

**Opening statement of Vladimir Makei,  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus,  
at the Meeting of the CEI Ministers for Foreign Affairs  
*Minsk, 22 July 2017***

Distinguished Ministers and Heads of Delegations,  
Esteemed Alternate Secretary General,  
Dear Guests,

Frankly, today's event is of very special nature for Belarus, which is honoured to find itself in the driving seat of the CEI for the first time. As it was just mentioned at the frank and open discussion with the President of the Republic of Belarus, we see this as a unique occasion to revive the engagement of our country in European integration processes. We would also like our Presidency in the CEI to contribute as much as possible to consolidating our region against the background of emerging new challenges.

Many of them, such as the ongoing migration crisis and artificial antagonism between integration models, demonstrate a striking level of interdependence between our states. They pose a serious threat to stability and sustainable economic development, provoke social tensions and inflame old conflicts. It is now more obvious than ever before that the only way to tackling these phenomena lies through concerted efforts of all countries in Europe. There is no room for selective dialogue, where those "not European enough" are ignored or set aside.

Instead, despite the grave lessons of the past, we are arriving to a point where peace and security in our region is at stake. Unless we act now, we may find ourselves in a dead end with new walls at best, as a bitter alternative to open confrontation.

It is time to finally admit that there can be no "one-size-fits-all" political integration in Europe. It is inarguable that European countries should continue to follow their aspirations towards common democratic values, rule of law and human rights. However, there can be no universal recipe for instant democracy. Many of our states are relatively young and have different historical backgrounds and distinct traditions of statehood. It is hardly possible to imagine a society that would transform overnight based only on the political commitments of its leaders. On the contrary, overambitious expectations give rise to political instability and opposite results. Genuine transformation requires time, patience and trust.

We have to acknowledge and praise the diversity of all countries on our common continent. Although this sometimes makes it hard to reach political consensus, such diversity is a priceless asset for trade, innovation and economic development. Economy remains the main nexus between our states and the main pillar of European integration. For this very reason it is exceptionally important, at now, to evade downshifting to a multi-speed Europe in economic terms. The long-awaited achievements of the past 25 years since the fall of the Iron Curtain in terms of free trade, alignment of standards, increased mobility should not be sacrificed in favour of unrealistic political targets or block policies.

Pragmatic economic integration is a vital prerequisite to ensure prosperity for Europe at large in the modern world, with increased competition from new emerging centres of power and growth.

The countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe have a special and challenging role in this process. Located at a crossroads between Europe and Asia, they are often the first to suffer in case of tensions between larger geopolitical stakeholders. At the same time, this position is a huge advantage in economic terms. Not only Belarus, but many other countries in our region see themselves as a gateway on main routes between the East and the West. Yet, it is hardly possible to use this strategic advantage unless we ensure pragmatic dialogue, compatibility and interoperability among various integration platforms on our continent.

The present setting makes the Central European Initiative increasingly relevant as a forum created to work for cohesion of a united Europe. Over the last quarter of a century, the CEI proved to be a useful and flexible platform for pragmatic dialogue and cooperation among its Member States with particular focus on economic and social issues. Active in such areas as transport, energy efficiency, regional development and many others, the CEI is engaged in effective project cooperation with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. As a long-time partner of the European Union, our Organisation has unique experience and capacity to transpose vital transition knowledge and know-how on to the Balkan States and the Eastern Neighbours of the EU, further assisting their approximation to European standards and practices.

Even more importantly, at present the CEI boasts a very diverse constituency of countries that participate in various integration formats and organisations: the European Union, the Visegrad Group, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Council of the Baltic Sea States,

the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Commonwealth of Independent States. Our countries also participate in important diplomatic initiatives such as the Berlin Process, the Eastern Partnership, the One Belt – One Road Initiative and the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. As it was also highlighted earlier today by the Head of State, Belarus is the only CEI country that is also the founding Member of the Eurasian Economic Union – a new integration entity further to the East, which has a special meaning for sustainable economic development in our region.

This endows the CEI with a unique potential to serve as a hub between these various integration processes. We should fully use it with particular focus on practical elements of connectivity. For this very reason Belarus chose promoting connectivity in a Wider Europe as the core topic of its Presidency in the CEI.

It covers various aspects of connectivity, which are important and complementary for cohesion not only among CEI Member States, but also between different integration formats. Above all, this includes development of key infrastructural interconnections within the CEI Region with account of such policy frameworks as the Trans-European Transport Network and China's Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we have to broaden interaction of the CEI with international financial institutions, such as the EBRD, the European Investment Bank, the World Bank and Asian infrastructural funds. At the same time, we also need to address the so-called paper bottlenecks to make full use of existing infrastructure. This includes harmonization of trade-related standards, digitalization of procedures and services, support of grassroot entrepreneurship and innovation along the main transit corridors.

Obviously, it is difficult to expect a rapid breakthrough in dealing with these complex, multidisciplinary issues. We have to move in small steps, without setting any unaccomplishable timeframe. Even little drops eventually hollow the hardest stone.

As you know, on 8 June in Minsk we held a special CEI Ministerial Conference on Connectivity and Compatibility in the CEI Region in relation to the One Belt – One Road Initiative. This event was attended by line ministries of the CEI Member States, representatives of China, the European Union, the Eurasian Economic Union, the UN Economic Commission for Europe, the EBRD, the World Bank and many others, proving the high attention to the mentioned subjects and their increased

relevance. The Conference was held back-to-back with the Meeting of the CEI Heads of Chambers of Commerce on the same day, which showed great interest of the business community in finding viable solutions to foster the practical aspects of connectivity. We hope that these events will receive further continuation and follow-up, both at decision-making level and in expert groups.

It is equally important to continue expanding the CEI's outreach to other European and international organisations in order to jointly address complex challenges. To this end, we should further develop links with the United Nations, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the International Organisation for Migration, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, the Energy Community Secretariat and all others that express their interest towards closer engagement with the CEI. Notably, on 9 June in Vienna we held a joint CEI-OSCE High-Level Expert Meeting on improving the International Response to Large Movements of People with participation of the IOM and the ICMPD. We hope that it will not only contribute to solving the pressing migration problems, but also blaze the trail for reinforced project cooperation between the CEI and the OSCE.

Last but not least, we should continue the process of the CEI reform to better tailor our Organisation to the changes in our region over the last decade. Started last year under the aegis of the Bosnian Presidency, this undertaking is crucial for updating the core areas of CEI's activities, regular cooperation formats and mechanisms. It could also help in elaborating the new CEI Plan of Action for 2018-2020. We hope that, with due account of positions of all the CEI Member States, this process may give rise to concrete decisions for adoption at key CEI high-level events in 2017. In particular, further during our meeting we shall review the concrete package of proposed amendments to the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure, which were elaborated in the recent months by the Committee of National Coordinators and the Working Group on CEI Governance.

Dear colleagues,

I hope that our today's meeting will be fruitful and constructive, paving the way to make the Central European Initiative even more vibrant and effective in helping ensure the sustainable development and prosperity of all our countries. I thank you for your attention.