

## **Opening Remarks of Christian Danielsson, Director General, DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission**

Over the last couple of years we have seen a growing recognition that when it comes to the major challenges that the EU and the Western Balkan countries are facing, we'd better address them together. That is about migration, that is about international organised crime, that is also about issues that you mentioned, of the global geography that is indeed changing, and that is about fighting terrorism. All of that together has built up a sense, within the EU, and among the Western Balkan countries, of the urgency of moving forward in the European perspective, of all that all these countries have. And that is the background to what we saw in February, and what we also saw in September last year, and what we also saw in March last year in terms of re-commitment of the EU side for the European perspective for the Western Balkan countries. So that is one important element. The other element that I think is essential to have in mind is that this is of course a choice, the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. It is a political choice on their side to use the opportunity that is there. But in order for that to happen, we from the EU side set up quite clearly what is called for, and I think it would be interesting today to have that also reflected in the discussion. And that is substantial reforms.

Substantial reforms to address the issues that you mentioned. Issues relating to state capture, issues relating to fighting corruption, issues relating to governance, issues relating to rule of law. So one element is that. The reform efforts need to be moved forward. Lots of things have been done, that is clear. But there is a substantive element of issues that needs to be addressed for the future. The second element regards economy. There is no way that we can see this positive development that was the European perspective happen, unless there is an unlocking of the economic potential in these countries, which is substantial. The level of growth today is around 4%. I am sure that can go up to two digits if the right policy is performed. What we are talking about here is business climate, it is regulatory burdens, it is once again fighting corruption, it is judiciary, it is the issue of the informal economy, it is the issue of seeing to that investments are coming into it, and it is about regulatory cooperation, which is central in that context. Investments will come into this area much more easily if there is a market, which is seen as 18 million, or close to 20 million, rather than each individual country. That is the second element which is essential. The third one is to address reconciliation. The legacy of the past needs to be addressed more prominently, otherwise it is difficult to move forward on both these elements, and the legacy of the past is underpinning political developments which are negative for the kind of direction that you are applying. For the part of the EU, the window is open, but there is a need to take to opportunity, which means to really focus on it. We will support you very strongly, and we will do it even more strongly in the years ahead. That is set out in the six flagship initiatives outlined by the Commission and it will come in the outcome of the Sofia summit that we are going to have here tomorrow.

And let me finally underline the importance of the Sofia summit. I think that should not be underestimated. This is the first time since Thessaloniki, it is all the leaders together and it is a confirmation from the leaders of the European perspective, on the one hand, but also very clearly a confirmation of the leaders of the countries concerned, of recognising the need to move forward on the reforms and also the recognition that there is call for assistance from the international community but in particular, in this context, from the EU. And finally, in order for this development to take place, in order for this process to move ahead I mentioned in the beginning the importance of civil society, freedom of expression, all those elements that hold the leaders into account is going to be very important. As important as the leaders' commitment to do this and of course also to see to that the public opinion, the people of the countries seize the benefits and take them also to the extent that these are now on the table. So it is a big challenge ahead, but there is also a fairly clear direction and the support from the EU side is clear there as well.