

Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Distinguished colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to attend this European debate event – European Forum Wachau. Since 1995 this Forum has aimed to strengthen the “closeness to citizens” and serve as an incentive and discussion platform for many Euro-political decisions. With this year’s theme, I hope we together get to the actions that will make Europe closer to us all!

Just a couple of months ago we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties. The Declaration of Rome, adopted by the Heads of State and Government on March 25th, 2017, rightly makes the important point that over the decades since the end of the Second World War the democratic nations of Europe have succeeded in building a community of peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, a major economic power with unparalleled levels of social protection and welfare.

The Rome Declaration speaks loudly about our great achievements. The pride we take in those achievements is fully justified. But at the same time the Rome Declaration identifies a crucial challenge for the future, namely that we must listen more attentively and better respond to the concerns of our citizens.

Our world today faces many serious challenges – terrorism, migration, climate change, slow economic growth. Some of those are universal, others – more regional challenges. Some are internal, others – external for the EU. That creates a sense that our world is in a crisis. In our European context, that creates the sense that the EU is a model in crisis. A model that is being contested by powerful external factors and forces who want to diminish our European project in order to advance their own. In this environment it becomes more and more difficult for the European citizens to retain their belief in the rules of the system our democratic societies are run by.

**TRUST IN THE EU.**

To be fair, we have to commit that the last couple of decades have seen a global rise of disaffection with mainstream politics, in and outside the EU. Numerous studies have clearly shown that trust has been declining not just towards politics, but also

towards business, media and the NGO sector. There is a loss of belief in the System. The sense that the System is in crisis, intensifies people's fears – fears from globalization, immigration, eroding social values, etc. These fears further deepen the distrust in institutions and politics in general. In the European context this translates into distrust not only towards the national political systems but also towards the EU. If we are to successfully tackle the problem with low public trust in the EU and national authorities, we need to be fully aware of just how big this problem is. We must bring the EU closer to the citizens. This is crucial, if we want to preserve those achievements we have made in Rome.

#### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Since the onset of the global economic and financial crisis in 2008 we have witnessed a significant decline in the level of trust in the EU, which reached its lowest point in 2013-2014. During the pre-crisis years, the public distrust towards the EU was running between 20 and 40%.

For example, in 2007 the public distrust was 23% in Spain, 28% in Italy, 36% in Germany, 40% in France. At the same time in the Member States from Eastern Europe the level of public distrust towards the EU was significantly lower. For instance, it did not exceed 15% in Bulgaria; the situation was similar in Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic.

Towards the end of 2014 after slowly recovering from the crisis, which brought consequent painful public spending cuts, the level of trust in the EU in those same countries was on average 15 to 20% lower. The most salient example was Spain, where a hefty 70% distrusted the EU. Today, just as 10 years ago, there are significant variations across EU. For example, the distrust towards the EU was never as low in the Member States from Eastern Europe, where – conversely – the trust towards the home democracy has generally been much lower than towards the EU. The level of trust towards the EU declined in the Member States from Eastern Europe, but remained higher than in the other Member States. An example for this being Bulgaria, where in 2007 the public trust towards the EU, was 76%, while in 2015 it declined to 56%. In Greece the public trust of 65% in 2007 has declined to 18%, only 8 years later.

To sum-up with a phrase from the Commission's White Paper on the Future of Europe, around a third of Europeans trust the EU today, compared to half of Europeans 10 years ago.

This is no doubt a worrying trend that places the future of our Union at risk.

Reversing it should be among our top priorities. We need to remember well that weak trust in the EU, if we don't deal with it, might damage the cohesion within the EU and undermine the Member States governments' desire and ability to seek common European solutions to common European problems.

#### SOLUTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE TRUST:

First, we must stop once and for all blaming Brussels for the problems, while at the same time taking credit for the success at home. There are no winners in such an approach of finger-pointing at others. It only plays in the hands of our opponents.

Second, we have to employ more and more evidence-based policies and be ready for multiplicity not uniformity of solutions. We have to work for solutions, which are synchronized with the growing diversity of Member States' contexts.

Third, we have to work hard to increase the in-depth knowledge among European citizens about how the EU works. What is the real added value it brings to our everyday life? Would anybody believe that in a just few days' time we could have got rid of the roaming fees without the EU?

Forth, we must demonstrate convincingly to our citizens that the EU has the ability to gain from globalization. Let us not forget that only a few years ago the free movement of people, goods and services was impossible. The EU brought us the opportunity to work anywhere we want to, to have free access to information and benefit from the diversity of the common market.

There is also a fifth, the basis of trust lies in the conviction that the actions of European institutions will be tailored to the wishes and needs of the people. The sense of fairness of all EU citizens is the highest indicator of the quality of the work of the institutions in the Union. Therefore, in my opinion, the rule of law and justice lies at the heart of increasing citizens' trust in the Union.

#### JUSTICE CLOSER TO THE CITIZENS:

The access to the judicial system is rather difficult for citizens. Especially if civil, administrative or commercial cases are to be dealt with, or gaining access to information. For people, the obstacles are huge and require more effort, time and money that they do not have.

We must work towards changing the judicial system from the inside. We have to inform citizens' awareness through new technologies.

We should bring justice closer to the citizens by simplifying and speeding up court procedures, through preserving the judicial proceedings that protect their fundamental rights.

#### REDUCING BUREAUCRACY:

One of the elements of simplification is the reduction of bureaucracy. This is the demand of citizens and businesses. Ensuring simplified procedures, easier to use and accessible to all is the way to eliminate bureaucracy in the administration. Less bureaucracy brings to more efficiency and growth of business. All this leads to richer societies.

Apart from the rule of law, another important aspect of increasing confidence in the EU is the sense of security both in the community and the individual.

#### COMMON DEFENSE POLICY:

Bulgaria supports the efforts to strengthen European security and defense through more effective use of existing instruments, including the establishment of Permanent Structured Defense Cooperation. The criteria for taking part into this cooperation must be sufficiently flexible, taking into account the capabilities and comparative advantages of the individual Member States. When Bulgaria takes over the rotating presidency of the EU, we will continue to work actively to meet the set common goals.

Particularly important are the regional cooperation in the field of security, the efforts to overcome the causes of radicalization among young people. The involvement of education, culture and environment, and successful cooperation in these areas will create perspectives for better life of young people of the Middle East. This is a constructive approach to the complex issue of migration. Bulgaria is ready to engage actively with its contribution to the ongoing initiatives and to work for their

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development.

Account should be taken of Bulgaria's contribution to the protection of the external borders of the European Union. Our entry into Schengen will allow the country to be even more effective.

The new challenge of Brexit puts the European Union at the heart of resolving fundamental issues related to the future of the Eurozone and the Union as a whole. We must make use of these lessons as an advantage in building our common future. Having just mentioned Brexit, let me say that the serious internal risk for the EU that Brexit no doubt poses is also an opportunity that we must seize. The strong, almost unprecedented, unity of EU27 on the methods, principles and priorities of the pending negotiations with the United Kingdom creates unique opportunities to introduce new impulses for the future development of our European project. The internal threat of disintegration, coupled by the weakened reliance on traditional partnerships, such as with the US, has so far been a deterrent against further undermining the unity and solidarity of the EU. The recent elections in several EU Member States have so far confirmed that observation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite the challenges and setbacks, despite the trust deficits of the last years, studies clearly show that the EU continues to be a beacon of hope for a large majority of Europeans. According to recent Eurobarometer data three quarters of our citizens – from all corners of our Union associate the EU with hope, while over 80% are solidly in favour of the Single Market's four freedoms. On a more personal note, I can only emphatically confirm that as a woman from Eastern Europe, where for half a century generations of people could only dream for the hope that united and democratic Europe stands for!

I am convinced that European leaders need to work on a daily basis to restore the trust of all citizens to the institutions. Institutions and politicians need to be more accessible and closer to people, otherwise all efforts for innovation and development become meaningless.

I will share with you one of my favorite remarks of Martin Luther King: "Time is always right when you want to do the right thing." The only way towards a strong Europe is the unity in actions in order to change citizens' perception of the Union. I believe that the future of Europe is a stronger European Union than ever. A Union

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with a stable civil trust in the institutions, with high security for citizens, and preserved diversity.

The road between the institutions and the citizens, as well as between the various EU member states is one - tolerant and transparent work from all of us!

Thank you for your attention!