



Ljubljana, November 20, 2014

U.S - Slovenia 2010 - 2014

Thank you for that fair and honest introduction, and thank you all for inviting me here tonight. This is likely to be my last official talk before leaving Slovenia later in January. I can think of no better place to have such a talk than here with all of you.

I have been asked to speak about Slovenian-American bilateral relations from 2010-2014. During those four years there have been occasional episodes fraught with drama and hyperbole that at times suggested that the bilateral relationship was not as firm and resilient as we all assume. But, as one of my closest Slovenian friends explained to me just last week, "Joe," she reassured me, "our bilateral relationship with America has a strong foundation and is rock solid." "How else," she explained, "could we have put up with you as the American ambassador for the last four years?" It is really hard to argue with such clear reasoning.

A little more seriously, it is true that the test of a mature relationship between nations--as it is also true regarding relationships between individuals--is the ability to keep focused on what binds us together and not be too distracted by minor irritants that risk pulling us apart. And what we have in common--as open societies, with democratic institutions and a respect for law and appreciation of diversity, with economic opportunity and protection for those in need--are the core values of any civilized, modern state. What binds us together far outweighs the small things that cause discomfort.

So let's discuss these foundation stones of our bilateral relationship a little more closely. First, we are both democratic and open societies. Imperfect, yes. After over two centuries we still struggle to form a more perfect Union in the United States, and certainly Slovenia after only a little more than two decades is also working toward a more efficient and workable democracy. But this commitment to freedom, to justice, and to law undergirds both our societies and makes us natural partners and allies.



Second, we seek to promote the general welfare of the people and not narrow economic interests. We both, if you haven't noticed, have failed at this time after time, but it remains our mutual objective. We want to increase wealth and prosperity, improve education, and ensure judicial systems that are not tainted by either corruption or incompetence.

And third, as NATO allies we both have already committed ourselves to the highest standards of democratic values and economic opportunity for all citizens. And we have pledged to support these principles around the world. Our diplomatic dialogue therefore takes place on a higher level. It's not a matter of whether we both support democracy in Ukraine or justice in Syria. It is only a question of deciding together which is the best strategy to achieve these objectives.

And here is where some confusion arises. Somehow, some people both in Washington and other capitals think that being allies and being committed to the same ideals means we all have to think exactly alike on all matters. Instinctively, in our own personal relationships, we know this to be absurd. Do husbands and wives always agree on how best to raise children? Do siblings always agree on what show to watch on TV? Do friends always agree on where to go on vacation? There are always disputes and disagreements, even among the best and closest of allies and friends. That does not mean that the core values and objectives are fundamentally different.

For example, to use a real life incident from a decade ago, we all recall how angry some Americans were in 2003 when France and other close allies disagreed with us about the invasion of Iraq. Some insisted that a true ally, a real friend, would not have broken ranks with us. But isn't this an infantile notion? That we should expect our allies to always walk in lockstep with us? Imagine what the world might be today if we had listened to those allies a decade ago.

Similarly, there was a brief firestorm of bewilderment last spring when your Foreign Minister offered to "mediate" between Russia and the EU regarding Ukraine. The use of the word "mediate" was certainly unfortunate. It suggested to some that Slovenia was still a committed member of the NAM instead of a full-fledged member of NATO and the EU. But this single word distorted a legitimate desire of the Foreign Ministry for dialogue between the parties to the emerging conflict--as well as supporting sanctions. It is good for allies to sometimes suggest other courses of action and to offer differing advice. It indeed proves the strength of the alliance that we can sometimes disagree on tactics, while always promoting the same objectives and values. We see this in other matters, as well, such as Palestine or Iran. We need not see completely eye-to-eye to remain allies and friends. But we do need to always be honest and forthright with each other. We must not say one thing privately and another thing publicly. That would be an unhealthy relationship.

Perhaps this is a good time to now discuss some of those incidents relating to Slovenia that some believe were disrespectful or a strain on the bilateral relationship. But first let me be



absolutely clear about US interests in Slovenia. Without question and without any sense of guilt or remorse our interests in Slovenia are unquestionably selfish. I am the US ambassador and my duty is to advance US interests above all else. So you need only discern what our selfish interests are to understand our commitment to the bilateral relationship. And our interests are sometimes too obvious to easily see: we need a stable, prosperous, tolerant, open-minded and forward-thinking Slovenia. All the issues that seem to some to needlessly cause strife in the bilateral relationship we believe are essential to resolve in order to ensure the stability and prosperity of this country.

Let's look at a few. First, privatization and other economic reforms. I don't think any foreign embassy has advocated for privatizing state-owned enterprises as loudly or as often as the US. I doubt that there will be a significant amount of direct monetary gain for US companies, but we see what almost 25 years of state mismanagement and misuse has done to the Slovene economy. Slovenia's economy is heavily state-controlled – some estimate 60-70%. Political interference and poor corporate governance of many key state-owned enterprises resulted in an insider economy starved of creative capital and any chance for growth. Of course there are exceptions and some state-owned enterprises have done well; state-ownership does not always result in poor management—but the probability is much higher due to the risk of political interference. We see that a talented and energetic and intelligent work force has been deprived of the prosperity it deserves by the reckless handling of companies and the politicization of what ought to be purely commercial enterprises.

Let me be clear on this issue of privatization. There are many bad reasons to privatize state-owned companies. Doing it just to please Brussels or Washington or Berlin would be a bad reason. Doing it to try to reduce the budget deficit would be an even worse reason. The only good reasons to privatize are to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the companies, and to ensure that the companies are no longer used by the political elites for their own benefit.

Similarly, we have expressed serious concern about the treatment of various minorities, whether it be the Roma or Erased, the Islamic community or the gay community. We do so not because we think the US is a model of tolerance and diversity, but because we share the same problems and challenges. Because we realize that unless there is tolerance and justice for all these groups and others in both our countries we risk instability and economic hardship.

Finally, there is the entire sensitive issue of reconciliation and our alleged interference. While many Slovenians, especially the younger generation, are moving beyond this issue, too many others seem stuck in the past: either insisting on living in the past or re-creating the past or denying the past – or sometimes all three simultaneously! The past should neither be lived in nor ignored. We have found in our own history that it is a mistake to try to hide the bad or deny mistakes, or ever try to paint the past starkly in black and white. This focus on the past has



caused needless strains and stresses within the larger Slovene community, but it is so sensitive it is nearly impossible to discuss in a civil, respectful way.

I often say, only half joking, that even those Slovenians who don't like me are always polite to me. And that it is a tragedy that they cannot always treat each other as kindly as they treat a foreigner. But this basic need for civil discourse and politeness—something sadly I even see eroding in the United States this last 20 years—is crucial for a stable, open, modern democracy. So, in some small ways we have tried to help by celebrating and commemorating all Slovenians. I have visited a dozen Partisan sites throughout the country and I also have visited sites such as Huda Jama and Kocevski Rog and other sites of great sorrow.

We have also placed on the outside wall of the embassy a plaque to commemorate all victims of totalitarianism, and to celebrate the courage, decency and compassion of all Slovenians. That one side of society has seen this plaque as a vindication and another side has seen it as an accusation is a double tragedy. For it is neither a vindication of one side nor an accusation of the other, but rather a declaration of admiration for all Slovenians and a heartfelt plea for mutual respect and understanding. And it is more than a little amusing that when I unveiled a plaque celebrating our wartime alliance with the Partisans at the Military Museum in Pivka there were no complaints about interfering in Slovenia's domestic affairs.

In one of the more bizarre complaints, some have asserted—as already mentioned in the introduction—that Slovenia has been treated like a banana republic. It is an intriguing accusation. I would think the opposite true. That those who speak condescendingly to you, who only talk about the beautiful mountains and the delightful people, who do nothing but drink wine and go to receptions, who refuse to treat you as an equal, who insist on treating you like an infant too weak and fragile to hear the truth or be talked to honestly are the ones who are treating you like a banana republic.

We promote these causes—from economic reforms to national reconciliation to advocating for greater rights for marginalized minorities--not simply because it is the right thing to do and surely not to hide the many flaws in our own country, but because Slovenia's future is at risk while any of these matters remain unaddressed and ignored. And since--as I have already confessed--it is in our selfish interest to have a strong and stable Slovenia, it is worth it to us to risk temporary strains in the bilateral relationship to ultimately strengthen those very bonds of friendship between us.

Simply put, we need Slovenia to succeed: economically, politically, and socially. We need allies who share our values and our interests and are strong and stable enough to join with us to take on the enormous challenges we face in other parts of the world. The world is changing and not in particularly good ways. The certainties of the past are fading and new challenges and threats



are proliferating around us. We need strong, reliable and mature allies to cope with these challenges.

In closing let me admit that I think my Slovenian friend who I quoted earlier was absolutely right. No matter whom the US ambassador is this bilateral relationship will endure and prosper and grow stronger. For me Slovenia has been an interesting challenge. After three decades in the Third World I became used to having governments to fight with and populations to support and defend. It is in a sense ironic that in my final assignment I have encountered almost the exact opposite. In Slovenia the governments, left, right or center, understand the crucial importance of the bilateral relationship and all of them have sought to foster and develop better relations. But among some of the people—certainly not all of them—there is suspicion of USG motives and objectives. I, of course, have some sympathy for this sentiment. Not trusting government is a great American pastime. It is almost our patriotic duty to distrust those with power. But it is odd that in a country that has so many values and ideals in common with the US, there should be this deep suspicion in a loud and vocal segment of Slovene society. But because of this phenomenon--and because we know that the bilateral relationship ultimately rests on the opinion and attitudes of the people--our number one mission has been to enhance the bilateral relationship by engaging not your government, but instead by engaging the Slovenian public. Whether it is our American employees giving speeches at high schools around the country or visiting Roma settlements or advocating for an Islamic Center or helping to feed the homeless, or calling for greater justice for the Erased, or marching in the LGBT parade, or placing a reconciliation plaque at the embassy, we see all these efforts as mutually supportive pillars designed to promote better bilateral relations by further strengthening the foundations of Slovene society itself.

Joseph A. Mussomeli

U.S. Ambassador to Republic of Slovenia