

V4 Foreign Ministers' Joint Statement on the Western Balkans Bratislava, 28 May 2019

The annual meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group (V4) and the Western Balkans took place on 28 May, 2019 in Bratislava under the Slovak Presidency of the V4. The meeting was also attended by State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania representing the EU Presidency and by Deputy Managing Director for Europe and Central Asia on behalf of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission.

This was already the 10th meeting of V4 Ministers dedicated to the Western Balkans.

At a special meeting in the “EU only” format, the V4 Ministers exchanged their views and first assessments of the results of the elections to the European Parliament and discussed possible political consequence for the formation of the Union's new institutions and shaping of EU policies. The Ministers reconfirmed their commitment to work together ever so closely in order to keep the Western Balkans region and its future high on the list of priorities of the next European Commission as well as the European Parliament. The V4 Ministers also expressed their expectations that genuine progress will be achieved during the next Commission's mandate. The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 should guarantee the necessary financial means for a credible enlargement policy.

During discussions with their Western Balkans partners, the V4 Ministers reflected on the situation in the Western Balkans and the implementation of the EU enlargement policy. The V4 countries reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement, which remains a key policy of the EU and continues to represent a strategic investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability in Europe. The Ministers underlined the necessity for every candidate or a potential candidate to fulfil the established criteria, including in the area of respecting democratic principles, rule of law and media freedom, that reflect the Union's shared values and standards. They also expressed support for the principle that each candidate or potential candidate must be assessed on its own merits.

The Ministers welcomed the recognition of the European perspective of other European states in the Sibiu Declaration and the Warsaw Declaration on the reunification of Europe. At the same time, they expressed the belief that the reform of the Union and the transformation and integration processes of the candidates and potential candidates could and should be carried out in parallel. Neither the EU nor the Western Balkans would benefit from a potential political vacuum that could make the countries of the region more vulnerable to malign outside influences.

In light of the upcoming Enlargement Package, the Ministers expect the comprehensive assessment reports and positive Commission recommendations to be a foundation for drafting the next Council Conclusions on the enlargement in line with the June 2018 Council Conclusions.

The Ministers appreciated the progress made by **Montenegro**. They expressed their belief that the last negotiating chapter will be opened in June this year and encouraged the authorities to do all they can in order to meet the benchmarks for provisional closing of the chapters. They took a positive note of Montenegro being the leading EU accession candidate and appreciated Montenegro's 100% CFSP alignment.

The V4 Ministers recognised the effort of **Serbia** to implement necessary reforms. The V4 Ministers expressed their hope that based on the overall results achieved in the reform process, the positive dynamic of Serbia's accession talks will be maintained and reflected in the opening and closing of chapters in increasing numbers. The Ministers also pointed out that effective parliamentary dialogue as well as cooperation between the government and civil society remains vital for successful integration into the EU. As regards the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, the V4 Ministers underscored the need to resume the talks with a view to reaching a comprehensive legally binding agreement on the normalization of relations.

The achievements of **North Macedonia** related to both good neighbourly relations, including the 2017 Treaty with Bulgaria and the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece as well as the conduct of the recent presidential elections were commended by the V4 Ministers. They encouraged the country's leaders to focus all the resources on the reform process so the citizens can enjoy the benefits of the progress achieved. The Ministers expressed their support for opening of accession talks with North Macedonia in June.

In the Ministers' view, **Albania** has firmly embarked on ambitious reform processes, including the one in the judiciary, which have already brought results. The Ministers called on all political forces in the country to focus on the common goal of starting accession talks with the EU. They pointed out that internal political dialogue between the government and the opposition should be pursued in the spirit of a mature democracy. The Ministers also appreciated Albania's 100% CFSP alignment. The Ministers expressed their support for the opening of accession talks with Albania in June.

The V4 expects the Commission to issue an Opinion on **Bosnia and Herzegovina**'s application for EU membership soon. The Opinion should serve as a guide for accelerating the country's EU integration path. In this regard, the Ministers called on the political leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina to complete the formation of the new legislative and executive bodies, to refocus on reforms and to refrain from divisive actions or rhetoric.

The V4 Ministers acknowledged the earlier assessment of the Commission that **Kosovo*** has fulfilled the set criteria for visa liberalisation with the EU. The Ministers pointed out the fact that the introduction of tariffs on goods imported from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina violated CEFTA and the spirit of the SAA. As regards the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, the V4 Ministers underscored the need to resume the talks with a view

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

to reaching a comprehensive legally binding agreement on the normalization of relations. The Ministers also called on Kosovo politicians to overcome the divisions that negatively affect reforms, the Dialogue and the overall goal of making progress towards the EU.

The security situation in the region was also briefly discussed. The Ministers pointed out a variety of security challenges and threats facing the region, including illegal migration and external threats. They supported strengthening of the resilience of the Western Balkans partners' relevant institutions and bodies.

The Ministers were briefed by the Western Balkans Fund's Executive Director on the Fund's recent activities as well as on its plans for future development. The Ministers reiterated that it is the quality of the Fund's political and financial ownership exercised by the member states that is decisive for the Fund's success and its ability to deliver results for the citizens of the Western Balkans countries.

The Ministers were informed about the conclusions and recommendations of the conference of think tanks of the V4 and the Western Balkans which had taken place in Bratislava on 27 and 28 May, 2019. The Ministers expressed their support for further strengthening of cooperation between V4 and Western Balkans' think-tanks, currently under the umbrella of IVF, and encouraged experts to continue in their activities and cooperation.

The Ministers reconfirmed their will to work on deepening the sense of togetherness and common future between the EU and the Western Balkans region.
