



First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic attended today the 3rd European Union-South East Europe Summit in Split.

The Summit was also attended by Croatia's Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic, Montenegrin Vice-Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Igor Luksic, Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati and by Romanian Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs George Ciamba.

The Head of Serbian diplomacy spoke at the final panel "Where Europe is headed?"

Following is full text of Minister Dacic's remarks delivered to the final panel:

"Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia Vesna Pusic for inviting me to take part in this prestigious meeting. I am here surrounded by friends from the region and the EU. There is no doubt that this is a guarantee for a thought-provoking debate on these issues very important for us that concern our future as well.

Over the past few years, we have followed the activities in the European Union with great attention. The global economic crisis that shook the world in 2008 has deeply affected both Europe and the European Union. In addition to devastating economic effects, unemployment, falling GDP, mounting inflation and slowed development, the worst consequence of the crisis for our political interests was the so-called "enlargement fatigue". Namely, the economic crisis has had a large impact on the level of commitment to the enlargement policy by the EU, its institutions and Member States, but it has also partly had a bearing on diminished public support for EU membership in our own countries.

Putting it simply, the EU, pressed by its problems and the growing influence of Eurosceptics and centre-right parties, apparently had to soften somewhat, at least in public, its enlargement rhetoric. The statement made by Juncker that there would be no further EU enlargements in the next five years came as no surprise to us as politicians, but it had definitely adversely affected public opinion in our countries.

We believe that this infamous “enlargement fatigue” is a kind of a thesis imposed by the media, because the real economic and political indicators, those which enlargement opponents mostly refer to, are almost exclusively in favour of enlargement.

The European integration process of SEE countries has lasted for a very long time and as the EU feels an enlargement fatigue of sorts, we are sometimes fatigued by the protracted nature of the integration process. Therefore, it is very important to strike a balance between the two, or to go ahead with the enlargement policy as probably the major and most successful European policy, for the benefit of all.

It is worth noting that European integration is undeniably a catalyst of social and economic development in this region. The vast majority of Serbian citizens vote for political parties clearly prioritizing the European integration process as the framework for ongoing intensive and comprehensive reforms of the state and society as a whole, based on European values and standards. I would like to recall that the current National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia reflects entirely the political parties supporting European integration. It is encouraging for us that the previous progress reports on reforms and EU integration process prepared by the European Commission clearly indicate that we are headed in the right direction.

When speaking of a new Europe in the future, we must consider the integration of all states of the old continent, as a prerequisite for this historic, political and economic project to reach its full potential. In recent years, many European states have demonstrated a trend of growing support for the political parties blaming the adverse economic conditions on the EU enlargement policy. I am convinced that there can be no talk of the new, future Europe until the enlargement process is successfully completed. This is best illustrated by the success and efficiency of the enlargement policy in the past decades.

The European perspective has made an essential contribution to the promotion of regional cooperation and relations in the Western Balkans. Among others, it is the European perspective which enabled solving open issues in the region through dialogue. The European perspective was a deciding factor which contributed to the success of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Its positive outcome is yet another confirmation that the policy of enlargement remains a strong motivating force in the Western Balkans.

Due to the most recent events, the EU has increased its efforts over the past months towards strengthening its Neighbourhood Policy. It is very important for us to bear in mind that it is sensible and practical to expect the Western Balkans enlargement policy to be brought to a successful conclusion in the coming years, since the successful launch of a new approach to the European Neighbourhood Policy would otherwise seem unlikely.

Any further deadlock in respect of enlargement to the Western Balkans would have multiple negative consequences for the economic development as well as for the political stability of the region. The price of such a stalemate or possible abandoning of the enlargement policy could be very high, in every respect. On the other hand, we are aware of all the challenges facing the EU, believing that as partners and future EU Members States, we could contribute to overcoming them, in line with our capabilities.

In conclusion, I wish to refer briefly to the current EU integration process of my country. The foremost strategic foreign policy priority of Serbia is its full EU membership. I need to reiterate this fact on this occasion as well, because there are periodic estimates which cast doubt on our goal. Our traditional political, economic and cultural ties with the Russian Federation do not, in any way, bring into question our foreign policy priorities. These facts speak for themselves. More than two thirds of Serbia's trade is with the EU Member States. Serbia has been working intensively on the opening of a certain number of negotiating chapters (23, 24, 32 and 35) in the course of this year. Some of the chapters are technically ready to be opened (32-Financial control) and we expect the European Council to reach a decision on the opening of first chapters, as soon as possible. The screening process has been brought to an end successfully and the time has come for a qualitatively new stage in our membership talks.

The European Parliament Resolution on Serbia's EU integration process, adopted on 11 March 2015, is balanced and positively worded. It takes note of reform activities that we are committed to, in order to become an EU Member State. Following the recommendations made in the EC Progress Report 2014 and in the mentioned EP resolution, we are implementing key reforms in order to fully embrace European standards and norms within the shortest possible period of time.

Serbia has been continuously committed to intensifying all forms of regional cooperation that would contribute to the stability of the region, to its European integration and international affirmation. In that context, I wish to emphasize the importance of the South-East European Cooperation Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, i.e. their contribution to the promotion and enhancement of dialogue on all levels and in all areas of mutual interest for the region. We are also actively working on closer connectivity of the region in the fields of economy, transportation, energy and infrastructure, which will connect us better with the EU but also create new, more favourable conditions for the movement of people and goods, and increase our competitiveness in the business field. This will certainly create conditions for young people to live and stay in our region. We will continue to work on bringing young people together in the coming years.

Thank you."