

Statement by the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committees of  
the Assembly of the Republic of Albania, Mimi Kodheli,  
Italy's Chamber of Deputies, Piero Fassino, and  
the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, Žarko Obradović,

*Rome, 16 July 2021*

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**THE DESTINY OF THE WESTERN BALKANS  
IS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

The Western Balkans form an integral part of the European continent, its history, and its civilisations. They have been for centuries, and they are today. Everything that happens in the Balkans has an impact on the life of Europe, just as every event that occurs in Europe has repercussions on the Balkan region.

We welcome the Chair's Conclusion of last July's Berlin Process Summit that reconfirmed the strategic value of the European integration of the Western Balkans.

We welcome High Representative Borrell's decision to make enlargement a priority item on the Foreign Affairs Council agenda.

We also welcome the support being provided by the Central European Initiative (CEI) and the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, of which our countries are members.

However, 26 years have passed since Dayton and 18 since Thessaloniki. Negotiations with Belgrade and Podgorica are still far from being concluded, the opening of negotiations with Tirana and Skopje has been delayed and prospects for integrating Sarajevo as well as Pristina appear to be more distant.

The risk is that a sense of disappointment and frustration may become widespread in the public opinion and among the governments of the Western Balkans, the reform processes required for EU integration may slow down, nationalistic sentiments may re-emerge and the temptation to subvert the delicate balances achieved after Dayton may gain ground. And where the European Union appears uncertain, other international players strengthen their presence.

Against this backdrop, in compliance with the agreed criteria and the new negotiating methodology that was adopted, a change of pace by the European Union is urgently needed, namely:

- by stepping-up negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro;
- by convening the Intergovernmental Conferences to launch negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia;
- by granting Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status;
- by supporting the EU facilitated Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, reconfirming the European perspective of Kosovo\* and liberalizing visas for its citizens.

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\* 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

In conjunction with the advancement of the negotiations, we believe it is necessary for the European Union to take immediate steps towards inclusion:

- by including the Western Balkans in the European area of vaccines supplies and measures to combat Covid-19;
- by supporting with adequate resources the economic development of the region, fostering convergence with the Next Generation EU programmes on the green economy, digitalisation, research and innovation, and infrastructure modernisation;
- by encouraging forms of regional cooperation and integration, such as the Common Regional Market and the Green Agenda;
- by involving the Western Balkans in the formulation of the new migration and asylum strategy proposed by the European Commission;
- by including the leadership and public opinion of the Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe, so that they will immediately feel that they form an integral part of the European Union.

We are aware that the candidate countries have to implement reforms to bring them in line with European standards in the matter of the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and the media, combating corruption and protecting minorities. A clear statement by the European Union of its intention to hasten the enlargement process would encourage the candidate countries to proceed to implement those reforms with a stronger resolve.

We are also aware of the importance of promoting close cooperation between the civil societies and between the local authorities of the Balkan countries, thereby pursuing reconciliation policies between their peoples to heal historical wounds and do justice to those who have suffered from the tragedies of conflict.

The enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans is a primary responsibility of the European institutions, but every European government bears equal responsibility, in the knowledge that the stability and security of the Balkans affect the stability and security of the European continent as a whole.

This is a goal that also involves the responsibility of the national parliaments, which – in response to repeated demands of the European Parliament – are called upon to support and accompany the process of European integration.

For these reasons – and endorsing the Final Declaration of the Interparliamentary Conference of the Chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committees of the Balkans and the EU of 26 April 2021 – we appeal to our fellow Chairs to promote every appropriate initiative to hasten enlargement to the Western Balkans, as a decisive step towards the completion of the grand design we have been pursuing since 1989 to unify Europe in the name of the values of peace, freedom, democracy, social equity, gender equality and human rights.