



JOINT STATEMENT OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP ON THE WESTERN BALKANS

BUDAPEST, 11 OCTOBER 2017

The annual meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group (V4) and the Western Balkans took place in Budapest on October 11, 2017, under the Hungarian Presidency of the V4. The meeting was also attended by Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Macedonia, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo*, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, Deputy State Secretary of Croatia and Deputy State Secretary of Estonia.

The V4 Ministers reiterated their continued interest in and support for the Western Balkan region on its EU accession path. EU enlargement policy provides an invaluable tool for achieving security, stability, and prosperity in the Western Balkans. As embedded in the EU Global Strategy, credible enlargement policy represents a strategic investment in Europe's security and prosperity, and it has already contributed greatly to reform implementation, economic development, good neighbourly relations and cooperation in the region. The Ministers welcomed the recent reiterating of the need to maintain a credible enlargement prospect for the Western Balkans in the EC President's State of Union speech. They simultaneously underlined that in order for this policy to be effective and credible, it needs to be based on the principles of conditionality and merit-based performance.

The V4 is committed to promoting a reliable EU membership prospect for the Western Balkans. In this context, the V4 calls on the European Commission to elaborate an interim report for Albania and Macedonia on the basis of the progress made since last year. Recognizing the significant mutual benefits of integrating the Western Balkans, the V4 is eager and ready to assist the Estonian Presidency of the Council of the European Union as well as the upcoming Presidencies in 2018 in the enlargement agenda and call on the EU institutions to keep up the proactive approach. In this context, we welcome the intention of the upcoming Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union to treat the EU enlargement as a priority as well.

The V4 continues to support those countries in the Western Balkans that aim to achieve Euro-Atlantic integration. From the security perspective, the NATO accession process is a key tool for stability in the Western Balkans.

*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.

The V4 Ministers acknowledged the progress made by Montenegro on the EU integration path, including the opening of two new negotiating chapters under the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union and look forward to further chapters being opened and provisionally closed in the upcoming months. Montenegro's continuous positive role in regional cooperation and advancing good neighbourly relations is highly appreciated as well. Montenegro's accession to NATO is the most important integration success of 2017 in the region.

The V4 welcomed the opening of chapters 7 and 29 with Serbia in June, and expresses its hope for the opening of further chapters later this year. The V4 is convinced that the new government will implement the reforms and regulations crucial to the accession process, the alignment to EU policies, implementation of crucial reforms in the field of rule of law and the prosperity of the country as an ultimate goal. The V4 ministers recognize the readiness of the both parties to renew the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and hope that negotiations will soon resume, which is vital for the EU integration process of both parties. The V4 also stressed the key role that Serbia can play in creating a constructive atmosphere for regional cooperation.

After the parliamentary elections of 11 December 2016 in Macedonia the V4 encourages the government to continue the implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities and political agreements of 2015, so that the European Commission can extend its recommendation to open accession negotiations. Should the recommendation be extended, the V4 would support the start of accession talks. The V4 welcomed the signing of the agreement on good neighbourly relations with Bulgaria and hopes for progress in the talks with Greece over the name of the country so that both the EU and NATO accession processes can be unblocked. The V4 is ready to support the launch of formal NATO accession negotiations with Macedonia.

With regards to Albania, the V4 Ministers acknowledged that the country continued to be a reliable partner of the European Union and its member states as well as underlined the proactive role Tirana had been playing in fostering regional cooperation. The V4 welcomes the exemplary performance in the EU integration process and the commitment of the new government to maintaining the dynamic in implementing the rule of law related reforms. Should the European Commission positively assess the process of judicial reform, the V4 would support the launch of accession negotiations with Albania.

The Ministers welcomed that the European Commission sent the questionnaire to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The V4 expects its soon completion and the necessary reforms to be implemented with even stronger commitment. The V4 Ministers call on the institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina to resolve the issues causing tensions and challenges to the internal coherence of the country - through the established legal processes, constructive dialogue, reconciliation, and the existing constitutional framework. The Ministers support the presence of the Office of the High Representative and encouraged Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities to deliver on the remaining five objectives and two conditions necessary to the closure of the OHR. The Ministers also support the upholding of the operational engagement in the country, including through the EUFOR Althea mission.

The Ministers stressed the importance of Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities focusing on reforms aimed at improving the everyday life of Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens, especially in the area of economy and the rule of law as stipulated in the Reform Agenda. In this context, the Ministers encourage Bosnia and Herzegovina to make the best use of the political, economic and financial support made available by the EU and international financial institutions. We hope that a positive decision on the activation of NATO MAP will be possible soon.

The V4 invites the new government of Kosovo to immediately and fully resume the efforts to further the European Reform Agenda and other criteria deriving from the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The Ministers also highlight the importance of making good use of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the EU programs as well as ratifying the boundary agreement with Montenegro and strengthening the results in the area of the rule of law as crucial prerequisites for the introduction of a visa-free regime for Kosovo. The V4 stressed the need for all relevant stakeholders to engage constructively in the process of establishing the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities. At the same time, the V4 also underscored that the implementation of all agreements from the dialogue with Belgrade is essential for Kosovo's progress on its European path.

The Western Balkans region's security and stability are inseparable from the EU's security. The V4 is strongly committed to supporting the Western Balkan partners in their determination to maintain stability in the region, fight organized crime, drug trafficking and corruption, prevent radicalisation and keep migratory movements under control. Both the EU and our partners in the Balkans need to address these challenges adequately.

Drawing on their own experience, the V4 highlight the benefits and importance of regional cooperation. Joint efforts in a wide range of fields are an efficient tool to facilitate the EU integration process. Moreover, they are fully compatible with the merit-based character of EU enlargement.

The V4 ministers attach great value to the V4-WB6 cooperation and reaffirm their commitment to further expanding the cooperation between the two regional groupings. In this regard, the V4 is committed to working closely with the European Commission on designing new and inclusive forms of cooperation between the V4 and WB6 that would contribute to smoother integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. The V4 welcomes the recent official launch of the Western Balkans Fund. From the beginning, the V4 and the International Visegrad Fund have been committed and proud supporters of this project which is based on shared values and good-neighbourly relations. The V4 encourages all WB6 partners to actively contribute to the institution's sustainable and successful operation, to the benefit of the whole region.