



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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The importance of inclusive regional cooperation

Check Against Delivery
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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

South East European Cooperation Process (SEEC) Ministerial Meeting in
Ohrid

31 May 2013

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by thanking our hosts, the Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process, for inviting the European Union to participate as a special invitee in your meeting, and for their hospitality here in Ohrid.

Allow me to also congratulate the South East European Cooperation Process for acting, for the last 15 years, as a genuine voice of the region, and as the political umbrella of the Regional Cooperation Council.

Yesterday, at the Annual Meeting of the Regional Cooperation Council, we stressed the need for regional cooperation to be inclusive. It was significant that the Regional Cooperation Council Secretariat managed to achieve consensus on admitting Kosovo* as a full and equal participant in the work of the RCC already in February. I also welcome that Kosovo has been invited for this ministerial as a special guest of the chair

The European Union would welcome Kosovo's inclusion in the South-East European Cooperation Process. This would be:

- in the interest of inclusive and representative regional cooperation; and
- very much in the spirit of the February 2012 agreement on Regional Representation and Cooperation.

I would like to turn now to the historic agreement reached in April between Serbia and Kosovo. This agreement represents a major achievement as the parties have committed to jointly work towards a future in the European Union.

The European Union wants Serbia and Kosovo to succeed. Serbia's and Kosovo's European Union perspectives have been repeatedly confirmed by the European Union whose Member States have set out an ambitious agenda for both parties in 2013.

Let me mention a number of other positive developments in the region.

First, Croatia will join the European Union in a few weeks. The example of Croatia should act as a strong incentive for the countries of the region to continue on their European integration path and we certainly count on Croatia to continue to share its experience and to support its neighbours on their road to European Union accession.

We also expect Croatia to continue playing an active role in regional cooperation.

Second, accession negotiations with Montenegro have been progressing well. The priorities are now for Montenegro to amend its constitution in order to increase the independence and accountability of the judiciary in line with the recommendations of the Venice Commission. In parallel, Montenegro will need to finalise credible Action Plans, which are a condition for opening the rule-of-law chapters 23 and 24.

Third, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has also moved forward on European Union related reforms. It is important now that the political agreement of March 2013 between the country's political forces is implemented without delay.

Fourth, thanks to the positive momentum in the accession negotiations with Turkey, there is a chance for the opening of at least one chapter during the Irish Presidency (chapter 22 on regional policy) – it would be the first chapter to be opened after three years. We also hope to move forward on the visa dialogue in the coming weeks. The positive agenda has played an important role in this progress and I look forward to continuing our common work on its implementation in order to sustain this momentum for the benefit of Turkey and the European Union.

Turning to Albania, the general elections of 23 June will be an important test for the country's commitment to the proper functioning of democratic institutions. Albania also needs to maintain a constructive stance towards regional stability by discouraging all forms of national extremism.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the focus needs to be on implementing the roadmap towards European Union integration agreed by political leaders in June 2012. The progress of other countries in the region underlines the urgency for Bosnia and Herzegovina's political leaders to step up their efforts vis-à-vis the European Union agenda.

On Moldova, I want to congratulate the new coalition government that has just taken office. It now has the opportunity to work hard on reforms and a genuine system of checks and balances in the lead up to the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November where the initialling of an Association Agreement/DCFTA would be an important step for the country. I am glad that the South East European Cooperation Process supports Moldova in its efforts.

Before concluding, I would like to say a few words about two topics that are relevant to today's discussion:

- 1) The Western Balkan 6 Initiative; and
- 2) The second Speak Up conference.

I fully support the Western Balkan 6 Initiative of Deputy Prime Minister Luksic. I hope that meetings can take place on a regular basis and thus help provide high-level political support also for the work of the Regional Cooperation Council.

As regards the second Speak Up conference, the conclusions of the first conference in May 2011 laid the ground for a strengthened approach to the key issue of freedom of expression and media which is now addressed as key priority early on in the accession process. The second Speak Up conference on 20 June in Brussels will provide an important opportunity to discuss where additional efforts may be needed.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me conclude by congratulating Romania for taking over the Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process. You have my very best wishes for continued success.

Thank you for your attention.