



Statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic at the Adriatic and Ionian Council /EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting held in Catania, Italy:

Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure that we have gathered today in Catania and to have the opportunity to take stock of our joint activities over the past year in the Adriatic and Ionian region.

I would like to thank the Italian Republic for providing facilities for the current AIC meeting in an extended format along with EUSAIR Ministers, reaffirming once again that the Strategy is an efficient synergy mechanism enabling even more meaningful cooperation among EU Member States, EU Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries.

The Republic of Serbia expects that the true achievements of our regional cooperation be made visible and available, owing to macro-regional EU Strategies for the Danube Region and the Adriatic and Ionian Region, to all citizens in the region. In that respect, we are now ready to focus more attention on specific projects to be implemented through the Action Plan of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

The Report of the European Commission on the implementation of macro-regional strategies released in December 2016, the 2017 Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions and the latest European Parliament resolution adopted this year have largely identified immediate challenges.

Priorities set for transport and energy sectors need to be coordinated with the initiatives launched in other fora ("the Berlin Process", "the Visegrad Group", Energy Community, etc.) so that they be seen as complementary rather than as unnecessary duplication and overlapping.

I would like to point to very significant steps taken since the last AIC Ministerial Meeting, steps that proved the efficiency of close cooperation model between the participating States and the European Commission towards effective implementation of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region:

- A new round of EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups in 2017 and the first half of 2018 has been completed successfully, thus fulfilling the expectations of the European Commission and all EUSAIR stakeholders in terms of establishing functional management structures within the Strategy;
- Within ADRION transnational program, 34 projects were agreed, while partners from Serbia are taking part in 13 of them. This opened up a possibility for the States participating in the Strategy to clearly articulate ideas through projects of relevance to the development of individual States and of the region as a whole.

We are convinced that the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region will start encouraging cooperation and investment to the benefit of all taking part in it, while making its full contribution to peace and security in our entire region.

I would now like to highlight some positive results achieved by the Republic of Serbia in the previous year. With a projected growth of over 4 per cent, my country has recorded a third consecutive surplus, while public debt has been reduced to less than 58 per cent which, let me recall, was a requirement set out in the Maastricht Treaty. Unemployment rate fell from almost 26 to 13 per cent. Unemployment of young people dropped from 51 to 33 per cent. Industrial output in January 2018 has increased by 10.6 per cent compared to January 2017 and overall foreign trade exchange by 39.1 per cent compared to the same period last year. With EUR 450 million in foreign direct investments, only in the first two months of 2018, Serbia is being steadily ranked high on various international lists according to investment security, competitiveness and ease of doing business.

Contributing to the strengthening of regional cooperation, R. Serbia has devoted particular attention to the activities carried out in the framework of the so-called Berlin Process. Serbia has supported the implementation of regional projects jointly agreed at last year's Western Balkans Summit in Trieste, particularly those related to infrastructure, youth investment as well as development of potential new joint projects in other sectors aiming to improve the living standard in the region prior to formally entering the EU.

Serbia advocates coordination and alignment of development policies and plans aimed at transport and energy connectivity of this part of Europe with the European Union, in a way ensuring a synchronized and fully aligned approach, as well as embracing good practices adopted within multiple regional initiatives, regional structures and organizations. We believe that the macro-regional nature of the European Union approach is able to provide instant support in the form of expertise and funding for operations, which is particularly important for states that are currently in the process of EU integration.

We believe that the EU Enlargement Policy is one of the vital instruments of the Union, not only

in the context of stabilizing the region and underpinning its economic prosperity, but also towards achieving stability and security of the EU as a whole, which was, it is my hope, unequivocally affirmed again at the recent EU-WB Summit in Sofia, reflected in the reality that full membership of the EU is the only strategic option for the Western Balkan partners. Serbia has proven to be an equal and reliable partner to the EU in the earlier years, and we are pleased that this fact was recognized, considering the amount of the political effort put to that end.

Despite the political and economic challenges apparently facing the EU today, we are convinced that a clear perspective of EU membership has been and remains the main driver for a number of reform processes and positive developments in the region. The Republic of Serbia is committed to the accession process in the context of which it has opened twelve negotiating chapters so far. It is our objective to open as many chapters we are prepared for as possible in the shortest timeframe possible, so that the entire governmental administration could focus on our key and overarching goal, that is, full membership of the European Union.

To Serbia, as well as others in the Western Balkans, an unhindered continuation of the integration process, above all a process of long and difficult reforms, is of utmost importance as we convey our expectation that unequivocal support and understanding will come from all of the EU Member States. A progress made in the EU integration process by each of us individually has a positive impact on all the others in the region.

It is towards the acceleration of the European path that we recognize the multi-faceted importance of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region: by enhancing its practical implementation we have an opportunity to closely cooperate with the administrations of other participants – EU Member States, candidate and aspirant countries. At the same time, we closely cooperate with the European Commission, using the mechanism enabling us to second our experts to EC structures – by which we both gain knowledge of the EC's operation and have an opportunity to showcase the capacity of professionals working in our own governmental administration, as yet another dimension of the added value of the Strategy for Serbia.

I thank our Italian colleagues and friends for the excellent arrangements provided for the 3rd Forum of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region – for their work and commitment that are in evidence all around us. To our friends from Montenegro I wish a successful Chairmanship of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative in the year ahead. I am confident that, viewed in a broader context, the former, the current and our next Chairmanship in 2019, will have a significant impact in the successful realization of activities and projects within the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, to which the cooperation in the Trio Presidency format will also contribute in many ways.

Thank you for your attention.