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“NALAS and Enlargement Negotiations “

Rede/Speech: NALAS General Assembly, Vienna/Austria, 19th of May 2017

I am delighted to be with you this morning and I do bring the best greetings of Commissioner Johannes Hahn, responsible for Enlargement Negotiations and Neighborhood Policy.

NALAS is a network of 16 associations of local authorities of South East Europe, representing roughly **9000 local authorities**, directly elected by more than **80 million citizens** of this region. These local authorities belong mostly to the so called enlargement countries, both candidate and pre-candidate countries.

So NALAS is a very important strategic partner for the European Union, especially for the Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission. And enlargement strategy and the accession of new Member States are the EU's most powerful foreign policy tools. Apart from the fact that enlargement discussions with Turkey have been put on hold for various political reasons, the enlargement process will continue. At the same time, the Western Balkan countries, which are surrounded by EU Member States, have started to participate directly in European Commission policies; in addition to the enlargement process, they are also closely involved in the EU's migration policy (Western Balkans route) and related policy areas, including security.

The European Commission is grateful to all municipalities along the migration route for their invaluable help and cooperation. We encourage them to gather and pass on their experiences, best practices and knowledge that could be useful in the event of further unexpected arrival of refugees. We know that the capacities of local authorities are limited and so they need additional support. Nevertheless we urge local authorities to support efforts to combat people smuggling and trafficking.

In all the ongoing processes the local and regional authorities are playing a key role, even though there is no separate chapter on the subject in the acquits, nor any

established EU model for decentralisation, regionalization and multi-level governance. The role of local and regional authorities in the overall enlargement information strategy is very important because broad public support for enlargement is only achievable if the potential benefits of enlargement are explained to society at grassroots level. To be successful in these efforts we need the local authorities, first and foremost the mayors. After accession they have to implement most of the EU legislature.

We may not overlook that in most of your countries a whole series of challenges remain. There is an urgent need for reform particularly in nation-building, the rule of law and expansion of administrative capacities at all levels, especially at regional and local level and also in better governance and effort to combat corruption and organized crime at every level of government. Therefore the capacities of local and regional authorities in legal, financial and administrative spheres have to be improved.

Without properly prepared and trained political and administrative representatives at regional and local level, enlargement efforts cannot be carried through to a successful conclusion. Therefore accession countries must continue to receive support for their efforts from the several EU Funds.

The EC is encouraging the accession countries in their efforts to further decentralise and regionalise. That means according to the principle of subsidiarity, to transfer as many powers as possible to regional and local level, to strengthen their regions and municipalities and to ensure their financial resources.

To underline the interest of EC in this topic I was appointed by the Commission as special advisor to Commissioner Hahn for the local and regional level in the enlargement and neighbourhood countries. Besides that I am chairman of the Working Group Western Balkans of the European Committee of the Regions and president of the Institute of the Regions of Europe.

In nearly all the enlargement countries annual economic reform programmes are established and the EC recommends involving local and regional authorities in these Agenda.

We have the experience that on local or regional level the standards in political culture are often higher than on national level. Policy-makers in the cities and regions could calm down national conflicts; they can contribute to the fight against extremism, radicalism and terrorism. By local and regional trans-border cooperation they can improve the relationships between candidate and potential candidate countries particularly in reconciliation and all forms of joint enterprise.

The enlargement countries, especially in the Western Balkans, have very different political and administrative structures and traditions – also in part at local and regional level. It is necessary to strengthen SMEs at regional and local level in the Western Balkans with a view to creating jobs and thus decreasing the incentives for young people to migrate, in particular from underdeveloped peripheral regions.

Let me say a few words about the current crisis in some Western Balkan countries.

I regret very much that in some enlargement countries inner political occurrences are jeopardizing the successful way to Europe.

In Albania – despite of several attempts of EU representatives to find a joint solution - we are in a situation where general elections on 18 June will take place without the participation of the main opposition parties. Commissioner Hahn deeply *regrets* the decision of the current opposition not to run for elections, from a democratic point of view.

Democracy and democratic standards shall not be held back by boycotting institutions and democratic elections.

Also the EC strongly condemns any announcements to call for "actions" that would undermine each citizen's right to vote. Such "actions" are absolutely not compatible with European Union standards.

So we have to demand from the Albanian political leaders to demonstrate the restraint and democratic maturity expected in a country that aspires to be a Member of the EU.

In the same way the EU Commission strongly condemns the deliberate attacks on MPs and journalists in the Parliament of Macedonia. Any repeat of such acts would seriously endanger the country's European perspective. I am glad to hear that there is a solution now.

Full of cares we are looking at the parliamentary and governmental crisis in Kosovo. A big problem for Visa liberalization.

All three countries have been on a successful path towards EU integration and have made good progress in implementing their Reform Agenda. Now they themselves are doing substantial steps back.

I only can appeal to all the mayors and policy-makers on local level – within NALAS – to bring their political leaders on national level to terms and to remember them to their political and democratic responsibilities. Political leaders will be held accountable if they try to derail the legitimate aspirations of the people for a better future.

But for all that: The EU will continue supporting all Western Balkan Countries on the path towards EU membership.

We count on NALAS and all its members. In this sense I wish you a successful conference and General Assembly.

All the best and thank you for your attention.