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Western Balkans – towards a more integrated Europe

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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Joint Parliamentary Meeting

Brussels, 14 April 2011

Prime Minister,
Chairmen,
Honourable members,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First let me start by saying how pleased I am to be here with you today for this joint parliamentary meeting dedicated to the Western Balkans.

I always say that the European Union is not just Brussels or Strasbourg. It is what we do in each of our Members States. It is what is done and debated in each of our national parliaments.

Indeed we cannot succeed without your strong involvement and support. Cooperation and dialogue between the European Union institutions and national parliaments are key for the Union to move forward.

So I welcome very much this opportunity to meet with you to exchange views on the further enlargement of the European Union to the Western Balkans.

The enlargement has rightly been considered one of the most successful policies of the European Union. It has greatly contributed to enhance democracy, stability and prosperity in the European continent. It has also served to reunite the European family which had been set apart by XX century history.

We have just heard Prime-Minister Orbán who is coming precisely from a country which only 10 years ago was still looking into the European Union as a distant promise and now is at the Presidency of the Council.

But this reunification will not be completed without the Western Balkans as part of the European Union.

The European Commission is strongly committed to advance the European perspective of the whole region has recognised in the Thessaloniki European Council in 2003.

Only last week I was in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; and I will visit Serbia, Kosovo and Albania in mid-May.

My visit was first and foremost a symbol of the Commission's renewed commitment and engagement with the region, which just confirmed the continued efforts of each day.

I came to these countries with one overarching message: a message that we see the countries of the region as members of the European family of nations, we see them all as part of Europe. Their roots, their present and their future are in Europe.

But to become members of the European Union there is a way to go and some work to be done.

The region is clearly on the move and we want each of the countries of the region to move forward decisively. Each of them deserves it. Each of them has to be part of the success story we want to write together.

Our enlargement policy towards the Balkans has always been and remains inclusive. And the forthcoming accession of Croatia should act as a catalyst for the whole region to move steadily towards the European Union.

That's why I went there not only with a message of solidarity but also with a message of encouragement.

The situation throughout the region remains quite complex and 2011 is both a year of opportunities and challenges.

We are at a point in time where Croatia's accession negotiations have entered their final stage and where Montenegro and Serbia are in a position to move into next stages of negotiations if the path of reforms is kept until October.

But we are also at a point in time where a number of important challenges remain. From the need to move forward with the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue; to the necessity to overcome political stalemate in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in Albania; and to resolve the name issue in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Moreover rule of law and freedom of expression are still major challenges throughout the region. And I appreciate very much that one of your working groups has addressed the issue of co-operation in the area of freedom, security and justice.

Democratic institutions, a well-functioning judiciary and respect for fundamental rights including minority rights, set the basis for all other policy developments and notably for economic development. The countries of the region need to attract foreign investments to generate higher growth. But for that foreign investors need to know that their property rights will be guaranteed and that they will have access to impartial justice and an effective and transparent public administration.

That's why I have encouraged all my interlocutors to pursue with determination the road of EU reforms and to address outstanding challenges.

The European perspective contributes to consolidate democracy and stability and benefits the socio-economic development of candidate and potential candidate countries. Those reforms are ultimately for the well-being and the prosperity of their citizens. So the progress made has to be credible and sustainable.

As I said to the Croatian parliament, the Sabor, the crucial point is to be fully prepared. This is a question of credibility and mutual trust. It is also important for European citizens to know that once new countries join the European Union this means that they are indeed totally ready to become fully-fledged EU members. The enlargement process is not just about ticking boxes, it is about a transformational agenda which impacts the entire structure of a country.

In this journey each of the countries of the region can be sure of the European Union's continued support. We will always stand next to them.

They can count on our political, economic and financial support and solidarity. A concrete expression of that is our pre-accession financial assistance. In the period 2007-2013 the European Union has allocated 11.5 billion Euros for institution building, human resources development, regional and rural development of cross-border cooperation.

However despite all our assistance each of these countries holds its European future in its hands. And the pace of its accession process depends on its progress on key reforms. They have to deliver on their commitments. This calls for strong ownership and strong leadership. This calls for mutual respect and a willingness to work together.

European Union membership is a key strategic choice for the Western Balkans. The countries of the region will then finally turn the page of a difficult recent past.

They will embrace a political project based on common values, among all human dignity, and a culture of compromise and consensus. That's how the European Union works and we are not weaker because we try to reach consensus on the contrary we are much stronger because we are able to compromise.

Yesterday you had a workshop on integration of citizens where you addressed the inter-related issues of cultural diversity and the success of the integration process. This is indeed a fundamental discussion.

No country has ever lost its identity because it joined the European Union. Our diversity is certainly not a weakness but a strength providing that there is a common political will to work together.

As I said to my interlocutors last week, the accession process has to be backed up by such a common political will. It has to be a project of national unity. All parties, all political forces are needed. National consensus is indeed indispensable to move forward on the path to EU membership and it should stem from a spirit of compromise and mutual respect. This is where national parliaments are important. To achieve the consensus needed around the European integration process.

I am confident that each of the Western Balkans countries will show the necessary willingness to overcome the outstanding challenges.

My confidence is reinforced by what I heard during my trip. In each of the countries I visited, all my interlocutors agreed on the key role that the EU integration process can play to ensure stability and prosperity to their citizens.

Some are more advanced than others on their EU integration path and some still need to show more determination to put long-term strategic interests first. But I believe that all understand that this is a historic goal and they cannot miss the EU membership train. And this is indeed also, as I told them, a historic goal for the European Union itself.

Jean Monnet, one of the European Union founding fathers, used to say that "everyone is ambitious, the question is if one is ambitious to be or ambitious to do".

These countries were ambitious when they set the goal to become EU members, now they need to keep that ambition and translate it in vigorous reforms. That is what we need from the countries in the region and also from all the countries which are part of the enlargement process.

The European Commission will continue to stand next to them in this journey and they can count on our continued support, solidarity, encouragement and confidence in their future as European Union members.

I thank you for your attention.