

*Dear Mr Chairman, Members of Parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

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It is my pleasure to join this distinguished assembly and to welcome you all to Bratislava Castle. I hope you have so far enjoyed both, your stay in Slovakia as well as this Conference which addresses a variety of topical issues.

The Parliament has always played an indispensable role in international affairs. So I'm truly honored that we can discuss one of the Slovak Presidency priorities at the parliamentary level. Let me thus lay out for you our thoughts on EU enlargement and the Western Balkans.

Let me start by saying that the Slovak Presidency is taking place in an unprecedented moment. The EU faces enormous challenges which require common and coherent efforts that very often go beyond its borders. Let me just mention migration, radicalization and terrorism, but also bloody conflicts in the European neighborhood.

This all underlines the importance of integration and close co-operation with our partners in the Western Balkans region. They have always played a significant role in the European stability and security. Dramatic events of past months in Europe have demonstrated that to address these problems we need each other more than ever.

Thanks to our common persistent work, the region has progressed considerably. The public discourse in many of region's countries has finally shifted from security dominated issues to state building and the agenda of European integration.

Major achievements on regional cooperation have also been reached. One example is the Belgrade – Pristina Dialogue which generated significant results over the last couple of years. And it remains so in spite of being currently negatively confronted in Pristina.

Nevertheless, we cannot afford to be complacent due to some positive developments. We still have an unfinished business in the region. Even after 21 years after the war in BiH, 17 after the war in Kosovo we can NOT consider the situation in the Western Balkans as calm and stabilized. Now I am referring to the perspective of irreversibility of both democratic political system as well as to its EU orientation.

The situation remains distinctively sensitive inside some of those countries and latently also on the bilateral level. There is potential for tensions, unresolved issues, setbacks and therefore EU engagement with the region has to be maintained.

So what we need today is to keep our common projects progressing, including EU Enlargement. In this context the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy rightly reflects the Enlargement Policy as a strategic investment in Europe's security and prosperity.

Here I also welcome the statements by several European leaders expressed during the recent summit in Paris (4 July) where determination to continue EU enlargement has been underlined.

Many see the outcome of the UK referendum as a turning point for the Union as well as the nations outside the Union. It puts to the test not only the EU as a community, but also the notion of the European identity. And when I talk about the European identity I mean all Europeans, including people in this region.

They say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is a different perception of enlargement among EU citizens on the one hand and citizens in the candidate countries on the other. It is a view „on” and “from” the region.

A view from the region sees stagnation of the enlargement process, causing frustration of political leadership as well as local people. Youngsters and their future fate are especially worth to mention in these circumstances.

At the same time, for many EU citizens various doubts and reservations exist to advocate for the further expansion of the EU. We believe that the key to bridge this gap lies in the credibility and transparency of the process and clearer and more effective strategic communication.

Our Presidency therefore attaches key importance to the credibility which is a two way street. We stick to the principals of conditionality and own merits. And pace of integration is determined by the quality not the speed of reforms. At the same time, we want to ensure that the EU is ready to deliver once the conditions are met.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

Let me now briefly comment on individual countries:

Montenegro remains the most advanced among the enlargement countries. It continues to make progress with 2 new chapters opened and now with 24 in total open and 2 provisionally closed. Major legislative and institutional advances were made on the rule of law.

One has to acknowledge how Montenegro dealt with its internal political situation. It allowed a part of the opposition to integrate into the government and take a constructive role in the election process. It is of utmost importance now for the upcoming elections not to slow down the reform agenda. They must be in line with the new electoral legislation. If this is the case, the Slovak Presidency will advocate for further advancement of Montenegro on its European path.

On Serbia: I am confident its new government will maintain the EU course. We thus welcome Prime Minister Vučić's reassurance that European integration remains a strategic No. 1 goal. The key Chapters - 23/24 have already been opened – during our Presidency (*July 18*). They pave the way to open further chapters once all conditions are met.

The EU Member States, including SK PRES, continue to pay close attention to the concrete steps of the new Serbian government. That regards especially its commitment to normalize its relations with Kosovo and implement all agreements achieved so far.

In FYROM we welcome the positive shift in terms of recent political agreement of the main political parties on meeting conditions for early elections. This is the very right step towards a credible and inclusive vote in December this year.

Implementation of the political agreements and Urgent Reform Priorities should remain a top agenda. It is the only way to restore citizens' trust in the state institutions. That should also end the tensions and move the country out of crisis.

Unhindered work and support to the Special Prosecutor is crucial in the process of reinstating public trust and putting the country back onto the EU path. The EU can help, but only political leaders of FYROM can turn the positive decisions taken recently into desired outcomes. We very much appreciate the long-term conduct of authorities in Skopje towards the migration crisis.

Albania has made a steady progress in addressing the 5 key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations. Yet further effort is still needed. The adoption of the judicial reform package represents a major step forward. It enables the start of implementation.

We believe in a swift adoption of the new legislation underpinning the package. If the country delivers it should be reflected in the Commission's Autumn Report. In such case, December GAC Conclusions on enlargement should reflect the work done by Albania.

On Bosnia and Herzegovina: We very much welcome the progress made recently by meeting all preconditions for further steps in the integration process. These are positive developments, especially on the implementation of the Reform Agenda. They provide enough arguments for putting the BiH membership application on the General Affairs Council agenda in September.

We believe in a positive outcome - a decision tasking the European Commission to prepare its opinion on the application. Preparation of the avis and the process itself will serve as leverage, not a reward.

In Kosovo the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force. It represents a most tangible opportunity for Kosovo's further progress in its European perspective. Now the focus should be on its early implementation. It should not be overshadowed by internal politics slowing Kosovo down also on other important issues such as the visa liberalization process.

There are two more outstanding issues. The ratification of the border agreement with Montenegro and solid track record in the fight against corruption and organized crime. The Slovak Presidency supports positive outcome once they have been resolved.

Let me underline that the normalization of relations with Belgrade simply has no alternative. Kosovo should focus primarily on its part of the deals. It should establish the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities as soon as possible rather than blaming the other side for delays in implementation of other agreements.

*Ladies and gentlemen,*

To conclude, allow me to say that the Western Balkans region is completely surrounded by the EU member states. Any event taking place in any country of the region has direct or indirect impact on all others – members or non-members. The European project will thus not be accomplished without bringing the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU family. It is an Either-Or case. Either they will endorse our standards or we will have to deal with quasi- or limited democracies.

On the other hand, we fully understand the worries of EU citizens to go ahead with enlargement. Nevertheless, we also remember their uncertainty and even fear when we were to enter the Union. In the end, they proved to be unfounded.

Due to many complex events of recent years, countries in the waiting room slowly see the EU losing its power to be a major influential actor. But as long as those countries keep their faith in the European project, we have to keep ours in them. So allow me one more Either-Or to make the case for more dynamics in the enlargement process. Either we will feed our neighborhood with a positive agenda or they will feed us with its own one, usually negative.

Slovakia has invested a lot of efforts into the idea of a unified Europe with the Western Balkans' place in it. And I pledge to keep contributing to accomplishing this vision rather sooner than later.

*Thank you for your attention!*