

Remarks by President Charles Michel after his meeting with President of the Republic of North Macedonia Stevo Pendarovski

Thank you very much, Mr President, for this meeting. The purpose of my visit, a few weeks after I took office at the European Council, is to deliver an ambitious first message. I have just shared with you my conviction that the future and the destiny of North Macedonia are European. And I think it is very important that in the European Council we should take the opportunity – and that is my intention at the March summit – to continue discussions on how we can keep progressing with that ambition. And the strategy I wish to propose to my colleagues in the European Council is based on three pillars.

The first pillar, which you have mentioned, is working over the coming days and weeks to try to agree on a reform and modernisation of the enlargement process. Because I have observed over some weeks that there are several European countries for which it is important to give this process more political leadership, more tangible results, and to ensure that relationships can be developed that lead to a mutual interest in which this process is clearer and stronger.

The second point is the question, which will be raised again in the European Council, of the start of negotiations with North Macedonia and with Albania. Here I would like to stress my awareness of all the efforts that have been made, the important reforms carried out and the whole process of reforms that must be kept up over the coming weeks and months, to continue to implement in particular the Prespa Agreement and the treaty of friendship with Bulgaria. I am fully conscious that the issues involved are extremely important and extremely sensitive, but that they can be moved forward.

And finally, the third point I would like to emphasise is a very powerful ambition, one which we have discussed with the President and the Prime Minister. That is the need, as I consider it, given that over the coming weeks the European Union will have to agree on its next European budget, for an investment and growth strategy for the Western Balkans. It seems to me extremely important to be able, in conjunction with these structural reforms on the rule of law, the fight against corruption and against crime, also to work on short-, medium- and long-term investment ambitions. As you see, we will have the opportunity to discuss these matters in greater depth over dinner this evening. I believe that this is an extremely important issue for this country and for the European Union.

The message I wish to give you through this visit and these meetings is that of the European Union's commitment to ensuring that there is a common European destiny. I wish also to convey another message, that of the need to continue, intensively, the dialogue we are already engaged in and which we

are going to continue, because it is important to achieve unanimity in the European Council, to bring about agreement among all European countries on this common objective.