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Opening Statement Before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs on ‘EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans’

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Honourable members of the Committee,

My name is Gëzim Visoka. I am an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies in the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University, where I have been based since 2010. I have published extensively on international interventions, the Western Balkans and peacebuilding in Kosovo, and on state recognition. Today, I would like to make three fundamental points:

1. While the EU’s Enlargement Policy is supposed to be guided by a clear merit-based methodology, in practice it is often crisis-driven, geopolitical, and uneven, which has had far-reaching consequences for the EU and the region.
2. Without resolving two nodal conflicts - the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the preservation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political functionality and territorial integrity - EU Enlargement Policy is unlikely to be successful in the Western Balkans.
3. Ireland should continue to promote EU enlargement and consider joining the ‘Friends of the Western Balkans’ group within the EU to encourage speedy accession and share Ireland’s unique experience of peace, prosperity, and economic growth, due to European integration.

The ebb and flow of crisis-driven Enlargement Policy

The EU’s Enlargement Policy is one of the central pillars in managing relations with its neighbours and a powerful stimulus for extending democratic and economic reforms in countries that aspire to join the EU. Over the past 20 years, the rhetoric of the EU repeatedly confirms its unequivocal commitment to a merit-based membership perspective for the Western Balkans countries. It has invested over 30 billion euros through its pre-accession instruments, which aim to create secure, stable, resilient, and well-functioning democratic societies in the Western Balkans. Despite extensive support, Western Balkans countries are still behind in meeting the political, economic, and legal criteria for membership, such as the rule of law, democratic governance, economic development, civil society, and regional stability.

However, due to internal disagreements within the EU regarding further enlargement, progress has not been linear. For example, in 2014 the Juncker Commission announced that no country would join the EU for 5 years, greatly discouraging reforms and reconciliation in the region. These days, the EU’s policy on the Western Balkans is increasingly looking like a containment policy. As part of this containment policy, the EU member states tend to drag and prolong the accession process and move the targets while offering financial and political

incentives to the countries in the region to ensure their compliance with the EU's foreign and security policy.

Paradoxically over the past twenty years, the EU Member States generally only united to accelerate the accession process when faced with domestic and regional crises in the Western Balkans. In this crisis-driven engagement, the EU pressures aspirant states to make the necessary reforms or resolve outstanding issues with their neighbours. However, the crisis-driven logic of EU enlargement risks sending the incorrect message that the only way for candidates to speed up the accession process is during times of crisis. Such instances undermine the logic of conditionality and expose an uneven enlargement methodology. A case in point is the EU's recent decision to grant both Ukraine and Moldova candidate status so these countries effectively 'jump the queue' ahead of several candidates from the Western Balkans who have been patiently working towards accession for nearly two decades.

The Western Balkan leaders are gradually renouncing EU frameworks and turning to ethnonationalist rhetoric and acrimonious politics to settle bilateral disputes. This is partially triggered by the EU's ambiguous political commitment and unclear timeline for accession. A case in point is Serbia, where we see a serious erosion of democratic principles, an aggressive approach to the Kosovo issue, and ever-closer ties to both Russia and China. Political polarization is resurfacing in Montenegro, and reforms are progressing more slowly. In Kosovo, the EU's influence is waning due to its divided approach to country's independence and an inability to efficiently follow through on commitments, such as visa liberalisation.

Even though the EU has recently taken steps to increase regional connectivity and has reaffirmed its commitment to accelerate the accession process, concrete actions should support these initiatives. Accession talks must intensify with all candidate countries and necessary support should be provided to enable a speedy progress through the negotiating chapters. Moreover, the Western Balkans should also join as a group; otherwise, we run the risk of experiencing within-region conditionality, in which countries that join the EU first impose unfavourable conditions on their neighbours who want to join, as happened between Slovenia and Croatia, Bulgaria and North Macedonia, Croatia and Serbia, and Greece in relation to Albania and North Macedonia.

The challenge of resolving the nodal conflicts in the Western Balkans

One of the most challenging features of EU's Enlargement Policy has been the focus on resolving outstanding disputes between states in the Western Balkans prior to joining the EU. The main regional issues that undermine good neighbourly relations concern border demarcations, recognition of state identity, and minority protection. While we have seen progress in the resolution of outstanding issues in North Macedonia, the situation in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be of great concern.

Despite the strong diplomatic investment, the EU has proven so far unsuccessful in delivering on its goal to normalise relations between Kosovo and Serbia through a legally binding agreement that would resolve the question of mutual recognition and find appropriate accommodations for the Serb minority in Kosovo. Instead, we have recently seen a reversal of progress with an escalation of violence in the north of Kosovo, obliging the EU to change its focus from normalization to crisis management and threatening to impose sanctions on Kosovo in an effort to de-escalate the situation.

More broadly, the EU-led talks were undermined by the lack of a clear negotiation framework and mutually agreed end goals, as well as insufficient monitoring of the implementation of agreements, and the exertion of unbalanced pressure on the parties. Although the EU has set the normalization of relations as the pre-condition for the EU accession of both Serbia and Kosovo, Kosovo's perspective is more uncertain since five EU member states, namely Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain, still refuse to recognise

Kosovo's independence. Although not admitted publicly, these five non-recognizers are veto players on Kosovo's European integration path, and also hold the key to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia. For as long as the EU - and in particular these five member states - refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, Serbia, Russia, and other adversaries are likely to exploit such a loophole to create frozen conflicts in the Western Balkans that ultimately aim to derail the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

The second nodal conflict in the Western Balkans is the political dysfunctionality of Bosnia and Herzegovina due to complex power-sharing institutions, coupled with secession threats by Republika Srpska. For Bosnia and Herzegovina to become a functional state ready to join the EU, fundamental reforms are required. However, that process threatens the ethnonationalist parties who continue to capture state institutions and hold back societal progress. Following strong U.S. sanctions against obstructionist leaders, the EU made the right call last December to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status to prevent further internal strife, quell calls for independence among Bosnian Serbs, and weaken Russia's malign role. However, more robust measures by the EU are required to end the appeasement policy towards spoilers in the country and to mitigate the destabilising role played by Serbia and other countries in the region that fuel divisions.

The case for more active Irish involvement in the Western Balkans

Ireland has a long-standing supportive attitude towards the EU's enlargement in the Western Balkans. Ireland has also welcomed the decision of the European Council to grant EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. However, there is a case for more active Irish involvement in the Western Balkans.

Ireland's support for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans should be seen as a valuable and long-term investment to strengthen existing goodwill and build new alliances in Europe to defend common security and prosperity. The Brexit experience has demonstrated how crucial it is for Ireland to develop and benefit from partnerships within the EU. Similarly, the Ukraine war has shown that Ireland is not immune from the effect of conflicts on the other side of Europe. Thus, Ireland should join existing EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe that promote a credible and fast accession for Western Balkan countries and discourage veto positions among Member States that risk undermining EU's credibility, values, and geopolitical interests. Swift and merit-based EU membership for the Western Balkans is crucial to prevent a repeat of the Ukraine crisis and reduce Russia's interference in a region encircled by EU and NATO member states. Supporting EU enlargement in the Western Balkans could be a significant way for Ireland to pay back its Central and East European allies for their crucial diplomatic support for Ireland's stance on Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol. Since Ireland is unlikely to join NATO in the near future, aligning with these allies on the Enlargement portfolio could also serve as an important foreign policy move to demonstrate Ireland's commitment to European security.

To promote this strategic alignment, Ireland should lobby for the collective recognition of Kosovo by the EU, including the five remaining member states, and reiterate support for a functioning state in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It should expand its diplomatic presence in the region and participate in technical assistance initiatives to help civil servants in Western Balkans countries build new skills and gain experience in implementing EU legislation and projects. Moreover, Ireland should consider setting up scholarship schemes for Western Balkans officials to study here or establish professional exchanges and capacity-building schemes. Ireland also has much to offer in terms of promoting peace, reconciliation, and dealing with the violent past. This expertise can be shared through improved people-to-people relations and collaborative civil society initiatives.