



Statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic at the panel discussion "Western Balkans: is the EU still a pull factor?" held during the Bled Strategic Forum:

"Distinguished colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Membership of the European Union remains one of Serbia's top foreign-policy priorities. We have seen so far that membership prospects served as a powerful impetus not only to the overall reforms implemented by Serbia, but also to reconciliation and regional cooperation in the Balkans. The Thessaloniki Summit conclusions promised the countries of the region that once they meet the requirements, they will become full members of the EU, thus inspiring hope that the EU would recognize our efforts aimed at building democratic societies and competitive economies, within a wider region committed to peace and stability. We see the enhancement of an all-round regional cooperation in the Western Balkans as one of the key instruments on the path to EU membership.

Nevertheless, only Slovenia and Croatia have become EU Member States since the 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda. Serbia and Montenegro embarked upon their respective accession negotiations with the EU, and Macedonia, despite being a candidate country for a number of years already, has not as yet opened its accession negotiations. Even though a candidate country, Albania failed to open its EU accession negotiations, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has the status of a potential candidate. If one is to draw the line under this track record, the success will only be partial at best; however, it is necessary to stress that membership enthusiasm among both candidate countries and potential candidate countries is still considerably high, much higher, one must also admit it, than that of many Member States regarding the further enlargement policy.

The overall political climate in the process of EU enlargement to the Western Balkan countries is significantly different and not that favourable. In the altered geopolitical and security circumstances in its surrounding regions, the European Union, faced with the increasingly visible consequences of the economic and migration crises, Brexit and the growing challenge of terrorism, runs the risk of losing its attraction in the eyes of the public in both EU Member States

and candidate countries. Additionally, the policy of imposing conditions is not infrequently implemented without enough political understanding, creating an impression among the public of candidate countries of inequality as the imposed conditions seem like a "moving target". Therefore, it is important to keep the dynamic of the process of European integration by valourising concrete progress in the negotiations with the European Union.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite such a backdrop, Serbia has gone ahead with its integration process which will ultimately lead to its full EU membership. On the other hand, we are not building castles in the air. We are aware that today the EU is much more different politically and economically from the EU that came up with the Thessaloniki Agenda. This brings us back to the theme of our meeting: "Is the EU still a pull factor?" This question might at some point be rephrased as "Are European values still a pull factor?", for I believe that the two have slowly started to have their separate lives, if I may say so. The European Union, as a family of nations, sharing the same or similar values, is at a crossroads, at a time when it is necessary to redefine common interests, which would, as a cohesive element, enable this large peace project, which it has essentially been from its very inception, to be maintained and strengthened. On the other hand, we have witnessed the fact that many professed European values have lately been brought into question within some EU Member States as well. Over the years, Serbia has unequivocally proven, by way of its active policy pursued in the Western Balkan reconciliation process, by implementing political, legal and economic reforms, by strengthening the rule of law and institutions, by seeking to enhance good-neighbourhood policy, through its treatment and response to the migrant crisis, that it is fully committed to European values, which it perceives as the achievements of the civilization we should strive to.

Ladies and gentlemen,

At this moment, it is difficult to say what the EU will look like when Serbia completes its negotiating process, i.e. to what extent the EU will be attractive in the political and economic sense to all those countries of the Western Balkans that are at some stage of the accession process. Nonetheless, we want to believe that Member States will be strong enough to keep all the advantages of unity to breathe a new energy into the European project that would make it additionally attractive to candidate countries. I gained the impression that, over the past years, for reasons I have already touched upon, the main reason prompting the countries of Europe to come and act together in the period following the terrible World War II, somehow faded into oblivion. Peace in Europe is priceless, the overarching interest that must remain preserved in the future is peace in Europe, and all the changes in the architecture of the common European home must remain directed to this aim.

At the same time, one must not forget that the enlargement policy has been one of the most successful policies in the history of the European project, the policy that inspired the transformation of many countries and broadened the horizon for freedom and prosperity. In this regard, accession of the WB countries would additionally strengthen the European idea, at the time when, within the very members, the idea faces challenges and doubts blurring its historic importance.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All options for the future are on the table and the responsibility lying with all of us, with all European politicians, is huge. Serbia will make itself equally good and successful during this reform and negotiating process. I believe that this will be to the satisfaction, and primarily in the interest, of all Member States, and of the Western Balkan region.

Thank you for your attention!"