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Address to the Western Balkan Forum

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Western Balkan Forum

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This year is an opportunity to renew momentum in the enlargement process:

- Croatia is delivering in a credible way;
- The extradition of Ratko Mladic extradition helped the whole region;
- Elections in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were perhaps the best in the last decade;
- There are some positive developments in most other countries.

This momentum is important because I am concerned about enlargement apathy in the region, rather than enlargement fatigue in our member states.

Today, I would like to encourage our colleagues from the Western Balkans to redouble their efforts, to deliver reforms in key areas, and to tackle regional issues.

Now is the best time to do this.

Croatia set the practical example of adopting credible reforms that bring results. This year, three of you have the chance to follow this example directly by starting accession negotiations.

The main – and well known – aspects are: good elections, functioning institutions, good governance, rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, media freedom, economic reforms, and gradual alignment with the acquis.

There is an overarching need to strengthen regional cooperation, based on inclusiveness and regional ownership. There are positive developments – please build on it.

Let me now discuss each country in turn:

- In our assessment, Croatia is now ready to close the accession negotiations. Croatia has successfully navigated the negotiation process, which included addressing demanding opening and closing benchmarks, and developing a track-record in particularly important areas. I express my appreciation for Croatia's hard work, and congratulate you on the result. I also thank the Croatian people for their efforts. It is now time for EU Member States to agree on the closure of negotiations.

But the job is not over yet – the Commission will monitor Croatia's respect for commitments undertaken in the accession negotiations right up until accession.

- We appreciate how The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia handled the parliamentary elections– especially the orderly and peaceful election day.

Now that the pre-election activities are over, the time and opportunity has arrived to make real progress – both on the name issue and on the reforms.

I appreciate that no time is being wasted in creating the new government, and I understand that Prime Minister Gruevski is keen to continue dialogue on the name issue very soon.

As far as reforms are concerned, we would like you to address a limited number of issues as a matter of urgency – especially the implementation of the reforms of the judiciary and public administration. Continuing the fight against corruption and rule of law reforms are equally important.

- Montenegro made impressive progress on the key priorities the Commission set last autumn. Please re-double efforts and make sure that all actions undertaken are solid, coherent and sustainable.

Particular attention is should be given to the timetable for the adoption of the election law, as well as the adoption of judicial reforms.

Regarding the fight against corruption and organised crime, further efforts are needed to build a track-record - and to adopt sound legislative amendments in the areas of conflict of interest and political party financing.

On displaced persons, efforts need to be stepped up to provide them with legal status and to ensure respect of their economic and social rights.

- I congratulate Serbia on the arrest of Ratko Mladić. This has removed a major obstacle on Serbia's path to the EU. However, there are still a number of key reforms for you to accomplish. I am aware this is a pre-election year, but it is also the year of the Commission's Opinion on Serbia. We are encouraged by recent positive moves: the adoption of laws on the election and funding of political parties, and the initiation of the review of the reappointment process for judges and prosecutors.

Please continue to deliver on what is still open: mainly rule of law, especially judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the clarification of property rights.

HR/VP Ashton already spoke about the importance of your dialogue with Pristina.

- In Albania, the political situation further deteriorated after the May municipal elections. Now, it is essential to finalise the election process transparently and in full compliance with the legal framework. If it is not possible to overcome the disagreements on your own, you can always call on Venice Commission to help, this in particular can be considered in future elections.

Once that issue is solved, efforts on the reform agenda must be resumed, in particular on the 12 key priorities. A prerequisite for that is return to political dialogue in Parliament.

It is equally essential to complete the judiciary reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Overall, Albania's political leaders should put the country's interest ahead of party considerations and agendas. EU integration has to become a national objective.

- The good news for Bosnia and Herzegovina is that the March Foreign Affairs Council gave us an EU strategy.

The successful launch of the Structured Dialogue on Justice on 6 June is also to be welcomed. All parties engaged in the discussion and confirmed they were ready to use this dialogue as a platform for addressing justice-related issues.

However, it is now urgent to establish a State-level government and to tackle reforms. The EU agenda should lie at the centre of the Government's programme. The Constitution needs to be brought into compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, and state-level state aid law adopted. Both are necessary for a credible membership application. The adoption of State-level census law will be important for BiH's integration steps at a later stage.

- Kosovo also has a European perspective. The Commission has proposed Kosovo's participation in the EU programmes. But now Kosovo needs to take action: we are concerned about the long term sustainability of the budget and the predictability of economic policy. The failure to respect the IMF Stand-By Agreement is damaging. Compliance with the Staff Monitored Programme would give Kosovo a new chance to regain its credibility. We hope that Kosovo will take this opportunity to improve economic governance.

To date, the Assembly has adopted only two laws of the legislative programme. The Government and the Assembly need to work together more effectively to enact reforms.

Reforms are also lagging behind concerning public procurement, and to lesser extent state aids and implementation of intellectual property rights.

Kosovo needs to continue reintegration efforts to move towards the visa dialogue.

We also hope for practical results in the dialogue with Belgrade.

In conclusion, this is the year of enlargement opportunities. With our support, the leaders of the Western Balkans can turn 2011 into the year of enlargement momentum. Fulfilling commitments brings results. There is still time before our next Enlargement package, to convince both the Commission and Member States that your countries are ready to move to the next stage in the process.

This will be the contribution that candidates and aspirant countries can make to the credibility of the enlargement process. Once the necessary requirements have been fulfilled, it will be for member states to contribute to credibility by acting on any positive recommendation from the Commission to start accession negotiations