

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

REGIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM 2016

Novi Sad, 20-22 November 2016

Dear friends,

It is a real pleasure and a privilege for me to be here with you at the end of your three-day Leadership Forum.

It is a pleasure because we can celebrate the fact that Novi Sad will become the European Capital for Youth in 2019 – well deserved ! – and the European Capital of Culture in 2021; we celebrate the fact that in the past twenty years so much progress has taken place in this city, in the country, in the region as a whole; the fact we all want to see, in a foreseeable future, the citizens of this region becoming citizens of our European Union. Yes indeed, the region is well on its way to joining the European family.

Our Union has a lot to celebrate, too: The Maastricht Treaty, which transformed the European Communities to a European Union and launched the Euro, is 25 years old. The Treaty of Rome will also mark a milestone next year: 60 years since the establishment of the European Communities. Ever since that signing in March of 1957, generations of Europeans have realised

the benefits of coming together as a community, as a union, and have recognised that the EU is an overwhelmingly 'good thing'.

The four freedoms, the openness, the striving for progress through dialogue underlines the European project. They have been and still are the bases of the peace, stability and prosperity many EU citizens enjoy - and that have drawn so many people and states towards the European Union.

Today many have forgotten how Europe's unification process was born out of the yearning for peace and reconciliation after the devastation of the Second World War. – How the creation of the EU turned former foes and rivals into partners and friends.

The Europe of 2016 is facing huge challenges of other kinds. You can read it in the EU's Global Strategy. It says: *"We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. To the east, the European security order has been violated, while terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself. Economic growth is yet to outpace demography in parts of Africa, security tensions in Asia are mounting, while climate change causes further disruption"*. This is from the outside, but many argue that the biggest threat comes from inside. The UK referendum has created uncertainty both within the EU as well as in your countries.

Until recently we said that the European Union has shown the ability to overcome major crises, including the recent financial and economic crisis and working closely with the Western Balkan region, we found a way forward in addressing the migration challenge.

Today we need more than ever to join hands to overcome the challenges. Today we need the Western Balkan region to overcome the political direction in which we seem to be heading as many citizens wish to turn their back towards the EU and vote for nationalism, for populism, for politicians 'who want to give them back their country'.

But we should ask "*which country*", "*back to where exactly*", and "*who took your country from you?*" When thinking about where Europe was over half a century ago – does one really wish to wash away the tremendous progress we have witnessed during the past 6 decades?

There are concerns about our enlargement policy after the UK referendum. But let me stress that EU integration of the Western Balkans is as important for the EU as it is for the region. Enlargement is the most successful peace process and success story of our foreign policy, extending the zone of peace, stability and economic prosperity across our continent. It is a goal that has been consistently pursued throughout the EU's history, with conviction that it is the right thing to do, and with remarkable success. This is also why the European Union received the Noble Peace price. Anchoring the Westerns Balkans firmly and sustainably in peace, stability and prosperity is in our mutual interest.

EU-Serbia

I will talk about the EU accession negotiations in a moment.

But first, let me ask you: Does Serbia – or any country in this region - really need to wait for membership before it can be or feel like it is a partner in Europe? The answer is no. Serbia is already our partner – as are all the countries in the South East Europe - and is indeed playing an important leadership role. A few concrete examples:

In the region:

Serbia is playing an important role in promoting stability in the region and shared values in our neighbourhood. It plays a positive part in helping Bosnia and Hercegovina break out of its political stalemate and progress on its own EU path.

Serbia (as well as Kosovo) is showing statesmanship in the way it is engaging in the normalisation of relations in the Belgrade – Pristina Dialogue. Prime Ministers Vucic and Mustafa have shown commitment and determination to find solutions through dialogue which will in the end benefit all the persons from both places. As the facilitator, HRVP Mogherini has asked both sides to keep moving forward on this path towards a comprehensive normalisation of relations.

Serbia is playing its part in Europe's economic recovery, by helping to improve connectivity in the region and the EU. This includes regular meetings of the Foreign and Transport Ministers from the region, including from Serbia, with Commissioner Hahn.

Beyond the region:

Beyond the region, Serbia is a key partner in promoting shared European values. The EU's foreign policy in the wider neighbourhood – be it Ukraine, Syria, Libya – but also in Iran, Colombia, Asia, and Africa, is being put to test.

Now we regularly discuss the EU's approach with Serbia and the other candidate countries - most recently at a meeting with all EU Foreign Ministers in Bratislava in autumn – and we greatly rely on Serbia, as a candidate country and our partner, to give support to the EU's wider foreign policy.

We greatly value Serbia's contribution to four EU international security operations. I just discussed this with the Minister of Defence Djordjevic. Serbian forces are helping us combat piracy off the coast of Africa, and restore stability in Mali, Somalia, and the Central African Republic. These may seem far-off places. But the security challenges they present are ones that affect us all. The EU says a big thank you for the important role Serbia plays.

EU accession

Back to the ongoing negotiations for EU accession.

Altogether the whole region has been moving forward, even if at different speeds. We have seen many positive developments:

- We hope to open accession negotiations with Albania soon;
- For Bosnia and Herzegovina, which submitted its membership application in 2016, we are currently preparing next steps. The

coming period will be the time for the country to put the divisive nationalistic rhetoric behind and accelerate its work for a European future of its citizens.

- On the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, we hope for successful and credible parliamentary elections which will hopefully allow it to revive the reforms in the interest of its citizens. This will create a new beginning.
- Kosovo has now contractual relations with the EU; the next step is visa liberalisation. It is important to underline that Kosovo's future is in Europe, Kosovo is Europe.
- In Montenegro, which is at the doorstep of Euro-Atlantic integration, we have seen the capacity of the government and opposition earlier this year to resolve problems through political dialogue. This will also be the case after the recent general elections.
- Serbia has made a great start in the actual negotiations. Work is progressing in many key areas. We hope before the end of the year to have another big step ahead.

The accession negotiations are not an end in themselves, they are part of the region's overall modernisation. We are working for a modern vibrant political culture, a focus on provision of state-of-the-art public services to the citizens with an overall view to improve lives of people in the region.

Our focus on setting up a functioning and independent judiciary and fighting corruption and organised crime is a *conditio sine qua non* for creating a society where people can feel safe, where companies can operate in a predictable legal environment laying

foundations for improved economic development, for much needed job-creation and prosperity of the citizens.

The focus on fundamental rights is crucial to ensure non-discrimination on grounds of gender identity, sexual orientation or towards other vulnerable groups. Everyone should be treated equal.

The same is valid for media freedom and freedom of expression, where media who dares to share its constructive criticism is a value added for a functioning democracy. Efforts in all of these areas can benefit the region's citizens straightaway.

People first

When, near the end of his career, journalists asked Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Community, what he would do differently if he had the chance to start again, he replied that he would put education at the very heart of European integration. His message was clear: the contemporary EU is made of treaties, laws, institutions and actions, but before and after all this, it is made of people.

Education is probably very close to your heart. And it is vital in many ways, especially to promote our values of democracy, freedom, human dignity and respect, and thereby preventing radicalisation.

Education also plays a crucial role in fighting intolerance and violence – a challenge facing many countries, inside and outside the EU. In this respect, prevention is vital and it rests to a large

extent on education, socio-economic conditions including employment opportunities, and Culture.

Many of you ask for some support for the young people in the region:

- The Erasmus+ programme provides young people with scholarships and offers many opportunities for cooperation and assistance in developing education and mobility for youth. Last year alone, more than 3,500 students and staff from the region received scholarships to study in the EU, and over 2,000 students and staff from the EU went to the Western Balkans.
- At a policy level, we have set up an annual Ministerial policy dialogue, the Western Balkans Platform on Education and Training. This helps the region to reform their education and training systems.
- Altogether, 86 million Euros have been granted by the EU for education system reforms at all levels in Serbia alone.

In July 2016, the Prime Ministers of the region launched the Regional Youth Cooperation Office in Tirana at the Paris Western Balkan Summit in July. The Office will help to reconcile people, consolidate peace, build trust and confidence as well as foster intercultural exchange in the Western Balkans. We expect that it will become operational by summer 2017.

The reason we fund these programmes is because we believe that when you are active, travel, experience other cultures and viewpoints, and receive a good education, the chance you are also critical and political is rather big.

When I say political, I mean having an interest in the way you are governed. Democracies require engagement from their citizens. But it is more than that; it is participation, action, questioning and voices being heard. These days there is a lot to do about deliberative democracy, I do not wish to go into political science here, but I do believe that a lot will change on the democracy front in the coming years, and the exciting part is that you can all take part in this, you will be part of the change, and I hope it is a positive change, for the good. All this you have discussed during the past days.

Re-cap

Let us be clear. There is a huge agenda in front of us. There is so much work to be done. And the good part is, you have the tools to work with, you know how to engage; get organised; articulate your needs. Surely this second Regional Leadership Forum has encouraged you all to do just that. What a wonderful privilege; to be part of a society where there is a place for everyone; Where one works on what unites, not on what divides; Where there are equal chances for all women and men, girls and boys, young and old.

Thank you.