**Conference**

**“THE OPEN BALKANS –**

**A Path towards Stabilisation, Cooperation and Prosperity of**

**the Region”**

 **Wednesday, 24 November 2021 at 14:00**

First of all, appreciations about this opportunity to talk about the Open Balkans.

Dear Friends, distinguished leaders, Dear Ana and Edi, Mr. Escobar,

It was only days ago when we had the Summit in Belgrade, where I emphasized that regional co-operation are absolutely a European. As one of the founding fathers of the European Union said - when the world seems large and complex, we need to remember that great world ideals all begin in some home neighborhood. We live in a region that has been immersed in history for too long, and that fails to create enough future, and as experience shows - especially in the case of my country, these issues can cause a complete stalemate on the European path. We need to build a strategy for moving closely, by sending a message that we a region that creates solutions instead of problems, we are oriented towards the future, instead of being stuck in the past.

The only sustainable and long-term vision for a stable, prosperous Balkan is one where borders become less and less important, to the point of irrelevance, which is why fostering regional co-operation through the Open Balkans initiative is a major step towards achieving this vision. The differences and geographic boundaries aside, there is a common interest that connects us: to create better opportunities for our citizens. My experience in bilateral disputes has taught me that the dexterity in overcoming them is to turn divergent positions into convergent interests. As the respected Mr Escobar recently stated, the key to stronger Western Balkans is one that creates inclusion and integration, so the Open Balkans, as the name suggests, goes in that direction.

The tragic event of yesterday where 46 of my fellow citizens, many of them children, lost their lives, shows us how interconnected we are and how illusory the differences and borders are. So if you allow me, I will use this opportunity to pay tribute to the victims, express condolences to their families, and send my wishes for strength and speedy recovery to the survivors, in these days where the whole nation is in pain, it is hurting. It is in such moments that we express mutual solidarity, taking care of others just like we take care of ourselves. There is a Macedonian saying, your neighbor is closer to you than your shirt.

This platform for cooperation - Open Balkans, is built on a European basis - to create solidarity by building a single regional market based on the freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital; implementing joint investments that will facilitate our transition to a digital and green economy, and mutual assistance in dealing with crises and natural disasters. These are areas where the whole region has a lot of work to do on the road to the EU. For example, most of the recommendations from this year of the European Commission Report for North Macedonia, divided by clusters are noted in Cluster 4 - Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity (55%), and Cluster 2 - Internal Market (52%). Through these concrete steps we actually strengthen good neighborly relations and improve the situation in the region, because when we are directed towards each other, when we are close - mutual trust grows, thus stability and prosperity are strengthened. The latest Balkan Barometer is out, published by the RCC. For the Western Balkans’ citizens, EU membership is still perceived as embodiment of European values and principles of democracy and rule of law, but the economic prosperity remains the most important association when it comes to the EU. On the other hand, democracy and the rule of law cannot make lasting inroads into the enduring poverty in the Western Balkans, unless there is economic growth and social progress in the region, in the context of the Europeanisation process. This is also emphasized with the EU Economic and Investment Plan for the region and the estimation by the World Bank indicates that at current growth rates, it would take about six decades for average per capita Western Balkan income to converge with the EU average.

Overcoming this convergence gap is critically important in the context of the region's European perspective. Estimations and recommendations of IMFs and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, conducted independently of each other, indicate that regional economic integration will increase each country's gross domestic product (GDP) by 10 percent above the pre-pandemic level. The World Bank - I will return to its data once again here to add more to context - estimated that in 2016 trucks spend 26 million hours a year, or 80% of their time, waiting to cross the borders in the region. Business owners we spoke to pointed out that the shortage of workers hinders economic development. Hence, from the point of view of the people and the businesses of the three countries, and of the entire region of the Balkans, the elimination of trade barriers is a very important and tangible benefit.

This process also increases the attractiveness of the region in terms of foreign direct investment - current trading models show that countries in the region are attracting higher-end economic activity, but their progress may be unsustainable without access to labor, capital, and goods from the other countries in the region. Thus, the path to prosperity is in joining supply chains.

The regional cooperation within the Open Balkans initiative is not a special turn with regards to the European path, or an alternative to the European integration - on the contrary, it is in line with the European integration. However, the effect of the delay has a strong impact on our domestic policy and makes it even more challenging to maintain the European course. So, even without accession negotiations or with their reduced dynamics in terms of approaching the EU, we must continue adopting European standards and values.

This is why this initiative is completely complementary to the European vision, and it is also an expression of political wisdom that our choice is not just to wait and do nothing, but on the contrary – to be proactive, which strengthens the responsibility and the regional ownership over the results in the process. When it comes to the process of Europeanisation, I always emphasize that we are in a race against time, to make our region European in order to keep our young people at home. When they leave, we lose a huge human capital - these people decide to leave because they are looking for a European way of life, and we need them at home, to create exactly this perspective in our countries.

From our activities so far, it is obvious that we have the political will. I think the summit in Belgrade was very important, because it prompted us to start delivering. I think the whole region suffers from the so called “implementation sickness”. And after the follow up meeting that we had on-line and the meeting of the ministers and directors of relevant agencies in Nish, I think that we will have good news to report at the next summit in December, that will take place in Tirana. So, this question of convincing others - I think that probably two words to do this are *successful results*. The more deliverables we provide the more obvious it is going to become for others that it is worth joining.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that that for regional cooperation to be successful and I think Mr. Escobar made that point very clearly, this initiative must remain open and it is open and inclusive for all interested. If we are able to deliver in December and if we are able to show, in numbers, the benefits for our people and for our business, I think there will be more and more arguments that we don’t really have holes in the regional cooperation, but we cover the full map of our region.

Thank you so much for the opportunity!