

## **"We offer you our helping hand on the EU path"**

The idea of a peaceful unification of Europe has never been something to be taken for granted. It may seem obvious at first sight; nevertheless, there have always been many obstacles in the way. But today, with the involvement of the Western Balkan countries in the unification process, the end of this long journey is nearer than ever before. European Commission's reports show that, year by year, your countries are moving ever closer to EU membership. And this is good news. Looking at the map, it is clear that without you Europe is incomplete. One can never fully understand European history without knowing the rich history of your region.

The European Union was founded as a peace project and it has succeeded in this ambition. Nevertheless, beyond the Union's borders history continued to run its own course. But you also deserve life in peace, stability and security symbolized by the Union. The EU is more than a group of countries working together on issues of common interest; it is a community of states and citizens who decided to share their fate and face the future together.

European unification is not only about turning an ideal into reality. It offers tangible political, economic and security benefits based on the solidarity and cohesion of the Union's members. The zone of peace, stability and prosperity is not an empty concept; it is a real programme for the European project and the external challenges that Europe is facing and the current migration crisis in particular confirm this. They also show the necessity of being able to offer more efficient and coherent answers. The importance of the Western Balkan countries for the Union in this context is crucial as your region is geographically – though not yet politically – inside the European Union. We appreciate the positive role and commitment of the countries that have been affected by the refugee crisis they did not cause.

As was promised in Thessaloniki years ago, the Union's door is open to you, and that will not change. The pace of the accession process depends on your individual performance. We want all enlargement countries to be measured with the same yardstick and we will, therefore, always oppose the setting of any additional conditions or efforts to slow down your accession process. But this on the other hand also means that the rules governing enlargement should not be relaxed. In order to join the Union,

necessary reforms have to be adopted in the areas of rule of law, fundamental rights and economic governance – that was as much the case for us as it is for you today. The shared values of freedom, democracy and human rights remain crucial. It is a task for both sides to ensure that the accession process remains credible, to cooperate and to seek joint approaches.

The progress you have achieved so far in building good neighbourly relations is admirable. These relations will lose nothing of their importance even after you join the European Union. Good neighbourhood is the cornerstone of every community. This holds true also in Central Europe: our four Visegrád Group countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – are not united by a common language, but we share a common historical experience of the second half of the 20th century and we do know that it makes sense to cooperate.

Our countries are located in the close neighbourhood of the Western Balkan region. That is why we follow closely your progress on the path to the European family with the strong conviction that this serves the best interest of the Western Balkans as well as the EU. It does take time to prepare for membership. Our countries also needed years to become full members. However, this was not a waste of time. The years were full of important and much needed work. Thanks to this experience we realize the importance of support from countries that have already entered the Union. We offer you our helping hand and our experience on the road that is still ahead of you, but it is always up to you to make the first step. We are glad to reassure you that we remain your supporters and staunch advocates.

That counts for the current migration and refugee crisis as well. The Visegrád Group Countries have strongly called for a special attention to be given to the Western Balkans transit route as well as to the need for collective European action from the very beginning of the migration crisis. A common Visegrád as well as bilateral assistance has already been provided to some of the most exposed Western Balkans countries.

We assure you that the crises the EU is facing at the moment, the migration and refugee crisis being one of the most challenging, will not be a cause for hesitation on our side with regard to our support of further EU enlargement. This process is governed by clear rules and linking it to the migration crisis could endanger its future as well as that of the European idea. We believe that all sides will benefit from the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the Union and we will endeavour to make sure that the Union's actions are guided by that.