

EU-Western Balkans Summit – Declaration

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Press release

We the Heads of State or Government of the member States of the European Union, the acceding and candidate states, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, as potential candidates, and the President of the European Commission, in the presence of the President of the European Parliament, the Secretary General of the Council/High Representative, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Kosovo, the Special Co-ordinator of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, meeting in Thessaloniki, agreed today on the following:

1. We all share the values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, solidarity and a market economy, fully aware that they constitute the very foundations of the European Union. Respect of international law, inviolability of international borders, peaceful resolution of conflicts and regional co-operation are principles of the highest importance, to which we are all committed. We vigorously condemn extremism, terrorism and violence, be it ethnically, politically or criminally motivated.

2. The EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union. The ongoing enlargement and the signing of the Treaty of Athens in April 2003 inspire and encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to follow the same successful path. Preparation for integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the European Union, through adoption of European standards, is now the big challenge ahead. The Croatian application for EU membership is currently under examination by the Commission. The speed of movement ahead lies in the hands of the countries of the region.

The countries of the region fully share the objectives of economic and political union and look forward to joining a EU that is stronger in the pursuit of its essential objectives and more present in the world.

3. The endorsement yesterday by the European Council of *'The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration'* represents a new important step in the privileged relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. Its content shall be considered as our shared agenda, and we all commit to its implementation. The countries of the region will focus their efforts on meeting the recommendations this agenda refers to.

4. We acknowledge that the Stabilisation and Association process (SAP) will remain the framework for the European course of the Western Balkan countries, all the way to their future accession. The process and the prospects it offers serve as the anchor for reform in the Western Balkans, in the same way the accession process has done in Central and Eastern Europe. Progress of each country towards the EU will depend on its own merits in meeting the Copenhagen criteria and the conditions set for the SAP and confirmed in the final declaration of the November 2000 Zagreb summit. The Western Balkan countries highly value the annual review mechanism of the SAP, based on the Commission's reports, and commit themselves to implement its recommendations.

The Western Balkan countries welcome the decisions by the EU to strengthen its Stabilisation and Association policy towards the region and to enrich it with elements from the experience of enlargement. They welcome in particular the launching of the European Partnerships, as well as the decisions for enhanced co-operation in the areas of political dialogue and the Common Foreign and

Security Policy, parliamentary co-operation, support for institution building, opening of Community programmes. They take note of the ongoing discussions for an increase in the budgeted Community financial support to the region through the CARDS programme.

5. We support the full implementation of Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council on Kosovo and the 'standards before status' policy of UNMIK; we remain committed to the Dayton/Paris Agreements and we encourage full implementation of the Ohrid and Belgrade agreements. The EU and the SAP countries fully support the International Criminal Court, recalling relevant EU decisions. The Western Balkan countries pledge full and unequivocal co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. Its work, on all open issues, including the transfer to The Hague of all remaining indictees, should be allowed to progress without delays. Providing justice for war crimes is a legal, political and moral imperative to which we are all committed.

Sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons is critical for ethnic reconciliation and an index of democratic maturity; it remains high on our priority agenda. We stress the role of education, culture and youth in promoting tolerance, ensuring ethnic and religious coexistence and shaping modern democratic societies.

Fragmentation and divisions along ethnic lines are incompatible with the European perspective, which should act as a catalyst for addressing problems in the region.

The recent launching of the EU police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and of the operation "Concordia" in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are tangible proofs of the EU's commitment to the region.

While the EU is strengthening its commitment in Southeast Europe, notably in police and security operations, continued engagement of other international actors is necessary. We all highly value the close co-operation between the EU and the US and NATO in the region, within the framework of UN Resolutions, as well as the role of other international organisations and financial institutions operating in the area. We encourage close co-ordination of their activities.

6. Organised crime and corruption is a real obstacle to democratic stability, the rule of law, economic development and development of civil society in the region and is a source of grave concern to the EU. Combating it constitutes a major priority. The SAP countries commit themselves to define and implement the measures foreseen in the follow up process to the London conference of November 2002 and described in the *Thessaloniki Agenda*. Particular attention will be given in combating trafficking in human beings. The countries of the region also commit to concrete measures, in accordance with the *Thessaloniki Agenda* and the documents of the Ohrid May 2003 conference, respectively, in order to cope effectively with illegal immigration and improving border security and management, aiming at achieving European standards.

7. We acknowledge the importance the peoples of the Western Balkans attach to the perspective of liberalisation of the EU's visa regime towards them. We recognise that progress is dependent on implementing major reforms in areas such as the strengthening of the rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, and strengthening administrative capacity in border control and security of documents. The Western Balkan countries welcome the intention of the Commission to hold discussions, within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process, with each of them, regarding the requirements for how to take these issues forward in concrete terms.

8. Economic prosperity is essential to long term stability and democracy in the region. Persistent efforts and structural reforms are required to establish functioning market economies and to achieve sustainable development and to ensure employment.

We recognise the importance of developing modern networks and infrastructures in energy, transport and telecommunications in the region, consistent with the Trans-European Networks. We encourage further mobilisation of international support in these areas, notably through the European Investment Bank and other International Financial Institutions, and private investment.

The SAP countries welcome the decisions by the EU to consider further measures for enhancing its trade with them, to extend the Internal Energy Market to the region as a whole and to establish a regular economic dialogue with each country of the region.

Considering that small and medium-sized enterprises are a key source of jobs, innovation and wealth and are essential for the functioning of competitive market economies, the SAP countries hereby commit to the policy principles enshrined in the European Charter for Small Enterprises, as well as to participate in its implementation.

9. We reiterate that rapprochement with the EU will go hand in hand with the development of regional co-operation. The countries of the Western Balkans and, where applicable, other regional participant countries, commit to promote concrete objectives and initiatives, along the lines prescribed by the *Thessaloniki Agenda*, in the areas of regional free trade, visa-free movement within the region, collection of small arms, creation of regional markets for electricity and gas, development of transport, energy and telecommunication infrastructures, environment and water management, research technology and development, cross-border co-operation and parliamentary co-operation.

We reconfirm our support to the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe in its complementary role to the Stabilisation and Association Process and in implementing its agreed core objectives. We invite it to focus in particular on the tasks suggested in the *Thessaloniki Agenda*. We support regional co-operation initiatives such as the South-East European Co-operation Process (SEECP), the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, and the Central European Initiative. We encourage further co-operation between the European Commission, the Stability Pact and the SEECP, which is gradually becoming the voice of the region.

10. Since our Zagreb meeting in November 2000, considerable progress was made towards stability, democracy and economic recovery in all countries of the Western Balkans, as well as in regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations between them, to the benefit of their peoples and of Europe as a whole. All the countries of the region have also made good progress in advancing towards the EU. A comparison with three years ago reveals the road that has been covered. At the same time, the Western Balkan countries, aware that there is much and hard work ahead, commit themselves to intensify the pace of reforms. The European Union pledges full support to their endeavours.

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We have agreed to meet periodically at our level, within the framework of a EU-Western Balkan forum, in order to discuss issues of common concern, to review progress of the countries of the region in their road to Europe, and to exchange views on major developments in the EU. Annual meetings of foreign ministers and ministers responsible for Justice and Home Affairs will be held as appropriate. Acceding and candidate countries will be fully involved. We welcome the intention of the incoming EU Italian Presidency to organise the first meetings of this kind, by the end of the year. Other ministers can also meet when appropriate

