



Together, Resilient, Europe:

The Key Priorities of the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU

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On 1 July 2021, Slovenia assumed the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which it will hold for six months until 31 December 2021, after which France will assume the mantle. The Slovenian Presidency concludes the “GPS Trio” of Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia. This is the second time Slovenia has held the Presidency of the Council of the EU, with the first being in 2008.¹ The 2008 Presidency was also under the stewardship of current Prime Minister Janez Janša, when the Slovenian Presidency oversaw the initial ratification process for the Lisbon Treaty.

Slovenia assumes the Presidency as the European Union begins to chart its recovery from the twin COVID-19 health and economic crises, as well as the initial ratification and release of funds for Member States’ national Recovery and Resilience Plans in the context of the green and digital transitions. The Slovenian Presidency will also oversee the initial sessions of the Conference on the Future of Europe and will place a particular emphasis on rule

of law within the Union as well as ensuring EU security within its immediate neighbourhood, which have been priorities within the broader GPS Trio programme.

The relative decline of COVID-19 cases across the EU and the success of vaccine roll-outs means that the Slovenian Presidency will likely be able to hold many, if not all, of its Presidency events in person, which may aid in the conclusion of sensitive discussions over the rule of law, as well as other files like artificial intelligence and EU-China relations.² Restrictions may however be re-imposed if there are subsequent COVID-19 waves, arising from the Delta variant of the virus.

Presidency Motto

The Slovenian Presidency motto, “*Together, Resilient, Europe*”, underlines Slovenia’s focus on reinforcing the EU’s health, economic, energy, climate and cyber resiliencies and basis for Union solidarity.

The logo of the Presidency represents the national symbol of Slovenia, Mount Triglav, as well as the ups and downs of the EU's development over time, and its resilience in getting back up after its falls. The seven stars symbolise the seventh stanza of the Slovenian poet France Prešeren's poem, "A Toast (*Zdravljica*)" and of Slovenia's national anthem, which calls for dialogue, open societies and peaceful coexistence.

GPS Trio Presidency

The joint GPS Trio Presidency programme emphasises supporting Europe's COVID-19 recovery and strengthening its resilience to future crises.³ Germany, Portugal and Slovenia issued a joint declaration during the German Presidency stating that their central goals were: dealing with the pandemic, containing the virus and coordinating health efforts across the EU. Two of the immediate priorities for the Trio Presidency - reaching agreement on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)



and finalising negotiations with the UK - were achieved under the German Presidency, and subsequently implemented under the Portuguese Presidency. The remaining goals build on the EU's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024,⁴ including: climate change, the digital transition, improving European industrial competitiveness and autonomy,

and promoting European interests and values globally. These Agenda goals are broadly reflected in the priorities of the Slovenian Presidency, outlined below, and Slovenia will also continue the remaining work on the MFF and negotiations with the UK.

Slovenian Political Landscape

Following its secession from Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia became an independent republic and joined the European Union in 2004, with a bicameral parliamentary system.

Slovenia's previous general election, held on 3 June 2018, resulted in a victory for the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), although they fell short of an absolute majority in the Slovenian National Assembly (with 25 of 90 seats). The current government was formed on 13 March 2020 following the resignation of the previous Prime Minister Marjan Šarec in January 2020.

Prime Minister Janša's centre-right minority government hold 38 seats, with the Modern Centre Party (SMC), Democratic Party of Pensioners (DeSUS) and the New Slovenian Party (NSI). The opposition have indicated they may call a vote of no-confidence in the Government during Slovenia's Presidency if all opposition parties agree to the motion.

Slovenia's Presidency Priorities

Slovenia has identified four priority areas as part of its Presidency Programme which aim to secure the EU's existence and future development.⁵ These are: reinforcing the EU's resilience plans and mechanisms based on a green, digital and fair transition; facilitating open discussion on a common European future through the Conference on the Future

of Europe; a Union of the European way of life with balanced rights, responsibilities and equal criteria for all, and; a credible and secure EU with protected external borders capable of ensuring security and stability both internally and in its neighbourhood.⁶

1. A Strategically Autonomous European Union

Resilience is the essential *leitmotif* of the Slovenian Presidency programme. As part of this, Slovenia has identified improving the EU's ability to identify and respond effectively to crises which are beyond the capacity of individual Member States as a key objective. There will be a particular focus on addressing pandemics and large-scale cyber-attacks, as well reducing the EU's dependency on external actors for critical materials, goods and services. Progress on the European Health Union, reinforcing the mandates of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and of pandemic preparedness plans and coordination mechanisms will be central in shoring up the EU's resilience. Improving cybersecurity facilities for critical infrastructure and the digital single market within the Union, as well as in the Western Balkans through the September 2021 Bled Strategic Forum, also feed into this resilience goal. This will be complemented by the further development of the European Civil Protection Pool and RescEU emergency response capacities, which are under the remit of the Slovenian Commissioner Lenarčič. Slovenia has also highlighted the need to support more longer-term strategic planning efforts to feed into the European Commission's 2021 Strategic Foresight Report regarding greater open strategic autonomy.

Fostering strategic autonomy is critical for the Slovenian Presidency, particularly striking the security of supply of critical products,⁷ like medicines, vaccines, medical equipment, industrial policy, energy and food supplies. Support for the establishment of the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) for health policy, and the Trans-European Energy Networks Regulation (TEN-E) for energy infrastructures in line with the European Green Deal, are at the core of this strategic autonomy agenda. As part of this, Slovenia will also stress the strategic importance of agricultural production and EU food security during its Presidency, and will aim to incorporate the strategic CAP implementation plans into tourism and natural resource management policies.

With reference to the EU's economic recovery, Slovenia plans to initiate a debate on new own resources for the EU, based on digital taxation and the carbon border adjustment mechanism, as well as tax on energy products and electricity. The Slovenian Presidency will also begin negotiations on the "Fit for 55" legislative package to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, wherein it supports allowing Member States to choose their own energy mixes (including nuclear energy). Slovenia will also encourage greater take-up of e-mobility and rail transport, and will be responsible for achieving a Council mandate ahead of the COP26 Conference.⁸ Determining what energy sources will be included in the EU's climate-friendly Green Bond financing instrument, particularly the role of nuclear power and natural gas, will likely prove complex.⁹ Reaching agreement on a legislative act for a life-cycle approach to batteries and the Waste Shipment Regulation also fits into Slovenia's objective of enhancing the EU's autonomy and reducing its reliance on external actors as part of increased recycling and more circular economy efforts.

Slovenia will aim to make progress on a common EU position to regulate and set global standards for the development of artificial intelligence,¹⁰ based on ethics and human rights,¹¹ with a high-level conference planned for September 2021. Concluding the Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act negotiations and regulating cryptocurrencies will also be key files for the Slovenian Presidency agenda. Supporting the recovery of Europe's tourism industry is a central concern for the Slovenian Presidency, which will host an informal summit of tourism ministers on 17 November 2021.

2. The Conference on the Future of Europe

As President of the Council of the EU and one of its co-chairs, Slovenia will represent and coordinate the positions of the Member States at the Conference during its Presidency. During its tenure according to Foreign Minister Logar speaking at the IIEA, Slovenia aims to organise two plenary sessions and four European Citizens' Panels.¹² Slovenia is keen to stress the importance of hearing "differing legitimate opinions" during the Conference and holding honest discussions based on "historical" experiences, which will be supported by European leaders' discussions at the September 2021 16th Bled Strategic Forum, entitled "The Future of Europe".

3. A Union of the European Way of Life, Rule of Law and Equal Criteria for All

Slovenia aims to raise awareness for the "European way of life" based on respect for personal dignity, freedom, fundamental rights, and common rules, and will also draw attention to the need to counter negative demographic trends in the EU in this context. Addressing demographic challenges in the EU

will be the subject of a conference in October 2021 to discuss possible labour market incentives to increase birth-rates, improve work-life balances for parents, young families and the elderly, and will build on the progress made at the May 2021 Porto Social Summit.

Slovenia will stress the importance of rule of law as a prerequisite for ensuring mutual trust between Member States and for the smooth operation of the internal market, with an emphasis on combatting media monopolies and fake news.

The Slovenian Presidency plans to underline the importance of understanding the constitutional, socio-economic, political, historical similarities and differences between Member States in explaining why certain countries have not internalised rule of law values, implying that this has not heretofore been accounted for by the EU institutions. In this context, Slovenia supports a comparative contextual treatment of different Member States and the establishment of a European foundation for constitutional democracy which would fill in a gap in monitoring rule of law compliance within the EU.

Whether such an institution would overlap, duplicate or undermine the monitoring work done by the European Court of Justice and the European Commission on rule of law remains to be determined.¹³ Concerns over rule of law and media pluralism in Slovenia itself may also call this goal into question.¹⁴

4. A Credible and Secure European Union

Strengthening EU security is at the heart of Slovenia's Presidency as an essential prerequisite for the EU's future peace and prosperity, particularly the full restoration of the Schengen Area by addressing the

challenges posed by COVID-19 and migration related restrictions. During the negotiations on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, Slovenia will work to harmonise Member States' asylum systems, forge consensus on defining solidarity and responsibility, address illegal migration routes into the EU and formulate clear returns policies procedures. Improvements in police cooperation and amending the Europol Regulation will feed into this objective.

Slovenia supports closer EU ties with its transatlantic allies, particularly the US, as well as Canada and the UK, democratic Indo-Pacific countries and Israel. Formally institutionalising EU-NATO cooperation is also prioritised under the EU's forthcoming March 2022 Strategic Compass initiative for security and defence policy, particularly regarding military mobility, cybersecurity, hybrid threats and interoperability. Slovenia supports the possibility of facilitating regularised EU-China summits, one with EU leaders and another between the EU27 and China.

The Western Balkans region is a key focus for the Slovenian Presidency, particularly the region's integration into common security and defence policy (CSDP) initiatives, with a dedicated EU-Western Balkans Summit to be held in October 2021. Slovenia plans to promote a comprehensive debate on the EU's neighbourhood policy, and to implement the EU's New Agenda for the Mediterranean at the December 2021 European Council summit. The Slovenian Presidency is also keen to move forward on enlargement negotiations, and to adopt the negotiating frameworks for both Albania and North Macedonia, and to make progress with Montenegro and Serbia. Minister Logar, speaking at the IIEA, underlined that if the EU does not push forward with the enlargement process, other global players will step into the vacuum left.¹⁵

Conclusion

The Slovenian EU Presidency will likely be affected in part by how quickly and effectively the EU's COVID-19 recovery efforts proceed, and its firm focus on resilience will underpin much of the objectives and goals for the Presidency. Concerns remain, however, over media pluralism, media freedom and rule of law questions in Slovenia, and these may cast a significant shadow over the Presidency.^{16 17}

Ireland and Slovenia are two small Member States, which though located on the geographic periphery of the EU are deeply engaged at the core of the Union, and who share common concerns over the EU's future resilience in the face of crises like the present pandemic. The Slovenian Presidency has set itself an admirable, if formidable, task towards fostering a strong, strategic, resilient and robust Union fit for the future.

Key People



Prime Minister
Janez Janša



**Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of
Economic Development and Technology**
Zdravko Počivalšek



**Deputy Prime Minister,
and Minister of Defence**
Matej Tonin



Minister of Foreign Affairs
Anže Logar



Minister of Finance

Andrej Šircelj



**State Secretary,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

Gašper Dovžan



Minister of the Interior

Aleš Hojs

Provisional Council Meeting Agenda for the Slovenian Presidency 2021¹⁸

- 12 July – FAC & Eurogroup
- 13 July – ECOFIN
- 14 – 16 July – Informal JHA
- 19 July - AGRIFISH
- 20 July – ECOFIN
- 22 - 23 July – Informal GAC
- 23 July - ECOFIN (Budget)
- 2 September – Informal FAC Gymnich (Defence)
- 5 - 7 September – Informal AGRIFISH
- 10 September – Eurogroup
- 10 – 11 September - Informal ECOFIN
- 21 September – GAC
- 21 – 23 September – Informal TTE
- 28 - 29 September – COMPET (Research) & COMPET (Internal Market and Industry)
- 4 October – Eurogroup in Luxembourg
- 5 October – ECOFIN in Luxembourg
- 6 October – EU-Western Balkans Summit in Slovenia, ENVI in Luxembourg
- 7 - 8 October – JHA in Luxembourg
- 11 – 12 October - AGRIFISH in Luxembourg
- 18 October - FAC
- 19 October – GAC
- 20 October – Tripartite Social Summit
- 21 – 22 October – European Council Summit
- 8 November – Eurogroup
- 9 November – ECOFIN
- 11 November – FAC (Trade)
- 12 November - ECOFIN (Budget)
- 15 November – FAC, AGRIFISH
- 16 November – FAC (Defence)
- 18 November - GAC (Cohesion)
- 19 November – FAC (Development)
- 23 November – GAC
- 25 - 26 November – COMPET (Internal Market and Industry) & COMPET (Research and Space)
- 29 November – FAC, EYCS (Education and Youth)
- 30 November – EYCS (Sport/Culture)
- 2 - 3 December – TTE (Energy) & TTE (Telecommunications)
- 6 November – Eurogroup, EPSCO (Employment and Social Policy)
- 7 November – ECOFIN, EPSCO (Health)
- 9 November – TTE (Transport)
- 9- 10 November – JHA
- 13 December – FAC, AGRIFISH
- 14 November – GAC, AGRIFISH
- 16 – 17 November – European Council Summit
- 20 November – ENVI

Endnotes

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6. <https://slovenian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/introductory-address-by-the-slovenian-prime-minister-janez-jansa/>
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