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Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for Science and Research

For the Presidency it is Worth Closing Ranks and not Exploiting it to Score Domestic Political Points

In recent times, “our” European Commissioner Janez Potočnik, responsible for science and research at the European Commission, has become a frequently mentioned political figure in Slovenia, in connection both with Slovenia’s EU Presidency and with the approaching parliamentary elections in Slovenia.

At the beginning of the year, on your official website, you wrote in your blog that you were very proud of Slovenia’s Presidency of the EU. What are your feelings and verdicts at this halfway stage of the Presidency, in your sphere and in other spheres?

Naturally none of the Commissioners has a detailed view of all spheres of the Presidency. For the most part each has a good view of his or her own sphere and of the priority areas, that is to say of significant events such as the Spring Summit. That was a success: it may not have included significant innovations but it was an important step in the right direction. Both with regard to the continuation of the Lisbon Strategy, and in terms of the energy and environment package. For me personally, the summit was extremely important because of the support for my proposal regarding the introduction of the “fifth freedom”, the free movement of knowledge. It will probably take some time before we are fully aware of the importance of this decision for the whole of Europe. In my sphere there is, of course, considerable willingness and readiness to continue to develop the European Research Area. As I said at the beginning, we cannot follow all

the details of what is happening in individual spheres, but personally I believe that the Presidency as a whole is going well. All the events I have participated in have been excellently organised – good organisation is generally something that comes quite naturally to us Slovenes...

Would you say, then, that in terms of organisation we are following the tradition of the German Presidency?

Yes, we are following the tradition of those Presidencies that have been well organised. The most important thing for us is, of course, how well we are going to acquit ourselves. It is still too early for a final appraisal, but even at this point we can say that after the Presidency ends at least one of the problems that Slovenia has had to date will have been resolved. Namely that we were not clearly recognisable on the map of Europe and the world. This is without a doubt the most important positive side effect of the Presidency. The Presidency is also excellent training for the domestic administration, in the same way that, for example, the pre-accession negotiations were.

You have probably also heard com-

ments from your fellow Commissioners in connection with the Slovenian Presidency. Praise or criticism?

We Commissioners do not discuss abstract or general views on the Presidency of an individual Member State. I can say, however, that I have yet to hear any criticism, while some of my colleagues have spoken appreciatively about events at which they have been present. And all of them are very enthusiastic about Slovenia. But there is still plenty of time ahead of us to further consolidate this good opinion before the end of the Presidency and bring Slovenia closer to those who do not yet know it.

As luck would have it, our Presidency has coincided with parliamentary elections in Slovenia, a time when internal political disagreements and, of course, the divided opinions of voters, are more than usually evident. For the time being, though, this appears to be having almost no effect on Slovenia’s attitude to the EU Presidency. Do you have the same impression?

The Commission refrains as a matter of principle from commenting on domestic politics, which of course is the only logical and correct position to take. There is no doubt that the Presidency is such an important test for every State that it is worth closing ranks and not exploiting it to score domestic political points, whether on the government

side or on the side of the opposition.

In 2004 you spent a few months working with Günter Verheugen when he was Commissioner for Enlargement. In the light of that experience, how do you view recent events in the former Yugoslavia, both in Croatia and in connection with the declaration and recognition of Kosovo's independence? When can these countries expect to join the EU?

That is quite a complex question. To begin with it is worth emphasising that the perspective of the countries of the so-called Western Balkans is clear – they have, and must have, the

light needs to be shed on the question of the enlargement of the Union to include these countries, both from the point of view of the Union and its members, and from the point of view of the countries of the Western Balkans themselves. From the European point of view, it is possible to say that enlargement has probably been the most successful European policy to date. Increasing stability, economic progress, the spread of values and democratic standards, and so on – all of these are processes to which enlargement has made a decisive contribution. I believe that all responsible politicians in Europe are aware

EU did not remain among those issues to which most political attention is directed. The Western Balkans must become an equal part of the Union as soon as possible – not least because Europe is and will be in the long term only as strong and stable as its weakest link. The criteria for joining the EU have remained the same as they were at the time of our negotiations, although their verification is essentially double: for each individual chapter, as well as the final evaluation, the readiness of the country concerned is additionally checked. It is this that enables the start of negotiations. And of course this does not speed up the accession process. We should not forget that the candidate countries negotiate with the Member States and not the European Commission.

All of this creates the impression that we now have candidate countries of the first, second and third divisions...

No, no... I don't think there is any question of classification into different divisions, but there are, of course, differences between countries, and these influence the potential speed of their integration into the Union. In its last report the Commission found that in practically all countries progress could be better and quicker in many areas. Croatia undoubtedly stands out from the other candidates in terms of readiness, and it is the Commission's wish, recently clearly expressed by President Barroso, that negotiations with Croatia should be concluded in the coming year, or if possible even before the end of our Presidency. Naturally this depends above all on Croatia itself. As regards the other countries of the Western Balkans, the key is Serbia, which has refused the offer to sign an associate agreement. Serbia is witnessing a convulsive conflict between the past and the future. All of us hope that wisdom will prevail and that in future elections Serbia will choose a European future. There is no doubt that the country, and above all its proud people, weary of all the terrible events of recent years, deserve it. But at the same time we must not neglect other countries – and certainly not merely because they are not currently in a crisis situation.



prospect of membership of the EU, just like Turkey. In some cases it is not merely a matter of a transition process, as was the case with the majority of countries in our enlargement. There are also questions of status to be resolved. These are usually more difficult and long-lasting. Even the scars of the recent war are anything but healed. We merely need think of our own scars from the Second World War, which are still visible even after sixty years.

of this. However, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the motivation for further enlargement of the EU has also dried up to a certain extent. Questions of the reorganisation of the functioning of the EU (the Treaty) and confronting global challenges (the Lisbon Strategy) have come into the foreground. These issues are of course extremely important, but personally I am convinced that it would be a mistake if the question of the further enlargement of the

European Commissioner Janez Potočnik, responsible for science and research at the European Commission.

The essential thing in these countries is to maintain the capacity for reform while maintaining support for further enlargement in Europe. Of course it is difficult to implement reform without

a clear assurance of entry to the EU, although it is true that things were not much different when we were negotiating. It is important to be aware and, above all, to believe that the EU keeps its word. I am convinced that it will continue to do so in the future.

The EU should also keep its word in the individual spheres of its work. In your sphere, significant growth in R&D investment has been predicted. According to the Lisbon objectives, investment should reach an average of three percent of national GDPs in the EU. It does not, however, appear that this objective is going to be realised, since for the time being the majority of Member States are devoting a considerably smaller share to development. Who has failed to keep their word? The Member States? Is the global economic recession to blame?

Development objectives should not be confused with promises. As regards the achievement of the predicted three percent, investment on the part of enterprises is of key importance. Enterprises should contribute around two thirds of all investments. Here, however, there is a paradox. Private investment in science and research and innovation is increasing in European enterprises, but their share of investment in Europe is not. Just as in the USA, enterprises are increasingly directing investment of this kind towards Asia. Economies are global and the success of European enterprises and the European economy is also based on investments outside Europe. Naturally, it would be a good thing if investment in science and research were also to increase in Europe, but for this to happen it will clearly be necessary to increase Europe's global attractiveness. Analysis shows that the key factors in enterprises' decisions on where to invest are available knowledge, the size and vicinity of the market, and the attractiveness of conditions. A systematic and long-term approach is therefore necessary in numerous areas, from the modernisation of universities to the provision of tax reliefs and State incentives, the proper orientation of calls for tender, the adoption of standards, transparency on the labour market, the availability of financial instruments, and so on. These are of course issues that concern the entire government, and all the Commissioners, and success depends precisely on the comprehensiveness and consistency of the approach.



Janez Potočnik

These issues are also discussed by your personal advisory group of leading economists from the sphere of knowledge for growth, which recently met for the first time in Slovenia. How much does their advice help you?

Exactly. The group helps me with many economic issues and their advice is extremely valuable. Above all, they help me connect the effects of knowledge, science, research and innovation with the real world – with development, growth, social standards, and so on. In my opinion, this connection has not been sufficiently clear and present in the past. The advisory group of economists in the sphere of knowledge for growth – I also like to call them “economists with knowledge”, since it is really a group of economists from different spheres – formulates proposals and useful advice which I can then use in my work and decisions.

Do your advisers also include experts of other kinds or do you mainly rely on economists?

Naturally I also have advisers in other spheres. I used to have, for example, an advisory group of more than forty experts consisting of a balanced mixture of representatives of academia and the enterprise sector (EURAB). We are currently in the process of reforming it – we want to make it more effective and recognisable. Its work will be targeted more towards giving advice on strengthening the European Research Area. We have reduced the number of members to twenty-two

but we have maintained the balance between the academic and business spheres. Letters containing my invitation to participate were sent out last week and I hope that the response will be good. As regards the sphere of cooperation with Africa, where I hope to improve cooperation and the effectiveness of EU aid, in April I will be advised by Professor Sir David King, who until recently was the Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government.

During your years as a Commissioner, a number of important new bodies have appeared in the sphere of European development policy, for example the European Research Council (ERC), which has attracted attention both for its autonomy and for the considerable funds of which it disposes via a European agency. You were initially enthusiastic about it. Is that still the case?

Yes, it is. The ERC is something of a revolution in the UE. Its foundation has had a considerable impact not only in Europe but around the world. I recently attended the Annual Meeting of the AAAS, the biggest annual meeting of researchers in the USA, and it was clear that they are closely monitoring changes in Europe, particularly the establishment of the ERC and the strengthening of the European Research Area. I am convinced that the ERC will develop into an institution that will really leave an indelible trace. I do not hide the fact that its work, and above all the establishment of the related Agency (the dedicated implementation structure), have also

encountered difficulties, but this is always the way with new institutions. We are all aware of the importance of the ERC, and therefore there is no lack of goodwill and understanding in the efforts to resolve thorny issues. And there is no doubt that it will be able to count on my full support in the future too.

You have recently been to America, and before that you were in India. What are these visits about? Is it a question of uniting research forces in the competitive struggle with the new centres of research, such as China?

Absolutely not. It is about the vital pooling of research potentials in the search for answers to the challenges of the future, such as climate change, available environmentally friendly energy, viral pandemics, and so on. The easiest way to find answers to these questions is to work together, and for this reason a strengthening of international cooperation is essential. In April I expect to be part of the delegation that President Barroso is taking to China for talks that will focus on the challenges relating to energy and climate change. In June we have a bilateral meeting and a ministerial meeting of the G8+5 group in Japan. This illustrates the EU's desire to cooperate with everyone. We are building an open European Research Area. And, of course, all of this is also important for the role of Europe in the globalised world in general.

The main share of the work of your Directorate General at the Commission falls under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), whose success it will not be possible to estimate even at the end of your term of office, since it continues a considerable way beyond it, to near the end of the next Commission's term of office. You can, however, give an assessment of the progress to date of FP7, and of whether its funding is in line with forecasts.

Funding is in line with forecasts and I see no difficulties with this in the future either, since the budget has been agreed for the whole of the 2007–2013 period. More difficult, of course, is the question of the efficient, transparent, responsible and lawful use of all the funds available. So far we have been successful. Despite the fact that this has been the first year of operation of the programme, we have used practically all the available funds and are



working hard to ensure that there are as few mistakes as possible.

Your visits to Slovenia are relatively frequent. What is your main motivation for these visits?

As I have already mentioned, one of the important tasks of the Commissioners involves ties with their home country. Putting it simply, we are ambassadors of our own sphere throughout the EU and of all spheres in our own country. I am happy to do this and I do it consciously. I hope in this way to help encourage, at least indirectly, certain processes and decisions that benefit Slovenia, while constantly maintaining a clear awareness of the role and mission of the Commission.

What events at home do you like best?

I don't have any particular priorities.

It must have been a special occasion for you last Monday, when you visited your old gimnazija in Kranj with the prime minister, and then his old school in Ivančna Gorica, to talk to pupils about the EU.

Yes, that really was special. Young people are critical and uninhibited, as they should be. That means that a discussion with them is always colourful and different. And if it takes place at your old school, what could be nicer?

Janez Potočnik in a conversation with Minister Jose Mariano Gago

Were you interested in European politics as a schoolboy?

Not really. In those days I was mainly interested in girls and sport, or perhaps the other way round. I believe that it is similar with the present generation, although their time is different from ours. Their world is a world without borders and there are many opportunities. Europe, which for us was something foreign and distant, is home to them, it is their reality. If someone had said to me then that I would one day be European Commissioner for Science and Research, I would have considered such a comment to belong to the realms of science fiction. My ideas, desires and ambitions at that time were mainly to do with sport.

What about now, after all these years in politics, is there a political model or political figure that has particularly impressed you?

I would have to think hard before answering that question. The profession of politician is a hard one if one wishes to do one's job responsibly and seriously, and there are many people striving in this direction. In recent years, of course, I have mainly got to know politicians who are responsible for the sphere of science and research, and I am happy to be able to count some of them as my friends.