

**Adriatic Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting
Sibenik, 15 May 2024**

Statement by Amb. Castellaneta, Adriatic Ionian Initiative Secretary General

Distinguished ministers,
Excellencies,
Honorable guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me thank the Chairmanship of Croatia and Mr. Gordan Grlić Radman, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and Mr Šime Erlić, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds, for the kind invitation and for the organization of the 9th joint Adriatic and Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting here in Sibenik, the oldest native Croatian city on the Adriatic.

2024 marked the 20th anniversary of the accession of ten new member states in the European Union, the biggest wave of enlargement since its foundation.

The big enlargement of 2004 was a transformative event for our continent. For the new members, joining the EU family has been a powerful engine for more prosperity. The spectacular rise of their GDP is the best proof.

For the EU as a whole it marked the reunification of a divided continent after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a powerful lever to increase prosperity and therefore stability and security in the entire continent.

Today, twenty years on, war is back in Europe. The next wave of enlargement is once again a date with history, a geopolitical imperative.

The desire to unite Europe and complete our Union is more important than ever before. The Western Balkans is moving ever closer to us. The decision of the European Council of 21 March 2024 to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina mark an historic milestone, confirming the European future of the country.

Candidate countries and EU Institutions have a lot of work to do now. For candidate countries, this means making the necessary reforms and solving all bilateral disputes. For the EU, it means reforming programmes, budgets and the decision-making model.

In 2004, our predecessors understood the scale of the challenge. Their goal was to reunite a continent scarred by centuries of war and division. Today, the test of our generation is to make our European Union stronger, more sovereign, more influential,

more integrated and more united. We are on the doorstep of another historic moment for our Union. We have a date with history.

If we prolong it indefinitely into the future, then we will end up with the same realities that we have today, that is, with the Western Balkans region outside the European Union, and I am not sure whether in the long term the EU, not only the Western Balkans, but the EU can withstand this.

These countries, which belong to Europe for their history, culture, political aspirations and geography, must join the European Union as soon as possible and without hesitation, finally obtaining the membership. This would greatly contribute to strengthening the stability of the entire region and of the European continent.

As for the All role, our commitment to the European integration remains one of the corner stones of the All mission.

For more than 20 years of its existence, this Initiative has significantly contributed to building trust, intensifying cooperation, integrating and adopting European values and standards. As Adriatic and Ionian Initiative, we will continue to support the European integration aspirations of the Western Balkans and supporting candidate in their bid for accession in the European Union.

But the high political level needs to go along with a bottom-up approach involving also the civil society. During these years we have been able to carve out our role as sponsor of the Adriatic and Ionian civil society (Chambers of Commerce, Cities, Universities) and stakeholders and I believe that their full involvement and participation in the process can provide an added-value.

I am really glad participating countries endorse the Joint Declaration of the 3 Fora of Civil Society on the Preservation and Promotion of the Mediterranean Diet in the Adriatic and Ionian Region as a tool oriented toward health and environmental sustainability.

I want also to commend the contribution of the All as a springboard for cultural and social exchanges, also increasingly involving the younger generations.

As Permanent Secretariat we have financed scholarships, university courses and internships. This means investing in our future and strengthening the solid bond of good friendly relations built over the years.

Let me conclude by thanking and congratulating the Croatian Chairmanship for the work done during this year and particularly Sanjin Vlastelica and Lidija Pansegrau Hadrović and their team for having established a friendly, fair and efficient

cooperation with the Permanent Secretariat. Croatia had the merit to put at the center of its Chairmanship, several key priorities for the future of our region, youth, women empowerment and the EU integration process.

I am convinced that what is emerging from the Sibenik Declaration can produce a qualitative step forward and sends a strong message in terms of importance of EU enlargement policy and on the positive outcomes that the youth engagement is producing.

I wish every success to the incoming Greek Chairmanship, which has always demonstrated its firm and enduring commitment to our Initiative.

THANK YOU.