

Brussels, 5 November 2008

2009 the year of the Western Balkans

Today the Commission adopted its annual strategy paper for the EU's enlargement policy. It highlights the role the EU's enlargement policy plays in the Union's strategic interest in stability, security and conflict prevention. The Commission also reviews the progress achieved in the Western Balkans and Turkey over the last year and spells out the challenges ahead. The Western Balkan countries' advance towards EU membership can be accelerated, provided they meet the necessary conditions. It should be possible to reach the final stage of accession negotiations with Croatia by the end of 2009, provided that Croatia fulfils all the necessary conditions. The pace of negotiations with Turkey will continue to match the pace of reform in the country.

Enlargement serves the EU's strategic interest in stability, security, and conflict prevention. It has helped to increase prosperity and growth opportunities, to improve links with vital transport and energy routes, and to increase the EU's weight in the world. In the light of recent challenges to stability to the East of the EU, the consistent implementation of the enlargement policy becomes more important than ever. The present enlargement agenda covers the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Presenting the reports Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn said: "The conditional and indicative roadmap we present today for Croatia should be seen as an encouragement for the country to press on with reforms. Success depends on Croatia's ability to meet the conditions for EU accession. The indicative timetable may need to be adapted in light of the progress achieved by Croatia. The ball is now firmly in Croatia's court. The Commission will closely monitor the fulfilment of the conditions."

"I also welcome the progress made in the Western Balkan countries. Their advance towards EU membership can be accelerated, provided they meet the necessary conditions. Potential candidate countries which demonstrate their readiness, could achieve candidate status. We will prepare a Feasibility Study on how to advance Kosovo's¹ European future."

"Turkey has major strategic importance for the EU and I welcome the constructive role it played during the Caucasus crisis. I also note that domestic politics in 2008 was marked by strong political tensions. Now, I expect Turkey to re-energise its reform efforts. The pace of negotiations will continue to match the pace of reforms in Turkey."

¹ Under UNSCR 11244/99

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has made good progress on judicial reform and implementation of SAA obligations and continues to consolidate multi-ethnic democracy by implementing the Ohrid Agreement. However, the country needs to ensure free and fair elections and to improve the dialogue between major political parties and actors. There has also been some progress on fighting corruption, civil service reform, improving the business environment and stimulating employment. Nonetheless, further efforts are necessary. The Commission will continue to monitor progress on these areas closely.

Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are moving ahead with the implementation of their respective Interim Agreements and have made progress in important reform areas. Consolidating the rule of law and administrative enforcement capacities remains a major challenge in these countries. In particular, Albania needs to ensure the proper preparation and conduct of its 2009 parliamentary elections. Montenegro needs to continue to pursue judicial reform with determination. Bosnia and Herzegovina now urgently needs to achieve the necessary political consensus and to proceed with reforms, in particular with a view to assuming greater ownership of its governance.

Serbia needs to follow by positive developments through full cooperation with ICTY and making tangible progress in priority reform areas related to the rule of law and economic reform. If Serbia meets these conditions, it could obtain candidate status in 2009.

Kosovo shares the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Overall stability was maintained. However, Kosovo's European integration remains at an early stage in most areas concerned. The Commission will present a feasibility study in the autumn of 2009, evaluating means to further Kosovo's political and socio-economic development, and examining how best Kosovo can progress, as part of the region, towards integration with the EU.

The Commission continues to take measures to make the European perspective tangible for citizens and companies in the Western Balkans. Provided that the established conditions are met, the Commission may propose lifting the visa obligation in the course of 2009, on a country-by-country basis.