

S E E C P

neighbourhood in cooperation



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**An appraisal of the perspectives of the Thessaloniki Agenda
in relation to the European integration of the Western Balkans**

In this year of important decisions affecting the future of the region, the SEECP countries consider further strengthening of the bonds of South East Europe with the European Union to be a basic step towards stabilisation of the region and towards their future accession to the EU. A crucial role in this context is played by the countries of the Western Balkans. In light of the Communication of the European Commission "The Western Balkans on the road to the European Union" and of the Informal Meeting in Salzburg last March, we consider it productive and helpful to bring forward here below an evaluation of the countries of the region concerning the three years after the Thessaloniki Summit, which gave birth to the Thessaloniki Agenda, as well as our view on its perspective and actualization. In this crucial period, we expect the EU to be at the forefront and continue its commitment to the European future of the Western Balkans.

The European Union brings a message of peace and reconciliation and offers to the countries and peoples of the region a clear and tangible road towards stable democracy, prosperity, regional stability and security, built on principles constituting its very foundations, such as rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, regional cooperation and good neighborly relations.

While noting the scepticism expressed by parts of European public opinion regarding future enlargement, we firmly believe that the integration of South East Europe into the larger European family will strengthen and enrich the European Union politically, economically and culturally. On the other hand, European integration is in itself an incentive for stabilization and peace in the region. The SEECP urges the EU not to go back on its enlargement pledge, as this would slow down the reform process and would have wider unwarranted consequences.

In the course of the last decade, the countries of the Western Balkans have made considerable progress towards stability, although much remains to be done in this respect as sources of friction still need to be addressed.

The European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans was launched at the 2003 EU-Western Balkan Summit, which adopted the "Thessaloniki Agenda". It constituted a milestone in relations between the EU and the region, containing a comprehensive program for their gradual rapprochement. As the European Commission notes in its 2005 Enlargement Strategy Paper, the rapprochement of the countries of the Western Balkans to the E.U. shall be based on strict and fair conditionality. Each country should fulfil agreed criteria and requirements in order to pass into the next phase of this process. In particular they must commit themselves to spare no effort in reaching agreed solutions on outstanding disputes, thus strengthening good neighbourly relations and further promoting regional co-operation. In this context, their response to the European Partnership priorities, in particular regarding regional issues and international obligations, will be assessed when decisions pertaining to a further advancement towards the EU are adopted.

Emphasis should now be laid on the Thessaloniki Agenda provisions which have been only partially implemented hitherto, but can still produce tangible results for our citizens. With this concern in mind, and after listening to the countries' needs as expressed at the Thessaloniki SEECP Summit, we propose to focus on the following areas:

Political Dialogue

Political dialogue, in the framework of SEECP, has known an unprecedented momentum in the last years. Meetings in all sectors and on all levels take place regularly. We call for the EU to take profit of this constructive development and, particularly regarding the countries of the Western Balkans, to reinvigorate the Political Forum launched by the Thessaloniki Agenda.

Regional Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations

Essential elements of the European Union's approach towards the countries of the Western Balkans are regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. The European Union's presence and contribution to the region becomes all the more crucial for the stability and the progress of the region. Our countries commit themselves to fulfilling all their international obligations and necessary commitments in this direction.

In view of the future reshaping of the activities of the Stability Pact, all relevant efforts should focus on a real transfer of its responsibilities to the region, within a clear timetable. SEECP, as the authentic voice of the region, is well-placed to play a predominant role in this process. SEECP realizes the need to strengthen its institutional capacity, by creating the appropriate organs, so that it will be soon able to play a central role in the context of future reshaping of Stability Pact's activities. The EU and all other stakeholders should contribute to this.

Public Sector Reform

It is of high importance to timely implement the Thessaloniki Agenda provision concerning the establishment of a regional School for Higher Education in Public Administration Reform, which would assist and monitor the administrative and judicial capacity of the Western Balkan countries to align with Community legislation and with the principles forming the foundations of the European Union. We welcome the proposal of Greece together with other similar offers to host relevant training seminars and courses for Public Administration staff from Western Balkan countries.

It is our firm belief that the above proposals will bolster the European perspective of the countries of the Western Balkans in the interest of European integration.

Culture and Education

Culture in Southeastern Europe has always been its main source of enrichment, inspiration and in many cases a means of survival. Culture should develop into a uniting force in our region. During the Greek SEECP Chairmanship, the first Meeting of Ministers of Culture of SEECP took place in Patras and the perspectives of cultural cooperation in the region were examined. This first Meeting of SEECP Ministers of Culture, we are convinced, constitutes the basis for future exchange of ideas regarding our cooperation in the all-important field of culture. We underline that a number of initiatives in this domain have already been organized by countries of the region with the support of E.U. member states or regional organisations.

In the field of education, we welcome the concrete measures proposed by the European Commission and favour a greater participation in relevant E.U. programs as well as an expansion of the existing scholarship programs.

Trade

Trade is the basis for stimulation of foreign investment and improvement of the countries' general economic condition. In this respect, we also welcome the positive steps and the decision taken at the South East Europe Summit, held in Bucharest on the 6th of April 2006, aiming at modernising and improving CEFTA, in order to establish a Free Trade Agreement in South Eastern Europe, for a better application of the W.T.O. and the E.U. standards and thereby promote trade and investments in South Eastern Europe.

Infrastructure

Developed infrastructure contributes widely for a regional stability. The SEECP countries expect continuous support from the E.U. in this direction. P.P.P. (Public - Private - Partnership) should be applied in order to start important infrastructure projects in the region.

Financial Assistance

The SEECP countries underline the importance of continuing financial assistance by the E.U. to the countries of the Western Balkans, in accordance with the priority it attaches to the stabilisation and prosperity of the region. The future Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) as well as other instruments, will make better use of the Community assistance to the countries of the Western Balkans.

Visa Facilitation

We support visa facilitation with the E.U. The perspective of liberalisation of the visa regime for the Western Balkan region is a priority issue for the countries concerned. Based on the reforms accomplished so far in this respect, we strongly encourage further intensification of this dialogue, in order to promote the proclaimed goal of facilitating the contacts between the citizens of the E.U. and the countries of the Western Balkans, with the aim of helping them to get better acquainted with the European ideas.

Within this framework and given the significance that a decision within the E.U. on visa facilitation agreements, in conjunction with readmission agreements, would have in the eyes of the citizens of the Western Balkan countries, the need is evident to step up the process of implementing relevant initiatives in the EU framework, along the following lines:

- * Progressive alleviation of the existing procedures for specific categories of citizens e.g. students, researchers, academics, artists
- * Reduction of visa fees so as to not exceed fees for third country nationals
- * Implementation of the Regulation on Local Border Traffic through bilateral agreements with the member-states

In this context, we strongly urge the European Commission to submit, without delay and in any case before the end of 2006, to the Council of the EU the draft negotiating mandates for initiating negotiations with the SEECP countries still under visa obligation for the conclusion, as soon as possible, of bilateral Visa Facilitation – and Readmission – Agreements with the European Union.

Justice and Home Affairs

Convening a Regional Conference with the concrete task to elaborate and initiate a Charter of Cooperation on Police and Judicial Matters, indicating various steps towards establishing an integrated regional approach in this area (e.g. a more systematic application of the provision of the Agenda for a JHA Liaison Officer in the Western Balkan countries). The proposed Conference could take place in the framework of the next EU-Western Balkans JHA Ministerial Meeting under the Finnish Presidency.

All SEECP countries firmly believe that South Eastern Europe and the European Union have strong mutual interest in the European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans. This outcome will enrich and give new impetus, political and economic, to both. The countries of the Western Balkans commit themselves to fulfilling the soonest possible all the necessary criteria and requirements for their integration into the European Union. This is a political pledge of the highest importance. We expect the E.U. to respond constructively in the future as it has already done in the past.