



Madame Chairperson,
Mr. Secretary-general,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me at the outset to thank Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mrs. Pejcinovic-Buric and Secretary General of the Central European Initiative Ambassador di Vietri for hospitality and excellent organization of the Annual meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Central European Initiative.

I am pleased to have the opportunity today to participate in the exchange of views on connectivity within a wider European region, experience and challenges posed by the European integration including our joint efforts to maintain the region's stability.

I dare say that over the entire past decade, the Republic of Serbia has not differentiated the priority goals in connection with domestic reforms, European integration and regional cooperation.

EU enlargement policy, we are convinced, represents one of the Union's major instruments not only in terms of stabilization of the region and in terms of the achievement of economic prosperity, but also achieving the stability and security in the EU as a whole, which has been I hope unambiguously reaffirmed at the recently held summit in Sofia, by virtue of the fact that full EU membership is the only strategic option for the Western Balkan partners. Over the past years, Serbia has proven to be an equal and reliable partner to EU and we are happy that it has been recognized in view of its substantial political commitment invested.

Despite evident challenges currently faced by EU politically and economically, we are convinced that a clear perspective of EU membership has been and still is a major driving force for number of reforms and positive development in the region. The Republic of Serbia is committed to the accession process and so far it has opened 12 negotiating chapters. We strive to open as many chapters that we are ready for as possible so that the entire state administration could focus on key and overarching goal - full EU membership.

To us, as well as to others in the Western Balkans it is of utmost importance that the integration process, which primarily implies a process of long and difficult reforms, continues without

obstacles, expecting that unequivocal support and understanding by all EU members will follow. Individual progress of each of us on the road to EU integration has a positive effect on others in the region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By striving for stability in the region we are effectively contributing to sustainability and progress of our economies.

Serbia achieved significant positive results last year. With a projected growth of more than 4 per cent, my country achieved a third successive surplus while public debt was reduced to less than 58 per cent which is, let me recall, a condition set out in the Maastricht Treaty. Unemployment rate fell from almost 26 to 13 per cent while unemployment among the young was reduced from 51 to 33 per cent. We all face the brain drain in the region, but with an estimated economic growth for the coming period and planned foreign investments, we can be confident that new employment opportunities, especially for the young, will rise.

On the other hand, it is not possible to discuss sustainable stability without recognizing common interests and full support to regional cooperation, which is, like I have already said, one of our equally important foreign policy pillars. In making its contribution to strengthening of regional cooperation, the Republic of Serbia has paid special attention to activities within the so-called Berlin Process. Serbia supports the implementation of regional projects harmonized jointly at the last year's Western Balkans summit in Trieste, especially those related to infrastructure projects, youth investment, as well as harmonization of potential new joint projects in other areas that would improve the quality of life in the region even before formal EU membership. Moreover, we have undertaken serious preparation for the forthcoming London summit, which will, in addition to well-established issues, also raise the issue of security and better regional connectivity in that sense.

Speaking of stability, we cannot ignore some developments and processes at broader international level that bring about new challenges to wider region but also affect each of our citizens. Abandoning multilateralism, UK Brexit, the rise of right-wing group and populism and overall radicalization of the political scene, terrorism persisting despite the defeat of the so-called "Islamic State" and migration are just some of the warnings reminding us of the need that Europe and European Union should grow stronger and unite in order to achieve common interests in the continent and beyond. When it comes to migration, we have to be aware of the crisis which is recurring, of course, not with the same intensity, but with new flows, routes and challenges. Even if it doesn't affect Serbia directly again, we are ready to continue our constructive cooperation and work together with all of you on solving this common problem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me repeat – CEI represents a "bridge" between the EU members and those countries perceiving EU membership as their goal. The membership of this regional initiative which is a framework for confidence-building and faster EU integration, is of great importance to Serbia in view of current EU accession negotiations.

As one of the oldest regional initiatives on the European continent, bringing together 18 States, CEI is a regional initiative that by its experience and respect may add a significant additional

value to the connectivity process among European macro-regions. In that sense, I note with pleasure the importance of efforts invested to this end.

Regardless of other formats and organizations, CEI has managed to remain relevant. Serbia and its institutions, at the local level, its universities and NGO sector fully recognized the capacity of the funds and calls for cooperation coming from CEI. The confirmation of Serbia's huge interest is best illustrated by the fact that at the recently closed CEI call for program of cooperation activities, Serbia submitted the biggest number of project proposals (21).

Dear friends,

Allow me to express my regret over Austria's decision. We surely respect the reasons and do not seek to dwell upon why the Government in Vienna decided so. Still, I would like to point to Austria's huge contribution to the Initiative and furthermore to its profound understanding and genuine support which, along with Italy, it has always offered to my region. I hope that once the conditions allow there will be will and interest to reconsider the decision.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the end, I would like to commend the efforts of the Republic of Croatia, currently holding CEI Presidency, and wish our host a lot of success in chairing this regional initiative in the period ahead.