

Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group on the Western Balkans

Gödöllő, 31 October 2013

The Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group (V4) together with the Western Balkan counterparts took place under the auspices of the Hungarian Presidency of the V4 on 31 October 2013 in Gödöllő, Hungary. The meeting was also attended by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania on behalf of the current Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the State Secretary of the Austrian Foreign Ministry, the Deputy Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey and the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs of the United States as special guests of this year, as well as the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy.

The participants emphasised the significance of the annual meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 dedicated to the Western Balkans which has become a genuine consultative framework for the region in the course of the last five years.

The V4 countries demonstrated their strong and continuous support for maintaining the momentum of the enlargement process. The ministers underlined that the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU is a mutual interest of both the EU and the aspirant countries. The enlargement process has a stabilising effect and transformative power to the benefit of all partners. The participants shared the same view: the enlargement process needs to be credible and consistent and should remain based on the principles of conditionality and individual performance.

The participants exchanged views on the current situation in the Western Balkan region and welcomed the findings of the detailed and balanced Enlargement Package recently published by the European Commission which offers a coherent strategy for the EU enlargement process in the coming year, emphasizing, among others, the importance of economic governance and competitiveness.

The V4 member states welcomed the significant progress of Montenegro in the course of the accession negotiations. They expressed their support to the start of accession negotiations with Serbia not later than in January 2014, ideally soon after the adoption of a negotiation framework not containing new conditions, as well as to the negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Kosovo*, while stressing the significance of the ongoing dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and the implementation of the agreements reached. In this respect they have emphasized their continued support to the process and the work done by the EEAS and personally by High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission Catherine Ashton. The V4 countries attached great importance to the widest possible participation in local elections in Kosovo on November 3rd and emphasized that creating the necessary environment is important in that regard. The participants expressed their hope and support for overcoming the obstacles hindering Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's progress in its integration process by emphasising the need for a decision on the start of the accession negotiations. The V4 member states view positively the progress reached thus far by Albania and the recommendation of the European Commission to grant EU candidate status to the country in December. The V4 countries expressed their commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina's European future while voicing their concern over the lack of progress on its European path.

The Ministers took stock of the ongoing V4 activities directed at the Western Balkan region and explored the ways and means how the Visegrad Group can more intensively support these countries on their path towards the EU membership.

The V4 countries reaffirmed their readiness to share their experience of transition and European integration. Regional cooperation is a relevant instrument for fostering genuine dialogue, reconciliation, stability, prosperity while being an important EU membership precondition for the Western Balkans. For this reason, the V4 countries attach great importance to the transfer of their know-how on cooperating in regional frameworks.

The V4 countries endeavour to provide concrete project-based assistance to the Western Balkans. In the framework of the “Visegrad+” the International Visegrad Fund has already been increasing its activities towards the Western Balkan countries by financing the first projects submitted by non-governmental organisations from the region and will continue to do so aiming to promote the European integration and values. Strengthening the rule of law and democratic governance remains crucial for the Western Balkans on their way towards accession to the EU. To this end the V4 countries together with their Western Balkans partners continue to develop the V4–Western Balkans Expert Network on Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights to promote reform process and provide technical assistance with particular focus on public administration reforms and national institutions for the protection and promotion of human rights. In order to intensify the local cooperation and encourage the development of effective regional cooperation among the countries and other stakeholders in the Western Balkan region, the V4 encourages the Western Balkan countries to step up the preparations for setting up a regional fund based on the model of the International Visegrad Fund. The new fund would pursue grant-making activities to the benefit of the local civil society by supporting projects in culture, science and education, promoting cross-border cooperation and the capacities of civil society organisations.

The V4 countries underlined the importance of the continued engagement of NATO and the EU, towards the stability and security of the Western Balkan region. The V4 remain firmly committed to NATO’s “open door” policy and will thus continue to support the endeavours of all the countries of the Western Balkans striving for NATO-membership. Besides upholding their political support, the V4 countries continue to be ready to do so also by actively sharing their own experience of Euro-Atlantic integration.

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.