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Commissioner for External Relations

The Western Balkans: The Road to Europe

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Speech to German Bundestag, "European Affairs Committee"

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Mr Chairman,

I was honoured and delighted to receive the invitation to address your Committee. I was particularly pleased to be asked to address you on the subject of the Western Balkans and to answer your questions on this subject. One of the greatest challenges I have faced as External relations Commissioner was to implement our policy of helping to bring about stability and democracy to this part of our Continent.

Let me start with a brief look at how things were when I arrived at the Commission. Those who criticized the idea of a Common Foreign and Security Policy should study recent history. Europe completely failed to get its act together in the 1990's on a policy for the Balkans. As Yugoslavia broke into bits, Europe was largely impotent because it was not united. Some Member States wanted to keep Yugoslavia together at all costs, some wanted to manage its break-up, and others still felt we should stay out of the whole mess. It was Bismarck who said that the Balkans "*was not worth the healthy bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier*" (speech to Reichstag, 5 December 1876). I understand what he was trying to say, but obviously our views of what it is to be European have, to say the least, developed a great deal since his day. The people of the Western Balkans are our fellow Europeans. We cannot wash our hands of them. Let us remember the consequences of our refusal to get involved. The shattered ruins of Vukovar. The ghastly siege of Sarajevo. The charnel house of Srebrenica. The smoking villages of Kosovo. The European Union did not commit these crimes. But 200,000 or more fellow Europeans died in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone. As Europeans we cannot avoid a heavy share of responsibility for what happened.

We had to do better. A lot better. And we are. A common foreign policy position was formulated on the Western Balkans. We're all agreed on it. And it's working. I don't want to sound complacent. Recent events in Kosovo warn us against this. But in the four and half years since I joined the Commission, I have seen substantial improvements in the Region. Greater stability. Functioning democracies. And progress, albeit slow but uneven, towards the implementation of the reform agenda which we have promoted.

In my judgement, there is one clear reason for this. With the adoption and implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Process, we are successfully repeating the approach we adopted towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. I have no doubt that without the possibility of membership of the European Union, the history of this Region after the collapse of the Berlin Wall would have been very different and very much worse. The gravitational pull exercised by Europe has worked with the Accession Countries and it is working again with the countries of the Western Balkans. In parenthesis, I should say, that those who attack the European Union ceaselessly - many of them in the country I know best - should reflect on this fact. If the Union is such a disaster, why are so many countries flocking to join it? The truth is that Europe is a beacon of hope and prosperity for the peoples of South East Europe.

Last year at the Thessaloniki Summit the European Council clearly recognised the aspirations of the countries of the Western Balkans to join our Union. We endorsed their right to join us, provided that they meet the conditions for entry. We also agreed proposals to enrich our policy with new instruments like twinning, borrowed from the Accession Countries' experience. We will also introduce this year new European Partnerships for each country, spelling out clearly priorities for action both in the short and medium term.

We have not just restricted ourselves to a political strategy. We have also helped the Western Balkans in more practical ways. European tax payers are paying out a total of around € 5 billion over the period 2000-2006 for the Western Balkans. Germany has obviously contributed a great deal of these resources, as well as being a generous bilateral donor in its own right. In addition, we have introduced the so-called Asymmetric Trade Measures (ATMs) which have opened up our markets to goods from the Western Balkans without any reciprocal access to their markets. As they move down the road towards membership they will have to allow our producers to sell into their markets, but we allowed them to start the process on a unilateral basis.

Let me now set out for you briefly my analysis of where we are in relation to the countries of the region. First, **Albania**. In many ways, the people of Albania suffered more than any other during the period of communist rule. Arguably, Enver Hoxha was a worse despot even than Ceausescu because Albania was almost entirely cut off from the outside world for decades. Freedom of expression and independence of thought were so completely crushed that it has been very hard to create a stable democratic country out of this awful inheritance. So we have to be realistic and understanding about the problems. The perspective of membership is very clear and as Europeans we want to see the people of Albania move forward in this process. We all remember the touching humanity of ordinary Albanians towards the Kosovars in 1999. Without the unstinting generosity of poor people to their neighbours, the scale of the human catastrophe would have been far worse. Having said all that, I am very concerned about Albania. It is true that it continues to play a constructive role in Kosovo and in its relations with the wider Region. However, organised crime is a dreadful problem in Albania and it is a problem which is exported to many of our Member States. At the moment, I cannot pretend that there is real evidence of the political will necessary to tackle this problem. At the moment, we are negotiating a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Albania. The Member States gave us a tough negotiating mandate which requires that Albania demonstrate the capacity to implement what it has agreed before we can close any part of the negotiations. I have to tell you that I see no prospect of concluding these negotiations this year. So the coming year is crucial for Albania to demonstrate to us that it really is serious about its European policy. The choice is Tirana's. It can work with us and move forward or it can ignore our clear messages in which case I can only foresee stagnation in the European integration process.

Next, **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**. If Albania suffered terribly from communism, BiH suffered most from the break-up of Yugoslavia. The attempt by Milosevic to create a greater Serbia involved driving out non-Serbs from great swathes of BiH simply because they were not Serbs. This was doubly tragic because before the war, Sarajevo was a cosmopolitan capital. We all remember the touching and tragic march of ordinary Sarajevans in 1992 to try to stop the slide to war. The question here is clear-cut. Can BiH ever be a proper country? The answer is equally clear. We cannot allow BiH to fail, because to do so would open up ethnic fault lines and expose the whole region to de-stabilisation. I hope that you won't think me biased if I say that I am unqualified admirer of Paddy Ashdown. He is doing a terrific job in driving through a reform process. The trouble is that every time there is a need to tackle an important problem, an enormous amount of heavy lifting is required by the international community. The latest example was the reform of the local administration in Mostar. Late last year we published a Feasibility Study for BiH. We set out sixteen conditions for progress down the SAP. We said that if there was significant progress in fulfilling these conditions, we would recommend to the Council the start of SAA Negotiations.

In fairness, that was only a few months ago, but progress has been disappointing, as Lord Ashdown has made clear. I said in November that if BiH worked really hard and effectively, it could be possible for them to be given the green light in the second half of this year. I now think that that is very unlikely. BiH will progress to the next stage, but because of the failure of leadership provided by BiH's politicians it will take longer than it should do. However, the European Union's commitment to BiH's future is undoubted.

Next, the **former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYROM)**. In many ways this has been the greatest success of European foreign policy over the past few years. In 2001 the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was in touching distance of collapsing into all-out civil war. Skopje could easily have become another Sarajevo. The European Union acted firmly and decisively to stop that in its tracks. We brokered the Lake Ohrid Agreement which laid down the basis for a fair deal for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's minority communities. Since then, there has been progress in stabilising the situation. A new EU Police Mission is working hard now to improve things further. It would be foolish to be complacent. However, we now have a multi-ethnic coalition Government which is implementing the provisions of the Agreement. Earlier this year, President Trajkovski tragically died in a plane crash. He played a key role in keeping the communities together at a crucial time and he will be sorely missed. Today, the people of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are electing a new President and I very much hope that they will choose someone who follows in his footsteps. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has now applied for membership of the EU and if the Council asks us to prepare an Avis, we will of course do so. However, we made it clear to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Government before they applied that we would not guarantee a particular outcome. That was not just a form of words. The preparation of an Avis is a serious business and we have to assess in a serious way the readiness of the country to go to the next stage. We will therefore have to consider very carefully whether the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is really ready to take on the responsibilities of membership within a reasonable period of time. Area-by-area we will have to look at just how far they have gone in meeting the technical requirements. We will also, of course, have to look at their adherence to the political criteria for membership. I think that it is important for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to be realistic about just how much work they need to do. Whatever the outcome of a future Avis, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's ultimate membership aspirations will be realised in the future.

Next, **Serbia and Montenegro**. This is a tragic story. Everyone remembers the joy we all felt on October 5th 2000 when Milosevic was overthrown. The Serbian people's slogan was "Gotov je". It means "he is finished", and he was. The European Commission helped by rushing energy supplies to opposition controlled towns, but ultimately it was the courage of ordinary Serbs which prevailed. Serbs like the Kolabara miners who resisted Milosevic's police. People like Joe, the bulldozer operator, who forced a passage into the Government TV building with bullets flying all around him. And people like Vojislav Kostunica, who had the courage to run against Milosevic and Zoran Djindjic, who had the courage to organise the opposition to him. That was in the Autumn of 2000. Here we are over three and half years later and there has been hardly any progress towards Europe at all. Serbia and Montenegro agreed on a State Union but have failed to make it work properly and there has been a failure to face up to the need of dealing with the war criminals in Serbia's midst.

Let's be clear, Serbia can protect those indicted for mass murder and other horrible crimes or it can join the European Union, but it can't do both. What we need now desperately is the recreation of the spirit of October 5th, so that today's challenges can be met through the unity of purpose of Serbian democratic forces.

Next, **Kosovo**. The recent disturbances were a disgrace. Javier Solana and I went down there last month and were dismayed by what we heard. NATO did not take action to stop ethnic cleansing by Serbia in order to facilitate ethnic cleansing by Kosovar Albanians. I made it clear to the Kosovar Government that they had to take the lead in reconstruction to demonstrate their commitment to a multi-ethnic Kosovo. The need now is not to panic and change course. The international community has a clear strategy which we call "standards before status". If there has been sufficient progress on standards by the middle of next year, then the way would be open to a consideration of final status. But let's be clear that the most fundamental standard of all is the right of everyone in Kosovo to live freely and without fear. We expect both Belgrade and Pristina to refrain from provocative statements and to co-operate in face-to-face talks designed to reduce tension. One thing is clear. Whatever Kosovo's final status, its place belongs in Europe.

Finally, **Croatia**. I am sorry not to have been here on the day of the publication of the Avis. Günter Verheugen and I shared the responsibility for preparing the Avis and we shared the pleasure of being able to announce a positive outcome. Croatia earned it. Had it not been for the legacy of war, it could well have got to this stage much more quickly. When we looked at the technical criteria, we concluded that Croatia already had a functioning market economy and that it could meet almost all the demands of membership within a reasonable period of time. So it became clear early on that the main areas of concern related to political criteria established in Copenhagen in 1993. To take a few examples. Croatia's judiciary is poorly trained and organised and this needs to be addressed, but its independence is not in question. Croatia needs to do more, as the OSCE told us, to enable Serbian refugees to come home, but the new Government has concluded an agreement with the leader of the Croatian Serbs, Mr Pupovac, designed to achieve that objective. Croatia's relations with its neighbours have not been improved by a tendency to act unilaterally, but more recently there has been clear evidence that the Government recognises that it needs to act in a way which respects the point of view of others. However, the most difficult issue of all was the question of relations with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Croatia's record of compliance in the past had been far from perfect, but in the last few months, things have improved considerably. It was noteworthy that two batches of indictments consisting of eight people were dealt with speedily and without fuss. All of them surrendered to The Hague within about a week of being indicted. There remains the case of former General Ante Gotovina who is still on the run. Here, too, the Chief Prosecutor indicated to us that the Croatian Government was doing all it could to locate and apprehend him. Her conclusion was that Croatia was fully compliant with The Tribunal. Our requirements were that there should be full compliance and that we would rely on The Tribunal for our assessment. Both those requirements were met and so the way was open to a positive Avis.

The next step is for the Council. Many Member States will be watching closely to make sure that this co-operation continues. It is a matter for the Irish Presidency to decide when the Croatian Avis should be tabled for consideration by the Council, but we expect this to be in June.

Should the Council approve our advice, we would have to begin a process of screening the Croatian legislation to establish the extent of harmonisation with the Acquis, so that we were in a position to start accession negotiations. Obviously, I cannot tell you when those negotiations might start because this is a matter for Member States.

Let me conclude by making the obvious point that our decision on Croatia is a clear signal to the other countries of the Western Balkans. It makes concrete our promise to them that they will become Member States provided that they meet the conditions. Our strategy for the Western Balkans is a political strategy. We want all of the countries of the region to progress because that will help bed down economic and political reform and ensure the stability of all of them. That is clearly in the interests of the European Union. However, the process cannot be a succession of political fixes. It cannot be a question of the countries pretending to reform and our pretending to believe them. The integrity of the process is crucial because the end result is so important. Extending membership has to be taken very seriously because it affects the sort of Union of which we are all members. So often in the last four and half years I have heard Ministers from the various countries tell me that, unless their country progressed to the next stage by a particular date, they could not answer for the consequences. I have never been prepared to tolerate that sort of pressure. If the Commission did that, the credibility of the whole process would collapse. But we need the strong backing of Member States when we have to say "no" to a particular country. On the other hand, Croatia has made abundantly clear that it understands this message. My message to you is that when a country makes the reforms and lives up to its responsibilities, then it should receive its due reward.