

**Statement by the Chair of the  
High-Level Meeting on the Western Balkans  
Sarajevo, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2010**

A high-level meeting on the Western Balkans, chaired by the Spanish rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU, took place in Sarajevo on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2010 to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Zagreb summit which offered the European perspective to the Western Balkans, as sealed in the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003.

The meeting noted the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty which represents a new stage in the process of European construction and provides the instruments and means to strengthen its role as a global actor. The EU reiterated its unequivocal commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which remains essential for the stability and development of the region. The future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union.

The EU reaffirmed the need for fair and rigorous conditionality in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association process and in accordance with the renewed consensus on enlargement approved by the European Council on December 2006.

Important progress in economic and political reform has been made by the countries of the region as demonstrated by ongoing accession negotiations, the preparation of Opinions on membership applications and the establishment of a network of Stabilisation and Association Agreements. Being now firmly anchored in the EU's enlargement process, the Western Balkans must intensify their efforts to fulfil the necessary established criteria and agreed conditions on their path towards EU membership. The progress of each country will depend on its own merits.

In particular, the Western Balkans continue to face major challenges related to the rule of law, such as administrative and judicial reforms, the fight against corruption and organised crime. These issues are key for a functioning democracy and economy and largely condition the EU accession process.

Completing the process of sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons remains a priority. Problems affecting the freedom of expression and the media need to be tackled as a matter of urgency. The Western Balkan participants committed themselves to intensify their efforts to address these issues.

The establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council represents a significant step towards inclusiveness and regional ownership. The RCC now needs to improve its efficiency by implementing a result-oriented strategy which will set clear priority lines of action and will provide the basis for streamlining the various initiatives in the region. The endorsement of such a strategy by the

Heads of State and Government of the member countries of the SEECP at its Summit in Istanbul on June 23<sup>rd</sup> will strengthen the political link between both organizations. Consolidating and further developing CEFTA is one of the strategic priorities.

Regional cooperation contributes to fostering reconciliation, good neighbourly relations as well as a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues. The participants encouraged parties concerned to invest their best efforts in addressing open bilateral issues in a European spirit.

The participants stressed the outstanding priority of completing the process of reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Participants welcomed recent commendable initiatives to this effect. These efforts must be made at all levels - governments, judiciary, and civil society. The participants commended the role of NGOs to work towards reconciliation through establishing a regional commission for truth-seeking and truth-telling.

The participants welcomed the European Union's intention to extend visa liberalisation to all the people of the Western Balkans, once conditions are met. In this context, they welcomed the Commission's proposal to extend the visa free regime to the citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The meeting was held against the background of the global economic recession which has also affected the Western Balkans and of efforts of the region to apply macroeconomic and financial policies designed to prevent future crises and foster balanced and sustainable global economic growth. The EU will continue to help them to alleviate the impact of the crisis and prepare for sound recovery. The implementation of EU-related reforms underpins the efforts of these countries in this regard.

In this respect, a regional recovery and development strategy which should follow the main parameters of the EU 2020 strategy, based on knowledge and innovation, and take into account the specific characteristics of Western Balkan countries, could be defined and actively pursued.

The EU reiterated its full support for the Western Balkans in their endeavours to intensify the pace of reforms. The EU looked forward to the Western Balkans moving to the next stages of the accession process, on the basis of established criteria and agreed conditions. EU membership of all the Western Balkans remains our shared objective.

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