

“Prespa Forum for Dialogue”
“Western Balkans: The missing Puzzle for completing Europe”
(Αχρίδα, 1-2 Ιουλίου 2021)
“Building Confidence through Dialogue”

I would like to begin by conveying the warmest regards of Foreign Minister Dendias, who could not join us today but wishes every success for this inaugural session of the Prespa Forum for Dialogue.

Initiatives such as these that encourage and foster dialogue are always welcome, particularly in our region that has faced and continues to confront a wide variety of challenges.

After all, dialogue is the right way to safeguard and promote our interests in the name of peace and to the benefit of all. It is the right way to cultivate mutual understanding and build confidence. To exchange views and explore synergies. And to resolve differences and promote cooperation in a spirit of good neighborly relations.

However, if dialogue is to be effective -if we want it to serve its purpose and allow us to reach our goals- it must be based on basic ground rules respected by all.

In the case of dialogue between and among states, these rules are defined by international law. And as EU members or candidate countries we are also guided by the fundamental principles and values enshrined in the European acquis.

Dear friends and distinguished guests,

It was in this very place, almost three years ago, that the Prespa Agreement was concluded and signed between our two countries.

An Agreement reached through dialogue and envisioned by those that engaged in the relevant negotiations at the time.

The current Greek Government made no secret of its disapproval of aspects of the Agreement and was obliged to point out its shortcomings.

After all, dialogue is also an essential internal process of democracies. It can only contribute to better results, that unfortunately cannot be achieved when internal political dialogue is omitted.

I believe that, as immediate neighbours and friends, we have a responsibility to be honest. And while my Government's views are well-known and have not changed, we now have a responsibility to ensure that this Agreement -no matter the ownership, how and when it was reached and despite our well-known disagreements on it- is thoroughly implemented in practice. By both sides.

On the basis of one of the fundamental principles of international law -pacta sunt servanda or “agreements must be kept”- there is no question that both parties are now bound by it and must remain committed to its full, consistent and in good faith implementation.

I may be stating the obvious, yet I wish to stress this point as we should never take such basic notions for granted or allow room for exceptions. Particularly in light of a number of delays and transgressions in the implementation process that we have observed and of course relayed, at all levels, to our friends in North Macedonia.

In this vein, we urge our neighbors, the other party to this Agreement, to fully respect this process and deliver consistently on all of our commitments, in good faith and on time, so that we can look ahead and move forward. This is what we are persistently trying to do.

After all, this Agreement is meant to signal and provide the foundation for a new chapter in our relations.

It is meant to offer a framework in which we can work together in order to broaden and enhance our relations.

The Agreement has also served North Macedonia's accession to NATO and serves as a road map for its European path. A path that Greece has consistently championed for the entire Western Balkans, ever since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003.

After all, following the transatlantic one, the European integration of this region, the "missing piece of the puzzle" as we are calling it here today, is a longstanding strategic goal of my country.

It is no secret that we are invested in safeguarding stability and peace and promoting development and sustainable growth in our immediate neighborhood, which we believe is an integral part of Europe.

It is also no secret that the merit-based approach of the integration process is a major driver for political, social and economic transformation.

It aims to promote democracy, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights.

It also prepares the ground for growth, by enhancing connectivity and supporting sustainable development.

And it calls for the cultivation of good neighborly relations and respect for international law.

We are firm believers that the fulfillment of these prerequisites is ultimately in the interest of the candidates themselves, but also of Europe as a whole.

And Greece, the oldest EU and NATO member in the neighborhood, with its valuable know-how and relatable experience, has played and continues to play a vital role in supporting the European path of the region, in practice.

More recently, we yet again proved our continuous engagement in the region by convening the 2nd "Thessaloniki 2020 Ministerial Forum", during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

This provided the opportunity to focus on coordinating approaches to common challenges, thus highlighting the importance and added value of enhanced cooperation among the Western Balkans and its EU neighbors.

Despite the critical situation due to the global health crisis, we have had productive discussions on a good number of important and practical issues affecting us all, such as the lifting of restrictive measures on transnational travel and the Green Lanes initiative, which facilitated the cross-border flow of essential goods during the pandemic.

From our part, we view positively the prospect of contributing to this initiative so that relevant procedures and flows at border crossings with our neighbours are further facilitated.

In fact we believe further cooperation and concerted regional efforts are needed in order to promote economic recovery in this COVID and post-COVID era. It is also necessary to effectively address collective security challenges we are facing, such as organized crime, human trafficking, illegal migration, violent extremism and terrorism.

Greece has demonstrated its commitment to principled dialogue and rules-based cooperation with our neighbors also through its participation in various regional schemes of cooperation in Southeast Europe, many of which have actually been initiated by my country.

In this spirit, Greece will continue working together with its neighbors for a better future for our region along the aforementioned lines, also during its Chairmanship of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) which we assumed today (1.7.2021 until 30.6.2022).

In closing, I would like to again express my wishes for many productive discussions at the first session of this Forum. I look forward to many more and I thank you for your attention today.