

Remarks by H.E. Mr. Ivica Dacic, First Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia at the Informal Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of EU Members States and EU Candidate Countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank Luxembourg, and my friend Jean Asselborn, the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union, for inviting me to attend this Informal Ministerial Meeting and for the hospitality extended to us on this occasion. I am pleased to have the opportunity to address you today.

The period behind us has seen a number of positive developments which, I believe, have reaffirmed once again the commitment of the Republic of Serbia and the course it has taken along with the other countries of the Western Balkans as a whole.

The signature of four agreements in Brussels has meant that some of the major issues related to everyday life, primarily Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, have been resolved. I trust and believe that these agreements are also crucial for the overall stability of the region.

This year's annual Western Balkans Summit in Vienna was successfully concluded, reiterating the commitment of leaders of the WB region to reconciliation and cooperation, to European values and implementation of some of the most important projects of common interest for all of us.

Unfortunately, we have before us also some topics that cause concern and require our serious, intense and prompt action.

After a series of tragedies of migrants that occurred, it is impossible not to see the most urgent need that we all together tackle responsibly and energetically the pressing, and probably the biggest problem of Europe and its neighbourhood today.

Serbia is among the countries affected by the huge wave of migrants coming from war-torn areas. We find ourselves on the main route of exodus, in a specific position between EU Member States. There is no other way for migrants to enter Serbia overland but to transit first through EU territories, and again the EU is eventually the final destination for most of them.

Throughout its history the Balkan region was often at a cross-roads and in the epicentre of developments, with Serbia having unfortunate, painful and extensive episodes with refugees, internally displaced people and population movements. Serbia is home to 44,000 refugees from the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, taking care of them for two decades already, while out of 220,000 internally displaced persons who left Kosovo and Metohija after 1999, a mere 1.9 per cent returned to their homes.

Sight should not be lost, either, of the fact that our primary obligation is to them, because their problem has become no less vexing than that of migrants from the Middle East or Africa. However, the present situation and the fact that since the beginning of this year until late

August, the state border of Serbia was illegally crossed by over 120,000 people, of whom slightly fewer than 108,000 persons said they intended to seek asylum in Serbia, presents a new, very complex kind of a challenge for us. Although most of them expressed the intention to apply for asylum, so far only 500 persons actually did so, which is not surprising, because their destination is not Serbia but the EU Member States of Western and Northern Europe.

The fact that Serbian people in the recent past have been forced to flee the war and save their lives, makes us understand the situation of the people from crisis areas of the Middle East and Africa and responsive to their problems. We have demonstrated willingness at all levels to face, within the limits of our capabilities, the situation and do our part of the job responsibly. All this is going on against a backdrop of an unsatisfactory standard of living of Serbian citizens burdened by economic and other problems, with the needs of refugees from the region and internally displaced persons not being catered to, either. Our engagement is along the lines of assisting those in need but also fighting criminal groups involved in smuggling people and exploiting their misfortune. Treatment of these people by Serbia is positively assessed by the European Union, because they are treated in a manner fully consistent with European and international standards.

The Republic of Serbia cannot bear this enormous burden alone. It has no capacity to do so - no accommodation facilities nor human and financial resources. The European Union, for Serbia and Macedonia has allocated a total of 1.7 million euros.

Once again I would like to point out the view that the Conference on the challenges of the Western Balkan route should take place as soon as possible, and we are looking forward to hearing that it might take place on October 5/6. We also understand that there is an interest of other countries - such as Germany and France, to also convene conferences to deal with migration issues. Our expectations are such that the forthcoming conferences will result in concrete measures of support, financial one in the first place, as the assistance provided so far by the EU, for which we are grateful, unfortunately is not enough to satisfy a significant portion of current needs. More specifically, it will not be enough if indeed there is considerable increase in the number of migrants, anticipated for this autumn.

We believe that the solution does not lie in partial and local steps such as sealing borders or building fences, but in cooperation and coordination across the EU and with the stakeholders from neighbouring regions. We are most directly interested in this kind of cooperation and we advocate it. The only right and effective solution is to stabilize crisis areas that will require a long-term action. The current crisis, going beyond political, cultural and administrative boundary lines between states reflects a correlation between geographically distant areas in the world of today and highlights the need to provide more comprehensive solutions. It also stresses the need to accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU, of course, in line with the capacity to make progress and fulfil conditions for any particular country, as well as to avoid the closing up and transformation of the current EU into a kind of a fortress.

Bearing in mind the recently renewed tensions in our region, including terrorist incidents, we must not overlook the necessity of maintaining stability and security. Serbia is

demonstrating responsibility and constructiveness in a consistent and resolute manner as well as the readiness for a compromise, cooperation, wisdom and patience. That is why I call for objective review of our role, merits and fulfilment of conditions at this time because I am convinced that the time has come for the first chapters in Serbia's negotiations with the EU to be opened and I hope that such a decision will be reached at the European Council.

Dear colleagues,

May I, in conclusion, address you briefly in my capacity as OSCE Chairperson-in-Office. When it comes to the topic that is now in our focus, I wish to inform you that OSCE will be one of the hosts of the meeting on irregular migration that will be held in Belgrade in early November.

You all know that the OSCE Ministerial Council will meet in Belgrade on 3-4 December, for which you will soon receive the invitations and I hope that you will attend in largest possible numbers. As the OSCE chairing country, we hold the view that the Declaration on Migration should be adopted by the Ministerial Council. This issue will be discussed in the period ahead, but I wish to ask you to consider it in light of the current event concerning the migration crisis and to support our initiative.

Finally, I wish to invite you all to attend the event concerning OSCE peace operations, to be held on the fringes of the high-level segment of the 70th UNGA in New York, on 1 October. I am glad over the fact that the OSCE Troika members have already confirmed their attendance and I hope that the majority of you will be able to attend the event.

Thank you.