

Speech: Supporting Montenegro in combatting corruption

Corruption is one of the easiest topics to talk about. Nobody likes it, nobody defends it and, no matter how harshly you attack it, you will have the sympathy of the audience. Yet, despite this universal hostility, there is no age or country in which corruption has not raised its ugly head. The sad truth is that there is no country free of this stain on our dignity. This, of course, does not mean that fighting corruption is pointless or hopeless.

Hundreds, thousands of people all over the world risk their lives and careers every day to make their society a bit less corrupt. It is an uphill, difficult battle, but each step is worth the risk and the effort. It improves not only our country as a whole, but the everyday life of each ordinary citizen.

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This year, we organised a Western Balkans Summit in London, as a part of the wider Berlin Process. A number of vital topics were discussed, including security co-operation, increasing economic stability and encouraging political co-operation. One of the most important areas was the fight against corruption, time and time again at the civil society and youth forum and events in the run up to the Summit corruption was seen as a critical issue. At the Summit each Western Balkans country voluntarily committed to a number of activities. Montenegro made one of the biggest commitments, taking on 15 commitments including:

1. Adopting a set of laws regulating Public and Private Partnership in line with EU standards: Law on public-private partnership, Law on concession and Law on public procurement.
2. Working towards a full implementation of the principles of Open Contracting Data Standard, as a part of new e-government procurement work.
3. Reviewing public procurement procedures to increase transparency and reduce opportunities for corruption.
4. Joining the Open Budgeting Partnership and commit to being reviewed under its survey.
5. Signing up to the Common Reporting Standard initiative on taxation, which allows automatic exchange of tax-related information.
6. Establishing a secure network for connecting to public central register of company beneficial ownership.
7. Ensuring that the Anti-Corruption body reaches solid and steady track record in: conflict of interest, asset declarations, control of financing of political entities, integrity plans, whistleblowers' protection and corruption proofing.
8. Implementing measures to ensure the media are able to report on corruption issues in an objective and independent manner, while not harming ongoing investigations.

9. Improving mechanisms for detecting and preventing conflict of interest in public officials.
10. And ensuring full implementation of all GRECO recommendations in a timely manner.

At the Summit countries across the region committed to enhancing the information flow between the financial institutions and designated nonfinancial business and professions to provide intelligence needed to fight money laundering. And this particular initiative was born in Montenegro, at a meeting of the Western Balkan 6 countries in Kolašin in February and had its first follow up meeting in Podgorica last month.

This is a long and ambitious list, but I believe that the only way to fight corruption is to set an ambitious goal and start walking, one step at a time. I do not doubt Montenegrin government's commitment to making this list shorter every month. In that they will have our full support.

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Ultimately, what matters are actual changes on the ground. Do Montenegrin citizens think twice before engaging in corrupt practices and choose not to be complicit? Do they protest to the authorities? Do the authorities take action in line with the growing set of laws, regulations and systems decide to prevent and take action against corruption?

As the Roman historian Tacitus wrote two thousand years ago, "the more corrupt the state, the more laws". Laws and regulations won't help if there is no implementation, if there are no positive changes in the behaviour and everyday lives of citizens and investors in Montenegro.

And yes, all of this is critically important for Montenegro's progress through the EU accession process; but it is even more important in terms of meeting Montenegro's aspiration to have a European quality of life. For every business that want to have a sustainable future, for every citizen who wants they and their families to have fair access to opportunities, and for the correct expenditure of every euro of government expenditure.

That is why we are all here today. The anti-corruption week brings together those working to tackle this most fundamental of problems in society and I congratulate NGO MANS for their continued focus on this subject and for putting together such an interesting programme.

Thank you.