

**Official Opening of the 9th EUSAIR Forum
Sibenik, 15 May 2024**

Statement by Amb. Giovanni Castellaneta, All 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, Mr Šime Erlić, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds and Nikolina Brnjac, Minister of Tourism and Sport for the kind invitation and for the organization of the 9th EUSAIR Forum in the beautiful city of Sibenik.

When almost 30 years ago the Dayton agreement put an end to the Balkan wars, the international community indicated the integration into the Euro-Atlantic institutions as the strategic objective to achieve stability and security in the Western Balkans. A commitment formally undertaken by the European Union with the Thessaloniki European Council 20 years ago.

The economic crisis that hit Europe from 2008 to 2015 and the many turbulences experienced by the European Union in recent years - from Brexit to the divergences on budgetary policies, from the Ukraine crisis to the migrant emergency, from the Covid-19 crisis to the green transition - have gradually postponed the acceptance of the Western Balkan nations.

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.

So, completing our Union also has a strong economic and geopolitical logic. If you look at the history of the last enlargement rounds, you see that they have shown that there are enormous benefits both for those countries which access the European Union and the European Union itself. Basically, we all win.

You can see that for the new members, their citizens and businesses, there is access to the four freedoms, access to the Single Market, citizens can travel, businesses have new markets. And all of this is a powerful lever to increase prosperity and therefore stability in these countries.

Enlargement is also an investment in our security. Because integrating new members in the European Union also shields them from foreign interference, and it therefore stabilises our neighbourhood. In times where we see the rules-based international order increasingly called into question, of course a larger and stronger European Union gives us a stronger voice in the world. In sum, enlargement is a unique opportunity both for the countries aspiring to join the European Union and, of course, for the Union itself. It is a driver for peace and prosperity that make our Union so special.

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

As Permanent Secretariat we make sure that the All role of “political anchorage” to the EUSAIR is implemented and that All activities are directed towards supporting the implementation and the accomplishment of the objectives of the EUSAIR. Enlargement remains the top priority for the All and throughout the years the All proved to be a good training camp to have EU and not-yet EU countries cooperating on an equal footing.

The All had also the idea to bridge the so-called Civil Society - the Adriatic-Ionian Fora - with the EUSAIR Strategy, so as to be able to channel the needs and requests but also ideas and proposals of the Civil Society within this complex mechanism, with a bottom-up approach. This has been requested in many occasions by the EU Commission to support the implementation of the Strategy.

I am therefore really glad that participating countries endorsed 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. A tool promoted by more than 150 Chambers of Commerce, Cities and Universities all together that can serve as a model for future policies and initiatives.

All this shows a high degree of complementarity with the EUSAIR, adding a more cultural and social dimension to the economic one. The overall result is a comprehensive set of strategies aimed at fostering integration in the region and at bringing it increasingly closer to the European Union.

In conclusion, I want to thank and congratulate the Croatian Chairmanship for the work done during this year and for having established a friendly, fair and efficient cooperation with the Permanent Secretariat.

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

THANK YOU.