

**Address by Minister of Defence Slavjanka PETROVSKA  
on the Conference "Peace and Prosperity in the Western Balkans"**

Smart Balkans, Thursday, 14.12.2023 – 09.30, Double Tree Hilton

Dear attendees,

The fact that today I have the opportunity to address this audience together with the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Norway accredited to North Macedonia, Christine Melsom, as well as eminent members of the academic community and representatives of the non-governmental sector from the region shows that the issue of prosperity of the Western Balkans, its development, the integration of the countries from this region is an issue that we in North Macedonia, but also the citizens of the countries in the region consider as a priority. This issue is linked to the security of the region itself, but also of Europe, and we say that security has no price because that is the only way we can build an open, democratic, prosperous society that offers a future for our generations.

When we talk about the European integration of the Western Balkan countries, when we talk about one Europe, united in one voice, we do not think of the European Union only as an idea. We are talking about values that guide us in everyday life, we are talking about the possibility of working together as Europeans, freed from everything that can keep us apart.

The European future is a future in which reconciliation between the peoples of this common continent of ours will become a reality. And we can take the example right from the beginnings of the Union. Countries that only a few years after the horrors of the Second World War managed to look each other in the eye and agree through dialogue that Europe is great and powerful only if it is united. That the citizens of the destroyed European countries will have a better life only if they work together – without a separate, French or German goal, but with one, European goal.

Integration has shown its unifying power when NATO membership is taken into account. With the admission of Croatia and Albania in 2008, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020, the Western Balkans gained stability, gained security, gained the opportunity to develop its democracy in peace and security.

I often say - a lot can be learned from North Macedonia about the pragmatic approach to finally closing an open issue that had cemented our approach to Euro-Atlantic integration for two decades.

Signing the Prespa Agreement was not an easy decision. On the contrary, it was a decision that required courage, it required a vision of how we want our homeland to look like in the future. And the vision was a secure, safe, prosperous state.

Only a few years after the historic decision, we can say that it was made at the right time. Today, in conditions of disrupted security on the continent, North Macedonia is a peaceful, safe country. Today, the country has a motivated Army that is being equipped and modernized like never before. Today we are one of the pillars of security in the region.

Together with allies as part of the NATO mission in Kosovo, KFOR, North Macedonia contributes to the security of Kosovo citizens. Together with our partners in the European Union, by participating in the EUFOR ALTHEA operation, we are strengthening the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina. By participating in NATO's multinational forces in Bulgaria and Romania, we guarantee the security of the Alliance eastern flank. We are stronger together is not just a motto, it is the way we perceive collective security.

When we talk about regional security, an issue that, as we could see through the messages shared by the Secretary General of the Alliance, Jens Stoltenberg here in Skopje, is high on the NATO Agenda, we must keep in mind that we are talking about a situation that is unpredictable and complex. In this part of Europe, we may not have a threat of a conventional nature, but our countries are continuously exposed to a plethora of disinformation campaigns that have their own goals, such as reducing trust in the institutions to cope with these challenges, reducing the interest of citizens in democratic processes, such as the population census, electoral processes, as well as filling the vacuum caused by the stagnation of the integration processes with the agendas of third countries that do not think well of our region.

The answer to these truly complex hybrid threats is actually very simple. Integration and only integration. Integrating into the Euro-Atlantic structures, regardless of whether we are talking about NATO or the European Union, or both NATO and the EU, these processes will oblige us to cooperate, coordinate and jointly search for answers, because hybrid threats do not recognize borders, ethnicities, religions. They only recognize societies that are ready or not to face this challenge.

Therefore, let's cut the Gordian knot and perceive our relations not as rivalry, but as an opportunity to create resilience together that will make the continuous attempts to exert influence fail.

Dear participants,

The European Union will be able to position itself as a significant geopolitical player on the global stage if it shows that it has a plan, especially for its closest neighborhood, that is, the Western Balkans. That is why the window of opportunity for the integration of the Western Balkans into the Union is now open. These opportunities do not open up often on the international political arena, and if we miss them, there is no certainty as to when the next opportunity will be presented. No responsible politician in our part of Europe must forget that. The cost of missing that opportunity is huge.

The European Commission proposes that the Union provide opportunities for strengthening the socio-economic convergence with the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, bringing the region closer to the single market of the European Union in many areas, as well as significant additional financial support. It is a significant step that should be welcomed.

Now is the time for each of our countries in the region and our political structures at home to show that they will translate into action what they have been stating persistently.

We need to be pragmatic and wise, which is not something new to us in North Macedonia. The signing of the Prespa Agreement showed our will to go through a process that, although difficult for many, had a higher purpose. Membership in NATO today gives us a voice to say – we are safe, we are secure, our democracy and values are preserved.

Regarding our path to full membership in the European Union, North Macedonia has just completed the screening process, followed by the opening of the membership chapters, which requires our decision and finalization of the process for constitutional amendments. We are holding this conference on the same day when European leaders are talking about the enlargement of the Union. Today we could have received good news for North Macedonia if we did not have an internal blockade by the opposition for constitutional amendments that would only confirm our democratic capacity and unique character. But we will not give up. The responsibility of the internal blockers of European integration is enormous, and unfortunately they are delaying the process, but they will not stop it.

My message is – we must not allow our country to fail in getting its well deserved place in the European Union.

Thank you.