

Speech: Strengthening anti-corruption in the Western Balkans through improving asset seizure measures

Dear State Prosecutor Šoškić, Honoured Judges and Prosecutors, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is my pleasure to be with you here today.

The British Government is deeply committed to fighting corruption, both at home and abroad. To that end, we have convened the International Anticorruption Summit in 2016, which brought together countries, businesses and the civil society to strengthen efforts to expose corruption wherever it is found; to pursue and punish those who perpetrate, facilitate or are complicit in it; to support communities that have suffered from it; and to ensure it does not occur in our government institutions, businesses and communities.

Since 2010, the UK has arguably done more than any country in the world to fight corruption. We have a strong legislative framework through the Bribery Act and now the 2017 Criminal Finances Act. The Act gave law enforcement agencies additional powers to identify and recover corrupt and criminal funds. The Act also introduced unexplained wealth orders, which can be used to compel individuals to explain the sources of their wealth. The first such orders have been issued relating to assets of £22 million by December 2018.

We are the first G20 country to establish a public register of domestic company beneficial ownership. And we are the first G7 country to undergo an IMF fiscal transparency evaluation. In 2017 the OECD review of the UK's anti-bribery regime welcomed the UK's "strong anti-corruption drive" concluding that the UK had made significant progress in fighting foreign bribery. Transparency International has stated that the UK is one of only four countries worldwide that actively enforces foreign bribery legislation. It also ranks the UK in the top ten least corrupt countries in the world.

In the Western Balkans, ensuring compliance with and implementation of key standards and reforms required in the areas of rule of law, good governance, and human rights remains a pressing issue. This was recognised in the EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans, launched in February 2018, which indicated that a concrete and sustained track record in tackling corruption is a key benchmark for Western Balkan countries wishing to join the EU.

In the context of fight against corruption and organised crime, strong and independent institutions are instrumental to the prevention of corruption; and to conducting more effective investigations and prosecutions, leading to final court rulings that are fully enforced. Simultaneously, using dissuasive sanctions such as confiscation of assets, plays a key role in tackling

corruption.

During the Western Balkans Summit in London in July 2018, the Prime Ministers and Ministers of Interior of the region reconfirmed their commitment to make the fight against corruption a top priority, building on an focus on tackling corruption in the Berlin Process, which began under the Western Balkans Summit in Trieste in 2017, and which will continue to the Poznan Summit in July 2019. Leaders recognised that national security threats were transnational and increasing in complexity, and reaffirmed their commitment to deepening regional cooperation and enhancing the collective response.

Today's conference helps turn the intent of regional co-operation into reality, by further strengthening expertise amongst prosecutors and judges in the field of asset recovery, facilitating the exchange of good practices in this respect in the South East Europe, and strengthening the capacity of judicial training institutes to provide training at national level, with a focus on international and European legal standards and the European Court of Human Rights case-law in the field of asset recovery in order to support the implementation of the asset recovery measures in practice. Today's conference is the first in the series of three such events.

And so I am delighted that the AIRE Centre and the Regional Anticorruption Initiative are using this conference to present a report which assesses the implementation of asset seizure and confiscation measures across the Western Balkans. This report confirms the findings of the EU progress reports, stating that that the biggest obstacle to effectively tackling corruption in the region is the lack of proper implementation of existing legal frameworks, including international obligations.

The report notes that final conviction rates remain low, particularly in high-level corruption cases, and powers to impose harsher penalties and to order asset recovery are not being used proactively. There is a need to further develop the effectiveness of asset confiscation and recovery systems in the region, based on international and European standards and minimum rules on the freezing assets with a view to possible subsequent confiscation.

Given that this region has broadly similar legal systems and encounters similar challenges, I am confident that a regional approach is beneficial, including exchanges of expertise, discussions of common challenges and opportunities to exchange best practice. This will help devise joint strategies, where feasible, to strengthen institutional capacity in each of the countries, and will foster links between those institutions that are central to fighting cross border criminal activities. Crime knows of no borders, so institutional cooperation between countries of the region in this area should be equally close.

The participation of Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Croatia in this project can only further strengthen and enrich this cooperation. And in particular I would note the support that Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia have given and continue to give Montenegro and the Western Balkans as part of the recent, current and future EU Presidencies.

Allow me to conclude by saying that the United Kingdom supports your efforts, that we offer to share our experience in fighting corruption, and that we remain committed to working with our partners in the Western Balkans and supporting these important reform processes.

I wish you all a successful meeting.