

Joint Statement
on the EU commitment to the Western Balkans' European integration

We, the Foreign Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Estonia, the Republic of Latvia, the Republic of Lithuania, Hungary, the Republic of Bulgaria, the Italian Republic, the Republic of Malta, the Republic of Austria, the Republic of Croatia, the Republic of Slovenia, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic reiterate our continued support for the Western Balkans on their European path. The EU enlargement process has a positive transformative power in the Western Balkans and is an investment in peace and stability in Europe. It is essential to ensure the overall progress of the region. The EU needs to fulfil its unambiguous commitment to the Western Balkans European integration. There is no "plan B".

Giving the importance of their decision for the future of all the States and peoples in Europe we call upon Members of the Council to take far-sighted, bold decisions in June, which would promote continuous reform progress in line with EU standards and values, as well as a strengthened regional cooperation, reconciliation, good-neighbourly relations and crucial support for the irreversible peace, stability and development of the region and our Continent.

Ahead of the General Affairs Council **this June**, we appeal to all EU stake-holders **to maintain and consolidate the positive momentum by opening the accession negotiations with the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia**. We are determined to live up to our responsibilities and react positively to the progress made by both countries.

Recalling our General Affairs Council Conclusions of June 2018 that set out the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019 as well as the previous documents commonly agreed, we call upon the Members of the Council to:

- implement the relevant recommendations of the European Commission;
- live up to our commitments and ensure the credibility of the EU enlargement policy based on clear conditionality and the own merits principle;
- strengthen the EU's credibility in international and institutional dimension as well as safeguard the EU's leverage in the region;
- recognise the remarkable efforts and progress made by the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia in adopting and implementing necessary reforms and in the case of the Republic of North Macedonia also acknowledge the historic importance of the Agreements with the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Bulgaria, which set an example of addressing open issues for the region and beyond;
- recognise the enlargement policy as the most successful tool for promoting EU standards and values and for fostering prosperity, democracy and stability in the region;
- continue supporting the clearly defined EU membership prospect which is the driving force for implementing demanding reforms and solving the outstanding bilateral issues in the Western Balkans;
- recognise the enlargement policy's irreplaceable impact on the process of strengthening of Europe;

And thus

- **support taking decisions on opening negotiations with the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia in June 2019.**

The start of the negotiations process will enable these two countries to focus even more on necessary reforms while the EU will obtain a valuable tool for scrutinizing their individual progress.

Furthermore, the launch of accession talks with the Republic of Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia will serve as an important motivational factor for the whole region. It ensures a win-win situation.

Starting the negotiations in June 2019 will also contribute to strengthening countries' resilience to external, detrimental interests of other players and ensure that the EU continues to be the leading player for a positive regional transformation.