

Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in Skopje

Good morning. There's no better place than Skopje to end my Western Balkan tour ahead of the Sofia summit. I just had a very good meeting with Prime Minister Zaev, and later today I will also participate in the Brdo-Brijuni summit.

A lot has changed since 2015, when I came here regularly to work with partners to stem the flow of irregular migrants towards Europe. The so-called Western Balkans route for illegal migration has since been closed, and it must remain so. Let me thank you again for your support back then, and your continued vigilance on this.

Today, the topic was no longer migration, but the future of your country and the entire region. Here in Skopje, I sense a change in the political mind-set. I sense a real political will to move on with your country's Euro-Atlantic integration. And I sense a courageous and forward-looking leadership of Prime Minister Zaev. The European Commission's recommendation to open accession talks is the best proof that the efforts of your people and you yourself impress many in Europe; and that a new and promising chapter in the history of your country is just about to start.

We agreed that when leaders from the European Union and the Western Balkan partners meet in Sofia in May, we should inject new energy into our relationship.

Our summit should first and foremost reaffirm the European perspective of the region. Secondly, and more concretely, it should improve connections with and within the region – be they human, digital or infrastructural. We should also agree to tackle together our common security challenges, such as migrant smuggling, terrorism and organised crime. Let me in this context also thank you for your solidarity with the EU and its member states in the face of geopolitical challenges, such as the Salisbury attack. You have stood with us; we will stand with you.

I also want to repeat here what I have said in every capital I have visited this week: the EU is, and will remain, the most reliable partner for the whole region. The European Union is by far the biggest investor, the biggest donor and the biggest trading partner for the whole region. This is also the true for your country. Close to 80% of your exports go to the European Union. Another 13% go to your Western Balkans neighbours. Only 1,5% goes to Turkey. 1% to Russia. And 1% to China.

Beyond trade and investments, I am convinced that the EU is the best hope for a better future for your citizens. I say this because this is my own experience, as a Pole. For too many years geopolitics was against us. But today in the EU, we can cherish our national identity while at the same time being part of a bigger community in which we can all prosper. It's no coincidence that 80% of Poles today continue to support EU membership.

With this in mind, I can assure that the EU will assist you in your reform efforts. You have all the necessary ingredients for success: a consensus for EU and NATO membership of the political class and the determination of your people.

Let me conclude by saying that we also discussed regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, and their importance for the whole region. You have proven with Bulgaria that where there is a will to overcome the ghosts of the past, there is a way, to the future. I very much hope that you can make the journey also with Greece. You have my unconditional support and I believe in you. Thank you.

(Delivered in Macedonian)

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