



Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Central European Initiative

Split, 11 June 2018

Communiqué

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Central European Initiative (CEI) held their annual meeting in Split on 11 June 2018. It was organised by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia in cooperation with the CEI-Executive Secretariat.

The meeting was chaired by H.E. Ms. Marija Pejčinović Burić, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, and was attended by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro and Serbia. Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Secretary of State of Romania, State Secretaries of Republic of Macedonia, Slovakia and Slovenia, as well as high representatives of Austria, Czech Republic, Republic of Moldova, Poland and Ukraine also took part in the meeting. Representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Commission (EC), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) were present at the meeting as Special Guests. The CEI Secretary General and the CEI Deputy Secretary General also participated in the event.

The Ministers welcomed the priorities set by the Croatian CEI Presidency addressing topics such as European integration, economic development, migration and culture. They particularly welcomed the focus on the future perspective of the CEI Region, in terms of European integration and building common efforts in backing regional stability. They reviewed the situation within the CEI region and agreed that a number of important developments had taken place.

They commended the progress made by a number of non-EU CEI Member States towards closer relations with the EU. The Ministers encouraged the non-EU CEI Member States aspiring to EU membership to make further steps to meet the criteria required in the process of EU accession as well as to further develop the partnership with the EU. Moreover, the Ministers stressed the importance of the rule of law, fundamental rights and good governance, which are core democratic values as well as crucial criteria of the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies.

The Ministers welcomed the credible European perspective of the Western Balkans, as described in the Communication of the European Commission released on 6 February 2018 and confirmed at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018, aimed at strengthening cooperation with Western Balkan partners, also in terms of connectivity, through tangible projects. In this regard, they supported the Sofia Priority Agenda. Moreover, the Ministers expressed their commitment towards the region's belonging to the European family.

The Ministers welcomed the progress made in the cooperation between the EU and its Eastern European Partners, as confirmed at the fifth Eastern Partnership Summit held in Brussels on 24 November 2017 where the participants recommitted themselves to strengthening democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as to the principles and norms of international law, which brings the Eastern European partner countries closer to the European Union. They recalled that the scope and depth of cooperation are determined by the EU's and partners' ambitions and needs, as well as the pace and quality of reforms. The Ministers also welcomed the result-oriented approach enshrined in the joint declaration of the Summit envisaging tangible deliverables to be achieved by 2020. The Ministers underlined the need to further enrich the EaP and bring it in line with the principles of differentiation, joint ownership, joint responsibility and solidarity. Furthermore, the Ministers welcomed that Eastern Partnership Summit participants acknowledged the European aspirations and European choice of the partners concerned, as stated in the Association Agreements, which provide for accelerating political association and economic integration with the European Union.

The Ministers reiterated that the European integration as well as partnership with the EU should remain on the top of the CEI Agenda. The Ministers highlighted the importance of the role played by the CEI countries, members of the EU, in supporting their non-EU CEI partners in their European integration aspirations. In this regard, the Ministers called upon the CEI Member States, which are also EU Member States, to continue to support the CEI candidate countries and countries aspiring to EU membership and partnership in the alignment to the EU rules and standards and to promote closer relations with the EU.

They recalled that the Western Balkans had come a long way since the past turbulent period and stressed that reform implementation in key areas and regional cooperation, including good-neighbourly relations, remained essential in the European integration process. In this context, they also recalled that this process was merit-based and should not be overshadowed by bilateral issues. In this context, the Ministers also appreciated the decisions taken at the Trieste Western Balkans Summit in July 2017, in the framework of the Berlin Process, and took note of the agenda of the forthcoming London Summit. They emphasised the important contribution of the Berlin Process and other regional cooperation initiatives, such as the SEECP and its operational arm the RCC, towards an enhanced and strengthened regional cooperation in relevant areas, including in the scientific field.

The Ministers noted that the Eastern Partnership countries still underwent various challenges and commended the fact that the CEI was strongly committed to these countries. In this context, the Ministers supported the closer cooperation with those countries, in view of their substantial progress in implementing AA/DCFTA-related reforms towards further EU internal market access; greater integration into EU transport networks; industrial partnerships; increased participation in other EU programmes and agencies; further cooperation in the field of the CSDP, where appropriate.

Furthermore, they expressed their gratitude to Belarus for holding last year's CEI Presidency, which offered to both CEI and Belarus new opportunities of cooperation and gave the Eastern neighbourhood dimension special importance.

In such a diverse composition, the Ministers noted that the CEI played an important role both as a platform of policy dialogue and as a donor. They highlighted that the CEI thanks to the generous Italian financial contribution and to the contribution of all other member countries, leveraged the investment flows supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development – EBRD (CEI Fund at the EBRD, fully financed by Italy since its establishment); implemented programmes directly managed by the Secretariat for the transfer of know-how between EU and non-EU CEI Member States (Know-how Exchange Programme); promoted cooperation activities supporting the mobility and networking (CEI Cooperation Fund, provided by all Member States); and increased the European funding of transnational projects (CEI EU-funded projects) focused on strengthening the partnership among public and private stakeholders in various fields.

In this regard, the Ministers praised the project-oriented approach of the Initiative, which - combined with multilateral diplomacy - represents a unique model of regional cooperation needed for pursuing the CEI's main aim and mission. At the same time, the Ministers commended the results of the above-mentioned funds, programmes and instruments.

The Ministers were convinced that the new CEI Plan of Action 2018-2020, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the EU Macro-Regional Strategies present in the CEI Region and devised in such a way as to enhance the connectivity and valorise the diversity, could be instrumental to effectively contribute to the necessary reforms in various fields.

In this regard, they expressed their concern about the complex large-scale trans-national challenges, such as the ongoing migration crisis and the security threats represented by violent extremism and terrorism, including those of hybrid and cyber security character. These are posing at actual risk the stability by delaying European integration and distracting from domestic reforms, spurring social tension and radicalisation, thus hindering sustainable economic development. Moreover, the Ministers affirmed their commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all CEI Member States and their full respect of the norms and principles of international law.

Therefore, the Ministers considered an on-going engagement with the region crucial, especially in view of removing potential obstacles in the countries' path towards the EU and sustainable development. This would consolidate the credibility of the international community and demonstrate its commitment to long-term stability and prosperity in the region. They also highlighted the necessity for adopting a more proactive and coordinated approach involving all countries in the CEI Region to closely monitor and to effectively combat potential risks.

The Ministers agreed that effective measures to tackle such challenges include a pragmatic cooperation by building stronger partnerships around common topics and tangible projects, including an active participation in the existing macro-regional strategies of the EU and the use of opportunities offered by other regional initiatives and formats of cooperation. They affirmed their strong commitment to jointly work in this direction with particular focus on tackling migratory issues, encouraging a wider use of modern digital technologies and services, promoting enhanced transport and energy connections as well as blue growth, while also taking into account the environment, supporting intercultural links, media freedom and science diplomacy, etc. - all this with an open and inclusive approach. Moreover, as the core democratic values are prerequisites for long-term stability, prosperity and peace, they pointed out that the CEI should also support its Member States in translating these values into actions with practical benefits for the citizens of all its Member States and that an increased dialogue of the Member States with the civil society as a key note in this process was essential.

In this context, the Ministers reiterated that the CEI Plan of Action 2018-2020, should be instrumental in translating the challenges into actions and highlighted the strong overall potential of the CEI, as one of the oldest and largest regional cooperation fora.

In this framework, in order to enhance the CEI capacity to address new challenges and ongoing developments both within the CEI Region and at a wider international scale, the Ministers highlighted the importance of continuing the process of adjusting the Organisation, by both updating the statutory documents that regulate its core areas of activity and regular cooperation formats, and by implementing the measures, in line with existing procedures, proposed by the Heads of Government at their Summit held in Minsk on 12 December 2017, while adopting the CEI Plan of Action 2018-2020. This way, the Initiative would ensure its proper role and effectiveness and further develop its cooperative character and address the needs of its Member States while avoiding duplication of efforts with other international and regional organisations and structures.

To this end, the Ministers commended the efforts of the Croatian CEI Presidency and the CEI - Executive Secretariat made so far and engaged to further improve the efficiency of the Organisation. The Ministers also noted an increased role of the CEI Member States in supporting the achievement of tangible results with efficient and mutually beneficial cooperation and tasked all the parties involved to continue along this way.

They reiterated that in order to strengthen the role of the Organisation, a review of the current contributions should be considered. They, therefore, encouraged voluntary contributions by the Member States.

They also reiterated the need for the CEI to closely cooperate and create synergies with other relevant regional bodies and acknowledged the excellent work already carried out by the CEI-Executive Secretariat to promote such cooperation.

Last but not least, the Ministers expressed their satisfaction with the enhanced cooperation with the Parliamentary Dimension of the CEI. The Ministers acknowledged the important role the Parliamentary Dimension played in advancing democratic decision-making in Member States and expressed their conviction that the Parliamentary Dimension was well-placed to make valuable contributions to the work of the Organisation as a whole. They took note of the Statement on Sustainable Tourism of the CEI Parliamentary Committee Meeting held in Zagreb on 14 May 2018 and were keen to see the results of the CEI Parliamentary Assembly in November.

Furthermore, the Ministers considered that the business component of the CEI activities, i.e. the CEI Business Dimension, was an important complementary field of activity of the Organisation and that it needed to be encouraged.

The Ministers took note with regret about Austria's notification of withdrawal from the CEI. They thanked Austria for the extraordinary support provided to the Organisation ever since its establishment and expressed hope to continue the cooperation with the country through other possible ways of partnership.

Finally, the Ministers expressed their gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Croatia for the numerous activities organised so far - in the framework of the Croatian CEI Presidency - on important topics such as technical assistance, combined transport, regional cohesion and were eager to know about the outcome of the upcoming activities.

The Ministers also expressed their gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia and to the CEI-Executive Secretariat for the excellent organisation of the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the CEI Member States in Split and agreed to continue the practice of informal meetings in New York on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly.