



Statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic at the Informal Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the "Western Balkans Six" held today in Sarajevo:

"Dear host, Minister Crnadak,
Dear keynote speakers,
Distinguished colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to thank Minister Crnadak, for organizing this meeting and all distinguished participants and colleagues who accepted to take part in this event and make a contribution to the debate on important issues for the future of the Western Balkans featuring on our agenda today.

Minister Crnadak,

All participants here are well aware that EU membership is Serbia's foreign policy priority. I was personally happy to see that the European Commission document of 6 February 2018 on EU enlargement strategy, singled out the Republic of Serbia as a candidate country from our region having a perspective of being fully prepared for EU membership in 2025. I am glad that such perception has been assessed as ambitious since this word accurately reflects an aspiration towards success and recognition and as such, it is both encouraging and constructive. Since this document stated that all six Western Balkan aspirants will be assessed on their own merits in terms of objective progress made by each country individually, I am convinced that the ambition of the Republic of Serbia, which I mentioned earlier, on the road to its full EU membership will continue to motivate us to make progress, to improve, acquire new knowledge, and instead of being complacent, work hard and commit ourselves to achieve our aspirations.

Allow me to emphasize that the Republic of Serbia has been well on the right track of reforms. Let me illustrate this by some of the latest indicators:

1. In the fourth quarter of 2017, employment rate for the population aged 15 and over was 46.3 per cent as compared to an unemployment rate of 14.3 per cent, resulting in an aggregate

economic activity rate of 54.2 per cent. In the same period, GDP increased by 2.5 per cent in real terms compared to the same period last year.

2. Over the past three years, the Republic of Serbia managed to balance out two economic lines – spending and earnings owing to which we had a budget surplus of 12 per cent of GDP while deficit was projected at 1.7 per cent. In practical terms, it means that we managed to reverse the debt trajectory downwards and reduce the share of debt in GDP. Projected GDP growth for this year is 3.5 per cent.

3. That the Republic of Serbia is safely on the way of full economic recovery can be best illustrated by the fact that the industrial output in January 2018 increased 10.6 per cent over January 2017.

Minister Crnadak,

Distinguished colleagues,

As for our debates within this format, I would like to point out that the "Berlin Process" and the Western Balkans Six have evidently profiled themselves as formats enabling us to promote and deepen cooperation in the region of the Western Balkans, as recognized in the EU enlargement document - one of the issues we are discussing here. It seems to me that the coinage "good-neighborly relations" was most commonly used throughout the document. It is of key importance to the Western Balkans as a whole to be reminded of this necessity. As a realistic man, active in politics for many years, I firmly believe that building good-neighborly relations is the proper way to make our region stable and prosperous and ensure that its citizens have a better and improved quality of life in all segments. Perhaps that is not fast enough nor efficient enough but all of us are apparently working to upgrade connectivity and cooperation among us. Let me give you just one example, something unthinkable not long ago. On 9 March this year, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with our colleagues from Croatia on the reconstruction of the Belgrade-Zagreb railway which will reduce travel time between the two capitals by four hours. We expect that project documents will be completed this year so that the works can start next year and be over in two to three years. This project is important to the entire region in terms of transport of passengers and goods since the railway is located on Corridor X. I trust that this project, in addition to the Highway of Peace, will be one of the core elements of transport connectivity of key importance both to the Republic of Serbia and the region of the Western Balkans as a whole. We are grateful to our Western Balkan partners as well as to EU Member States for their support to Belgrade in winning the seat of the headquarters of the Transport Community Secretariat.

Minister Crnadak,

Dear colleagues,

I would like to assure you that various institutions, especially State authorities of the Republic of Serbia very carefully analyze the requirements we have to meet in order to join EU as soon as possible. As a representative coming from Belgrade, I cannot but mention – and I quote: "Without an efficient and comprehensive normalization between Belgrade and Pristina through the EU-facilitated dialogue, there will be no long-term stability in the region. A comprehensive legally-binding agreement on normalization is urgent and crucial in order for Kosovo and Serbia to advance their respective European paths."

However, the position vis-à-vis the Community of Serb Municipalities, constituting an integral part of the Brussels agreement, exemplifies best how the two sides embraced different approaches to its implementation.

Our position is that all agreed upon and accepted forms an integral part of the Agreement. You know, situations like this are graphically described by a good old expression "It takes two to tango".

Minister Crnadak,
Distinguished colleagues,

I am confident that we should continue to cooperate on all transport, energy and other projects within the "Berlin Process" agreed so far, as well as to strengthen cooperation in all segments that bring benefit. On this occasion, I would like to underline the key importance of implementing as efficient and as fast as possible the Multi-Annual Action Plan for a Regional Economic Area in the Western Balkan Six, harmonized at last year's summit in Trieste. I think that the activities of the common Chamber Investment Forum will have a particularly important role to play in strengthening and connecting the regional economies. The activities of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office will no doubt have a positive impact on the region's progress. Its establishment and first public call for project financing represent initial practical results of our cooperation within "Western Balkans Six" and the "Berlin Process". One of the latest examples of successful cooperation in the Western Balkan region is surely the official launch of the Western Balkans Fund – WBF about which I shall speak more this afternoon in a meeting devoted to this issue.

Minister Crnadak,
Dear colleagues,

My impression is that the energy injected by the Berlin Process into the Western Balkan cooperation has been additionally boosted by an enthusiastic approach of our British colleagues in preparations for the upcoming Summit in London. We support inclusion in the debate of new cooperation topics such as security or gender equality. In this way, we can strengthen the ties among us to the benefit of all.

Allow me to finish by quoting the first sentence in the Enlargement Document from the EC President Juncker's state of the Union address delivered in 2017: "If we want more stability in our neighborhood, then we must maintain a credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans.

Thank you for your attention."