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(Speaking notes, language not checked)

“Next Steps for Euro-Atlantic Security Integration”

When discussing the future for the Euro Atlantic security integration, I simply cannot help but focus on our immediate neighborhood and their struggles on their European and Euro Atlantic path. Why is this so important for us? There are plenty of reasons for that: geographic proximity, historical connections and myriad other, no less important elements. But, for a defence minister, the most important one, of course, remains the safety and stability of the countries that lie close to our borders and whose internal dynamic affects us a great deal.

Let me go step back into the history that remains so important even today, as one tries to understand the motivations of different nations and the hurdles on their way forward.

Balkans countries have traditionally been considered a part of Europe, in both a geographical and cultural sense. Their geostrategic placement has always been of considerable importance to the stability of Europe. Even today, the Balkan countries remain an indispensable part of Europe. This is not only due to the geostrategic position of the region and its historical and cultural ties with Europe, but mainly because of economic and security reasons.

The security spillover of regional instability in the Balkans is to a great extent a legacy of the bloody wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia. It is also predominantly characterized by economic devastation and social migrations to more developed countries in the region. The Western Balkans remains unfinished business that NATO and the EU cannot ignore. It still poses a clear security vacuum with hidden ethnic and political tensions that can easily be triggered by populist political leaders, unstable economic situations, or a combination of the two.

With the 1991 disintegration of Yugoslavia, the countries of the region faced a collapse of their state, social and economic systems. After the armed conflict, new states started to emerge with the support of the international community.

The newly formed countries were immediately confronted by the challenge of building a state and statehood on the ruins of what was left of a once common state system. The Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans countries slowly began in 1990s and intensified in the following years.

During that time, countries developed different phases of state building. Post-socialist political and economic transformations in most countries changed their authoritarian regimes towards democratic ones and state-planned economy moved towards the free market model. The processes were followed by slow democratic consolidation.

While some Western Balkan countries have started to aspire to Euro-Atlantic ambitions, other Balkan countries have delayed the processes of the Euro-Atlantic integration because they are preoccupied with some of the remained and unsettled challenges. Their integration into NATO and the EU continues to be a huge challenge, but at the same time, it is also a precondition for lasting peace and stability in that part of Europe.

While settlement of most of the conflicts was negotiated with the help of the international community, ethnic tensions remain and still form the backbone of political parties for their narrow political intentions. From Dayton to the Brussels Agreement, the negotiations or contracts between ethnicities did not open new avenues of cooperation in the Balkans. Ideological, cultural and religious confrontations make this part of Europe more politically sensitive and easily captured by the powers of the time.

Euro-Atlantic integration remains an inspiration and aspiration to achieve reforms for those countries that have not yet entered either both or one of the two organizations. This will not last permanently, as the drive for a change is mainly coming from the

outside rather than from the inside. Euro-Atlantic integration serves as a facilitator of such endeavors.

There is a different level of preparedness and determination among the Western Balkan countries to achieve reforms. Existing NATO and the EU policies for the Balkans are focused primarily on building domestic support by promoting pro-Western elites. Sometimes this is simply not enough. It is blocking broader public support for fundamental reforms and there are too many political spoilers.

Both NATO and the EU promote regional cooperation in the Western Balkans, primarily through membership requirements. Both organizations promote bilateral relations with each country through targeted programs, political dialogue, financial assistance and other instruments of support. At the same time, they also promote regional policies and inter-regional relations that stimulate the countries to assume responsibility at the local level in order to further broader understanding that they need and must cooperate with other countries in the region.

During and immediately after the war, the EU was criticized for the inconsistency of its security policies and for the latent tension between the emphasis on post-war regional cooperation and the priority on the merits of individual candidate and potential candidate countries. Today, the thrust of the EU's Balkans policy seems more focused and consistent. It has shifted from an agenda dominated by security issues related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, to a strategy focused on the perspective and accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU.

For peace and stability of the whole of Europe, the Western Balkans must remain on the Euro-Atlantic path. The countries must adopt democratic standards and align the strong support from abroad with internal, domestic support and the desire to achieve reforms in order to make a transformation to a democratic and economically stable region.

At the same time, these same countries face an enlargement fatigue that is slowing down the processes of Euro-Atlantic integrations. NATO is primarily a political and military organization that requires certain political and military standards to be met

before membership. The EU, on the other hand, is a political and economic project driven by stabilization and an economic integration agenda. Although NATO and the EU are two different organizations, they do share the same final goals, which are peace, security and stability, and respect for human rights.

Although public support for two organizations is usually somehow correlated, the EU does make more demands on governments and people to transform their societies than does NATO; mainly because security is a precondition for any other type of activity. As the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU has not yet developed to a level that offers countries a security alternative to NATO, both organizations remain indispensably linked to each other and their efforts.

Euro-Atlantic organizations continuously promote an open door policy and enlargement. Enlargement remains one of the most effective policies that strengthens political and economic stability in those countries aspiring to membership. Traditionally, integration into NATO had preceded integration into the EU because of the understanding that security and stability ensure democracy. Although democracy is a prerequisite, it is not the only requirement. Most come from the aspirant countries' needs for internal reforms in order to overcome the challenges that these countries face. Most of the latter arise from the fact that the Balkan countries need an overall transformation of their political culture.

The pace of transformation in the region is slow and economic crisis is adding more strains on the process. Other challenges of the Balkan countries include accepting peaceful and democratic processes and cohabitation of different ethnic groups in newly formed states, accepting political realities to learn how to work together and how not to use the "zero-sum" game that leads to blocked institutions, and achieving mutual regional cooperation. The countries are still overcoming regional cooperation challenges and the lack of sufficient cooperation and communication. Bilateral questions greatly affect accession processes. But on the brighter side, the recent Belgrade-Pristina agreement showed that what has seemed impossible could also be possible.

If we list the existing countries, we see that Montenegro and Macedonia are the closest to NATO, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina stay further behind. The future of the latter two in NATO is still unclear, while Serbia has made important progress with regard to the EU. Montenegro has already started negotiations on EU membership. Macedonia has recently received a recommendation to open accession negotiations, which are not progressing due to the ongoing unsolved name issue with Greece. Albania, already a NATO member, is expected to be granted the status of a candidate soon.

The Belgrade-Pristina Agreement of April 2013 was an important step towards the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo and has led to an announcement of opening negotiation talks with Serbia and the European Commission's call to launch negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Kosovo. Relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU are at a stalemate.

Montenegro is in a good position to join NATO in the next enlargement but the question remains when will that happen. Montenegro is also most likely to join NATO first among the Balkan countries, once it completes its Membership Action Plan (MAP). Even though the progress of defence reforms is at good pace, Montenegro is challenging changing public support for the NATO membership.

Macedonia is not expected to achieve NATO membership until it reaches some type of settlement of its name dispute with Greece. Unfortunately we are no closer to that than we were years ago. It is in its 14 Annual MAP and although a significant progress in implementing defence reforms has been made, Macedonia must fulfill the necessary political requirements before joining NATO, including the resolution of the name issue.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia are unlikely to become NATO members soon, each for their own reasons. Two of them have no desire and one is not recognized by all NATO members.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided between three different national entities. It is highly unlikely that if the three nationalities could not live peacefully together in a much larger country that they will ever live peacefully together in a smaller country, formed and governed under the supervision of international community. Therefore, we see a political solution for the country by further facilitating and encouraging their aspirations for the Euro-Atlantic integration.

Kosovo is in a different position than the rest of the Balkans. NATO plays an important role in keeping stability there, although much of the international attention is currently focused to the implementation of the Belgrade-Pristina agreement. Every progress towards achieving Euro-Atlantic integration will be measured through the implementation of the agreement.

Especially in Serbia, NATO still has the label of an aggressor. Memories of the intervention are still charged with NATO-skepticism of parts of population and well used by the NATO-skeptic political elites across the Balkans to underpin the Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbia is therefore the only country of the Balkans without stated NATO aspirations. However, it does equally participate in the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) and importantly contributes to the overall performance of NATO. Their contributions of medical capabilities are also very valued in the EU framework.

The experience of current NATO and EU members shows that both organizations have helped them drive the necessary reforms and have triggered internal political consolidation. NATO has helped these countries with much needed defence reforms and the professionalization of their armed forces, which added to the stability and maturity of armed forces and defence systems. The EU has offered countries opportunities to advance both politically and economically, as well as it has backed them with prosperity and stability. Although NATO and the EU are different organizations, they can work hand in hand. They are complementary and need cooperation to ensure coordination of their efforts to avoid possible duplication.

Today the Western Balkans represents a security vacuum that can easily produce or trigger escalation of hidden tensions, produce instability and bring uncertainty to Europe. NATO and the EU must conclude the unfinished business and make Europe

truly whole, at peace and free again; for peace, stability and security of the region and of the two organizations. They can simply not afford to keep the Balkans outside.

To finish the job, both organizations need public support in the countries of the region and these countries must delivered the minimum political requirements expected of them. The longer countries are kept waiting, the lower support for membership will be. Both organizations need public support as they are and remain both political and military organizations that currently face competing challenges over the financial crisis debates and austerity measures on the EU side and an uneven transatlantic burden sharing on the NATO side.

Realizing the need for an urgent adaptation to the new security environment, NATO has transformed from a Euro-Atlantic area peace keeper to a worldwide peace provider, from an exporter of security to the importer of stability, from an organization established to tackle conventional threats to an organization able and willing to address the threats of the future. In this respect it is important to keep the momentum of membership aspirations on the side of the candidates.

There is no alternative to the “rocky road to Europe”. The obstacles are not going away, the will and optimism are being diminished and the organizations have their own issues to settle.

The current crisis is “killing” the will for more enlargements. A decision on more suffering before a better future comes is more unclear than ever before. Serbia and Kosovo are proof that the current state of affair can move forward if there is a strong political will within, backed with a push from the outside.