REGIONAL APPROACH AND ACCESSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA IN EURO-ATLANTIC STRUKTURES
Regional approach and the approach of the Republic of Macedonia to the euroatlantic institutions

At the very beginning, allow me to dwell on the key issue, in my opinion, related to the main topic of this Forum on the further expansion of NATO and our place in this process of undeniably historic reference. Although at first glance, this is not related to the topic I have been invited to speak about today, I think that our concrete expectations of the date of our integration will considerably affect the intensity and scope of regional cooperation. Namely, some circles both in our country, and in the region, believe that the enlargement of the Alliance is a set axiom that cannot be changed and that the next rounds of integration of new members have to occur in cycles of 3 to 4 years.

In this context, it will be useful to recall the enlargement rounds so far and the conclusion that such a priori set cycles have never, in fact, existed. Simply said, the political and strategic considerations of the key NATO nations on their foreign political priorities and geo-strategic positioning were crucial for the accession of new members, and in this context, the accession criteria were important, but not the most dominant or decisive part of the overall set of arguments, in which, the political reasons have always had more specific significance than the implementation of the formal technical standards.

People need to be explained that it is possible for the Republic of Macedonia to do completely its “homework”, and still not be invited, because the dynamics of the NATO enlargement has its own internal logic that sometimes does not have a direct correlation with the individual achievements of the aspirant nations and their internal forecasts.

Regional approach is one of the basic categories of the NATO doctrine and represents, essentially, one of the key political and security “philosophies” of the North Atlantic Alliance, applied at micro level. In simple words, quality regional cooperation is, essentially, practising interoperability of the aspirants at a lower operational and tactical level and “de facto” test for involving them in so-called large scale and broad NATO-led operations in and beyond its traditional area of responsibility.
However, this is not all. The regional cooperation that brings together not only the permanent members and the aspirants, but also aspirants with other aspirants, means existence of a broader consensus on the political goals of such cooperation, and that, in its turn, accepting the common values of the Alliance, whose political, and even cultural dimensions or bases of existence, at least in the public eye, have never been so exposed as the military ones, although have always been equally important. Although the approach to the EU imposes identical requirements, that imply a high level of complementarities in the set of integration criteria for both entities, I am not completely sure that in the past years, the essence of the regional approach and cooperation has been completely incorporated in the dominant national political matrixes of thinking. My impression is that in the past ten years, the regional approach in the Balkans, including our country as well, has been accepted with serious reserve and has been only formally supported by the political authorities that have not fully understood the message sent from Brussels about the importance of the regional dimension of integrations. As an illustration: in some other parts of Europe, it would surely have been unusual for immediate neighbours to have a bilateral military exercise in 2003 for the first time, while previously declaring for a whole decade that they had the same strategic goal – integration to NATO; but, when it comes to the Balkans, it can happen.

Partial justification, on the one hand, may be the fact that the Balkans has really been overburdened by a testing and long series of interethnic conflicts and armed violence; on the other hand, there has been partial influence by the ideological inertness of communism that favoured only the cooperation between socialist nations. However, the impression remains that we have waited for too long to introduce a new quality in the regional cooperation in the Balkans.

In the next part of my presentation, I would like to touch upon the question why it is precisely this moment that certain positive moves are being made in the sphere of regional cooperation in our region and whether it is a question of a sudden inspiration of the state leaderships and consequence of the current political trends, or it entails an essential change of political reasoning.

In my view, there are several factors that have affected this direction of intensification, the primary one being the understanding of the idea of regional cooperation itself. In this context, the received invitations for NATO membership and the certainty for EU membership for the first Balkan nations were an additional inspiration and a clear indicator of the right way for the other countries. For the first time after the establishment of NATO, three former communist nations from the Balkans – Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania – received invitations for membership, which was a de facto confirmation that they have gone through the most difficult phases of the transition process, as well as a declaration of the successfulness of their security and defense system in ideological terms.

In addition, the enhanced regional cooperation is due to the fact that in our region, the overall security ambience has undergone an essential transformation after the series
of internal conflicts and wars between states. Although stability in the region still partially depends on several peace treaties and the presence of the international community, all governments in the region are legitimately elected and have reform and pro-western agenda.

Some assessments indicate that the end of last year marked the beginning of a new phase of regional cooperation in the area of defense and security, and in its framework, nations from the region have themselves started to produce initiatives and activities.

In November last year, just prior to the Prague Summit, we initiated a trilateral cooperation with Albania and Croatia, in NATO context that was formally supported in the margins of the second day of the Summit. The document envisaged post-Prague enhancement of the cooperation among the three remaining members of the Vilnius Group, that is, those that did not receive invitations. Of course, this was not done for the purpose of substituting the other forms of cooperation, both existing and planned, including the Riga initiative of the Polish president Kvasnievski for de facto fusion of the activities of the Vilnius and Visegrad groups. Although certain analytical circles are somewhat sceptic of these groups, whose members have different status and priorities in terms of NATO (some of them are members, while others only candidates), being capable of contributing to the coherence of the group; nevertheless, prevailing view is that they should continue with their activities based on the principles of solidarity and cooperation, until they join NATO. In this context, our initiative for hosting the heads of states of these two groups next year can be viewed as useful.

On 02 May 2003 in Tirana, on the basis of the Prague idea for trilateral cooperation, the Partnership Charter was signed, between the USA and Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. The Charter has extremely great political significance characteristic only of documents of strategic importance and influence that lasts longer than the duration of the ceremony of their formal signing and promotion. Essential provisions of this document, in my view, are articles 10, 16 and 30, where the USA clearly state that they have permanent interest in the independence, integrity and security of Albania, Croatia and Macedonia and declare that their common goal is full integration of these three states into the European and trans-Atlantic political, economic, security and defense institutions, and they even express willingness for joint consultations in case of a threat to the integrity of any of these states.

The political analysts with longer memory can recall very well the fact that the USA do not employ such rhetoric very often and do not pledge commitment without some deep reason. The Partnership Charter symbolizes that greatest tangible act of political support for the Republic of Macedonia on its way to NATO, especially given the fact that it has been received by a so-called pivotal state of the Alliance. According to all assessments, this triangle in the region would only add up to its importance if transformed into a square by involving Serbia and Monte Negro, of course, after they fulfil all the necessary requirements set forth by the Alliance and the international community as a whole.

Last but not least, I would like to point out one more issue. The geo-strategic positioning in the Balkans cannot be completed without knowing the final status of Kosovo.
In other words, in spite of the theses of certain national and international political and expert circles that suggest the opposite, the final status of Kosovo will undisputedly affect the final picture of the Balkans.

In this, in my view, relatively positive and favourable political and strategic ambience, we may not reach the projected goal now only if new large-scale conflicts emerge in our country or in the region, or if the enthusiasm of the political elites for implementation of the reform process radically decreases. Not going into details about the probability of each of these possibilities, in both cases the country would be marked as undemocratic or even failed state, which would of course entail a completely different treatment by the overall international community, including NATO, and our low positioning in the table of candidates, or even shifting to a lower status category.

My assessment is that it mostly depends on us if we will allow such development.
Regional cooperation and coordination as precondition for faster NATO membership

NATO membership is a challenge for many countries in the world and in this regard, several key questions are being asked: how to make that membership operable and what is the way to its realization; how to turn that vision into reality and put it into practice? In answering these questions, one should begin from the nature and proportion of the changes that peep over the horizon as well as from the possibility whether the states can prepare themselves to respond to new challenges, which are required by probable NATO membership.

The approach to the Euro-Atlantic institutions and organizations mainly through the EU and NATO membership has to remain the main goal for the countries in the region which will be realized through a gradual and continual process. This certainly requires permanent and constant attention as well as effort so as to remove all the obstacles on this road. For the peoples from this region the European and transatlantic perspective remains one of the most important guarantees for their security.

Close connection and cooperation among the states is historically necessary and lawful manifestation. The world inevitably develops more and more regardless the social forms of economic development of certain countries. This fact from its side unavoidably sets in first plan the form of political cooperation among the states and their connection in solving the problems that have a common character.

In striving to develop the concept of dependence as asymmetric interdependence among the states, one comes to the so-called sensible interdependence and vulnerable interdependence. The first one is a synonym for the relations founded on mutual conditioning of the partners, and the second one for the relations that are being established on subordination and comprise something more than mutual conditioning of the partners.
Macedonian interests have been constantly tied on achieving overall stability, security and development of South-Eastern Europe. Republic of Macedonia continuously strives for regional approach towards democracy, controlling the sources that trigger conflicts and constant strengthening of the reforms that are directed toward achieving the final goal and that is an EU and NATO integration.

Regional cooperation should not in any case be promoted as a substitute for the European cooperation and integration, nor should it look like that. On the contrary, it has to be organized in a form of close contact with the European and trans-Atlantic organizations and institutions, as an irreplaceable part of the process of European integration.

Regional cooperation should create conditions under which the question for territorial integrity within the security borders will lose its essential security meaning.

Governments from the region should cooperate and create capabilities for parallel analysis and comparison of different issues that are relevant for the problems related to security. At the same time, specific structures have to be created that will be coordinated at the highest level. Their prime aim would be exchanging information and dialogue at the highest state level together with engagement of political services, experts, and media for raising an overall awareness. They would also contribute to timely warning and giving common estimation for the security no matter where the threats come from.

Therefore, there should be considered the fact that the list of priorities and moves that should be drawn by the governments could not be overemphasized and based on something that is unreal, but on the contrary, they should rely on genuine basis.

The development of regional cooperation (political, economic and other) is also a manner that could contribute to achieving integration into numerous organizations. Regional cooperation also permits standardization of rules and practice and increases the operability and organizational capability and capacities. So far, the history has shown that regional cooperation in great extent reduces the risk from international clash or rivalry among friendly states.

Efficient organization of regional cooperation is a unique means for strengthening the security and promoting a Euro-Atlantic perspective. This cooperation should be political and at the same time, it should be directed towards one aim. Within that frames cooperation should guarantee territorial order and territorial integrity of every country in the region, creating simultaneously mechanisms for protection of the minorities, as well as strengthening of the international cooperation. Among the distinctive goals, cooperation in the area of security at all levels will play a central role, including the cooperation for preventing crime, and especially emphasizing the combat against international crime and terrorism.

In general, as we have pointed out, cooperation could evolve in the area of organized crime. Combating organized crime is a problem that countries cannot solve by themselves. This problem has taken international dimensions. Its solution demands not only regional cooperation but also a new way of thinking of political elites. In order to succeed combating this evil regional cooperation and coordination of joint activities is needed.
Organizing joint exercises and operations of border units along the border could be another type of cooperation among countries. This would lead to synchronizing activities for successful combating new threats such as organized crime and terrorism. Such kind of cooperation will surely be impossible if there is a lack of political will.

In a course of strengthening the cooperation of the states in the region and as a condition for faster integration in the international organizations, countries from the region should undertake further measures and activities for improvement of the regional and especially the bilateral cooperation, such as:

a) measures for enhancing mutual trust and cooperation:
- promoting border cooperation and meetings;
- forming combined teams in the field of security and defence;
- preparing joint strategy for the region for its NATO membership, and forming joint body through which it will be achieved coordination of the activities for combating terrorism and organized crime;

b) economic measures:
- funding projects for infrastructural connection of the region;
- unification of customs formalities for faster and simpler flow of goods and capital;
- establishment of good foreign trading relations for easier foreign - trading exchange among the countries in the region.

c) political measures:
- training personnel who will work on the integration of the region;
- ad hoc groups, conferences, bilateral and multilateral meetings at highest working level for solving important political issues in the region etc.

Republic of Macedonia is interested for accomplishing full cooperation with the countries from the region, in direction of further advancement and creation of conditions for common recital that should shorten the way for NATO membership.

In that course, the Republic of Macedonia undertakes numerous activities for improvement of the situation in the region.

As a result of our endeavors, in Prague we gained support from Albania and Croatia for our initiative for more intensive regional cooperation in the area of defense and security. In the last period, we have witnessed continuous activities that are in direction of accomplishing the strategic goal of the three countries, and that is NATO membership.

However, there is an opinion that in future time the Governments from the region can strengthen the security in their states and the region as a whole only by solution of the external problems in their countries. One could say that strengthening the security in the region depends on strengthening the security in the very countries.

Security and stability of the countries in the region depend on two principles: invariability of borders and respect of state identity of the countries on one side and absolute protection and integration of minorities and national or ethnic communities within the state institutions on the other side.
The EU and NATO have central security power in the region, so the region and its stability directly depend on them. That is why, the countries in the region will still be economically, politically and military dependent on the EU or NATO. If one analyses the current situation of these countries one can with certainty say that the economic and financial help by the Euro-Atlantic community determines their long-term survival.

One could expect that the international community will gradually withdraw from the region and people should do more for themselves. If the countries from the region do not open themselves and intensify their cooperation, the international community will be powerless to offer solutions. It seems that the people got used that even in such circumstances when countries do not cooperate, the international community will do the necessary minimum effort and, for certain misses there will always be a responsible person to point to. Leaders from the countries in the region should finally undertake the risk and be prepared to make big decisions but also to contradict public opinion that will always be reserved for the undertaken steps. In other words, countries need leaders who will offer sustainable solutions to their citizens and countries. On the other hand, the responsibility of the international community will continue and will refer to encouraging such leaders in their activities. The support should be constant but the solution should be initiated and emerge from the region. If solutions do not emerge from here then every solution will be interpreted as imposed and people will not accept it.

In a situation when the world is burdened with great challenges for peace and stability of the countries, the crises and conflicts being present in many parts of the globe, coordination of defense in every country represents a very important task for the state leadership. Coordination of defense enables creation of conditions for organized action in case of emergency of threat for the country.

In terms of greater disorder of peace and security the realized cooperation and the way of its accomplishment is particularly important for the necessary coordination with the international institutions, especially with the UN, the Security Council, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the EU, NATO and of course coordination among the countries in the region.

For the countries in the region of the Republic of Macedonia, strengthening functional cooperation expressed in number of areas represents alternative and possibility for their advancement. Nevertheless, without completion of the process of EU and NATO enlargement, the security zone in the region will still be sensible.