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~FACT SHEET N° 3~

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Background

At the end of the Yugoslav conflict the EU set itself the priority of restoring peace, security and stability and preventing further conflict. It began by providing humanitarian assistance, then contributed to reconstruction of the countries in the region, reconciliation and return of displaced persons. With peacekeeping its major concern, it for the first time in its history dispatched military and police forces to the area.

The long-term objective is to guarantee lasting stability in the region. In 1999 the EU therefore launched the Stabilisation and Association Process, involving democratic, economic and social reforms, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations and offering the prospect of possible EU membership. At the Zagreb Summit in 2000 the EU stated that "democracy and regional reconciliation and cooperation on the one hand, and the rapprochement of each of these countries with the European Union on the other, form a whole". Throughout the process the EU has been unfailing in its support. In return, the countries concerned must fulfil the requirements laid down. At the Lisbon European Council in 2000 the EU offered the Western Balkan countries the prospect of possible membership and said that Stabilisation and Association Agreements with these countries implied the establishment of free trade areas and must be preceded by asymmetrical trade liberalisation. Under the Stabilisation and Association Process the EU therefore opened up its markets to virtually all goods from the Western Balkans, without imposing import duties or upper limits and without any quid pro quo.

In 2003, at the Thessaloniki Summit¹, the EU reiterated its commitment to the region by introducing individual European Partnerships setting priorities for reform and suggesting a series of measures for each country to adopt.

¹ The Thessaloniki Summit decided to enhance political cooperation, strengthen the institutions and implement new trade measures to underpin economic growth.

P R E S S

Recent developments in relations between the EU and the Western Balkans

At an informal meeting of the EU-Western Balkans Forum in Brdo (Slovenia) in March 2008 the Presidency, speaking on behalf of the EU Foreign Ministers, clearly reaffirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the EU and that these countries should proceed rapidly with political and economic reform, reconciliation between peoples, protection of minorities and progress towards the European Union by fulfilling all the conditions set and commitments entered into under the Stabilisation and Association Process. It also noted that the Thessaloniki agenda needed to be given fresh impetus and the countries of the region encouraged to take a decisive step towards European integration.

The EU is aware that the European perspective needs to be tangible and visible to the people across the Western Balkans.

For that purpose, the EU notably:

- has successfully launched a dialogue on visa liberalisation based on roadmaps for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, containing clear and realistic benchmarks. This is a clear sign of the political commitment of the EU to achieve visa free travel for the citizens of the Western Balkans. As a first step towards full visa liberalisation, the Commission last year concluded visa facilitation agreements with all the Western Balkan countries. These agreements entered into force on 1 January 2008 and aim to lower fees and shorten the issuing time for visas;
- intends to further increase the number of scholarships granted to students from the Western Balkans to study in the EU;
- proposes to step up support to civil society;
- intends to enhance coordination with international financial institutions and with bilateral donors in order to support socio-economic development in the region;
- works towards enhancing cooperation on disaster prevention, preparedness and response in the region and supports further participation of the Western Balkans in Community programmes and agencies.

Another area to which the EU attaches importance is regional cooperation. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is the framework established for sustained regional cooperation and is a key partner for the European Union. The RCC can play its full role only if the all parts of the region take an active stand in the activities the RCC is mentoring and developing.

State of play of the SAP

The network of Stabilisation and Association Agreements has come to its completion with the signature of the SAA with Bosnia and Herzegovina on 16 June in Luxembourg. The EU will continue to encourage BiH to pursue its reform agenda. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Serbia was signed on 29 April. As soon as the Council decides that Serbia is cooperating fully with the ICTY, the SAA will be submitted to Member States' parliaments for ratification and the Community will implement the Interim Agreement. The EU stands by its commitment to support Serbia's continued speedy EU integration. The Stabilisation and Association Agreements signed with **Croatia**, the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**, **Albania** and **Montenegro** have already entered into force – either the SAAs proper or in the form of Interim Agreements. Among others, these agreements provide for free trade zones and deepen political dialogue. A sound track record of implementation of these agreements is an important requisite for moving forward in the process towards accession to the EU.

Accession

Accession negotiations with Croatia are advancing well and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was granted candidate status in 2005.
