Transcript:

*On the possibility of a new date for Albania and North Macedonia to begin EU accession talks*

“First of all, it is particularly important that the European Union continues to discuss the questions of the Western Balkans. So, if there is a discussion in April that would be significant. However, I am not, at the moment, very optimistic about the chances that North Macedonia or Albania for starting accession negotiations or getting a date to start these negotiations. The reason is that I do not think Bulgaria will, at the moment, compromise on its demands and there has not been any big progress in efforts aiming to find a solution between Skopje and Sofia. Also, Albania will hold elections in April. So, we should expect to see how the elections will run and whether countries like the Netherlands will be more willing to give the “green light” to Albania to start accession negotiations.”

*On the recent initiative taken by 9 EU member states including Greece to ask in a letter to Joseph Borrell to bring Western Balkans back on the EU agenda*

“I think this initiative is particularly important and it comes at the right moment after a period, during the German EU presidency that we have seen intensive efforts on the part of the EU to find a solutionand start accession negotiations with North Macedonia. I believe that at the moment we see a bit slowing down of these efforts; there are several reasons for this, the EU is totally preoccupied with tackling the effects of the pandemic and the roll out of the vaccinations etc., but the situation in the Western Balkans is not getting better, it is actually getting worse, while the Covid 19 pandemic has also been one more occasion in which the EU has not done its best and at the same time other players like Russia or China have been very active and filling the void that the EU is leaving behind in the region. So, I think it is significantly important that some countries that are more interested in seeing the WB joining the EU being very vocal about this issue, especially during a period which is important and sensitive for enlargement”.

*On whether the new Enlargement methodology could produce further delays of the process*

“The new methodology that has been pushed by France is a fact. There has been a lot of discussions about whether this has been the right thing to do at that specific moment, but it reflects I think that France and other countries were not very happy that the European Commission was leading the process and for some time there has not been enough trust towards the Commission and some countries including France wanted to see the member states being even more influential in the process of enlargement and making sure that the process would be more political and less technocratic. So, as I said it is a fact, there is a new methodology now. What the EU needs to do with it is another story. I think it is important that after this little crisis that was produced when France blocked the start of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia, it is important now that France, Germany and other key players in the EU demonstrate that with the new methodology, the enlargement process should be revitalized, and the WB should feel that they have a future within the EU”.

*On why Athens is not mediating on the Skopje – Sofia dispute*

“I think Greece is not feeling very comfortable in intervening in this dispute. I think this is wrong since it has excellent relations with both Bulgaria and now with North Macedonia. Additionally, I believe that it has enough diplomatic capital to try being a friend to both and possibly to mediate between the two sides. Why is Greece not doing that? I do not know. I think probably the reason is that Greece is too much preoccupied with the problem of Turkey or even that the government under Nea Dimokratia does not feel very comfortable working with North Macedonia or using the Prespa Agreement -for which it has been against while in opposition – to actually build a partnership with Skopje.”

*On whether Turkey is the “magnet” of Greece’s foreign policy*

“It is fair to say that Greece’s problems with Turkey these days are so big that Greece does not invest enough diplomatic capital in other problems. The relations with Turkey the last couple of years have been the most difficult in the last 15-20 years. As you know we have a long history of turbulent relations with Turkey, but these relations have become extremely difficult and sensitive and volatile in the last couple of years. And of course, Greece is investing a lot of energy, a lot of diplomatic capital in building relations with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean or the wider Middle East, countries that could help its diplomatic efforts to count the problem with Turkey. Having said that I think that Greece could do more in the Balkans. Every now and then our Foreign Minister reiterates the country’s commitment to see all the WB joining the EU and sometimes Athens takes part in initiatives aiming to revitalize the enlargement process, but I think much more could be done. One direction of is of course enlargement and in this context, we should be doing more to help Albania and North Macedonia to start accession negotiations and another direction should be to make full use of the potential of the Prespa Agreement, the implementation of the core provisions of the Agreement but also working more to build a long-term partnership with North Macedonia. North Macedonia can become possibly the key partner, the most important partner of Greece in the region and for that to happen, we need to do more to engage with North Macedonia and help with its EU accession path”.

*On the idea of some key EU member states that the WB will not move forward before any solution of the Serbia – Kosovo issue*

“It is a complicated issue and difficult question in general. It is fair assessment to say that many EU member states would like to see the WB eventually joining the EU, but they do not see that happening without Serbia. Serbia is a central country of the remaining WB 6, it is the biggest country, the biggest economy in the region and especially important geopolitically. Therefore, they think that many efforts should be invested in helping Serbia follow the EU path and the rest can follow Serbia. Of course, that is not easy because the biggest problem Serbia has in the process of joining the EU is indeed the Kosovo problem. Serbia does not accept the independence of Kosovo and in mind, this is irreversible while most EU member states have recognized Kosovo. So, this is a very complicated situation and will continue in the coming years. I think that if we are to see the WB in the EU this has to be together with Serbia and probably Belgrade leading the way. I do not think there is an appetite to see the smaller countries of the WB joining without Serbia and for that reason, I see that the EU will continue to find a solution to the Kosovo – Serbia problem. But it is exceedingly difficult to find a solution to this. Therefore, the entire enlargement process is also to some extent tight to the question of Serbia – Kosovo and whether a solution could be found soon”.