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**EU’S enlargement in the Western Balkans: why is it critical for Europe’s future?**

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**-Transcript-**

It is a tricky question, its sounds simple – yes and no, I think. Yes, because we received a very clear political message from the leaders of the EU at Brdo, that they are committed to the enlargement process and to the decisions made therein. This was a sentence that was not mentioned at previous Summits in Zagreb and in Sofia. And as we all know this was the 4th Summit between the EU and the region. The first one was in Thessaloniki, when the vision was actually declared, the promise was made. And I very much appreciate Joshka reminding us – if I may use first names – why this happened. The peaceful political order of this region is tied to the European integration. If we take out this goal, the promise, I think alternatives will come into play. And we have been there, in the 90s. So, United Balkans is only possible if we have a functional European integration process and reaffirmed promise in Thessaloniki

Now, what is missing, in addition to the clear political promise, is movement on the ground – action. What we have in the region in terms of action is: the lasts Chapter for Serbia was opened in December 2019, for Montenegro in June 2020. We have the decision for North Macedonia and Albania from March 2020 to start the accession talks, but we are still not able to actually do that. So, the EU has been struggling to deliver on its promise. We have the Commission and the European Parliament repeatedly saying that Kosovo delivered on the requirements to get visa liberalization, but this is still not really happening and Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a potential candidate country. So, to restore the faith of the people that this is actually possible, we need action in the region. It is not fair to blame the EU for this. The EU is a complex organism, it has a Commission with 30.000 people, it has 27 Member States - it takes one to prevent a decision on this file, on enlargement - it is a consensus decision-making process.

So I think, in order to move and open this new chapter, restore the European momentum in the Balkans, we need our neighbors in Sofia to assume their responsibility. We talk a lot about common history, but we also have a common region and we should have a common European future. So it is time to show leadership and responsibility, because all of us are losing momentum in the Western Balkans. And to restore that, and turn it around, U-turn for the better, we should act fast.

EU is by far our biggest partner, both politically and economically, the European Economic Investment Plan is 9 billion euros in grants. At the same time the EU also gets a lot from the Western Balkans. The trade deficit in the last decade has been between 7.5 and 9.2 billion of euros. There is an international study - in terms of brain drain, the loss of human capital - the region loses 5.5 billion of euros per year, in terms of investment in education and potential loss of GDP growth. So, economically we are in the same boat. We are completely interlinked, we trade with EU, 70% or the trade of the region is with the EU, EU invests between 3 and 3.5 billion of euros every year in the Balkans, so there is an issue with the repatriation of profits as well, but we are in the same boat.

When I listened to the vice-Prime Minister of Montenegro about the Port of Bar and smuggling of cigarettes, this is a clear example of why engaging and making this region more like the EU - in terms of strong democracy, free media, rule of law, fighting corruption, etc. - is actually far less costly than not engaging with the region. And because this is an Economist Summit, I’d like to refer to a recent Charlemagne poll that had a subtitle “Bigger is still better”, that exclusion is not a happy solution and that if the EU wants to become a global player, it needs to become a local one first. We are surrounded by member states and if this region that is essentially called Western Balkans to know that these 6 countries are still out, we need to be plugged in. If we have divergent policies, if we do not fight corruption, this is not good for the countries surrounding us. Migration, or any challenge that the EU has faced in the last several years – we have a role. This region played a very important role for the security on the European Union in 2015 and 2016 in terms of the migration crisis. Often, the boarders of our region were the external borders of the EU because of our simple geography.

It is really high time to act. We also have our responsibility. Sometimes people argue that progress is not there because of lack of reforms, but in the case of North Macedonia and Albania, even the strictest of the Member states, the Netherlands and their approach of strict and fair – we heard Prime Minister Mark Rutte at the doorstep in Brdo saying it is time for this to happen. We have president Macron in one room with us and president Radev, trying to help together with Chancellor Merkel. So, even the strictest Member States on criteria have no dilemmas that this should happen. The stakes are so high for this region, for our Government, for the friendship with Bulgaria, that it is time to assume leadership, responsibility, and do this. We have to have a reasonable European solution, in line with European standards, that will also respect the dignity of the Macedonian citizens. Being a Member State is not a free license to ask for whatever you want – there is a legitimate interest for every country to push for their interest, but this should be in line with European values, if we are talking about accession to the European Union.

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I agree on this dilemma - bringing the house into order before you invite new residents, so to speak. We have to be frank, even though we like to think we are the center of this universe, here this region, we are not. And it is realistic that we have to take into account all the big challenges the EU faced in the last years – Brexit, the Eurozone crisis, the financial crisis, the migration crisis, self-confidence crisis so to speak to some extent, the narrative crisis where some Member States think that others are not behaving the way they should on rule of law and other issues. Behind the atrium of the European house, we are here and the huge investment that the initial EU made in uniting the continent, that followed the fall of the Berlin wall, is not exactly happening in the Western Balkans. If you take into account the numbers in this 7-years budgetary cycle, per capita a citizen of any of the Western Balkan countries is getting an assistance of about 500 euros, and a citizen of a member state surrounding the region is over 5000 euros, so it is 11 times [bigger]. This economic gap - we have to start closing it, not making it bigger.

And I think we have a better understanding – you were mentioning the French position – I think these are legitimate dilemmas – do we get more solutions, are there more plusses if we get these six countries on board, or do we bring in more problems, because they would have a vote, etc? I think finding a mechanism to bring the house in order is also important. I like to use quotes in panels, and I haven’t found a better quote that these processes must run in parallel than Lord Robertson’s, who once in Skopje said *“If you cannot ride 2 horses at the same time, what are you doing in the circus in the first place?”*. I think the EU must face the challenge of this internal issue, but cannot part the region and deal with the region after this is done. And we are not talking about getting new members today, we are talking about keeping the process of transformation alive, because it is good for the region and it is good for the EU. And I do not think we can make a rigid distinction between economic prosperity and democracy and rule of law. And this is why I think the political commitment is there.

We don’t have an alternative to making North Macedonia a strong European democracy - more rule of law, more visible results in the fight against corruption. We have to do that regardless of the accession process, whether we start it or not, and we are going to try to do that. But the best reform tool, the transformative power of accession is there, and we can do it easier and faster if we have access to the process. I agree that the process is more important the end goal. If we join the EU today, life in this country will not change overnight. We need to do the changes and this is why the process is more important than the end goal. These two processes we have to do in the same time, we Europeans. And we can also help in the region, to convince others that we can bring more solutions than problems – this is about regional cooperation, this is about how mature we are in resolving problems, in opening up opportunities. The more we can show that, the more convincing the region will be in the eyes of the EU.