



Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Borjana Krišto, Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sarajevo, 1 November 2023

Thank you very much, Chairwoman Krišto, dear Borjana,

It is a pleasure to be back in Sarajevo. I remember very well when I was here last year. And indeed, it was at a crucial time, when Bosnia and Herzegovina was about to reach the candidate status. And mid-December, a few weeks later, the Commission's proposal to grant candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina was endorsed by the European Council. It was a historic day. It was a very emotional day and a very important day for your country, but also for the European Union.

Therefore, my first message is basically reemphasising that Bosnia and Herzegovina's future is in the European Union and how much we want to have you as a full member of the European Union, and how strong our support on your path forward towards this goal is. The appointment of your government, the work you have done in your first year in office, all this shows that the country can deliver. That is very positive. I am thinking in particular – and you have outlined it – of the package of rule of law measures that you have been working on in the past weeks. Now indeed, the goal should be to make resolute progress on the 14 key priorities that you know very well. This will make you move forward with the accession process and bring you closer to the European Union. And again, we are here to support you.

Our cooperation has been excellent, I thank you for that. And building on that, our cooperation and our close work will continue. We all know that to reach this objective of moving forward, we need Bosnia and Herzegovina to speak with one voice and move forward as one. What we cannot accept is a backsliding on our common values, or divisions, in any part of your country. We all know – and you said it – there is the respect of the constitutional order, of the founding freedoms and of civil society are at the core of the EU values and essential on the European path. Bosnia and Herzegovina's future is in the European Union as a single, united and sovereign country.

My second message is that we should bring our economies closer to each other. We have discussed that, too. This is what we have already been doing. We have our EUR 30 billion Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. It is delivering fast. For example, with great projects such as motorways and railways, indeed along the Corridor Vc, which connect your country to Central Europe. Last year, we went through a severe energy crisis. But we stood together. Together, we overcame this energy crisis successfully. This shows that: If we are closing the ranks, standing together, speaking as one, moving forward as one, we can overcome any difficulty.

Now, let us look at the economies as they are today. And, as I said, we would like to bring them closer. The size of your economy stands at 35% of the EU average. So, there is a lot of untapped potential – that is important for us. This is the reason why we presented today the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. It has four components.

The first component is that we open our Single Market to Western Balkan companies and businesses in seven very important sectors.

The second element is that the Western Balkans also open their borders and complete their Common Regional Market. The Common Regional Market has, in itself, already an enormous potential. If it were completed, it could increase the GDP of the Western Balkans by 10%. You spoke about the deliveries that still have to be done. It is a huge opportunity.

The third element of the Growth Plan says that if we open the Single Market, you complete your Common Regional Market and we integrate both, we need a level playing field. Therefore, reforms have to be done. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, improving the business environment, digitalisation – we all have to work on digitalisation –, developing skills – it is also a common task –, and making your energy market ready for the green transition.

This would be reforms that would be accompanied – this is the fourth pillar – by investment. We

have made the experience in the European Union that the combination of reforms and investment is very powerful. It works in our Member States. If it works for our Member States, it will work for the Western Balkan countries too.

So that we have the effect, if implemented, the Growth Plan will bring our economies closer and will create good jobs. And, of course, it is a step forward in the accession path towards the full membership to the European Union. So I think that this is the right offer at the right time. If we manage to do all this in the Growth Plan, we have the capacity to double your economy in a decade. And we know how important economic prosperity is for the functioning of any country.

So here I am to again re-emphasise and reassure you that we stand by your side and how much we want you to progress, as Bosnia and Herzegovina, towards the European Union.

Thank you very much.

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