

The Petrovac discourses

WESTERN BALKANS - BETWEEN NUMEROUS INTERNAL PROBLEMS AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Friday, 6 October 2017 (17.00-19.00)

Ladies and gentlemen,

- Introductory greeting and gratitude for the opportunity to speak

The topic of our today's panel is one of those that I regularly and gladly talk about in all my meetings, in Montenegro and abroad. I see this topic as extremely important, if not fateful, for the future of each of our countries within the region and within the European political area. I wish my introductory speech to be only a base for later discussion, and I will be happy to elaborate on each of the thesis I'm referring to.

In order to speak on the Western Balkans and European Union, I will start with my own house - Montenegro, our internal developments, neighbouring relations and status in European integration.

Internal developments in Montenegro

Every political stakeholder gives an image of Montenegro from the perspective they found favourable for them. In order to avoid this approach, I will stick to the facts: A year ago, we had parliamentary elections, characterised by a high turnout of 73.41%, and by innovation in this region - the electronic identification of voters, as well as by other significantly improved elements of the electoral process. The reports of observation missions, headed by OSCE/ODIHR, were positive, with the fewest number of recommendations for improving the legislative process. The events after the elections, which resulted in the so-called boycott by the opposition parties, are actually a consequence of their inability to form a ruling majority with minority parties. In this moment, except for sporadic appearances, the opposition members do not participate in the work of parliamentary bodies and plenum, but use all privileges of parliamentary status.

The public increasingly and rightly poses a question - how consistent are the ones who represent themselves as members of the Parliament, whereby, they don't recognise the results of elections in which they gained the parliamentary status. Or they recognise results only in local municipalities where they won the majority.

The opposition is also trying to create an image of political crisis in Montenegro which would be resolved if the elections were repeated as many times as they need to finally win. It is clear that there is no legal or political basis for repeating the elections, and the events of the Election Day that the opposition is referring to are currently legally processed.

The real picture, I repeat with checked data, says something else: Montenegro resisted to attempt of foreign factor to meddle in the election process and stop the Euro-Atlantic integration. The state achieved one of its main foreign policy priorities, it became the 29th NATO member on the 5th June. Membership of the Alliance is the strongest and long-term guarantee of sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of our state. That is also a pre-condition for smooth economic development, greater influx of foreign investments and a strong incentive to our process of EU integration. We are convinced that Montenegro's membership of NATO has a positive effect and that it will encourage reform and integration processes in neighbouring countries, primarily those sharing the vision of Euro-Atlantic structure.

When it comes to the institution I lead, the facts show that the Parliament of Montenegro has completely exercised its legislative and control role, while MPs also had diversified international parliamentary activities.

In the same manner, other governing structures in the country, in the given circumstances are working, by a set of systemic measures, on strengthening economy, institutions of the system and reform processes. At the national level, despite the lack of social cohesion in some key issues, we preserved civil character of the state in difficult times as well as traditionally good multi-ethnic and multi-religious harmony. Apart from anti-fascism, these are one of the greatest values fostered by contemporary Montenegro. Also, I would like to remind you that our territory was saved from was destruction, and a small Montenegro was a shelter for so many refugees that in one moment they constituted 20% of the population of the country.

Environment

Every state of the Western Balkans, including Montenegro, is facing internal and foreign policy challenges. When it comes to Montenegro's relations with its closest neighbours, I can proudly say, that we are recognised as a state which fosters and affirms good neighbourly relations, resolving all disputable issues by dialogue.

By our clear foreign-policy orientation and regional cooperation which is highly on our priority list, and through participation in the regional organisations and initiatives, we unequivocally show our devotion to building more stable and safer region.

While each state has its particularities, interests and priority issues, the joint tasks of the whole Balkans is, without a doubt, the strengthening of rule of law, resolute fight against organised crime and corruption, strengthening of economy and improving the quality of life aimed at achieving European standards and overcoming consequences of economic backwardness compared to the rest of Europe.

Majority of the Western Balkans countries, and here I primarily think of the former Yugoslavia countries, realised in a difficult manner that mutual orientation to each other is logical and inevitable and that, without a doubt, we have a clear mutual interest in preserving the peace and stability of the region.

Today, together with all the countries of the Western Balkan region, we are in various stages of an intense process of European integration. Some of our neighbours are members of the EU, some of them, as we, are the candidate countries, while other countries, I hope, will get that status soon.

Connection in a single European area will contribute to learning about and accepting differences, removing barriers and fear of unknown. It is up to us to facilitate this process in various ways through the infrastructure basis and technology-enhanced communications. We must not forget the importance of exchanging experiences and cooperation in the field of science and education. These are the key elements of the Berlin Process, which is today maybe one of the strongest ties of the EU region and the most certain perspective for our further connection.

When it comes to Montenegro, political preconditions as a base for all other regional ties are obvious and undeniable.

EU integration

Montenegro is strongly devoted to the idea of EU membership, firmly committed to pursuing its reforms, in order to finalise the accession

negotiations in a good manner and thus become the first next member of the EU. With its current negotiation status and devotion to reforms, Montenegro is the best promoter of the European values in the region. Keeping the regatta principle is essential, by which the progress of every state is measured on individual merits and capability to fulfil criteria for the EU membership. Despite the fact that Montenegro clearly emphasises its priority - and that is achieving European standards through strengthening of reform processes, and not the date of admission to the EU - our view is that regatta principle maintains motivation of the candidate countries in fulfilling criteria for membership, and at the same time, it contributes to weakening of forces that promote Euroscepticism or even anti-European values.

With 28 out of 33 opened and three provisionally closed negotiation chapters, Montenegro is making significant steps ahead of other candidate countries. I would like to emphasise that chapter 30 - *External relations* is provisionally closed, confirming a full compliance of Montenegro with foreign and security and safety policy of the EU.

We readily accept the experiences of our closest surrounding pertaining to the EU - Croatia and Slovenia, and we are also ready to share our knowledge on Euro-Atlantic structures with our neighbours who would ask for that.

On the other side, on their path to the EU, the Western Balkan countries have to understand the challenges that the Union is facing. Despite all the national turbulences and other temptations, I am convinced that the EU will keep the enlargement policy highly on its agenda, which is important for the Union credibility as well as for long term stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans region, which wants to be re-located from the European periphery. This is confirmed also by a recent speech of EC President Jean-Claude Juncker on the state of the Union, when he underlined that the EU must give credible perspectives for enlargement to the Western Balkans countries, emphasising the need for implementing a strategy for successful Montenegro's membership in the EU. President of France Emmanuel Macron also had an encouraging speech on the enlargement of the Western Balkans countries, through the perspective of introducing the European standards in our environment.

Therefore, recent speeches by the high officials of the Union and leaders of the member state show that there is not only possibility but also the need for enlarging the EU by the Western Balkans countries. It is up to us to use that opportunity, primarily through implementation of reforms and achievement of

European standards. By making positive progress in reforms, Montenegro is determined to retain the status of a frontrunner among future members of the European community of nations.

Thank you!