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*Panel: The EU and the Balkans – How to Accelerate
Integration?*

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The European Union's commitment to the accession of the western Balkan countries has played an important part in the stabilisation of the region after the break-up of Yugoslavia. This commitment, which has been regularly reiterated by the Member States, has encouraged these countries to introduce political and economic reforms which will help them to develop in a stable and supportive environment. Administrative reforms which are necessary to realise the ambition of closer integration with the Union have also helped the countries to introduce more efficient and accountable government. The assistance which the EU has given and is continuing to give to these countries has also been an important factor in their development. Together with these countries and their people we have achieved a lot.

But we all know there remain very difficult problems in this region which need to be solved. We also know that the danger of further violence in the region has not been totally eliminated. This makes the further stabilisation of the western Balkans an absolute priority for the European Union.

The example of the recent successful enlargement to the countries of central and eastern Europe shows how the promise of accession and the

preparation to meet the conditions for accession can radically change and reform an aspiring member state. We know this of course in Poland only too well.

The Union of course does require that the states of the western Balkans meet the conditions set for accession. These conditions have become considerably tougher over the recent past, partly because as integration within the Union deepens, the level of regulation grows, creating more of work for an acceding country. But it is also a reaction to the heightened level of concern about enlargement amongst the public in the Union – something which the Commission takes very seriously.

It is not a surprise to anybody that meeting these conditions will require a major effort from the governments of the western Balkans. The Union requires not just the introduction of new EU regulation but also its implementation. It is therefore not only in the Government and Parliament that considerable activity will be required. Those services associated with the implementation of laws will also need to be reformed and strengthened. This means not only the creation of new inspectorates, regulators, the reform of existing offices and administrative services but also the reform and training of the judiciary, so that legal redress is available when EU regulation is not implemented.

The countries which accept the challenge of preparing for accession to the Union gain immeasurably from the legislative and administrative effort involved. However we should not ignore the fact that the Union itself stands to gain enormously from the stabilisation of the western Balkans, which is seen in the rest of the world as a European problem and a European responsibility. And the gains are not only in the political

and security areas. We have seen in central Europe how the process of economic catch-up leads to greater trade and economic benefits for the Union itself.

The strategy of the Union in the western Balkans is first to negotiate and implement Stabilisation and Association Agreements with each country. These agreements are in structure and content similar to the Europe Agreements signed in the early nineteen-nineties with the countries of central Europe. They aim of course to liberalise trade between the Union and the third country completely, but also to go well beyond that in preparing to allow the partner country to participate in the internal market of the Union through progressive adoption of the Union's regulation. These agreements also lay the basis for cooperation between the two parties across wide areas of policy, including participation in Community programmes.

The operation of the agreements requires the progressive adjustment of domestic regulation to that of the Union. But it also requires the countries to respect the fundamental values of the Union in terms of democracy, human rights, minority rights, non-discrimination and the rule of law. Thus the negotiation and implementation of stabilisation and association agreements not only leads to pressure to undertake economic reforms but also underpins the growth of tolerance and the attachment to democracy.

So far the Union has negotiated Stabilisation and Association Agreements with Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and that with Montenegro is due to be signed in October. Negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina have been completed at the

technical level though the initialling of the agreement is held up by the lack of certain reforms. Negotiations with Serbia have restarted and it is hoped that rapid progress can be made with the new Government in Belgrade. Finally the Union is actively involved in the question of the future status of Kosovo which we hope can be solved soon.

But of course the Union is already far into the negotiations for accession with Croatia and, though the Commission has not proposed a date for opening accession negotiations, Macedonia is recognised as a 'Candidate Country'. This demonstrates the Union's serious intent to eventually enlarge to the whole of the western Balkans.

While accession and its dynamics depend essentially on the ability of the countries concerned to carry out the necessary reforms, it is clear that the Union itself must undertake measures to facilitate this difficult task. The Union already provides considerable assistance to help the western Balkan states undertake the steps necessary to integrate with the Union. Twinning, the despatch of experts from the Union to work as advisers in ministries in these countries, is widely used and the TAIEX programme also provides specialist assistance.

But beyond technical assistance, I feel that people to people programmes, which help citizens of the western Balkan countries to have meaningful contact with those from the Union are most important. This is particularly so for the young. The Commission has been increasing the funding of scholarships for study at EU universities and fostering programmes aimed at strengthening civil society. The development of these programmes will be facilitated by visa facilitation agreements which are ready to be signed by the Member States.

Finally we must work to demonstrate to the citizens of the Member States that enlargement is positive for the Union as a whole. The debates about 'enlargement fatigue' and the 'borders of Europe' demonstrate that the advantages of enlargement have not been understood by citizens. Here both member states and the Union institutions are called upon to provide objective evidence of the benefits which enlargement has brought.

To conclude Chairman:

I hope that I have been able to establish three essential points. Firstly, European and regional integration of all the Western Balkans is mutually beneficial for all states and people involved. Secondly, the Union has recognised this and will therefore stick to our commitment towards these countries' European perspective. And most importantly, the key to accelerating the integration of the Balkans lies with the countries themselves. Swift and thorough reforms will translate into progress on the way towards the EU. The European Commission will continue to facilitate and support this process both politically and financially.

It is vital that we continue to demonstrate our determination to see the western Balkans as part of the Union. If doubts were raised this could have catastrophic impacts in the region. And peace and stability in the western Balkans is not only vital for that region but also for the stability of the Union itself.