

Visegrad Group Joint Statement on the Western Balkans

Bratislava, 31 October 2014

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group (V4) and Western Balkan countries met on 31 October 2014 in Bratislava under the Slovak Republic Presidency of the V4. The meeting dedicated to the Western Balkans was also attended by the incoming Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as by Federal Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Austria and the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council.

The Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in the Western Balkan region and exchanged views on the Enlargement Package which was published by the European Commission on 8 October 2014. The V4 member states reaffirmed their support for EU and NATO enlargement as one of the main priorities of the Group. The Ministers underlined the importance of maintaining the momentum and credibility of both the EU and NATO integration processes. Conditionality and a merit-based approach should be applied; on the other hand the EU and NATO should respond appropriately to the progress made by aspirant countries. For their part, the V4 countries are ready to continue sharing their experience with the transition and integration into the EU and NATO.

The V4 countries welcomed the European Commission progress reports on the candidate countries and potential candidates as balanced and objective assessment of the situation. They agreed with the Commission's conclusions and recommendations.

The V4 ministers highlighted the progress of Podgorica in the accession negotiations and expressed their support for the opening of new chapters by the end of 2014. The V4 member states advocated the opening of first negotiation chapters with Belgrade as soon as possible in order to keep the reform momentum in the country. The completion of negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Pristina is a considerable success as well. They stressed the need for the continuation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue as a means for the normalization of mutual relations. The participants congratulated Tirana for obtaining candidate status and encouraged the country leaders to continue their reform efforts in order to fulfill all criteria necessary for the opening of accession negotiations. The V4 countries confirmed their dedication to support Skopje on its European path but highlighted the need for all politicians in the country to focus on matters which can move the country forward. Only through constructive dialogue there is a potential to solve all domestic and international challenges the country faces. The ministers voiced their concern over Sarajevo's lack of progress in reforms and the EU integration process; however, they expressed hope that the country would get back on track after the recent elections. They called on politicians to enhance internal political dialogue and meet expectations of their own citizens. A pro-active role of the EU was highlighted in this context.

The V4 countries also pointed out a necessity to enhance the efforts to fulfill criteria in the European agenda. The V4 ministers underlined the importance of alignment of candidates and potential candidates with EU foreign policy statements and actions.

With regard to NATO enlargement, the V4 ministers welcomed the decision of the North Atlantic Council to start intensive, focused talks with Podgorica and to review the issue of the country's accession by the end of 2015. They also highlighted the importance of the advancement of the NATO integration process of Sarajevo and Skopje. The V4 ministers stressed the role of several V4 embassies serving as NATO Contact Points in some Western Balkan countries and expressed hope that their activities will contribute to further rapprochement between the region and the NATO.

The V4 activities oriented towards the Western Balkan region were also discussed. Since the Expert Network on rule of law and fundamental rights was launched in 2012, there have been several concrete examples of practical assistance provided by the V4 in order to facilitate the fulfillment of criteria within the negotiation chapters 23 and 24, which represent the backbone of the accession process. Among others, the organization of an expert seminar on justice and the rule of law in mid-October in Omšenie, Slovakia; a conference on children rights in Warsaw, Poland between 30 September – 1 October or another seminar on the public administration reforms of the V4 and best practices in Budapest, Hungary in September proved readiness of the V4 to offer its expertise and assistance. The V4 strives to increase its activity in the Western Balkans each year also through the International Visegrad Fund by involving third countries into the cooperation.

The V4 Ministers welcomed the political will and common consensus of the Western Balkan countries to establish a fund based on the model and principles of the International Visegrad Fund. The launch of a “Western Balkan Fund” with its seat in Tirana will be another positive example of deepening the regional and cross-border cooperation among Western Balkan countries. The V4 will assist this project by providing expertise in establishing a regional fund.