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ATTENTION : ONLY EXCERPTS CONCERNING THE WESTERN BALKANS !!!

PRESS RELEASE

2915th Council meeting

General Affairs and External Relations

External Relations

Brussels, 8 and 9 December 2008

President **Bernard KOUCHNER**
French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs
Anne-Marie IDRAC
Minister of State with responsibility for Foreign Trade

* Some External Relations items were adopted without debate at the General Affairs meeting (16832/08).

P R E S S

WESTERN BALKANS – Council conclusions

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"The Council had an exchange of views on the Commission's communication entitled "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2008-2009" and on the progress reports "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", "Albania", "Montenegro", "Bosnia and Herzegovina", "Serbia" and "Kosovo (under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/99)". The Council broadly shares the assessment made by the Commission.

The Council reaffirms its full support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which remains essential for the stability, reconciliation and future of the region. It also reaffirms the need for fair and rigorous conditionality, in the framework of the stabilisation and association process and in accordance with the renewed consensus on enlargement approved by the European Council on 14 and 15 December 2006.

The Council recalls that by making solid progress in economic and political reform and by fulfilling the necessary conditions and requirements, the remaining potential candidates in the Western Balkans should achieve candidate status, according to their own merits, with European Union membership as ultimate goal. Further, a country's satisfactory track-record in implementing its obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements, including trade-related provisions, is an essential element for the EU to consider any membership application.

The Council restates its support for the dialogue on visa liberalisation with Albania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, based on the roadmaps containing clear and realistic benchmarks. It invites the countries concerned to focus on full implementation of these benchmarks. The Council and Commission will closely monitor the process, based on country-by-country assessment.

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

The Council welcomes the progress made in a number of key areas, in particular judicial and police reform, as well as the implementation of obligations arising from the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It encourages the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to improve the dialogue between the major political players so as to allow the normal functioning of institutions and accelerate the pace of reforms. Actions and statements which could negatively impact on good neighbourly relations should be avoided. The Council recalls, in accordance with the conclusions of the European Council on 19 and 20 June 2008, that maintaining good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually acceptable solution on the name issue, remains essential. The Council recalls that further steps by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in its progress towards the EU will be possible as soon as the conditions set out in the December 2005 European Council conclusions, the Copenhagen political criteria and the outstanding key priorities of the accession partnership are fulfilled. It points out that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia must in particular guarantee that free and fair elections are held in 2009.

Albania

The Council welcomes the progress achieved in a number of areas such as electoral reform, improvement of the business environment and good implementation of the interim agreement. It stresses, however, that good governance, enforcement of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as the strengthening of administrative capacity, are still major challenges requiring resolute action. The Council encourages Albania to continue its constructive role in the region's stability. It also encourages Albania to guarantee that free and fair elections are held in 2009.

Montenegro

The Council welcomes the important progress achieved, in particular the pursuit of political and economic reforms and good implementation of the interim agreement. It stresses, however, that sustained effort is still necessary in order to achieve progress in a number of areas, in particular strengthening of the rule of law and administrative capacity, judicial reform, media independence, and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

While the signing of the SAA constituted a milestone in the relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU, the Council is very concerned by developments in the political situation, including the recent declarations and unilateral actions, and the slowdown in reform. The need for a shared vision of the country's future, enforcement of the rule of law, the strengthening of institutions and administrative capacity, and the fight against corruption and organised crime remain major challenges. While reaffirming Bosnia and Herzegovina's European perspective, the Council calls upon Bosnian political leaders to assume their responsibilities in order to make progress on the necessary reforms. The Council notes that Bosnia and Herzegovina has begun to implement the interim agreement. It notes with satisfaction the agreement reached on 8 November between three of the main parties and urges that the proposals be swiftly implemented. The Council takes note of the statement by the Peace Implementation Council on 19 and 20 November 2008. The Council reaffirms its full support for the HR/EUSR, Mr Lajčák. It calls on the Bosnian authorities to intensify their efforts to fulfil all those objectives and conditions. In accordance with its conclusions of 10 November 2008, the Council emphasises the European Union's renewed willingness to step up its involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to assume its responsibilities by making use of all the instruments at its disposal, including on the basis of the joint report by the SG/HR and the Enlargement Commissioner.

Serbia

The Council welcomes Serbia's reaffirmation of its commitment to Europe. It recognises the progress achieved in terms of cooperation with the ICTY, but points out, however, that Serbia must complement this positive development by full cooperation. It also stresses the importance of tangible progress in priority areas such as strengthening of the rule of law, economic reform, and the fight against corruption and organised crime. It emphasises the importance of a constructive attitude towards regional cooperation. The Council restates its view that Serbia, with its strong administrative capacity, can accelerate its progress towards the EU, including candidate status, as soon as all necessary conditions are met.

Kosovo

While noting the progress made in certain areas, in particular the adoption of many important laws, the Council stresses that major challenges remain: the strengthening of institutions and the rule of law, protection of the Serb and other minorities, the fight against corruption and organised crime, budgetary and fiscal reform and the improvement of living conditions, in particular. In this framework it encourages a constructive attitude in terms of regional cooperation. In this context, the Council recalls the European Union's willingness to assist the economic and political development of Kosovo through a clear European perspective, in line with the European perspective of the region. The Council welcomes the Commission's intention to present, in the autumn of 2009, a study examining means to further Kosovo's political and socio-economic development in accordance with the conclusions of the European Councils in December 2007 and June 2008."