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**“The EU and the Western Balkans: The Objectives of the Slovenian EU
Presidency – Implementation and Continuation”**

Presentation of Mr. Telmo Baltazar

**Directorate General Justice, Freedom and Security, European Commission,
Brussels**

EU Integration and Assistance

What is the record of the Pap/SAs in promoting economic and governance reforms in the region? Do the particularities of the South Eastern Europe require further modifications of the EU's enlargement strategy? How could visa liberalisation and other pragmatic upgrades of the relations benefit the reform process without jeopardising enlargement conditionality?

- A common thread emerged from the different panels yesterday's.
- It is fairly safe to note that despite the high level debates in Brussels over the future of the European Union and the Treaty of Lisbon - or as one of the speakers put yesterday, the constant European tango between deepening and widening - and regardless of the level of attention being given by the rotating Presidencies of the EU to the Western Balkans there are certain realities that we can not ignore.
- These are the areas where the collective action of the European Union does have a direct impact on the Western Balkans citizens and consequently on the assessment by those citizens of what the EU stands for and how it affects their eventual willingness to become a participant and active member of the EU if and when such enlargement takes place.
- One of those areas is that of Justice and Home Affairs including the discussions over visa policies.
- I will focus today's presentation on how the European Union and the countries of Western Balkans can – or must – develop efforts – in a true partnership to tackle common problems, meet shared policy objectives and, perhaps most importantly, effectively deliver tangible or concrete solutions meeting the wishes and needs of the citizens.
- In a nutshell the different actions in the field of Justice and Home Affairs are based on the following priorities:
 - Promoting security and stability in the region,
 - Fostering the internal security of the EU and

- Progressively developing the legal framework in the countries of the region in view of their EU perspective.

These are then translated in a series of activities supporting law enforcement cooperation in different fields, ranging from the fight against organised crime, capacity building for the police and the judiciary, measures against money laundering and illegal migration, and the implementation of Integrated Border Management.

The Stabilisation and Association Process has been the forum through which the executive in Brussels or the Commission has monitored progress in the countries of the region and supported their efforts. Generally speaking we have seen **encouraging progress** over the years in these fields of justice and home affairs.

- However, despite positive developments, the "**Balkan route**" of crime remains one of the main entry points of illicit activities into Europe. An estimated 80% of the heroine flowing to the Europe market is trafficked through the Western Balkans.
- To visualise things better, take for instance the recent enlargement of the Schengen area of free movement. This has moved the Schengen border closer to the Western Balkan region.
- The security situation in Western Balkan countries is now more than ever directly impacting on the security inside the EU.
- **In short, Security in the Western Balkans** is not a local or regional concern. It is a **concern for the EU as a whole**. This easily makes activity in these areas a **key concern of the EU's enlargement policy**.

Coordination of visa policies or what is also known as Visa Facilitation and Visa Liberalisation

- *In line with the EU's intention of developing people-to-people contacts with the Western Balkan countries, the Commission, working hand-in-hand with the Slovenian Presidency*

has launched the dialogue on visa liberalisation with the countries of the region during 2008.

- *This is a good development no doubt though not the end of the road. A future abolishment of the visa obligation for Western Balkan countries will only be possible if the countries concerned comply with the conditions set in the roadmaps. The speed of the dialogue with each country will therefore depend on the individual capacity to undertake the necessary reforms.*

On visa liberalisation let me underline that the aim is clear: to support efforts and initiatives aimed at the promotion of people mobility between the EU and Western Balkans as a key element towards closer cooperation and preparation for EU membership in the future.

The first step towards the goal of a visa free regime consists in the visa facilitation agreements that entered into force in January 2008. A correct implementation of those agreements is needed to make it clear that both the EU and the local authorities in the Western Balkans use the possibilities offered by those agreements to the maximum. Implementing and monitoring the implementation of the agreements is as crucial, if not more, as their signature.

During 2008 the European Commission, working hand-in-hand with the Slovenian Presidency has opened the dialogue on visa liberalisation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries, starting with Serbia in January.

The methodology is simple: the dialogue will be based on detailed roadmaps setting clear benchmarks to be met by all the countries in the region.

The basic elements or four blocks of the roadmap are in line with the Thessaloniki agenda: document security, fight against illegal migration, public order and security and external relations. On document security we have been insisting on the introduction of biometrics to curb document-tampering. The roadmaps are country-specific (responding to the specific needs of each of the countries) even if largely similar among them. These are true roadmaps with clear milestones and an end goal.

Meeting the milestones set in the roadmaps (and at which speed) will depend on the progress of each country in fulfilling the requirements set. The process needs to be conducted seriously. The whole process will take a series of technical meetings and the thorough assessment

of the efforts put by each country. We are currently in the processing of receiving the individual countries reports and a first analysis may be made at the occasion of the JHA Ministerial Forum in Zagreb in November. It is a process requiring commitment from all involved. Brussels understands well the importance (and emotional aspect) of this issue in the Western Balkans. But Brussels also understands that it takes two to tango and governments need to understand that the response lies primarily with them and with the level of commitment they put in this file.

- But visas or rather the lack of visas is not everything. There are other areas where action is needed.
- **One of these areas is corruption.** It remains a serious problem in most Western Balkan countries. Do not need to say that corruption endangers the democratic system, rule of law and economic progress. In particular high-level corruption needs to be addressed via a firm zero-tolerance approach, awareness raising, an appropriate legal framework and serious investigation and prosecution.
- Equally, the **fight against organised crime** lacks in many cases a convincing track record. Firm actions are still needed to tackle powerful organised crime structures, for example in the area of economic crime of trafficking in human beings the rule of law and economic development are in danger. We need to encourage our friends from the Western Balkan to **show the necessary political will** for tackling these dangerous criminal phenomena.
- **In conclusion**, ensuring security and stability in the Western Balkans is one of the key challenges which lie ahead. Those seeking profit through economic crime, drug trafficking, trafficking in human beings or other forms of organised crime present new and ever-evolving challenges.
- This can only be achieved by working together. The European Commission remains committed to support the efforts of the countries of the Western Balkans on their road to the EU.