

**Peaceful democratic transitions: the Czech and Slovak experiences**  
**Panel Discussion, University of Pretoria, 16 September 2013**

**Introductory Remarks by Mr. Alexander Ilascik, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to  
the Republic of South Africa**

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**The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of existence of the Slovak Republic**

first of all I would like to express my gratitude to the UP for organizing this workshop and granting us such an opportunity to present to this distinguished public our unique experience with peaceful split of Czechoslovakia 20 years ago and successful development of both successive countries – the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic. I would also like to thank SAIIA (South African Institute of International Affairs) for its active involvement into this event. And last but not least to thank you, distinguished guests for finding your valuable time, joining us and showing your interest in our countries.

The split of Czechoslovakia 20 years ago (by the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1993) opened by democratization of our society in November 1989 and its transition from totalitarian regime to modern democratic society is frequently referred to as a “velvet divorce”. I would like to stress that dissolution of Czechoslovakia, as it is in divorce, was followed by the division of our territory, national property, our obligations, our policy and economy and it was done in exceptionally peaceful and civilized manner. So I don't want to encourage any divorce or country dissolution but if you have to do it, do it our way. But I would like also to stress that we split to be unified in different quality, within the EU and we use to classify our present relations with the Czech Republic as ever best.

I think that it is not necessary to stress that both our countries have developed itself during this 20 years of their existence into modern successfully functioning democracies with market economies and established themselves steadily on international arena as reliable, responsible, viable and self-confident partners.

Those 20 years were not just a walk in the rose garden. We have experienced and are experiencing both success and joy, but also many setbacks and disappointments. As a citizen of Slovakia, I am proud to say that as a nation and a state, we were able to overcome the barriers that were standing in the way. In general relatively short history of independent Slovakia is an exciting success story. Slovakia gained confidence and made bold economic reforms. In 2000 we joined OECD. In 2004 we successfully accomplished our effort to become a member of EU and NATO and by the same to stress our euro-atlantic orientation and values. In 2007 we became a part of Schengen system and in 2009 we joined Eurozone and introduced the euro currency in Slovakia as the 16<sup>th</sup> country and 1<sup>st</sup> post Soviet block country. We became not only integral part of EU but together with Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland we also created so called Visegrad group (V4) of countries, regional group of countries close historically, culturally, economically and politically and our partnership with this countries helped us a lot in our integration ambitions as well as in successful transformation and transition of our society.

Looking for some parallels between our 2 countries I actually realized that both of them took the path for radical changes meaning political independence, human dignity and economic emancipation, approximately at the same time (by the end of 80s and beginning of 90s). Since that our peoples and countries for about 20 years have been successfully transforming their societies to modern democracies with market economies from apartheid or totalitarian regimes. We believe that there are valuable lessons to be learnt and best practices

to be shared between our two countries that could be of mutual benefit. We feel it as our commitment to share our valuable experience and lessons learnt from this transition with other countries of the world finding themselves in similar situation as Slovakia 20 years ago.

For this purpose – to share our experience with other African countries we initiated and co-organized in November 2007, being a non-permanent member of UNSC, together with South Africa common regional workshop in Cape Town, attended by 47 countries including 25 African countries. This workshop was devoted to SSR – Security sector reform (judicial and law-enforcement system, army, police, intelligence, respective ministries etc.) and aimed at enhancing UN Support for SSR in Africa, which is one of the key-condition for building a legal state, peace and democracy inevitable for sustainable development and which can be applied to post-conflict as well as transitional countries. This workshop, led by that time our foreign ministers – Kubis and Dlamini Zuma was a success and to my opinion deserves some follow-up. And I'm pleased to note, that South Africa positively reacted to the Slovak offer on the UN soil and accepted co-chairmanship of the Group of friends of Security Sector Reform, an initiative started by Slovakia more than 5 years ago.

Finally I would like to conclude my introduction with remark that although there is a lot to learn from each other experience and there is a lot of similarities in transformation of our societies to democracies, I would also like to stress that democracy is not the right to be equal but democracy is the equal right to be different and that also means that every country has its own specifics and therefore the general rules and experiences must be applied sensitively and creatively with enough invention and improvisation taking into consideration these specifics. It happened also in our conditions, when the Czech Republic and Slovakia didn't have exactly the same starting positions.