

Professor Danuta Hübner, Ph.D.
Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament
***Integration and connectivity of the Western Balkans – a new impetus to
EU enlargement policy***

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I was in Thessaloniki fifteen years ago and I remember the enthusiasm there when the European pledge toward Western Balkans states was made. That is why I would like to thank the Bulgarian presidency for insisting to get us together around the table for the Sofia Summit.

When I think of assets European Union has to be an important global player, what comes to my mind is the European, unfortunately rich, war experience, its capability to get 500 mln people together and enlargements. That is why I believe we should look at Western Balkans from a different angle that we normally do. The process that the European Union started back in 1990s which led to three enlargements and which has brought 13 new member states to the Union will not be completed without the Western Balkans.

Of course there are things that go wrong there but often they are not as bad as it might sound. For example, there are more foreign fighters from some of the EU Member States than from Western Balkans. Yet, the perception is very different.

The EU is the only option there. If we take it away, there is nothing left for them. Of course, after Sofia Summit, Western Balkans are back on European agenda. We should spare no effort to avoid that this will again die politically one day.

Let us also remember that during the Summit in Sofia we could see some differences between the region's expectations and what EU can deliver. So, yes, there are risks to the sustainability of the process.

EU has to become explicit on what it wants for the Western Balkans. Also, because they have their place on President Putin's EU destabilization agenda. Russia is

active in energy sector there, China in infrastructure investments. President Trump cuts on American engagement there, we lose a traditional partner. Our perspective has to be credible. We have to find better ways to drive the Western Balkans states toward a change to stop degradation of democracy and political system. We have to learn how not to see too late when bad things are coming.

Western Balkans have to be invited more often to the table, not only on migration. I trust that recreating a momentum on enlargement will create a momentum for further indispensable reforms.