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“13th NALAS General Assembly”

Welcome Address: Brdo Congress Center, Brdo/Slovenia, 18th of April 2018

Dear Mr. President Micic, honorable participants of the General Assembly,

Thank you for the invitation. I am delighted to be with you this morning – like last year in Vienna - and I do bring the best greetings of Mr Karl Heinz Lambertz, president of the European Committee of the Regions and Commissioner Johannes Hahn, I have the honor to be his special adviser for Western Balkans.

I am glad to be here again because NALAS is a very important network of associations of local authorities of South East Europe. These local authorities belong mostly to the so called enlargement countries, both candidate and pre-candidate countries.

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 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.

We all are grateful to all municipalities along the migration route for their invaluable help and cooperation.

In all these processes the local and regional authorities are playing a key role, even though there is no separate chapter on the subject in the acquis, 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.

We may not overlook that in most of your countries a lot 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 success.

We appreciate very much that the Bulgarian Presidency requested an opinion from the CoR on the Western Balkans way to the EU. I was appointed as rapporteur. The opinion was adopted on 22 March. In the center of my opinion is the conviction that the "bottom-up approach" as absolutely essential for the success of further EU integration to include the Western Balkans countries. It is very positive that the Commission now explicitly calls for an appropriate balance to be struck between central, regional and local government and that LRA representatives should be actively involved in accession.

So NALAS is a very important strategic partner for the European Union, especially for the Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission. And I have to thank for the very fruitful partnership und tight cooperation with the European Committee of the Regions. I underlined in my opinion that NALAS should be integrated and promoted to a greater extent at European level. We are looking forward to the NALAS Position Paper on EU-Enlargement Strategy.

On 6th of February 2018, the European Commission presented a comprehensive Western Balkans strategy, which is intended to give the six countries a perspective that is oriented towards 2025. However, the year 2025 is neither a fixed accession date nor a target, but only a possible time horizon. Both the Bulgarian and the following Austrian presidencies of the EU have stated that they are particularly concerned with the approach of the Western Balkan countries to the EU.

The countries of the Western Balkans must achieve reconciliation and solve open issues together, ahead of the accession.

Officially, all six countries want to become a member of the EU. For some of their representatives, however, one begins to doubt their seriousness and integrity when we

realize how deeply involved they are in corruption, crime, drug trafficking, obscure business, and so on.

Nevertheless, there are always new and positive things to report. The fact that it was possible to bring all six heads of government to the conference table several times last year, most recently in Trieste, is by no means self-evident. The agreement reached on the creation of a common economic area could be a first important step towards economic integration.

Subsequently, what is the best perspective for the new enlargement strategy of the EU for the Western Balkans?

"Frontrunners" Serbia and Montenegro

The negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro are already well advanced. These two countries are among the "front runners" in the EU integration process, although there are still huge deficits in terms of democracy and media freedom. If they manage to carry out real and sustainable reforms and, above all, that Serbia can conclude a comprehensive, legally binding agreement for the normalization of relations with Kosovo, a membership could be in the prospect by 2025. Since Serbia's President Vučić was not really provoked by recent events in Kosovo represents a good sign of a rational policy. But whether he will withstand the increasing pressure within his country is the crucial question.

Accession negotiations with Albania and Macedonia

If the candidate countries Albania and Macedonia continue to make significant progress, the basis for opening accession negotiations would be given. The fact that in Albania all political forces are participating in the political and parliamentary process and that progress in the fight against corruption and in judicial reform is remarkable, helps to bring them closer to the EU. After violent conflicts in the parliament, political life in Macedonia has stabilized again and the negotiations in the name dispute with Greece –

as recently in Vienna again - make it possible for the first time to bring together a common solution.

Possible candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia-Herzegovina could be given candidate status by 2025 if the country makes the necessary efforts. The fact that various war criminal judgments of the International Court of Justice have not led to any dangerous escalation in the Western Balkans region is due to the reason of those responsible on all sides. It should not be unmentioned that all sides are constructively involved in the response to the comprehensive questionnaire of the European Union. The ability to agree on a constitutional reform of the electoral law for the October 2018 elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina will be the litmus test of the country's suitability for the EU.

Latecomer Kosovo

Kosovo is the taillight of the road to the EU, which is not by accident. Although it was gratifying that after three years the Parliament of Kosovo finally managed to ratify the border agreement with Montenegro - against the use of tear gas from the opposition - two regrettable events put the country back somewhat. The investigation into the murder of an important Serbian politician in Kosovo in January 2018 have not led to any results till now, the unnecessarily brutal and violent arrest of Serbian politician in Mitrovica was completely exaggerated. Both are no proof of confidence in the EU's suitability for Kosovo. The triggered disturbances of the peace process with Serbia and the domestic destabilization by the withdrawal of the Serbs from the government harm first and foremost Kosovo itself.

Accession countries must continue to receive support for their efforts from the several EU Funds. The EU, as the region's largest trading partner, is ready to financially support the implementation of the strategy. Already for 2018, 1.07 billion euros are already earmarked for the Western Balkans, and funds for the pre-accession IPA could be gradually increased by 2020.

Commissioner for Regional policy Corina Crețu a few days ago debated the future of cohesion policy with a post-2020 cohesion policy proposal. She is convinced that Europe needs a cohesion policy for all regions. She underlined the need for more flexibility, a more tailored approach to regional needs, with a new allocation method (less complicated) and a stronger link between cohesion policy and structural reforms. Priorities are investments, industrial transition, innovation and smart specialisation. The Commissioner also mentioned the need for a long-term response to the migration challenge.

The European Commission adopted yesterday, 17th April, its annual Enlargement Package, including seven individual reports. The Commission recommended to the Council that accession negotiations should be opened with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania, in the light of the progress achieved, maintaining and depending the current reform momentum. Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations stated that there are no shortcuts on the way to EU. Important gaps remain. We need to see the reforms, especially in the rule of law. All this will directly benefit the region and its citizens, and Europe as a whole.

The entire Western Balkans region is surrounded by EU member states. Under no circumstances should we allow forces from outside Europe - be they Russia, Turkey, reactionary Islamic states or China - to take the place of the EU. The mixing of NATO accession and EU membership of the Western Balkan states is not always in the interest of Europe.

It is well-known that not all EU member states are in favor of enlargement by the Western Balkan states. However, they all must finally agree to the accession of new EU Member States and therefore need to be prepared for enlargement and convinced that the enlargement strategy not only offers a great historical opportunity for the countries of the Western Balkans, but also for the EU itself.

With this in mind, I wish you a fruitful and successful General Assembly.