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The Thessaloniki Summit: a milestone in the European Union's relations with the Western Balkans

The European Council and the E.U.-Western Balkans Summit of Thessaloniki, to be held on 19-20 June and 21 June, respectively, will mark an important step in the deepening relationship between the EU and the Western Balkan countries (Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Croatia; the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; Serbia and Montenegro). The European Union will underline once again the prospect of EU membership offered at the European Councils of Feira and Copenhagen, and will outline the concrete ways in which it is willing to support the countries of the Western Balkans as they move towards European Integration. The rate of progress will depend on the performance of the countries themselves in a wide range of reforms of their economies, standards of democracy, human rights, good governance and respect for rule of law. It is hoped that the Summit will see an intensified commitment from the whole region to step up the pace of reforms. Ahead of the Summit, the Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten said: "Thessaloniki will send two important messages to the Western Balkans: The prospect of membership of the EU is real, and we will not regard the map of the Union as complete until you have joined us. We in the European Commission will do all we can to help you succeed. But membership must be earned. It will take the sheer hard work and applied political will of those in power in the region. How far you proceed along the road towards European Integration, and how fast, will be up to you".

The Thessaloniki meeting will adopt proposals set out by the Commission in its recent Communication "The Western Balkans and European Integration"¹. The current framework for European relations with the region, known as the Stabilisation and Association process (SAp)², will remain central, but it will be enriched with elements drawn from the recent successful enlargement process. These include strengthened political co-operation, enhanced support for institution building, promotion of economic growth by increasing the region's export possibilities through concrete trade measures, and the possibility for the countries of the Western Balkans to participate in some Community programmes.

¹ [IP/03/721](#): European Commission proposes new European Integration Partnerships for the Western Balkans

² [IP/99/350](#): Commission proposes a Stabilisation and Association process for countries of South-eastern Europe

In Thessaloniki, new European Partnerships will be offered to the Western Balkan countries as proposed in the European Commission proposal. Inspired by the pre-accession process and tailor-made to each country's needs, these partnerships will identify, on a regular basis, priorities and obligations to be fulfilled. EU financial assistance will be directed to the priorities set out in the partnerships. Each country will draw up a national action plan for implementation of the partnerships, which will provide a clear agenda against which to measure progress.

The EU has invested a tremendous amount in the stabilisation and development of the Western Balkans. Since 1991, through its various programmes, the European Union has provided more than € 7 billion in assistance to the 5 countries of the region. In the year 2000, a six-year programme of € 4.65 billion was agreed for the Western Balkans.

The results of this assistance can be seen in the progress already made in the region towards greater political stability, democracy and economic recovery. Through the SAp the European Commission already offers intensive technical assistance and support for improved governance, better functioning institutions, democratisation, protection of human rights, refugee return, economic development and the fight against corruption and organised crime. In the Western Balkans the European Commission has demonstrated some early fruits of the reforms of the way development assistance is delivered. Since 2000 assistance to the region has been delivered with efficiency and speed, helping to transform the lives of people in South Eastern Europe and improve the security of the continent of Europe as a whole.

For the 1998-2002 period, for the region as a whole, 77% of all funds have been contracted (contracts signed) and 58% disbursed. The rate of implementation varies between the countries and depends to a great extent on the focus of the assistance granted. The rate of implementation of assistance is highest in Serbia and Montenegro (Serbia/Montenegro/Kosovo). About 98% of the allocated funds have been contracted and 77% of these have been paid.

The signature of the Treaty and Act of Accession in Athens on 16 April 2003 signalled the beginning of a new era throughout Europe. The next Enlargement will bring about a new dynamic in the European integration process, and have a profound impact on the countries of the Western Balkans. It should illustrate that their perspective as potential candidates is real, and encourage them to follow the path of reform that the accession countries have so successfully followed.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/see/index.htm