

**Address by the Prime Minister of Luxembourg,
H.E. Mr. Xavier Bettel, on the 15th anniversary of Slovenia's membership
of the European Union**

[Excellencies,]

[Ladies and Gentlemen,]

It is a real pleasure and honour to be here with you today to celebrate the 15th anniversary of Slovenia's membership of the European Union.

Let me begin by congratulating Slovenia for reaching this important landmark. In fact, I would like to go one step further today by not only congratulating, but thanking all of you gathered here this evening – *as well as the Slovenian people* – for the remarkable contributions Slovenia has been able to make during the last 15 years to strengthen the European Union.

When looking back at Slovenia's road to EU membership, it is surprising to see just how relatively short and direct Slovenia's evolution from independence to full EU membership went. Since independence from the Former Yugoslavia in June 1991, the country set course to join the EU – and you did so in exemplary fashion. Slovenia succeeded in laying solid foundations by progressively reshaping its economy and society from a Communist system towards a Western European model. Hence already in 1997, when under Luxembourg presidency the decision was taken to launch accession negotiations with 10 countries, Slovenia was considered as the best prepared for future EU membership.

During the accession process, Slovenia successfully transposed the EU's *acquis* and implemented the necessary reforms without hampering its national economy, which throughout the process continued to grow. Slovenia's transition can thus

only be qualified as efficient, and it allowed for a relatively smooth and seamless integration into the Union's structures.

Only three years after joining the EU, Slovenia met all the conditions to become the first of the then new members to adopt the EU's common currency, the euro. That was an outstanding achievement in and of itself. And in 2008, Slovenia became the first of the then new countries to organise an EU Presidency, and a very successful one at that.

More recently, despite the economic and financial crisis and its profound consequences, which rocked Slovenia in 2012-13, you have been able to overcome the different challenges. Your economy has seen remarkable growth over the past two years, and despite the current gloomy outlook, your economy ranks among the best performing in Europe. The same can be said of employment market, which has seen a constant decrease in unemployment figures.

Slovenia is export-oriented, open to foreign investments, strongly favouring open internal borders and fully embracing the EU's four freedoms of free movement of people, goods, services and capital. In short, Slovenia is a truly remarkable model of a new, young and dynamic Member State, which has not only lived up to its own aspirations but also serves as an example to many established Member States. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the efforts of successive Slovenia governments in this regard, but most importantly of the Slovenes themselves who have made sacrifices to bring their country to where it is today.

Without doubt, since joining the EU, Slovenia has established itself not only as a solid economy and a wonderful holiday destination but – *most importantly* – as a reliable and trusted pro-European partner as well as a "*voice of reason*" in favour of deeper EU integration. Within the EU, where the voices of the smaller member states are oftentimes not heard enough, Slovenia has succeeded in finding its place and sharpen its profile. Slovenia has established itself in this – *sometimes chaotic* – European family of nations, as a truly European country with a distinct character

and clever diplomacy. Membership of the EU has strengthened your sovereignty and your status as an independent nation, just like Luxembourg has strengthened its place among the family of nations precisely by becoming active and enthusiastic driver of European integration. On top of that, when I look at the daily business inside the EU, I see Slovenia very often on the same side as Luxembourg, not only on internal market issues, but very often also in questions relating to environmental issues, and the fight against climate change in particular, or when it comes to strengthening the social dimension of the European Union.

Since Slovenia joined the EU, Luxembourg – *and I take the liberty to include my Benelux-partners, Belgium and the Netherlands* – have gained a trustworthy and reliable ally. I am very proud to say that we consider Slovenia as a truly like-minded State, with whom we share a common outlook on so many issues.

We share common values, such as the defence of the rule of law inside the EU. It is notable that even during the height of the European migrant crisis in 2015-16, when your country was one of the main transit countries, Slovenia fully respected established norms and values and supported the common solutions the EU was seeking. Slovenia could be counted on to defend and protect those values, while at the same time defending and protecting refugees' rights and controlling its external Schengen border with Croatia. Let me take this opportunity to emphasise that, although the migration crisis is now behind us, we still urgently need to address the reform of the Dublin system in order to protect and normalise Schengen and strengthen its resilience.

In foreign policy matters, Slovenia – *like Luxembourg* – has always been an advocate of multilateralism as well as a fervent defender of a rules-based international system. We share a deep belief in the strengthening of international institutions, which protect smaller actors disproportionately and thus help them defend and develop their sovereignty. Together with my Slovenian partners, I look forward to further strengthening international institutions, which uphold international law in an independent and objective manner. In some cases, these

institutions are the only ones that can settle long-running disputes in an objective and independent manner.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At tomorrow's European Council of Sibiu, EU leaders will be asked once again to discuss the future of the European Union, with all the challenges and opportunities this brings, and with European elections on the horizon. At the same time, we must brace ourselves for unexpected new troubles and identify weaknesses in the light of the various threats Europe is facing.

Let me limit myself in this regards to emphasise that, like Slovenia, Luxembourg is convinced of the urgent need to strengthen the internal cohesion of the EU. We need to focus on the fundamental principles and values, which are at the origin of the European project. We need to build upon what has been achieved over the last seven decades, implement and enforce what we have decided together, and identify domains where the EU can discernibly add most value to achieve further progress.

In this context, I look forward to closely working together with our Slovenian partners. I am convinced that small countries must joint forces and cooperate more closely to successfully defend our shared interests.

To achieve this progress on the European level, leadership is needed, and I am very confident that Slovenia will seize the opportunity to provide progressive leadership on key issues of common interest during its upcoming 2021 stewardship of the EU. This presidency will be yet another occasion for Slovenia to showcase its potential, to try and shape niche policies in which Slovenia has a strong voice and to strengthen its presence and expertise in EU institutions.

Excellencies,

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to conclude by reiterating my gratitude for the excellent cooperation Luxembourg has enjoyed since Slovenia has joined the European Union. We are deeply grateful for Slovenia's solidarity and look forward to the next chapters of this long-lasting friendship.

Thank you for your kind attention.