**Skopje Economic Forum**

**A New Dawn: Laying the Foundations for Stability and Prosperity**

**Skopje, June 2021**

Thank you so much for the questions and apologies for being slightly late.

I just met representatives of the Greek government who are here for this forum. I’d like to praise this initiative and I hope that this pilot gathering here in Skopje will become a regular annual gathering because I see it as a great tool to further the friendship and tangible cooperation between GR and MKD. This is not an easy question for me coming after the GAC meeting of yesterday. I’ve spent this last weeks and months talking at various panels in different European capitals about how important it is to finally make a move.

The promise that Europe made to the Balkans took place in Thessaloniki, many years ago in 2003. It was reaffirmed in Sofia in 2018. We also had Western Balkans - EU summit in Zagreb, virtually, and we are going to have another one on the 6th of October in Ljubljana this year. The topic, the title of this panel that “seeing is believing” from Latin, “Videre est Credere” is I think telling. As Vice Prime Minister for European Affairs, it is becoming more and more difficult for me to talk to the people, to my people, to the citizens, and to maintain the narrative that this is really possible, we really need movement. This region is surrounded with member states, economically, politically, and historically, culture wise we belong to Europe and it is really important that we see concrete decisions and movements to support and to deliver upon the promise made in Thessaloniki. We don`t have an alternative, but becoming a functional European democracy that comes together with economic prosperity. We will continue to do reforms, because we do them for us. But the tool, the accession process, which is a reform tool, will help us to do it better. Regardless of whether we start accession talks or not, our path is clear - we are going to continue to work on becoming a European democracy. But it is also important, and I realize that so many Ministers are now publicly stating this is also now an issue for the EU itself and in a way this block is not only over North Macedonia`s European future, it`s also blocking the policies of the European Union towards the Balkans, so we are in this in a way together. We either have a failure on all sides, including our neighbours in Bulgaria, or we have a win-win-win. We did everything we could, we are open, we are honest, and we believe that a European solution in line with European values is possible. But my public line is - when this happens, we should be positively surprised. We have responsibility towards our people to protect them, because when people go through a hopeful moment and then they are disappointed, and this is repeating from June 2018 almost at every 3 to 6 months, this is not healthy for the nation. So, I will stop here.

In a way, the start of accession talks with the EU is one of the key elements of our narrative, our political narrative in the last 4 years that started on 1st of June 2017. So, to some extent, whether we can deliver on our promise to the people, we depend on whether the EU delivers on what many European ministers say: “you delivered, now it is our turn”. We are doing everything that we can, I think it is critical that we push the agenda at home. Joining Europe is about changing our societies and countries, so the ultimate goal I think is - we can achieve it if we focus on the reform agenda at home - democracy issues, freedom of the media, rule of law, fight against corruption, better jobs, more economic cooperation with our neighbours, and since this is an economic forum, inspired now by the world famous Delphi one and organised by it, and we are in, hopefully, post-COVID circumstances, we have to make use of the 9 billion of euros in the economic and investment plan for the region, many of the member states part of this region are getting recovery funds from Europe, I think we need to join forces, think strategically. *Orama* is a word I know, have a vision for this, so that we jump start the convergence, bridge the gap between the Balkans and the rest of the continent in economic terms as well. I am grateful to the Slovenian presidency and their plans, I am also grateful to the Portuguese presidency and what they did as an honest broker. We all realize that the stakes are huge and I thing we have the opportunity for success, that we have to use in the months to come. Of course, pro-European forces will become weaker if European vision fails in this region, so I don’t want to underestimate this. Eurosceptics will \_\_\_\_, so this is why we have to continue the work at home, to be credible in the eyes of the European Union and this is why we also need the European Union to be credible in the eyes of the people in the Balkans. And I think this is the equation for success. Thank you.

Thank you for this question. There was a recent poll that showed, I think encouraging signals. First of all, about the balance under the terms of the Agreement: equal number of people, from both sides of the borders, see it as harmful, I think about 35 %, so I think this is telling as to the type of compromise we made. Second, I think we did something really, really big, and we are in a stage now when implementation matters. Many things have been done and we need to continue. The key is to have both countries, in particular both Governments but also the societies (the special responsibility lies with the Government), to focus on the implementation under the Prespa Agreement and to deal with any issues that come - no Agreement is perfect and there will be issues that will come - in the spirit of mutual respect and close cooperation, and use the terms of the Prespa Agreement to overcome them. If we manage to do that, we are going to have a positive dynamic and where issues will be solved and where cooperation will be more visible to the people. The alternative is to have a negative dynamic, this is a blame game, less and less, so I think we need to stick to the more and more, I think there is a huge potential and I really would not want to see a situation where we go back to where this started, this is too important. In some ways, this is why many call it historic. We should not take things for granted though and we should focus, in the spirit that we have in between the two governments and the two countries and solve everything that comes in our way and move forward.