

Address to Oireachtas Joint EU Affairs Committee Briefing
Discussion on EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans

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Mr Chair, Mr Vice-Chair, honourable members of parliament

Thank you for inviting me to address you today. I wish I could have been with you in person, but unfortunately, the events of the last few weeks did not allow for it.

Today's briefing is a timely one, both in the context of your discussions on enlargement, but also in light of your upcoming visit to the region.

In my address, as the title of today's discussion says, I would like to speak about EU enlargement and the Western Balkans. Let me highlight three important aspects:

First, 2022 as an exceptional year for enlargement

Second, rethinking enlargement

Third, the challenges in the region.

Colleagues, honorable members of parliament,

First on enlargement during the past year.

Looking back at 2022, it is fair to say that it has been an exceptional year for EU enlargement.

In the face of Russia's brutal war of aggression in Ukraine, we have been more united than ever. The war has put an end to the illusion that Europe can be truly united, prosperous and at peace with our close partners being left outside.

It has brought EU enlargement back to life. Bold decisions – which seemed impossible – are suddenly possible. And enlargement – for years reduced to an exercise of ticking boxes and meeting technical benchmarks – is now political again.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status and long overdue accession negotiations were launched with Albania and North Macedonia. Kosovo, while not yet on the accession path, finally got a green light for visa liberalisation and submitted their application for membership at the end of the year.

Today, the mood in the EU is different from what it used to be, because we realized that only EU membership can achieve what we aspire for all of Europe.

This brings me to my second point – rethinking our approach to enlargement.

Enlargement is not a sprint. It is a marathon. Ultimately, you will cross the finishing line, but it will take some time depending on how well you trained beforehand, you may be a little fast ... but while you are running it, the end seems very far away. This has been the reality for many years.

But the war on European soil made one thing crystal clear, business as usual is not an option anymore. And the need to rethink our approach to enlargement is becoming more urgent than ever. When thinking about a new approach to enlargement, two key points come to mind:

First, we need to overcome the “fear” of enlargement, which some EU Member States developed. It is a process we invented, we are setting the rules and we are fully in control.

Second, we need to have an honest and open discussion about practical interim solutions on the road to full membership – such as staged accession. There are many good papers and studies out there, but the discussions in Brussels are still at very early stages.

What is clear though is that the momentum created a year ago will not last forever. So we need to act and we need to act fast.

It has frankly been disappointing to observe that the positive developments on our side did not really resonate in the Western Balkans. While with us in words, our partners in the region have failed to undertake the necessary actions that would bring them irreversibly closer to the EU.

We see close to zero progress in implementing reforms or resolving bilateral disputes. We observe worrying backsliding and increasing political instability. And we witness toxic issues of the past resurfacing.

This brings me to my next and last point, the challenges as I see them.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates clearly that we need peace, true stability and reconciliation in Europe now more than ever.

There is very limited appetite to deal with another crisis in our neighbourhood.

So this means for our Western Balkan partners, that we need them to clearly demonstrate that they are with us ... that they share the same values of the Union they want to join... that they want to be part of the solution and not add to the problems....

It is a fact that the Western Balkans still grapple with unresolved challenges with the potential to contribute to instability or frictions.

And as partners, we do not want the region to face these challenges alone. I therefore call on all of us to ...

First, help North Macedonia. The country went through a lot and there is only so much more it can take. It is on us to make sure that it starts accession negotiations quickly. This is in the interest of everyone who wants to see European Balkans.

Second, demand de-escalation of the recent tense situation in the north of Kosovo and call for quick progress in implementing the landmark Agreement on the Path to Normalisation. As you know, the Dialogue has been at the centre of my work for the better part of the last three years. Since February and March, we have a very solid platform to make rapid progress towards normalisation, but unfortunately, we are again in the midst of a crisis, which is distracting from our efforts in this regard. This is why de-escalation and return to the Dialogue – as requested by all EU27 – is crucial and urgent.

Third, have an honest discussion about what BiH we want. We have seen promising developments lately, but there are still open questions, which need to be solved. It is positive that we got through the elections, institutions have been formed faster than usual and the EUFOR mandate was extended. But the root causes for the many challenges of BiH remain unaddressed.

Fourth, don't lose sight of Montenegro. The country has been the frontrunner on enlargement, but since 2020, it has been in a political turmoil with zero progress on the EU path. Montenegro gets more and more entangled in issues of the past – ethnicity, religion, culture. The warning lights are flashing, so let's not start paying attention when it is too late.

If we do not manage to address these issues, I am afraid that we will be looking at another year of tensions and damage to the EU's credibility and reputation in the region.

Colleagues, honorable members of parliament,

Let me conclude by saying that for me, the overarching answer to all of it is full EU integration. It is the only way to offer a European future to the next generations in the Western Balkans.

For me, there is no credible alternative. So we will need full commitment, new initiatives and out-of-the-box-thinking.

Thank you for your attention.