

Tomas Pojar, *First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Czech Republic*

I didn't prepare any speech, but let me just react on some of the topics or the questions which have been written in the program for an open debate. With respect to the issues of the European parliamentary elections and the institutional changes inside the EU and the readiness of the EU, the European parliamentary elections are important but rather from the psychological point of view and they can affect the domestic situation in each individual Member State, rather than on the work of the European parliament itself, because the European Parliament is still the European Parliament, it's not a parliament of state, and its functions are limited. This will be changed at the time, and if Lisbon's treaty is effective, but I think you should not be overestimating the importance of the European Parliament on some processes. We are talking and we will be talking about them, but you should not underestimate the importance of the psychological effects of the European election into domestic issues of the Member States which are always the priority number one in the elections for the European Parliament. The domestic issues rather than European issues, and I am not commenting if it's right or not, but that's simply the reality. A lot will depend on the mode after the elections and that means how much the European Parliament will be changed, so how much the *status quo* or the distribution of forces will be changed. To put more simply, I think that a lot will depend on what kind of the percentage the major two blocs, that means the Socialists and Christian-democrats, are going to be holding after the elections. If it's going to be relatively the same, than that will not have any deep effects, if there is going to be more changes on the landscape inside the European Parliament, than it will have more effects on the psychology of the Member States and their decisions of how to proceed with the issues, for example the enlargement or the visas, because those issues are debated in the political circles and they have effect on the readiness and on the courage of the leaders of every individual Member State and the European Union itself on how to act and how to move.

The other thing that should be mentioned is that European Union has been enlarged such significantly, but only recently and that has not been the same in all corners of the EU, in all Member States, which is partly understandable because it was enlargement from 15 to 27 and it is significant enlargement. I hope that enlargement will continue and will be fast, but the fact is that it has not been finished yet, so it is not in the mind of every each European where the borders of the European Union do stand at the moment and what exactly is the neighborhood of the European Union. By the enlargement, the geographical distances have grown as well and I think it's very clear that the view of the importance of the relations with neighbors and what kind of neighbors, is very much different if you look from Prague, Dublin or from Lisbon. So you should take that also as reality and understand that for us in Prague it is much more important to be looking into Europe, and I also must admit that I have never been visiting Morocco, so I don't blame anyone from Portugal as not visiting Minsk. That does not mean that I would be saying that enlargement process would be stopped, I don't think it will be stopped, but the enlargement process is a long way for it. That doesn't mean it's large way for it always, in all the cases, and I am not talking specifically about Turkey, Turkey is rather exception, but I think that no one would imagine 20 years ago in Prague, that it would take us 50 years to get into the European Union. And being in Prague, which means being rightly in the heart, in the centre of Europe, neighboring Germany, neighboring Austria, no one would imagine that 20 years after the revolution we would not have highway built slinging Prague and Vienna, for example.

So, those processes are slower, but, that does not mean that we should be easing our efforts in moving forward and, in really, putting the whole region in the strategic, this visions and the discussions in the EU, with the respect to the Western Balkans, is really on the table. Because, in one hand it is good that Western Balkans is not discussed on the EU table as the priority number one, because those priorities number one are usually those real problems around the world, and the priority number one would become everyone when the new round of fighting would start and I hope that will not be the case. So we have to be really working on keeping Western Balkans as the region directly bordering European Union, and hopefully sooner rather than later being part of European Union, keep it on the table, keep it on the tracks, although it is not very easy.

From Prague, we have been always looking more modestly at the role of the European Union currently around the world. We have always said that we should first concentrate on the issues right around our borders. That means the priority number one should be Western Balkans, and should be the Eastern- neighborhood policy, now divided into the Mediterranean Union and Eastern partnership. Off-course, for us is more stressed always the Eastern partnership rather than Mediterranean Union, but it's natural that for some other countries, it's opposite. But we should really care more about direct neighborhood, because this is directly affecting our security and prosperity and peace and stability. So it is in our interest, as it is the interest of Serbia, the national interest of Serbia, to get into the stable European Union environment, it is in the interest of the European Union to have stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans and in the whole region. But, believe me, that is not easy to the strategic debate inside the European Union, because (now I will be very opened) sometimes if you talk about the strategic interests, and national interests than something is wrong, because you should be nice to everyone and not to have the interests, and I think there should be more strategic thinking in Bruxelles, and the member states, with respect to the role of the European Union, should be sometimes less masionic and really more strategic.

And the last issue is bilateral dispute, and how our bilateral disputes are affecting the enlargement process. Off course they are affecting, and it is of the great importance to keep bilateral disputes on the bilateral level, because it is not in the interest of anyone moving the bilateral disputes and the bilateral issues at the no-bilateral level, and playing with that and trying to misuse the enlargement. Because it will be backfire and it will not benefit anyone. I can say it also, specifically from our own experience, that we did have bilateral disputes, we still have some bilateral debates with our neighbors on some issues, but it was always strategically important to keep them on the bilateral level and not to be moving them upper and I am glad we have succeeded in that and I am also glad that those countries which we have the bilateral disputes have kept it also at that level, because otherwise it is very dangerous , and otherwise we would be spoiling and slowing the process of enlargement, and I think there is no doubt about that. That definitely has the effect on the functioning of the Union, and I am not talking about who causes them, who is right, who is wrong, who is inside the EU, or is outside the EU. But we should be very carefully about those issues, because if those bilateral disputes go out of hand, then it's very hard to be putting them back into the box and no one benefits.