

Deputy Prime Minister Nikola Dimitrov address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe within the Autumn Session

Dear Mr. President of the parliamentary assembly, the setting is like this I suspect and I'm turning my back to you, but it is with respect and friendship. Madam secretary-general, distinguished assembly members, ladies and gentleman, dear friends. It is a major honor for me to be here to address the parliamentary assembly of the council of Europe for the second time, I was here in 2018 in a different capacity as a foreign minister so this is my second opportunity and privilege to address you.

This time I think I have to underline how grateful we all are in the region for the initiative of the parliamentary assembly to have a debate on the European future, on the European perspective of the western Balkans, this debate comes at a great time I think because it colides with the end of the visit of the European commission's president Ursula von der Leyen to the region her message in all capitals was: Do not lose faith, your future is European. It also colides with an article from Reuters that made headlines through out the Balkans that member states do no longer have a consensus to repeat the promise that was made 18 years ago at the European council of Thessaloniki in 2003, a promise that is still unfulfilled. Few days after today next week there is a summit between the EU and the region and will see what the declaration, what the messages of the EU will be towards the region. I know that this organization as a credo of democracy of human rights of rule of law is very much part of the same vision and if we reform and do what we need to do at home to be in line with the Copenhagen criteria we rely on and are very grateful for the corporation with many of the mechanisms of this organisation including GREKO, the committee for intervention of torture of the Venice commission, the Horizontal facility etc.

I'm going to try to make the case for my country, for North Macedonia, but also for the region and I'm going to appeal for responsibility and leadership in the capitals of the region and the capital of the European Union, that it is really high time to move forward. I've never done this I was silent for 16 seconds, not because I lost the train of thought, this is to illustrate the 16 years that my country had been a candidate country since 2005, and we are still not able to start the journey. So North Macedonia is probably the most drastic example from the wrong side of things of the accepting policy of the European Union. We started the journey after Slovenia and before Croatia, Croatia marks 8 years of membership, In the European Union, and we still haven't started the journey. The reason for this lost generations was not lack of reforms it was not because we were part of the Yugoslav force because we were not, it was a problem that we had with a neighbor, a problem that we resolved in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement.

This was highly praised by the whole democratic world as a triumph of democracy of diplomacy of reconciliation because arguably one of the biggest bi split resolution effort and success after the Dayton agreement in our region. Prespa agreement was preceded by the important agreement for friendship and cooperation with another neighbor, with Bulgaria. It is not only the lost generations and the passage of time that makes us a strong candidate. It is also what we did at home, in terms of continuously improving our democracy and our society direct by the rule of law. In all of the reports of the European Commission, but also many other important

organizations, we are in a small group of countries regrettably today that makes a democratic progress also I think the most recent was the global peace index, we are the fifth country in the world with biggest progress in terms of predictability, and stability and peacefulness. So, it's really time to move forward. The obstacle that we have in front of us, and this misunderstanding that we have with our neighbors in Sofia, with Bulgaria is not territory, we do not have territorial dispute, it is not something that has to do with reforms at home, it has to do with issues of history of identity and of language. And I think it's really high time for both countries to assume responsibility and leadership and find a way out of this because this really takes a deep toll on the friendship between the two nations and it disrupts important European policies in our region. The natural fate of play should be that our neighbors will be our biggest champions, because they have the most to gain from the European success of North Macedonia.

In 21 century, Europe, the issue of languages, this Sunday I think we marked the European languages day, that was basically made by this organization, by the Council of Europe, a day where we celebrate our diversity on the European continent. The issue of my mother tongue, the Macedonian language should not be in contradiction with the efforts of the nation to move forward on its European path, not if Europe is a continent where we cherish linguistic and cultural diversity, as it is written in the Lisbon treaty and as we cherish and celebrate in this organization, in the Council of Europe, and this is why I argue that this struggle is not only a struggle for my own national identity of my people, but it is also, a very important struggle for the European identity for the whole of the European Union. Who am I, and what language do I speak is not a matter where others should have a say, other countries or other organizations. The right of self-determination, of self-identification is something very intimate and it is mine. In a democracy, I do not allow my own country to tell me who I am, let alone third countries. What we did with Bulgaria in the friendship treaty was, we said we are going to enable and create a positive climate for historians to discuss historical issues, and we as politicians and government will work on what we can change, and what we can change is today and tomorrow.

This plan, the approach of the friendship treaty, has been derailed and in contradiction with Article 2 of the friendship treaty where it says that Bulgaria will assist our efforts on our way to the European Union, instead, it stopped our journey, by blocking our path for two times now. In the long run, I think this significantly undermines the relationship and I think we are in a status quo where we have losers throughout the region. In Skopje, in Sofia it resonates throughout the region, because other countries are also losing trust, that this is actually possible, seeing that what North Macedonia has done which is admirable for the last several years it's still not enough for Europe to say, you delivered, we will deliver. So I think this is where we are and this is a moment where we have to assume responsibility. I grew up as a diplomat resolving problems, and what I've learned is that you have to understand, and you have to be able to think in the shoes of the other if you want to resolve the problem. You have to clearly know the concerns of the other party and find a combination of issues where the concerns of your nation are met, but also the concerns the other party are as well met, and if we introduced the context of European values, and principles, then we have a sustainable solution. Resolving a dispute between two nations always cost political credit. You cannot have a success if you don't spend political credit.

We did it once to some extend twice, and in many ways, we did it because of the next generation and not the next election, sometimes people realize that and reward leadership,

sometimes they don't, but in the long run I think it's important that what we do today will put us talking about history so much on the right side of history when others will observe what we have done. We live in a world where patterns, organizations, alliances, geopolitics cannot be taken for granted. All of the organizations, all of the patterns of the international relations are now more shaky and less predictable, and this is a time when we have to assume responsibility. The region of the Western Balkans whether we like it or not is composed of six countries surrounded by member states of the European Union. Geographically we are like a room in the European house, but not on the borders of the house, somewhere within and we are not plugged-in, we are not plugged-in in the water plant, in the water system, in the electricity, in the air-conditioning. To have this room, as no part is not good for the room, is not good for the whole house. We are a region that trades with the common market for over 3 quarters. We are a region where all investments come from European companies for all the 3 quarters as well. We are a region that is critically important for the EU's own stability, be it organized crime or fighting terrorism, or the migration crisis of 2015 and 2016. If Europe loses the trust of the people in the Balkans that their future is with them, Europe risks losing this region, and after so many years of no progress, our last biggest progress was Croatia in 2013.

It is really time to think hard and if this world is now a world where more geopolitical players compete for power. And if the European Union is serious about its role and its place, it should think twice whether it is more costly to lose the Balkans or to invest and make the Balkans properly European so that their democracy is there, independent judge is there, their media are free, and that there is economic prosperity. All this is possible but we will need political leadership. It's really difficult for me, my portfolio is. I don't want to talk too much because I like to have a lively debate, so I'm going to conclude soon. For me as someone who is in charge of European affairs for my country, I really struggle when I talk to the people, to the citizens, explaining this constant cycle of hope and disappointment, and we've been going through this constant cycle of hope and disappointment in particular since June 2018, at that time Bulgaria was actually a huge advocate for start of the accession talks of my country the issues were different. It took a new methodology to bring other countries in the consensus and now we have regrettably this problem with our neighbor. It's really time to show to the region that the European Union is serious about its promise from Thessaloniki. And this unfulfilled promise takes a toll, it makes pro-European forces weaker and it makes other forces, probably more nationalistic stronger. If we lose the European vision of the region other more sinister will come in to play. And I think we witnessed what can happen by... there is a competition of greater ethnic states from the nineties. I think this was an admission of defeat for our continent. I appeal to European leaders to reiterate and send a strong political signal from the summit in Slovenia that the future of this region is European. Thank you so much for this opportunity, and thank you so much for the debate that will follow after my address.