PRESS RELEASE

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THIRD MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION COUNCIL BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC
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JOINT PRESS RELEASE

1. The EU-Slovak Republic Association Council held its third meeting on Tuesday, 25 February 1997. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Michiel PATIJN, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Delegation of the Slovak Republic was headed by Mr. Pavol HAMZIK, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The European Commission was represented by Mr. Hans van den BROEK, Member.

   This third meeting comes at an important point of time following the Dublin European Council, which confirmed the timetable for the enlargement process as set out in Madrid, and in the prelude to the conclusion of the Inter Governmental Conference which aims at laying the foundation of a Union able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

2. The Association Council took stock of the state of the bilateral relations under the Europe Agreement as well as it noted the achievements registered so far in the pre-accession/enlargement process. The two Parties exchanged position papers in which they review developments to date and consider future priorities within the Europe Agreement; the meeting also took note of a statement by the European Investment Bank.

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3. The Association Council was pleased to note, that thanks to the close cooperation between the Parties, a number of decisions have been taken by written procedure since the last meeting. They include the implementing rules for competition, the new Annex III to the Protocol on processed agricultural products as well as the double-licensing system for 1997 for imports of steel products from Slovakia into the Community. The decision taken on the new Protocol 4 to the Europe Agreement was noted with particular attention: it represents a very important step in the strategy for the setting up of a system of diagonal cumulation of rules of origin for preferential trade in Europe.

4. In its assessment of the state of bilateral relations, the Association Council took note of the good preparation made by Association Committee of December last, as well as of the useful contributions made by the two Parliamentary Association Committees held since the last meeting.

The Association Council noted with satisfaction that the EU-Slovak Republic trade relationship continues to develop in a positive manner, with few open trade issues. It welcomed the removal of the Slovak import surcharge as of January 1 and encouraged Slovakia to have it eliminated. It encouraged Slovakia to approximate EC legislation in the area of standards and certification legislation and to introduce a product liability law and an effective post market surveillance system, to avoid any technical barriers to trade.

In regard to antidumping, the European Union noted that as an associated Partner, Slovakia enjoys a favourable treatment by the Community. The European Commission has established procedures applicable to the CEECs which provide for increased and improved consultation during the investigation procedure. The Slovak side appealed for a more moderate approach in the evaluation of complaints.

Concerning Slovak trade relations with other partners, the Association Council, while expressing its support for trade liberalisation in general, emphasized the need to respect WTO rules and to take into account the implications for the future accession to the Union. The Association Council took note of the Slovak readiness to act in a manner coherent with this.

On agriculture, the Association Council expressed satisfaction that the adaptations of the Europe Agreement to the enlargement and the Uruguay Round results have been successfully concluded. These adaptations represent an important step and will improve market access and develop trade. In view of the time necessary to have the adaptation protocols ratified, the Community has extended the autonomous measures for 1997 in order to avoid even transitory disturbances of trade.

The Association Council welcomed that the Additional Protocol on Slovak participation in EU programmes is now in force. The terms and conditions for Slovakia's participation in three human resource programmes (Leonardo, Socrates and Youth for Europe) are under discussion and decisions will be taken in the course of 1997. Slovak participation in other Community programmes, such as MEDIA II, is also foreseen.

On nuclear safety, the Association Council reiterated the importance it attaches to a high level of safety in nuclear power plants. It took note of Slovakia's intention to complete the Mochovce nuclear power station according to internationally recognized safety standards and of its commitment to close any plant which does not comply with such standards.

5. The Association Council encouraged Slovakia to use the pre-accession period as intensively as possible for all aspects of accession preparations and welcomed the intention of Slovakia to launch a public information programme on the European Union and the implications of membership. It welcomed the European Union commitment to help the associated countries in fulfilling the conditions for accession as determined by the Copenhagen European Council. The European Union welcomed recent developments in the field of democratisation in Slovakia, whilst stressing that it would continue to closely follow certain domestic developments. The Union encouraged Slovakia to continue on a course of democratic consolidation as defined by the Copenhagen criteria. It expressed the hope that the additional legislation on the use of minority languages would be applied.

As regards market economy consolidation, the Association Council was encouraged by the very positive macroeconomic growth and the low inflation in Slovakia. Control of inflation and public deficit as well as the development of a sound financial sector, are crucial for EU membership. The Association Council noted, that a transparent privatization process, together with effective implementation of competition policy, bankruptcy policy measures and procurement policy, would contribute to the further opening of the Slovak market to foreign investment and give the full benefits of access to the EU market .

With a view to harmonization of legislation, another important pre-accession activity, the Association Council acknowledged the progress made by Slovakia in taking a further step by setting up the institutional framework for the implementation of the White Paper on integration into the Internal Market. The Association Council welcomed the very recent receipt of a Slovak National Approximation Programme. It emphasized the importance of ensuring that the follow-up be in harmony with the ambitious schedule for legislative alignment. It emphasized the need for approximation to be supported by the building up of an effective public service, and that new legislation on civil service reform was required to this end.

The PHARE Programme, which has become the main financial instrument for the pre-accession strategy with an indicative budget of 220 MECU for Slovakia for the 1995-99 period, will contribute to many activities geared towards membership preparation. The Association Council, recalling that no agreement was found on a commitment to Slovakia on the 1996 budget, emphasized the importance of ongoing dialogue on effective and accelerated implementation of the PHARE Programme, particularly with a view to speed up the preparation of a Country Operational Programme for 1997.

The Association Council also took note of the importance of European Investment Bank operations in Slovakia. Since 1993, the Bank has lent a total of ECU 353 million to the country, supporting its development and integration into the European Union.

6. On regional co-operation, the Association Council welcomed the ratification of the Basic Treaty between Slovakia and Hungary in May last year. Stability and good neighbourly relations under the auspices of the Treaty are of utmost importance.

   The success of the Central Europe Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) cooperation was appreciated by the Association Council, and it applauded Slovakia's efforts to widen the scope and membership of CEFTA to other CEECs, as well as its constructive role within other regional fora, such as the Central European Initiative (CEI).

   The Association Council encouraged Slovakia to take advantage of the various programmes provided by PHARE aiming at fostering regional integration, such as the multi-country programmes, the Cross Border Co-operation Programme, the new CREDO programme, as well as PHARE support for infrastructure investment in TENs.

7. The Association Council confirmed its confidence in the good development of future relations between the Slovak Republic and the European Union in view of the objective of accession.