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At the Presidency Conference

10 Years after Thessaloniki: An appraisal of the EU perspective and challenges in the Western Balkans

The future of enlargement in the Western Balkans: Where do we go from here? How the EU can maintain credibility in the face of its own economic and social challenges.

I speak today as a representative both of Ireland and of the Presidency. Ireland is an accession State. We were part of the first enlargement in 1973, and EU membership has transformed our country and brought many significant benefits to our people.

Since that time, there have been several further enlargements. Twelve new Member States have joined since Thessaloniki and Croatia will cross the threshold in a matter of weeks. Enlargement is an integral part of the Union. It has been part of its past and it will be part of its future, a future which, as was agreed at Thessaloniki, includes the countries of the Western Balkans.

It is no secret that Ireland is a supporter of enlargement. We have made enlargement one of our Presidency priorities. I was very much encouraged by the strong endorsement of this decision by Member States at the informal meeting of European Affairs Ministers which I chaired in Dublin in January.

We see the clear benefits of the policy. We have seen them for our own country, we have seen them for other Member States, and we see them for future member states.

The European Union may have changed dramatically in the 40 years since Irish accession. It is a political union and an economic union. It is a Union that is not without its problems. But let us not forget one fundamental point that has not changed; that the Union is first and foremost a Union of values.

The values upon which the Union is founded are set out clearly in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. They are: human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality,

the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These are powerful values and it is worthwhile recalling them. They provide the bedrock of the Union itself and they provide inspiration for the citizens of aspiring member states for the type of society in which they wish to live.

Together with the Copenhagen political and economic criteria, these values provide a framework for countries wishing to join the Union. Article 43 of the Treaty says that any European state which respects these values and is committed to promoting them may apply to join. In this way, enlargement brings us back to the very *raison d'être* for the Union.

Enlargement is also inspiring because it is transformative. To meet the requirements of membership, aspiring member states must undergo a rigorous reform process. They must ensure the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and a functioning marketing economy.

This process may take many years, and the effort required is great. But through working to meet the conditions, aspiring member countries can transform themselves to become more stable, more peaceful, and more prosperous.

Enlargement not only benefits prospective member states; from the EU's point of view, the adoption by the Western Balkans countries of the EU's values ensures stability and irreversible political reform. There are obvious economic benefits in the form of a larger common market which translates into jobs, better living standards and economic growth, both for the EU and its aspiring members. Ultimately the policy has the power to increase stability, peace and prosperity throughout the continent of Europe. This is manifestly to everybody's gain.

This, I believe, is the most compelling reason why the EU should continue with its enlargement policy even in the face of its own economic and social challenges. This policy has the capacity to transform the lives of the citizens of Europe to offer them hope where there might be despair and to bring a sense of unity and common purpose in tackling the many challenges with which we are all confronted.

I noted at the outset that EU membership transformed this country. It has transformed other Member States. And in the future it can transform the lives of the people of the Western Balkans. The rewards come, not only from the date of accession itself, but throughout the enlargement process. Twenty years ago the Western Balkans were reeling from the bloody conflict following the breakup of Yugoslavia. Today, Slovenia has been an EU Member State for almost 10 years. Croatia is about to join. The other countries of the Western Balkans are at different stages along the accession process. Some are in negotiations, some are official candidates and some hope to be granted candidate status in the future. But all are

aspiring member states. As such, all can enjoy the benefits that the reform process can bring including help in tackling the burdens of history that at times may seem insurmountable.

We saw a powerful symbol of this recently with the historic agreement reached in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. If implemented, this agreement will improve the lives of the people of Serbia and Kosovo, and it will bring them closer to EU. The leaders of both countries are to be commended for their courage. So too is High Representative Ashton for her tireless efforts.

If Enlargement has the power to improve the lives of the citizens of Europe, it has this transformative power because it is conditional. So while Ireland is a supporter of enlargement, we are also a strong supporter of conditionality. Yes, the reforms required can be difficult and can take many years. But it is precisely through the effort expended that the benefits of enlargement come. There can be no shortcuts or special conditions. States must be ready for the obligations of membership.

The EU stands ready to provide assistance to aspiring member states. But fundamentally, it is for the countries themselves to implement the required measures. I am pleased that we have seen progress towards EU membership for almost all countries of the Western Balkans in recent years. But to realise their places as future members of the EU, these countries must continue to make progress towards meeting the conditions of membership.

In turn, we Member States must not forget that conditionality works both ways. If aspiring member states are implementing the required reforms, they can legitimately expect the Union to fulfil its commitments and enable them to make progress on their EU paths. If we insist on conditionality for aspiring member states, the EU should hold itself to its own standards. To retain its transformative power, enlargement must remain a credible process.

There are those that argue that there should be a 'pause' in enlargement after Croatia. There are those who believe that the Union must spend some time looking inwards to resolve its current problems before it can begin to look outwards towards new members again.

I disagree with this analysis. In enacting such a 'pause' the Union would lose much of its credibility. The Union offers the prospect of membership to those countries in Europe that meet its conditions. By withdrawing this offer, the EU would lose one of its most effective tools for promoting peace, democracy and prosperity in Europe.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At a time when the EU is focussed inwards on the challenges it faces, enlargement

reminds us of the reasons for the founding of the Union. Aspiring members, as they enact the difficult measures required of membership, remind us of the fundamental values of the Union.

It is also heartening for the EU Member States to be reminded, in this time of crisis, that European Union membership remains attractive, and that countries are prepared to make painful reforms in order to join.

Enlargement must remain an integral part of the Union's future because it has proved itself a powerful tool that has the capacity to transform the lives of the people of Europe, both within the Union and beyond it. The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU provided eloquent testimony to this truth.

Ten years after the Thessaloniki agreement, and on the eve of the accession of Croatia, we must look to an EU where the people of the Western Balkans can take their place among the citizens of Europe, with shared goals, renewed hope and a common future.