

**Statement by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs
of the Republic of Serbia, H.E. Mr Ivica Dacic
*CEI MFA Meeting, Banja Luka 16. June 2016.***

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Esteemed colleagues,

One of the most serious challenges facing the region and even the whole of Europe for months now is certainly the migrant crisis. I wish to recall that the Republic of Serbia registered and provided temporary shelter for 600,000 migrants in 2015, and for more than 100,000 of them in 2016. It is a fact that we managed to reduce and put under control migration flows only after we had realized that the issue was of a common nature and that only together we could resolve it. Serbia has supported and will continue to uphold any comprehensive and sustainable initiative to that end. I am pleased to note that both the state authorities and the citizens of the Republic of Serbia have demonstrated through their actions and conduct that they do not see migrants as the root-cause of the problem but, first and foremost, as people in need. I do not say that we provided enough assistance to every person but I do say that we helped as much as we could. In many cases even more than that.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Referring to the second item on our agenda today, I wish to recall that the complexity of countering terrorism lies, inter alia, in the fact that countries bear responsibility for the protection of human rights of all citizens, including those who brutally violate human and other rights by committing acts of terrorism.

I believe that the Resolution on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in combating terrorism which has been adopted by consensus for several years in succession in the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, expresses our position on the issue clearly enough and offers guidance for further joint action.

Distinguished colleagues,

Although already said and re-affirmed on many occasions, may I reiterate once again that the process of European integration, i.e. of full EU membership, is one of Serbia's foremost foreign policy priorities. In that context, I wish to emphasize the importance and the role of the Central European Initiative as the bridge between macro-regions, between EU Member States and the

aspirant countries, but also as the bridge between parts of Europe having different names –Mittel Europa, the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership or the Baltic - but which are all part of a unique European culture.

What makes CEI different compared to other regional initiatives is its project-orientation. I shall remind you that in 2014, the Republic of Serbia has voluntarily doubled its annual contribution which is perhaps not much in nominal terms but is a symbolic indicator of the confidence and importance we attach to cooperation within this regional initiative.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The potential of our common region has been recognized also within the China-CEEC mechanism. The Mechanism of connecting parts of Europe with China shows, in practice, how geographically distant parts of the world can be brought closer together by their interest in common projects. The model of universal connectivity, communication and integration of different development strategies within the “Belt and Road” Initiative, offers an additional business platform and development perspective. In this context, I would like to mention the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway project (approximate value of over \$ 2.5 billion), the realization of which will significantly contribute to better transport networking of Southern and Central Europe.

As to the regional cooperation in the context of improved transport and energy connectivity, I wish to draw your attention to the problem of gas supply that the Republic of Serbia and the majority of the countries in the region might face as early as 2019. Discussions on possible new gas routes are being held but with no concrete solutions in sight as yet. Therefore, I take this opportunity too, to call on EU institutions to come up with some durable solutions as soon as possible.

Dear friends,

In conclusion, I have to take note of the fact that, by their impeccable organization of today’s meeting, our hosts have demonstrated, once again, that they rightfully enjoy the reputation of good hosts. I congratulate and thank them, wishing them successful continuation of their Presidency.

At the same time, I would like to underline that the Republic of Serbia welcomes and upholds the 2017 Presidency of CEI by the Republic of Belarus. We are convinced that the Republic of Belarus, just like it was in the past and still is the reliable partner of the Republic of Serbia in bilateral relations, will steer the Presidency of this regional initiative in a reliable and successful manner.

Thank you.