

Remarks by President Donald Tusk after his meeting with Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama

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Thank you very much dear Prime Minister, dear Edi. I am really grateful for your compliments and warm words. It is true, I am your friend, we are in the best possible personal relations and really good friends. Because of my personal experience and political views and beliefs I am also a devoted friend of your nation and of your country. This is why I am really happy to be back in Tirana, and not only because of the weather. I am very grateful to Prime Minister Rama for his hospitality.

Let me start by congratulating the people of Albania. The recent recommendation of the European Commission to open accession talks, shows that you have made great efforts and are getting ready to start one of the most positive political projects in the history of your country. Accession negotiations with the European Union are not easy but I can tell you from my political and personal experience, that they are worth the effort. When my home country started similar talks some 20 years ago we knew that much needed to change in Poland. Yet the full determination of the political class and the support of ordinary people made our dream come true. And it is my personal dream that Albania follows the same path to the EU as my homeland. With your proud history, with Skenderberg who protected Europe from the Ottoman empire, I have no doubt that you will. And it is also in the very best European interest that Albania and the whole Balkan region is fully integrated into the European Union.

It will not happen overnight. There will be many challenges and hard work on the way, starting with ensuring the rule of law, fight against organised crime and ambitious justice system reform. What you have made is enough – and I want to be very clear – to open accession talks. No doubt. It is not only the substance of the European Commission recommendation. This is also my opinion, I am not alone here, this is what I deeply believe.

Another challenge will be to convince all EU Member States in June to agree to start negotiations. I am aware that this process will resemble more a hurdle race than a motorway. But I have no doubt that full integration remains our common destiny. The EU and the Western Balkans belong together. You can count on me also in this very complicated and challenging process. I

am traditionally very cautious, but today I can say that I am an optimist when it comes to this long-term perspective, and a cautious optimist when it comes to short-term perspective, but still an optimist.

Already now, the EU is by far the biggest investor, the biggest donor and the biggest trading partner for the whole region. This is also true for Albania. As an example: 78% of Albania's exports go to the European Union. 78%! To compare: only 3% of Albania's exports go to China. With your Western Balkan neighbours, on a clear 2nd place, with 14% of your exports. But compare again 78% of the EU, China 3%. Turkey 1%. And Russia 0%.

My visit here today in Tirana is the first stop on a weeklong Balkan tour to prepare for the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia on 17 May. The summit will gather the leaders from the EU and the region.

In Sofia we should reaffirm the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

But what is equally important, the summit should define ways and means to improve connections with and within the region. It is about human, digital and infrastructure connections. Albania and other countries of the Western Balkans should be fully integrated into Pan-European transport corridors. Traveling between capitals of the Western Balkans should not take longer than flights to Beijing as is still sometimes the case. To avoid power cuts we should invest more together in upgrading our energy grids and interconnections. Young people from the region should get more opportunities to study in the EU. A doubling of Erasmus+ funding will make sure that this objective is within reach. And finally, we should increase our common efforts on cultural exchanges and promotion of national identities.

To boost our cooperation in these concrete areas we do not need to wait until the EU enlargement. And improving our connectivity would be beneficial both for citizens and businesses from Albania and other Western Balkan partners as well as from the European Union. I want to be very clear here, this connectivity programme is not an alternative to enlargement or a substitute for enlargement, it is a way to use the time between today and tomorrow more effectively than before.

Finally, the summit will also be an occasion for the leaders to discuss common security challenges, such as migrant smuggling, terrorism and organised crime. Here we have to continue our fight as brothers in arms. Let me thank you, Prime Minister, for Albanian solidarity with the EU and its member states in our geopolitical challenges, such as the one we have witnessed with the Skripal attack in Salisbury. It is well noted and appreciated. As you know you have this unique reputation as the most loyal and reliable partner of the whole European community in this context.

Let me conclude by paying respect to Albania's unique trademark of religious tolerance and coexistence. These qualities continue to be extremely important in today's world. These are the foundations on which we can continue to build our common future. Sometimes I feel that you are more European here than some EU Europeans. Thank you.

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