



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

Banja Luka, 16 June 2016

Communiqué

The Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Central European Initiative (CEI) held their annual meeting in Banja Luka on 16 June 2016. It was organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in cooperation with the CEI-Executive Secretariat.

The meeting was chaired by H.E. Mr. Igor Crnadak, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and was attended by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia and Serbia. Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Albania, the Czech Republic, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, as well as high representatives of Slovenia and Ukraine also took part in the meeting. The meeting was also attended by the EU Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations. Representatives of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) were present at the meeting as Special Guests. The CEI Secretary General and the CEI Alternate Secretary General also participated in the event.

The Ministers reviewed the situation in the CEI Region within a wider international context. They agreed that there were two principal challenges with major consequence for the Region, i.e. on the one hand the migration crisis and on the other the growing threat of terrorism and the foreign terrorist fighters phenomena. The Ministers stressed their willingness to support policies and actions against these threats, contributing to a strong, united and peaceful Europe. At the same time, the Ministers declared their readiness to continue and strengthen their efforts in combating organised crime, especially in the area of trafficking of human beings and arms, as well as any form of corruption which undermine the progress of their countries towards stable and resilient democracies.

The Ministers, furthermore, noted with concern the continuing crisis in and around Ukraine that poses a major threat to the regional security. They expressed their full support to the implementation of Minsk agreements and to the peaceful settlement of conflicts on the basis of the UN Charter's norms and principles of international law.

The Ministers also reiterated their full commitment to good-neighbourly relations, stability, security, the rule of law, free market economy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are the core democratic values at the heart of the EU and in particular of its enlargement policy.

In this context, the Ministers welcomed the progress made by the Western Balkans in its European integration process, noting that further efforts are necessary on its road to move closer towards the EU. They acknowledged the ongoing accession negotiations between Montenegro and the EU commending the result of 22 negotiating chapters opened, among which two are provisionally closed, and welcomed the progress in all areas encouraging the country to continue with the reforms, including their implementation, thus open the negotiations on new chapters. The Ministers also welcomed the progress made by Serbia towards the EU, which led to the opening of the first two negotiating chapters on 14 December 2015 and expressed their hope that further progress would be achieved during this year. The Ministers expressed their belief that the Republic of Macedonia would succeed in making progress on the EU integration path. The Ministers addressed Albania's further progress in the fulfilment of the five key priorities, with special focus on the justice reform, as an essential step for the opening of accession negotiations. Furthermore, the Ministers welcomed the formal application of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union on 15 February 2016, and expressed hope that the Council of the EU would consider the application favourably.

The Ministers repeated their conviction that progress in the EU enlargement policy and the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, once all necessary criteria and reforms are completed, would serve the strategic interest of both the EU and the region. They reaffirmed the importance of regional cooperation formats, as crucial instruments in supporting the integration efforts. In this context, they welcomed the cooperation, among others, in the framework of the "Berlin Process" and expressed hope that its next Summit in Paris would advance specific investment projects. They commended the contribution of the WB6

framework and the Brdo-Brijuni Process for cooperation and reconciliation in the region. The Ministers reaffirmed the positive value of pre-accession assistance provided to the Western Balkans by the EU and its Member States. They also underlined the integrative role of the European macro-regional strategies as platform to support EU aspirations of the Western Balkans and some Eastern European countries.

The Ministers welcomed the progress made in the cooperation between the EU and its Eastern European Partners based on differentiated and tailor-made approach, enhanced by the European Neighbourhood Policy review, which gives prominence to the stabilisation of the neighbourhood in political, economic and security terms. In this respect, the Ministers underlined the importance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). While welcoming the enhancement of regional cooperation within the EaP, they noted that until the next EaP Summit in 2017 more efforts should be exhorted to advance cooperation in strengthening institutions and good governance, enhance mobility and people-to-people contacts, market opportunities and interconnections.

The Ministers expressed satisfaction with the planned full entry into force of the Association Agreement including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA) between the EU and the Republic of Moldova and the subsequent increase in trade and in business opportunities since the application of the DCFTA. They also took positive note of the smooth implementation of its Visa Free regime and Readmission Agreement with the EU. The Ministers reiterated their hopes that the AA/DCFTA with Ukraine will fully enter into force at the earliest possible date. Furthermore, the Ministers welcomed the European Commission's proposal to lift short-term visa requirements for the citizens of Ukraine, in parallel to other amendments to the relevant EU regulation, following the assessment that the country has successfully met the relevant benchmarks under the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) and expressed hope that the EU Council will soon be in a position to adopt the necessary decisions. The Ministers also acknowledged positive developments in EU-Belarus relations, including the lifting of most of the restrictive measures against Belarus on 15 February 2016 and the establishment of Belarus-EU Coordination Group to further promote structured dialogue and to expand cooperation in the fields of mutual interest.

In connection to the above, the Ministers agreed that cross-border, regional and interregional cooperation are valuable instruments for stability and security, for promoting reconciliation as well as for exploring the potential of trade and economic cooperation and facilitating pending reforms linked to the European integration and modernization process. They highlighted the support available via available Instruments for projects and programmes aiming i.a. at improving connectivity, market opportunities and capacity-building. In this context, and in view of the preparation of the CEI Plan of Action 2017-2020, the CEI was called upon to remain actively involved in assisting the non-EU CEI Member States in their institutional, social and economic reforms, in particular to achieve sustainable development of a modern network of infrastructure, energy and transport, consistent with the interconnectivity principle. With regard to the latter, they commended the great efforts made by the CEI-Executive Secretariat and commended the outcome of the CEI/EBRD Conference under the title "Supporting Local Enterprises and SMEs along China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Eastern Europe" held in Trieste on 19 May 2016.

They also agreed that the CEI should foster regional cooperation and cross-border contacts by strengthening cooperation among governmental and non-governmental actors and continue providing a viable forum for the exchange of experience, people-to-people contacts, capacity building and enhanced policy dialogue. In this context, the Ministers agreed that the political and practical support of the CEI to European integration policies of its countries, represented unique added value as well as the fact that it embraces both EU and non-EU Member States. In this context, the CEI Member States, which are also EU Member States, should continue to assist the efforts of the CEI countries aspiring to EU membership to fulfil the relevant EU criteria and to promote closer relations with the EU.

Furthermore, the Ministers fully agreed on the need to strengthen concerted efforts also in the framework of the CEI aimed at countering international terrorism, combating organized crime, with special attention to human trafficking, illegal migration and corruption, which greatly affect the lives and well-being of the citizens of the Region. They welcomed CEI activities in tackling these issues, such as the Extraordinary Call on migration and security issues feeding an on-going campaign of networking events, and agreed that the next CEI Plan of Action 2017-2020 should reflect these challenges as well.

The Ministers called for a continued assistance to countries of the Western Balkans most affected by the migration crisis. Moreover, they welcomed the signing of Memoranda of Understanding with specialised organisations such as the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). They also encouraged further development of cooperation and exchange of expertise with other relevant specialised organisations, such as Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC).

The Ministers reiterated the need to forge a strong partnership between governments and business in order to improve the macro-economic stability, accelerate structural reforms and create a favourable environment for investments. They stressed the importance of an enhanced role of the CEI Business Dimensions and of further integrating of the Chambers of Commerce and other national employers'

organisations into the scope and activities of the CEI. In this regard, they appreciated the fact that the BiH Presidency, with the support Austria, included among its activities a meeting of the Presidents of the Chambers to be held in Vienna on 12 September 2016.

The Ministers also underlined the important role of the CEI Parliamentary Dimension in supporting the activities of the CEI, particularly by providing a framework for dialogue on the most important issues.

The Ministers declared interest in deepening cooperation between the CEI and the EU. To this end, they stressed the need for an intensified flow of information to open up avenues of concrete cooperation. Moreover, they stressed the importance of linking CEI activities to EU macro-regional strategies, such as the Baltic (EUSBSR), the Danube (EUSDR), the Alpine (EUSAR) and the Adriatic Ionian (EUSAIR), and further supported the CEI to act as "a Bridge between Macro-regions". The Ministers praised the CEI commitment to play an important role in their implementation underlining, in particular, the importance of synergizing the strategies overlapping in the Balkan region i.e. the EUSDR, the EUSAIR and the SEE 2020 Strategy. In this context, they recalled the Final Declaration by the Chair of the Vienna Western Balkans Summit of 26 August 2015, in the framework of the "Berlin Process", which called for fully exploiting the CEI's potential in regional cooperation.

The Ministers also agreed that close collaboration with other European regional initiatives and organisations was useful to further the CEI's goals. Moreover, they expressed satisfaction with the intensified cooperation with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). They also acknowledged the excellent cooperation with the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII), the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and its operational arm, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and stressed the importance of developing cooperation relations between the CEI and the Eastern Partnership.

The Ministers took note of the CEI actions aimed at strengthening the cooperation with the United Nations (UN) and tasked the BiH CEI Presidency to prepare a Draft Resolution on the Cooperation between the UN and the CEI to be presented on the occasion of the Biannual Meeting between the UN and the Regional Organisations to be held later in 2016. Moreover, they agreed to meet informally in New York in September 2016 with the aim to consider the various concrete possibilities for cooperation with this important global player.

Last but not least, the Ministers recalled the great importance of the partnership between the CEI and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), thanks to the CEI Fund at the Bank, established and fully financed by the Italian Government. The Ministers expressed great appreciation to Italy for pledging an additional replenishment - totalling about 42 million EUR since the Fund's inception, mainly focused on technical assistance and on the Know How-Exchange Programme (KEP), which resulted in a strong project-oriented dimension of the CEI's core operations. They also expressed appreciation for the continuing commitment of the EBRD to supporting the economies of the CEI countries and their regional integration, as well as of EBRD's efforts to strengthen policy dialogue with the countries where it invests. Furthermore, the Ministers stressed that this cooperation represented one of the main assets of the CEI, enriched this year with another area of common interest, i.e. cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative - a global investment plan recently launched by the Chinese Government to strengthen the logistical infrastructure for the transport of goods and services between China and Europe. Indeed, the Conference in Trieste on 19 May 2016 is to be considered as a first of the series of events planned in this regard.

The Ministers also expressed their satisfaction with the results achieved within the project activities of the CEI Cooperation Fund and adopted the scale of national contributions of the Member States for 2017, noting, however, that the demand for funding exceeds largely the available resources. While Ministers considered this as an indication of the growing success of the Fund among Member States, they also pointed to the need of an effective selection system based on clear criteria. Furthermore, they reiterated that in order to strengthen the role of this important Fund, a review of the current scale of contributions should be considered and voluntary contributions to the Fund should be encouraged.

Finally, the Ministers commended the BiH CEI Presidency for the established priorities linked in particular to the interconnectivity and sustainable development and highly appreciated the planned activities in this context.

The Ministers extended their best wishes to the incoming CEI Presidency of Belarus in 2017, pledging full cooperation and support.

The Ministers also expressed their gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the CEI-Executive Secretariat for the excellent organisation of the Meeting of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the CEI Member States in Banja Luka.