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During his first official visit to the United States since taking office, Slovakia's **Foreign Minister Jan Kubis** discussed his country's role in strengthening the Transatlantic partnership at a CSIS *Statesmen's Forum* on **Monday, September 25, 2006** at CSIS in Washington, DC. The forum was organized in cooperation with the Embassy of Slovakia to the United States and *Friends of Slovakia* (FOS).

Foreign Minister Kubis stated that the Visegrad countries are generally viewed as a success story after the last EU enlargement in 2004. They are reliable members of the EU and NATO, contributing to the stability and security of neighboring regions, especially with regard to Ukraine and Moldova. Although there are many challenges ahead, the Visegrad countries are consolidated democracies with no potential for regression.

Kubis acknowledged the progress made by previous Slovak governments and cited Slovakia's economic reforms and the fact that all parties supported EU membership as major achievements. But he also underscored that Slovakia has faced challenging social issues, many of which were not resolved with EU accession, and that the Slovak electorate voted for a different government in recent elections.

The Foreign Minister claimed that there were no major political disagreements regarding Slovakia's foreign policy orientation. Bratislava will continue to have strong ties with the EU, NATO, and the U.S. Slovakia will remain a stable partner, even on controversial issues such as Iraq, because it would like to see democratic values prevail in other parts of the world.

Other key foreign policy priorities call for active involvement in the Western Balkans, the EU's eastern neighborhood, and the Caucasus region. Kubis emphasized the significance of Slovakia's temporary seat at the United Nations Security Council, saying that he had over forty official meetings during the UN General Assembly session last week and had received positive feedback regarding Slovakia's work in the Middle East.

Minister Kubis focused on Slovakia's role in operation Iraqi Freedom. The Social Democrats will stick to their pre-election promise to reduce Slovak troops in Iraq, but such a move should not be confused with a complete withdrawal. Kubis asserted that Slovakia regards itself as a strong ally in the mission and the objective is to restructure his country's involvement rather than terminate it. Kubis had discussed these issues with Secretary Rice, as the goal is to build a smaller and more efficient military force.

Kubis said that Slovakia a responsible member of the NATO alliance and would like to see its further enlargement, especially in the Western Balkans. He stressed that Slovakia is a strong advocate for an open door policy, and that having the Western Balkans in NATO would greatly enhance regional stability. He also asserted that Slovakia is reaching out to Ukraine, which still has insufficient

understanding about NATO. Slovakia's embassy in Kyiv is working to help remedy this situation with the approval of Ukraine's prime minister and president. Bratislava is ready to cooperate once the government in Kyiv overcomes its internal differences and clearly identifies its interest in the organization.

Kubis also described Afghanistan as a strategic NATO mission. Slovakia would like to make its participation there more effective, so a primary goal of the new Slovak government will be to optimize its force in Afghanistan.

Slovakia has broader approach regarding the EU. Bratislava remains a firm supporter of EU membership for the Western Balkan countries and for Turkey. Kubis criticized the EU's ambiguous European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and asserted that the EU's eastern neighbors should be given more clear guidelines and prospects for accession.

Minister Kubis also covered the issue of Kosova, saying that the status quo is untenable and that the decision on status could not be postponed much longer. He said that Belgrade seems unwilling to cooperate, as Serbian leaders evidently lack the courage to resolve the problem. According to him, Serbia should be provided with strong incentives and prospects to join the EU. Kubis also said that the rights and the security of the Serbian minority in Kosova should be guaranteed and the responsibility for that is in the hands of the Kosova Albanians. If they fail to accommodate the Serbian minority, the implementation of any decision would be a failure.

Kubis concluded his talk with a few remarks about transatlantic relations. Some of the rifts between Europe and the United States have been healed, but cooperation and coordination should continue to strengthen, especially in combating terrorism. For example, Washington and Brussels are not working hand in hand when it comes to key Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan.

Discussion:

- Foreign Minister Kubis described Montenegro's referendum for independence as a European and democratic solution. By setting a higher benchmark of 55% for the referendum, the EU reinforced the legitimacy of the outcome so that the losing side would have to accept it. As to the future of independent Montenegro, Kubis said that the country has clearly confirmed its Euro-Atlantic orientation and that both the EU and NATO would be open for accession on an individual basis without trying to place Montenegro in a package with other countries. However, the forthcoming NATO summit in Riga will deal with transformation rather than enlargement, and that potential member states should wait until the next summit in 2008.
- Kubis called the Russian Federation a very different country than it was a decade ago. Russia is assertive and empowered and it has gradually turned into a "controlled democracy" under President Putin. Kubis emphasized Russia's growing economic strength as a foreign policy tool to reestablish itself in the post-Soviet perimeter through mostly economic means.
- The position of the Roma minority and Hungarian-Slovak relations are priorities for the new Slovak government, which will be more actively involved both domestically and with neighboring countries. Slovakia is ready for a multi-party dialogue and bilateral talks with

Budapest and there will be zero tolerance for ethnic bigotry. Kubis also stressed that Slovakia expects more support and cooperation by the EU on minority issues, especially with regard to the Roma.

- Kubis stated that Slovakia will not shift its position from the overall EU approach toward Belarus despite the initial expectations of the regime in Minsk.
- Minister Kubis reassured participants that Bratislava will maintain a favorable investor climate. Although the government is not especially happy with certain former privatization deals, it will respect the country's laws and not intervene to reverse any prior privatization arrangements.