

EU-Balkan Summit : Speech by Romano Prodi

Tessaloniki, 21 June 2003

I am **very happy** to see our friends from the Balkans sitting at the same table with us. It is a sort of foretaste of what will happen -- hopefully as soon as possible -- when the countries in the region become full members of the European Union.

I also feel a **deep sense of responsibility**, because the Union is restating its commitment and determination to **assist the Balkan countries along the road to integration into the Union**.

I have said this several times before but I want to repeat it here: **Europe's unification will not be complete until the Balkan countries are members of the Union**.

So I warmly welcome Croatia's application for membership. It is an important milestone for the Zagreb Process, and it is a very encouraging sign for the whole region.

Together with the Greek Presidency, we have worked hard since the beginning of the year to achieve a **significant result at this Summit**. And I believe the document we have just approved -- *The Thessaloniki Agenda for Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration* -- does represent a significant result.

It is a **major result that sends a clear and unambiguous political signal** that the Balkans is destined to become part of a unified Europe.

The **decision to bolster** the Stabilisation and Association Process with the features that typify enlargement is an important one.

It is vital to strengthen political dialogue, step up the **commitment to fight organised crime**, cooperate in the area of justice and home affairs, and work to **foster economic development** -- starting with transport, energy and telecommunications infrastructure.

It is an agenda that aims high in seeking to create the best conditions to prepare the Balkan countries for membership.

The **Commission is ready to pull out all stops** to implement this Agenda.

And I am sure that **the countries in the region will also pull out all stops** and speed up reforms of their political, economic and social systems to bring them up to EU standards.

There will be no lack of **resources to achieve these objectives**. The Council has just decided to increase funds to support the Stabilisation and Association process. Perhaps the figure agreed falls short of what people had hoped on the eve of this Summit. **But the Council has said it is ready to make an extra effort to back reforms and change in the region**.

So I appeal **sincerely and confidently to all leaders in the region**. My message is: "Work hard, push ahead with reforms and you will **oblige** us to allocate more funds."

Greater resources are directly dependent on your capacity to convince us you are serious about your commitment.

Let me add a few words on the **regional dimension**, which I am firmly convinced is crucial in relations between the Union and the Balkans.

Those are not just big words. **The regional dimension is vital.** And I am not just referring to the historical and cultural bonds between you. Or at least not to them alone.

I am talking about the **down-to-earth problems that can only be solved in a regional perspective**, such as the return of the refugees and the fight against organised crime.

I am talking about the need to create a more suitable **market dimension** that is attractive to investors.

I am talking about **stability and security issues** that can only be properly addressed at regional level. Just think of all the problems in Kosovo. Whatever its ultimate status, Kosovo must be bound securely into the Balkans. And the Balkans must be bound into Europe.

Let me make it clear that when I speak of preserving a regional dimension, I am not saying that the countries in the region will all have to join the EU at the same time. **The principle of differentiation** -- whereby each country must be assessed in terms of its own capacity to meet the criteria set for membership -- **must apply to the Balkans too.**

But the enlargement process is one and indivisible.

And today I am totally convinced we have set that process irreversibly in motion. So a **very warm welcome** to you all.

Let me close by **expressing my sincerest appreciation to Kostas Simitis** for the work that he, George Papandreou and all their team have done to achieve today's result. Their dedication and determination have been absolutely crucial.