



First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic participated in the Annual Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group (V4) and the Western Balkans, held in Bratislava on 28 May 2019, in the framework of the Slovak V4 Presidency.

The plenary session of the meeting discussed reform and integration processes in the Western Balkans region and offered participants an opportunity for an exchange views on the common European future in the new geopolitical context. Two brief presentations followed the plenary segment, one dealing with the results of "Think Visegrad" conference held earlier that day in Bratislava with participation of the NGO sector from the Western Balkans region, Croatia and Slovenia, and the other in which the Executive Director of the Western Balkans Fund presented its work.

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Following is the full text of the statement given on this occasion by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia Ivica Dacic.

"Esteemed Minister Lajčák,
Distinguished colleagues,
Dear friends,

At the outset, allow me to greet you all and thank our host country, Slovakia, for organizing this meeting and for inviting us to attend.

I hope that other colleagues from the region share the view of the Republic of Serbia that V4 members are above all seen as true friends and dedicated partners who continually support our region and assist us along the road which not too long ago they have also taken. In that sense, we also perceive V4 as a good model and example of regional integration and cooperation.

Our efforts and commitment regarding the European project prove that all of us share the same vision, the same idea of a united Europe where everyone can will find a place for himself/herself if he/she embraces and honours its values that we may be different but still equal; that we are

willing to reach out and touch a hand extended to us; that we are willing to accept an apology and offer one bravely in case we do wrong; that we have to abide by agreements made both in writing but by word of mouth. This is the kind of Europe I am sure we are all committed to.

Distinguished colleagues,

Over the past decades, on our continent that has experienced major changes which transformed it in the broadest social sense, small countries like Serbia have tried to carve out a niche for themselves and by changing and improving themselves, sought to make Europe a better place for generations to come. Serbian society has undergone and is still undergoing more or less painful processes of structural reform in various fields. In that context, the coming in force of the Stabilization and Association Agreement reinforced further our commitment to reform and facilitated the process of gradually bringing our system in line with the EU standards. Adoption and achievement of these standards has been one of the primary goals pursued by all our Governments in the past decades.

To us, social system reform is inextricable from EU integration processes while progress related to reforms should go hand in hand with progress towards integration. However, the aim is not just to open chapters but to close them once the standards have been fulfilled. The ongoing judicial reform in Serbia is well under-way and carried out in cooperation with the Venice Commission. Let me recall that the process of ongoing constitutional changes has taken fully into account the recommendations of the Venice Commission.

A strategic document, Economic Reform Programme is worked out on a regular basis and implemented in accordance with the guidelines of the European Commission. We are in the final stages of adopting a new, highly inclusive Media Strategy which will establish clear standards regulating this area. All corrective measures have been undertaken to have Serbia stricken off the FATF list of high-risk countries and expect that this will take place already in June. Only a few days ago, the Law on the Prevention of Corruption has been adopted. We have done a lot so far, but we are aware that we still have a long way to go. The reason that we have embarked on all these reforms is not just because we want to join the EU but because we need to do it for our own sake.

Of course, this is only a fraction of all the reforms we have been implementing in Serbia, together with our European partners. I have to underline that Serbia's commitment to the EU accession process and membership, as well as the implementation of various social reforms, regional cooperation and normalization of relations with Pristina, were also recognized by the European Commission in its April 2018 Progress Report on Serbia. Hence, I assure you that, pending the new Serbia Progress Report to be released in the following days, we continue to implement further reforms with the same determination and commitment, in accordance with the assessments and recommendations made in the 2018 Report.

On the other hand, allow me to notice that setting forth the progress in the dialogue with Pristina as a prerequisite for Serbia's progress on its European path has lost meaning, precisely because this progress is not based only on Belgrade's contribution to the dialogue, but also on the fact that it is not possible for anyone, including major international partners, to impress upon

Pristina to comply with the obligations undertaken. Nevertheless, Belgrade is the one being on the receiving end, in spite of its constructive policy.

Therefore, we have full right to expect that the halt in the dialogue on normalization, triggered by the unilateral moves of Pristina in breach of CEFTA Agreement and at the same time seriously undermining the overall regional cooperation, will not have an impact on the dynamic of accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia nor will it influence the decision by member states to approve the opening of new negotiating chapters. No one can sway us in our belief that it is only through talks that regional stability can be maintained, nor can we be persuaded that it is not a responsible approach towards everyone in and beyond the region that we support the normalization dialogue with Pristina and refuse to impose counter-measures which would further exacerbate the situation.

Therefore we rightly believe that the resumption of the dialogue will be feasible only after Pristina has lifted the tariffs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On its European path thus far, Serbia systematically approached completion of the tasks presented, addressing with courage all the challenges faced in the process, recognizing the fact that the EU is a moving target and the accession process a lively and dynamic one. Let us recall the 2015 migrant crisis and the Western Balkans route leading, among others, through Serbia. At the time of the largest migrant wave, 700,000 people passed through Serbia and we met all commitments assumed under international agreements and ensured the respect for human rights guaranteed under the Constitution. Even more so, we added a human dimension by creating the climate of tolerance, solidarity and humaneness, which was not provided for either in paragraphs or legal frameworks.

We are also aware that the EU itself is going through a very dynamic and turbulent period, ranging from economic issues, high unemployment, slow economic growth and situations related to possible serious injury to free trade to major social shifts on the political stage, external threats and challenges such as terrorism, migration and tensions within the trans-Atlantic partnership and an important challenge such as Brexit. EU reform processes launched due to new international circumstances and trends within the very EU, have lasted for several years now. We are very much familiar with the need to undertake reforms and it is exactly for that reason that we hold the view that processes of EU consolidation and enlargement, on the other hand, do not exclude but rather complement each other and should take place at the same time. We too need a stronger and unified Europe as we are candidate countries just like Europe needs a stronger and safer Serbia. Successful policies should not be altered and the EU enlargement policy has proven to be exactly a success story and one of the most successful policies.

Dear friends,

We are aware of the challenges and problems we are all faced with. The goal we all aspire to is the common one. The only question is how we will traverse this path. Experience has shown

time and again that when we come together, when we promote positive agendas by putting the needs before differences and cooperation before problems, we can make a step forward. Positive examples of such cooperation in the regional context are launching of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office and of the Western Balkans Fund.

These two institutions constitute a concrete fruit of our cooperation, the success of which we observe together and we are proud of. Protracted and complex negotiations on the establishment of the WBF, which was based on the role model of the International Visegrad Fund, enabled the creation of a formula which was later successfully applied to the RYCO and Transport Community establishment.

In conclusion, I would like to underline once again that full EU membership is the key priority of Serbia's foreign policy but also a long-term commitment of our society. In that context, we do not expect any favours or concessions but only to fairly valorise what has been achieved. We believe that both Serbia and the entire region belong in Europe and that without integrating the Western Balkans Europe will not be complete. Europe should not let its own problems stop it from paying enough attention to its immediate neighbourhood because notwithstanding all the criticism, the European project is the major guarantor of peace and stability in the world.

Thank you!"

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