



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council Conclusions on Western Balkans

*2840th EXTERNAL RELATIONS Council meeting
Brussels, 10 December 2007*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"The Council had an exchange of views on the Commission's communication on "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2007-2008" and the accompanying Progress Reports on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo as defined by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. The Council broadly shared the assessment made by the European Commission.

Aware that the year ahead will be an important one in consolidating the transition process in the Western Balkans, the Council reaffirmed that the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union and reconfirmed its continued support to the region's course towards the EU. The EU engagement through the Stabilisation and Association process has made a significant contribution to the progress achieved in recent years by the countries of the region. These achievements now need to be built on and made irreversible. Recalling the European Council Conclusions of December 2006, the Council reiterated that each country progresses from one stage to the next, when it has fulfilled the established conditions. Provided the conditions are fulfilled, Stabilisation and Associations Agreements could be signed with the remaining Western Balkans countries at the earliest opportunity.

The Council considered that the challenges faced by the countries of the Western Balkan region warrant greater focus on key reform priorities, which relate to state-building, rule of law, reconciliation, administrative and judicial reform, and to fight against corruption and organised crime. Strong progress on these issues, hand in hand with sustainable economic and social development, will enable the countries of the region to move forward in building modern democracies and in developing a political culture of dialogue and tolerance.

P R E S S

The Council recalled the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations and of the need to find mutually acceptable solutions on outstanding issues with neighbouring countries. It welcomed good progress made in regional cooperation, in areas like trade, energy, transport and environment and expressed the hope that this would continue, including in the relevant regional fora and initiatives. The Council noted with satisfaction that the Western Balkan countries will take increased responsibility for regional cooperation with the transition from the Stability Pact to the Regional Cooperation Council.

The Council welcomed the Commission's intention to present a communication early in 2008, in which it takes stock of developments and points the way forward in following up the Thessaloniki Agenda, as well as the Salzburg communication, on promoting the course of the countries of the Western Balkans towards the EU. In this context, the Council invited the Commission to further explore possibilities to promote people-to-people contacts as well as civil society development. Recalling its 18 June conclusions, the Council expressed its readiness to hold a discussion during the first half of 2008 on these issues, based on the Commission's communication, as well as on Member States' contributions.

Albania

The Council noted that Albania has made progress in a number of areas, but underlined that good governance and rule of law, in particular the fight against corruption and organised crime, remain major challenges requiring sustained efforts. Noting progress made in the areas of the protection of minorities and freedom of expression, the Council stressed the importance of Albania continuing to make progress in these areas. The Council encouraged all political forces to contribute to a constructive dialogue in moving reforms forward, notably in the electoral and judicial fields. The Council noted that Albania is implementing its trade commitments under the Interim Agreement smoothly and pointed out that a sustained and effective track record of implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement is essential for further progress towards the European Union. The Council also underlined the importance of Albania's continued constructive and stabilizing role in the region.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Council welcomed the latest positive developments, including renewed commitment to police reform. However, the Council reiterated its concern over the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and slowdown in reform process over the last year. It underlined the responsibility of the political leaders to ensure the full functioning of State institutions and to advance reforms which are essential for Bosnia and Herzegovina to move forward and assume full ownership of its governance. The Council reiterated its full support to HR/EUSR Miroslav Lajcak and his efforts to advance the reform agenda.

The Council noted the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement as an important step. The Council reaffirmed its readiness, as soon as the four conditions are met, including full cooperation with ICTY, to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

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The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Council noted that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia achieved some progress but regrets the delays in reform because of internal political tensions, which diverted the focus of the country's political institutions away from the priorities of European integration. The Council encouraged all political parties to deepen political dialogue and cooperation, including on inter-ethnic relations, in order to move ahead in the accession process. It called for acceleration of the pace of reforms in key areas such as judicial and public administration reform, implementation of the police reform and the fight against corruption, as well as in addressing unemployment and enhancing the general business environment. However, the Council noted that there has still been no solution to the name issue. It called on the Government to make renewed efforts, with a constructive approach, to find a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution on the name issue with Greece, under the auspices of the UN, thereby contributing to regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations.

Montenegro

The Council noted the progress Montenegro has made in a number of areas, including adopting a Constitution and in establishing the necessary legal framework and institutions following independence. The Council stressed the need for Montenegro to implement the new Constitution in line with European standards and to continue efforts in broadening consensus on basic features of state building. It encouraged Montenegro to continue enhancing its administrative capacity, as well as to achieve significant reform results notably in strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption and organised crime.

Serbia

The Council noted the initialling of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement as an important step and recalled that its signature remains conditional upon Serbia achieving full cooperation with the ICTY. The Council called for further efforts in reform, in particular of the judiciary and of the security sector, as well as the fight against corruption and structural economic reforms. In view of Serbia's institutional capacity, the Council was confident that Serbia would be capable of accelerating its preparations on the road towards the European Union.

Serbia/Kosovo

While noting progress made by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government in addressing certain priorities, the Council stressed the need for major efforts to strengthen the rule of law, anti-corruption policy and the fight against organised crime, as well as to enhance the dialogue between the communities. The Council recalled the crucial importance of further effective implementation of the Kosovo Standards, including the protection of minorities, historical and religious sites. The Council stressed that resolving the status of Kosovo will facilitate progress in the reform agenda. The Council confirmed that the European Union will continue to assume its responsibilities in Kosovo."

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