

**Conference on Inter-parliamentary dialogue  
to further promote the European integration  
of the Western Balkans  
Skopje, 20 October 2023**

**Tiny Kox**

**President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe**

Dear All,

May I first thank you, President of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia for hosting and co-organising this conference on ‘inter-parliamentary dialogue to further promote the European integration of the Western Balkans’? May I also thank you, Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, for your participation and contribution to this event. And may I thank as well the Chairperson of the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy, and the Assembly’s rapporteur on Supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans, for all the work already done – and which remains to be done, today and in the future?

My opening remarks come directly from last year’s Western Balkans Resolution of our Assembly.

To strengthen democratic resilience and respect for the rule of law and human rights; to promote reconciliation and good neighbourly relations; and to create the conditions for economic and social progress in the region we call Western Balkans: these elements together could be an effective geostrategic investment in peace, stability, and democratic security for the whole of Europe, as formulated in our Resolution.

That is why our Assembly believes that helping Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo\* meet their aspirations for closer European integration is so important.

\*All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

Not only for the countries in this region in the heart of Europe, but for the European continent as a whole and for the benefit of all 700 million + European citizens.

History was written in 2003, in the Thessaloniki Summit between the Western Balkans and the European Union. Then, the European Union reiterated its support for the European perspective of this part of Europe. The prospect of EU membership acted as a catalyst for addressing challenges and introducing reforms. However, since Thessaloniki, the length of time and failure to adequately reward progress, have lowered political momentum and public enthusiasm. An increasing number of citizens in the region, especially amongst the youth, now are pessimistic about the prospects of EU accession. The European vision is losing its shine. In its place, ethnonationalism has resurfaced. This is a reason to worry – and an obligation to act better, without losing more time – we cannot afford it.

Therefore, the Assembly called last year for a new impetus to be given to the European Union enlargement process. We welcomed:

- the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (in 2022);
- the diplomatic efforts in addressing bilateral disputes including the Prespa agreement between Greece and North Macedonia (in 2018);
- the agreement which led to Bulgaria waiving its opposition to the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (last year);
- and the agreement on freedom of movement (reached in August 2022) by Pristina and Belgrade in the context of the EU-facilitated dialogue.

The countries of the Western Balkans do form a region. But they also have their own national history, their own successes and their own failures. That also does matter. As the President of Iceland said during his address to our Parliamentary Assembly in April when referring to what he called “positive patriotism”: this patriotism, - he said -, “can and should foster solidarity and support for each other in our societies. It should enhance our love and care for our nature and environment. It should connect our past, present and future. It should maintain and strengthen our diverse languages, cultures and customs”. He further added that Iceland could be an independent country, precisely because of its

interdependence with others. Independence and interdependence must go hand in hand. A lot of wisdom, which may also inspire you and me.

Therefore, our Assembly wants to help national progress, regional cooperation and European integration.

It urged the Western Balkans:

- to address outstanding challenges, such as a polarised political climate which often affects the collaboration between political forces and sometimes leads to interinstitutional deadlocks and conflicts;
- to address serious rule of law and good governance issues which affect the independence and impartiality of the judiciary and the functioning of the public administration as well as the fight against corruption;
- to address issues relating to the rights of national minorities and minority communities and the persistence of cleavages along ethnic lines which affect many aspects of life;
- and to address problems relating to freedom of the media and media ownership. Greater efforts are also necessary to strengthen reconciliation and enhance civil society engagement.

Much to be done, but the Council of Europe is ready to assist! Especially on democracy, rule of law and human rights, the Council of Europe has an unparalleled expertise. The Assembly therefore wants the Council of Europe to redouble its efforts to help the Western Balkan countries make tangible and measurable progress towards meeting the EU enlargement criteria.

The Council of Europe, I believe, should also play a greater role in promoting effective and inclusive regional co-operation, the normalisation of relations and the solution of bilateral differences and disputes, hand in hand with the European Union and other like-minded actors.

Therefore, we call on all other Council of Europe member States:

- to support the efforts of the Western Balkans to fully pursue their European vocation;
- to support the implementation of co-operation activities, including at parliamentary level, aimed at ensuring that this region makes further progress towards meeting the criteria for EU membership;

- to contribute financially to Council of Europe co-operation activities in the region and to the projects of the Council of Europe Development Bank targeting the Western Balkans;
- and to promote, through their diplomacy, reconciliation efforts and good neighbourly relations in the region.

As regards our own activities, our Assembly resolves to play a greater role in supporting a European perspective for the Western Balkans. I am looking forward to today's conference, hoping to find ways to achieve better European integration, in also using parliamentary diplomacy as an important and often useful toolbox.

Dear all,

We are living in challenging times. This region too. You know it better than I do.

But challenges can be met – if we want to.

Opportunities can be taken – if we do so.

Solutions can be found, can be created – if we dare to!

History is written, future is still to be written. I hope this conference contributes to this.

I thank you for allowing me to address you, now I will listen carefully to your contributions.