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ADRIATIC IONIAN COUNCIL / EUSAIR MINISTERIAL MEETING

Belgrade, Wednesday 27th May 2020 (Via Videoconference)

SPEECH OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE AI, Amb. Giovanni Castellaneta

- Dear President, Ministers, Excellencies...
- It is a pleasure for me to be here today, as Secretary General of the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative, for the **fifth joint “Adriatic and Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting”**.
- Unfortunately, this year it is not possible to hold this meeting “in presence”. However, I am glad to see that, despite the unforeseen circumstances, our **spirit of cooperation is still alive and strong**.
- This year marks **the twentieth anniversary of the signature of the Ancona Declaration**, the founding document of this same organization.
- Twenty years on, **the same values - fostering political and economic stability, enhancing the European integration process, regional cooperation, mutual confidence, unity and solidarity** are now needed more than ever.
- Confirming our support to those values is essential **to elaborate an efficient and concrete response to this pandemic** and to its harsh economic consequences.
- Only by **working together** – as we have been doing over these years - we can overcome the extraordinary challenges posed by the coronavirus.
- I would like to **acknowledge all the help and assistance provided during the pandemic** by the countries participating in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region not only to each other, but also to their neighbours



PERMANENT SECRETARIAT

and towards the EU. This **spirit of a true and authentic European solidarity** deserves public praise, and it is a striking example of the solidarity and mutual support the EU is built on!

- Therefore, it **is now time to create momentum and to leverage on this opportunity** to further step up the integration process. We should do that also in light of the opening of the negotiations with the Commission for the **accession to the EU of Albania and North Macedonia**, and of the new political orientation towards a more credible perspective of EU integration for the Western Balkans.
- **The future of the Western Balkans is firmly in Europe.** These countries still demand for a full and comprehensive integration within the European Union.
- In this regard, I am **convinced that the Adriatic Ionian Initiative and its Permanent Secretariat will continue to be an essential tool** for fostering regional cooperation by further enhancing policy dialogue and cooperation among the ten Participating Countries. We will continue to support the European integration aspirations of the Western Balkans.
- This is a **significant test – we could even call it a “training camp” - for those Western Balkans Countries** that are approaching the EU membership. Cooperation in this context is beneficial as it facilitates their accession process and fosters a democratic, social and economic development across Europe.
- As far as our activities are concerned, **during the Serbian Chairmanship, the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative and its Permanent Secretariat have been able to foster a more active interaction** between roundtables and thematic steering groups and to achieve an almost perfect synchronism between the two exercises. This was possible thanks to frequent contacts and events organized in cooperation with Pillar Coordinators of the thematic steering groups, the Chairmanship-in-Office and the Permanent



PERMANENT SECRETARIAT

Secretariat.

- The **Adriatic and Ionian Initiative Round Tables** are now an instrument at disposal of Presidencies in order to make grassroots cooperation more effective, thanks to a bottom-up approach.
- Cooperation with Adriatic Ionian Fora has also registered a quantum leap thanks to the **special attention devoted by the Serbian Chairmanship of the Initiative to the role that Civil Society** can play in the EUSAIR process. Under Serbian Presidency for the first time in the history of the Initiative a new Chairmanship-in-office met the Fora of Civil Society at its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, demonstrating a growing awareness of the role and the contribution that the Civil Society is increasingly bringing – also through their involvement in the Round Tables mentioned above - to the EUSAIR Strategy process.
- Only through their full involvement and participation into the Macroregional process **we can apply the so-called principle of subsidiarity**, stressed in many occasions by the European Commission and essential for each and every macroregional strategy.
- It also worth mentioning that, since the very outset of this Chairmanship, **the Serbian Chamber of Commerce and Industry has become a regular member of the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce**, thanks to the work carried forward by the Serbian Presidency.
- I would really like to **thank the Serbian Chairmanship for the work done during this year and particularly Pavle Jankovic and Kristina Milosavljević** for having established a friendly, fair and efficient cooperation with the Permanent Secretariat.
- Furthermore, the Serbian Chairmanship has had the merit and the foresight to organize for the first time in the history of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative, besides many Round Tables, **a Round Table on “Labour Force Emigration”**. This event, which was held in Belgrade last November, was



PERMANENT SECRETARIAT

chaired by the **Serbian Minister of Labour and Social Affairs the Serbian Government, Zoran Djordjevic.**

- I can assure you that the **Permanent Secretariat of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative stands ready to cooperate with future Presidencies** in order to contribute to any potential follow-up of the meetings

- Unfortunately I deeply regret that - due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown - that has touched us all profoundly across the Region, **the second half of the envisaged activities of the Serbian Chairmanship under its Calendar, could not be held.** However, **I remain optimist and I strongly wish that we will soon be able to meet in person** and to deliver extremely successful activities for our community.

- Let me finally wish every success to the **incoming Slovenian Chairmanship** and to the Slovenian Delegation which has always demonstrated its firm and enduring commitment to our Initiative.

- Thank you for your attention.