The corona crisis is dividing the continent. However, there is also hope, as the EU is demonstrating its strengths in the accession negotiations in the Western Balkans.

The united Europe is facing the greatest challenge in its history. The corona crisis has dealt a severe blow to the continent and exacerbated the debate on fair burden-sharing between north and south. However, there is also good news.

The EU recently gave Albania and North Macedonia the go-ahead for the opening of accession negotiations. This was not a matter of course. We had to work hard to make this happen. But Europe will benefit, particularly at this dramatic time when we face an unparalleled stress test because of the coronavirus. Despite all the necessary focus on crisis management, we must not forget our geopolitical interests, especially now.

The lift-off for Skopje and Tirana is richly deserved. Both countries have made impressive progress, constantly worked on an ambitious reform agenda and refused to allow themselves be thrown off course by setbacks.

Albania has launched unprecedented judicial reform. In addition to its major reforms on strengthening democracy and the rule of law, North Macedonia made history in the best sense of the word by resolving the dispute on its name with Greece.

That is why our decision is right. It sends an important message to the entire region, namely that it can rely on the EU. It shows that reform efforts and painful compromises to resolve conflicts and achieve reconciliation are worthwhile. And it proves that the EU stands by its word!

**Democracy and the rule of law are at the heart of the EU**

Democracy and the rule of law are at the heart of the European idea. The EU’s new accession methods put an even greater focus on lasting reforms in these key sectors. The fact that EU member states will take on even more responsibility for the accession process from now on is likely to prove beneficial.  
One thing remains unchanged -

the path to EU accession is coupled with clear conditions. There is certainly no such thing as “automatic accession”, as some people fear. Instead, we are talking about the first stage of an arduous path that is likely to take years. We will guide and actively support Albania and North Macedonia on this path.

Not only is it in the Western Balkans’ interests to have very close ties with the EU, it is also in our own key strategic interests. The EU needs to significantly step up its engagement and raise its profile in the region.

If it does not do so, other powers that care little for our values will move in to fill these gaps. We cannot allow that to happen because the Western Balkans are Europe’s inner courtyard. In the long term, a great deal is at stake for us all, not least peace, reconciliation and stability in the region and in Europe as a whole.

The corona crisis and the deprivations it brings are a painful reminder of what Europe has achieved and what it offers, in particular our liberty and freedom of movement.

**The EU must remain capable of taking action and making decisions**

The go-ahead for accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania is all the more important now, when we face a collective stress test. We are showing clearly that the EU remains capable of taking action and making decisions despite a dramatic crisis of historic proportions. And even at a time of crisis, we are not losing sight of our strategic interests. We need to think now about a “post-corona world”.

This world will be different. And corona will permanently change our Europe. It is all the more important that we choose the right course, thus leaving absolutely no one in doubt that the future of the Western Balkans is in the EU!

Right now, social distancing is vital to curb the pandemic. But in politics, we need the exact opposite, especially now. EU partners must become even closer and play as a team.

This is essential because we can only overcome this unparalleled challenge by working together. We cannot afford national sensitivities or procrastination when it comes to taking action. Borders and national egoism are a matter of supreme indifference to the virus. And some countries, including those of the Western Balkans, urgently need our assistance.

As the EU, we have a special responsibility to the region and that is why we are currently mobilising immediate support for it. Let us take this opportunity to show what European solidarity means, including in our inner courtyard!

The people of the region must feel that they can count on us, both during the corona crisis and on their path to EU accession. And unlike China, Russia or Turkey, we offer democracy, the rule of law, freedom, human rights, prosperity and regional reconciliation. It is these values that make Europe so precious and unique.