



## **High Representative addresses key challenges at “Friends of the Western Balkans” meeting in Rome**

High Representative Christian Schmidt took part in the meeting of the “Friends of the Western Balkans Group” in Rome. The meeting, also attended by the Foreign Ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, focused on the economic prospects and the EU integration of the region. The High Representative also met with Alexander Schallenberg, Foreign Minister of Austria, Elmedin Konaković, Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Jan Marian, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic to discuss political developments in BiH and the Western Balkans region.

The High Representative stated that the opening of accession negotiations would be a unique opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Restoring public trust in the electoral system is the immediate priority for the BiH authorities. The election integrity reforms therefore need to be implemented swiftly to ensure the successful organization of local elections scheduled for October this year. Furthermore, he underscored that BiH institutions must operate efficiently and at full capacity to address other priorities so that BiH can be able to officially commence EU membership negotiations this spring.

The “Friends of the Western Balkans” initiative was launched in 2023 by Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia, to accelerate the EU accession and integration of the region. The High Representative expressed gratitude for the collaborative discussions at the meeting, reinforcing regional commitments to positive political developments and the shared goals of Western Balkans States in their journey towards EU integration.