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**Keynote address by Mr. Eamon Gilmore, T.D., Tánaiste and Minister
for Foreign Affairs and Trade
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10 Years after Thessaloniki: An appraisal of the EU perspective and
challenges in the Western Balkans**

Allow me to begin by echoing the welcome of Minister Creighton, and adding my sincere thanks to all the participants in this Conference, for taking the time to come and share their reflections on the enlargement process, particularly as it relates to the Western Balkans.

Ireland is, and always has been, a strong advocate of EU enlargement, and of the European future of the Western Balkans. It was a matter of particular pride that it was during the last Irish Presidency in 2004 that we held the “Day of Welcomes” here in Dublin with the accession of 10 new Member States. During our current Presidency, we want to see concrete progress in the accession process for all the candidates and prospective candidates. As such, enlargement is a priority for the Irish Presidency.

Upcoming decisions

And while we are nearing the end of our time at the helm of the EU, there are still a number of important decisions to be considered on the enlargement dossier. While the tendency in recent years has been for the Council to consider enlargement only in the second half of the year, with a focus around the Commission’s annual progress reports, the Danish Presidency saw a change in that trend with decisions made on Serbia and Montenegro.

The Council Conclusions agreed last December allowed for the possibility of similar important decisions on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo during Ireland’s term. And, of course, we are due to see the completion of Croatia’s journey to EU membership with their accession on 1 July.

Beyond the Western Balkans, we are working to reinvigorate the accession process with Turkey, and I hope to see a negotiation Chapter opened before the end of our Presidency. While the new government in Iceland has called for a review of the accession negotiations, I would hope that this review will highlight the benefits to both Iceland, and the EU, of accession.

I believe that the fact that enlargement is appearing more frequently on Council agendas is evidence of the positive moves that are taking place in the region. When things are not progressing, we don’t have much to talk about. Now that there is momentum, the Council has much to consider.

The situation 10 years ago

And yet, despite this recent activity, we are possibly not as far along as we might have hoped 10 years after the historic summit in Thessaloniki. I hope that you will use the occasion of this Conference to reflect on why that is, on how the accession process has evolved, and on where we may go in the future.

While we are seeing more activity on the enlargement agenda, this is not an easy time to be singing the virtues of greater expansion of the Union.

Back in 2003, the economies of the EU were buoyant. The Union, then made up of 15 Member States, was less than a year away from welcoming in ten new members. The countries of the Western Balkans were emerging from a decade of conflict. There was optimism across Europe as to our shared future and a recognition that, to ensure stability, the countries in the South East of our continent also needed to be encouraged on the path to EU membership, and welcomed in when they were ready. The intervening decade has seen many changes that have had a bearing on the EU accession process for the Western Balkans countries.

The EU has changed. We are grappling with deep economic challenges that have, by necessity, caused us to focus more on our internal workings.

The door to membership is not closed. But, just as the EU has changed, the process by which one becomes a member has changed in the last decade. And, indeed, the Western Balkans region has changed too. The five countries that signed the Declaration in 2003 have now become seven. And each is at a different place on the path to EU membership.

Individual paths to membership

While today we are considering the progress of the region, it must be remembered that the accession process itself is based on own merits. So each country's path will be different, influenced by its own internal dynamics and difficulties; and by the different positions from which each starts the journey to EU accession.

Croatia

Croatia is the obvious success story. At the time of the Thessaloniki Summit they had just applied for membership. Croatia was confirmed as a candidate country during Ireland's last EU Presidency in 2004. And now we are just a few weeks from their acceding as a full member of the Union. And I am delighted to welcome First Deputy Prime Minister Pusić here today to give her reflections on Croatia's decade of EU integration.

So in ten years we have managed to see one of the seven countries get to the point of accession. What of the other six?

Montenegro

Montenegro is now in accession negotiations. At the time of the Thessaloniki Summit, Montenegro was a part of Serbia and Montenegro. Having declared independence in June 2006, Montenegro signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in October 2007; applied for membership in December 2008; was granted candidate status in December 2010; and saw the launch of accession negotiations in June 2012. By EU standards that is a blistering pace! Their Chief Negotiator, Ambassador Pejovic, will be able to tell us more of this journey.

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been a candidate since 2005. It is disappointing that we have not been able to open accession negotiations yet. I want to acknowledge the work of Commissioner Füle and the Macedonian government, represented here today by Foreign Minister Poposki, on their efforts to keep up the momentum of the reform agenda through the High Level Accession Dialogue. It is important to continue to carry out EU reforms, in line with what will be required for membership, so that when the Council can agree to proceed to negotiations, the Macedonian government can move forward at a fast pace. I certainly hope that decision comes soon.

Serbia

Serbia received candidate status last year. It started later on the path to EU accession, with negotiations on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement opening in October 2005. And there have been some bumps along the road. However, the strong support of recent governments for EU membership is clear. Cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal on the Former Yugoslavia was an important prerequisite. The capture and rapid transfer to the Hague Tribunal of the last indictees has allowed this issue to be closed, so far as it affects Serbia's further progress on EU integration.

The Council has asked that Serbia continue to work towards a visible and sustainable improvement in relations with Kosovo. And I would like to take this opportunity to again commend the political courage and consistent efforts shown by both Prime Minister Dačić and Prime Minister Thaci; and to thank High Representative Ashton for her very active engagement as facilitator of the process. Serbia has been a candidate for just over a year. The SAA will hopefully be ratified in the coming weeks. The Council in June will consider the possibility of agreeing a date to open accession negotiations.

The remaining three countries of the region are not yet official candidates for EU membership.

Albania

Albania has applied, but has been given some homework to do before the Council will consider candidate status. The December Council conclusions set out a perspective for Albania which took account of its EU-related achievements and showed the way towards its European future. I hope that the upcoming elections will see the Albanian people give their political leaders a mandate to further strengthen their efforts in reaching that goal.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has not made the progress we would like to have seen. We were hopeful of progress following the formation of a government in December 2011 and the passing of two EU-related laws last year. We also had the launch of a High Level Dialogue in June which saw agreement on a roadmap towards accession. But since then progress has stalled. While we will continue to encourage movement on the path to EU integration, this is ultimately a matter for the political leaders of

Bosnia and Herzegovina. The EU cannot impose a solution. What we can do is use our policies to encourage and facilitate progress, and we will continue to do that.

Kosovo

Finally we have Kosovo, which in 2003 was under UN administration. The fact that 5 EU member states do not recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence has complicated the EU's relationship with Kosovo. However, the Council has confirmed that Kosovo's EU perspective, and we are taking steps to support Kosovo on that path. I am hopeful that the June European Council will see a further step taken in that regard.

The future

So this is where we have come from, and where we are now. What of the future? There is no denying that the new applicants for EU membership are being held to a higher account than their predecessors, not least due to the increase in the scope and depth of the *acquis*. The EU has not remained static. Neither can the accession process.

I can understand the concerns of candidates and prospective candidates that accession is a moving target, but that is the reality. The EU train will not wait at the station for aspiring passengers to catch up and board.

The countries from the Western Balkans that join the Union in the future will be very different from those countries today; just as the Union they will join will be very different from that operating now. Accession is a long, slow process; but it is one that requires continual forward momentum. Stalling or stopping will likely result in regression and a possible return to the instability that we saw in the early 1990s, and that is in no one's interest.

So realistically, where can we hope to be 10 years from now at the 20th anniversary of the Thessaloniki Summit? I would sincerely hope to see at least three more Western Balkans States either members or on the verge of membership, though I am not prepared to be explicit about whom those three might be!

Whether we can manage to have all six taking their place at the Council table in ten years time will be dependent on the progress they make in their individual reform processes and preparations for membership.

The EU too must protect the credibility of the enlargement process and ensure that when countries do what is required of them, they are rewarded accordingly.

Conclusion

This ten year anniversary is an appropriate juncture at which to assess the results of the Thessaloniki Agenda 2003 and to reflect on the progress made by the Western Balkans countries towards EU integration, the difficulties encountered along the way, and the outlook for completion of the project.

Let me wish you well with your discussions today. I hope they will be fruitful and thought-provoking.

I will now hand over to Commissioner Füle for his thoughts on our theme today.

Thank you.