warned that drawing the cohesion funds in the future is of key importance.