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The EU and the Western Balkans: the Critical Year of 2009

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Czech MFA conference on the EU and Western Balkans

Prague, 18 September 2008

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last week I had the pleasure of receiving the winners of "the European Young Journalist Award" in Brussels – one young journalist from each of our 27 Member States. Reading through their prize-winning articles, I realized how quickly our perceptions of each other can change, as soon as we get beyond stereotypes and let facts work their way.

A Belgian journalist, for instance, had interviewed a Spanish man who recalled the resistance in the 1980s to the Spanish EU accession. "Once, Europe could not imagine Spain and Portugal would become members. But now a European Union without us is unthinkable", the Spaniard was quoted saying. The same can be said about the 5th enlargement: It is impossible to imagine a European Union without the Czech Republic!

Fittingly, the 5th anniversary of the accession to the EU of the eight Central and Eastern European Countries, Malta and Cyprus falls under the Czech Presidency. The reunification of Europe, once artificially divided by the Iron Curtain, is indeed worth celebrating. It is a chance to remind our citizens of the *raison d'être* of EU enlargement: to extend the area of liberty and democracy, peace and prosperity throughout Europe.

Today's conference focuses on the Western Balkans. The countries of the region have a perspective to join the EU, once they fulfil the criteria.

The Irish "no" to the Lisbon Treaty has raised some questions on the future of enlargement. Will it affect the process?

It should not be allowed to. Enlargement did not play a role in the debate in Ireland. It should not be used as a scapegoat for the result, either.

We need the Lisbon Treaty in order to make the current EU function better. But we cannot take any sabbatical from our work for peace and prosperity that serves the fundamental interest of the EU and its citizens.

The June European Council reaffirmed the EU accession perspective of the Western Balkans. Since then, we have opened negotiation chapters with both Turkey and Croatia. The EU has signed Stabilisation and Association agreements with Bosnia and Herzegovina and with Serbia. The enlargement process is on track – not a bullet train, but on track.

In the Balkans, countries that recently were at war are now busy setting up regional cooperation, an energy community, a transport community and a free trade area. They are all preparing for EU membership. Yet, much remains to be done on such key issues as the fight against corruption or the reform of public administration and judiciary.

The Commission will present the 2008 **enlargement package**, including progress reports, in early November. This will provide the December European Council with proposals for managing the way ahead.

The accession negotiations with **Croatia** are proceeding well. I expect most of the remaining chapters to be opened this autumn. However, the trickiest ones may be left for the Czech Presidency. It should be possible to close a large number of chapters during the spring, so as to conclude the technical negotiations before the end of next year.

In the progress report on **the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**, we will assess the fulfilment of the key priorities of the Accession Partnership, especially the judiciary and administrative reforms and electoral standards. Any recommendation concerning the accession negotiations will depend on the country's performance.

In **Serbia**, the new Government has made EU integration its key priority and set itself an ambitious reform agenda. The arrest of Radovan Karadžić showed that the Serbian government is determined to cooperate fully with the International Criminal Tribunal in the Hague.

As President Barroso said earlier this month, Serbia could achieve candidate status next year. This possibility is further reinforced by the fact that the Parliament of Serbia ratified the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) last week. The Radicals, who have traditionally opposed EU membership, abstained from voting, which may signal better national consensus on Serbia's European objectives.

Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina face the challenge of implementing their SAAs, including trade-related provisions.

Dialogue on **visa liberalisation** for the Western Balkan countries will reach a crucial state during your Presidency. Commission Vice-President Jacques Barrot recently confirmed that the countries most advanced in fulfilling the criteria might obtain visa-free travel already before the end of 2009. The Commission will present its assessment of this before the end of this year. For 2009 to be realistic, discussions among the EU Member States should take a great leap forward under your Presidency.

Kosovo will remain a focal point during the Czech Presidency. A successful deployment of our ESDP mission EULEX Kosovo is essential. The EU is committed to help secure peace and stability in Kosovo and support its economic development, as well as its progress towards the EU as part of the Western Balkans. Kosovo on its part needs to ensure its commitment to a democratic and multi-ethnic society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is clear that Europe today faces more serious challenges to security and stability to the east than at any time since the end of the Cold War. The EU's role in defusing the crisis in Georgia was significant. But we need more than just crisis management. We need a sustainable medium-term strategy to ensure stability and security in the Eastern Dimension of our continent which is crucial to the EU's own well-being.

The **EU-Ukraine** Summit last week was a major step towards further strengthening our relations. The new Association Agreement will bring about a closer collaboration in the political, economic and legal sphere.

Deeper cooperation between the EU and the Ukraine will improve the business environment, open market access for goods, increase border traffic and transport, as well as promote justice and the fight against corruption. Moreover, the visa dialogue aims at establishing, in the longer run, a mutual visa-free regime between the EU and the Ukraine.

Discussion about Ukraine's EU membership perspective is not on the agenda for the moment. Having said that, we will not prejudge the future. The new Association Agreement will leave open the question of the future development of EU-Ukrainian relations.

Poland and Sweden proposed the reinforcement of the Eastern Partnership in the spring. The events in Georgia speeded up the work on this. The Commission is preparing its proposal already for this autumn.

The Eastern Partnership is based on a desire to step up our support for both bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Eastern Europe. The partnership will be flexible, tailored to the needs of partner countries, and responsive to their desire for closer ties with the EU.

Increasing the number of scholarships made available by the EU and moving ahead with visa facilitation are but two concrete examples of initiatives to this end.

In addition, we need to consider how to further strengthen regional cooperation in our Eastern Neighbourhood.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The political attention in the EU has recently focused on Southern Caucasus, which is only natural and necessary. However, we cannot forget our friends in the Western Balkans and Turkey.

On the contrary, cementing democracy and the rule of law in these countries and encouraging their progress towards the EU is all the more important for stability and security in Europe.

This has been underlined by Turkey's constructive role in the Caucasus crisis and its recent diplomatic activities in relation to Syria, Armenia and the Middle East. These have demonstrated Turkey's strategic importance for Europe in building stability in our common neighbourhood.

Last but not least, there is finally serious movement towards the reunification of **Cyprus**. The EU supports the efforts of the leaders of both communities to achieve a comprehensive settlement under the auspices of the United Nations. The Commission is ready to contribute to a UN settlement process with its expertise in matters of EU relevance.

The EU can accept any solution agreed by the two communities, as long as a united Cyprus respects the Union's founding principles of liberty, democracy and the rule of law, and is able to carry the obligations of EU membership. This implies a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation with political equality, as defined by relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

In sum, 2009 is bound to be the year of the Western Balkans and of the Eastern Europe Partnership. That will certainly suit your priorities and the motto you have chosen for your presidency: "Europe without Barriers".

I look forward to working with you, and I want to assure you that the Commission will support the work of the Presidency in all possible ways.

Thank you.