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JANUARY Edition

Issue Theme: "Slovenian Presidency of EU"

Slovenia: Small Balkan Country to Chair the Presidency over 27 Nations

Slovenia, which joined the EU in 2004, is the first of 12 EU newcomers honored to preside over the EU and represent close to 500 million people for the next 6 months. This is seen as a great Slovenian achievement and the country's most serious political project since it declared independence in 1991. Being in the spotlight of European and world attention, Slovenia will have to steer the European boat in the shaky waters of world and European politics. The Western Balkans states, all along the long road towards EU membership, have great expectations from the Slovene presidency – they expect integration of the Western Balkans to climb at the top of the EU agenda. Are those expectations realistic and substantiated?

Facing Challenges...Setting priorities...

Expectedly, a highly diverse agenda was presented by the Slovenian Presidency. The focus is placed on realization of the Lisbon strategy, integration of the Western Balkan region into the EU, intercultural dialogue, as well as energy and climate change. This creates a window of opportunity for Western Balkans states, which if properly used, could prove beneficial for the EU aspirations of the states from the region. The fact that the unresolved status of Kosovo remains on the EU agenda could be an additional advantage - by keeping the Balkans in focus.

Will Balkan Countries be Guaranteed A European Future?

Considering Slovenia's historical, economic and cultural relations with these countries, and the priority position Western Balkans occupy on the Presidency's, there are already some positive developments. Recently, Slovenia indicated that they will support their neighbors in Croatia to close several negotiation chapters with EU, while optimistic scenarios are mentioned for Serbia as well since Slovenian officials signal that the country should not face any additional conditions for entry except obligation towards The Hague Tribunal and by recently announcing that the EC would launch negotiations on visa-free regime with Serbia. Despite this, perhaps the Western Balkans states can do more than to rely on the Slovenians as promoters of their countries' interests. A more clear and unified voice from the leaders in the region would assist Slovenian efforts. Considering the great importance EU officials attach to regional cooperation a strong regional effort would boost the visibility and salience of the Western Balkans in the EU and lead to concrete steps forward in revitalizing the Thessaloniki Agenda.

What Could Macedonia Expect? - *According to Slovenian Prime Minister, Janez Jansa, any progress towards accession negotiations depends on Macedonia meeting the criteria and requirement set by EU. Yet, Slovenia will work to move the country's EU effort forward and would help Macedonia as candidate country to get a date for start of accession negotiations. Macedonian political leaders are optimistic, however, judging from the EU officials statements it is hard to predict the date for Macedonia accession into EU but it is unlikely to be during the Slovenian presidency. Absolute priority of the Macedonian government should be faster pace of EU-related reforms to catch up after the lukewarm Progress Report from November 2007. Perhaps Macedonian leaders can lobby for a possibility for Macedonia to be issued a special additional report noting the positive developments since November. This could serve as a basis on which Macedonia could be finally given a negotiations date by the end of 2008.*