

FUTURE OF EUROPE

**Article by Dominique de Villepin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, published in the “Korrieri” (Albania), “Kathimerini” (Greece), “Dnevnik” and “Fakti” (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), “Polikita” and “Koha Dirore” (Serbia and Montenegro), “Sega” (Bulgaria), “Financial Times” (Britain), “Dnevnik” (Slovenia), “Vecernji List” (Croatia), “Adevarul” (Romania) and “Proinos Logos” (Greece) newspapers
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At the end of this week, the Thessaloníki Summit will bring together the Heads of State and Government of the European Union, the new member States and Balkan countries. It is the opportunity to take stock of over ten years of action in which France and the European Union have played a leading role.

The first lesson we have learned, there as elsewhere, is the imperative of unity. At first hesitant and divided, the international community failed at the beginning of the 1990s to prevent in Bosnia and Croatia one of the most terrible conflicts of the end of the last century. With the creation, at France’s instigation, of the Contact Group in 1994, there emerged a vision, followed by the adoption of common positions by the main players. It was essentially this new-found unity which brought about the return to peace and stabilization of the region’s countries. Subsequently, thanks to the Europeans and Americans’ joint determination to stand up to Milosevic and extremists on all sides, we victoriously confronted the crises, in Kosovo, southern Serbia and Macedonia.

The second lesson is the necessity for courage: whenever the international community has shown determination, it has broken the cycle of violence and fanaticism. In Bosnia, the deployment in July 1995 of the Franco-British rapid reaction force modified the balance of the forces on the ground and paved the way for the peace concluded in Dayton and signed in Paris. In Kosovo, the second milestone for the international commitment to the Balkans, the NATO operation was critical in ending the repression perpetrated by the Milosevic regime and in leading to the adoption of a peace settlement.

Finally, the third lesson of these bleak years was the demand for a vision and a project capable of rallying the peoples’ support. The Zagreb summit in November 2000, fruit of an initiative of President Chirac, defined its terms: this project was European accession. The prospect for the Balkans’ rapprochement with, and eventual integration into the European Union was thus clearly mapped out.

This ambition must be underpinned by the resolute commitment of everyone, that means both the Balkan countries and the European Union. The Balkans’ future is above all in the hands of these countries’ peoples. It is up to them to confirm the choice of Europe and accept the consequences.

This choice presupposes first of all support for the values underpinning the European pact: democracy, tolerance, respect for the Other, the absolute refusal of ethnic and religious hatred and any recourse to violence. These principles must be translated into concrete action: affirmation of the rule of law, through the balance of powers and protection of individual freedoms; the trial of war criminals, starting with Karadzic, Mladic and Gotovina, in the framework of what has to be exemplary cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia; the resolute fight against the development of Mafia-like networks and organized crime which today constitute the major threat to the region’s political stability and economic take-off. Some governments have not yet fully appreciated the commitments required from prospective members of the EU. So we must keep on reaffirming these objectives and determinedly pursue their realization.

Progressive integration into the European Union also calls for what are often difficult radical reforms in order to move towards the market social economy with all that this requires in the way of transparency and openness. The primacy of the law and need for economic initiative are prerequisites for promoting the democracy and prosperity which are at the heart of the European project.

Last, but by no means least, the progressive integration into Europe must go hand in hand with the restoration of bonds of understanding and friendship between the region's peoples and countries. As we unanimously declared at the Zagreb summit in November 2000, "Democracy and regional reconciliation and cooperation on the one hand, and the rapprochement of each of these countries with the European Union on the other, form a whole."

The European Union is determined to support the progress on this path of the Balkan countries which choose Europe. In order to lend them a helping hand, the EU has defined a special contractual relationship, the stabilization and association agreements, which combine not just the progressive opening-up of their markets and appropriate technical assistance, but also a political dialogue which needs to be strengthened. Indeed, one of the objectives of these agreements must be to strengthen the cooperation between the region's countries. Moreover, the European Union has put in place some powerful financial instruments: through the CARDS programme (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization) the Europeans are granting these countries EUR 4.65 billion over 6 years; this is on top of financial support over the past four years of more than EUR 8 billion including, inter alia, humanitarian aid, loans from the European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), bilateral support from the member States and special duty-free access to the common market for almost all their products.

A leading economic player in the Balkans, Europe is already a particularly close political and military partner. This was the case in Macedonia, when the Ohrid Agreement sealed the institutional compromise between the different parties and put an end to a new potential conflagration. It was also the EU which brokered the creation, last February, of the new State of Serbia and Montenegro. Since then and on the ground, the European Union has taken over from the NATO forces in Macedonia and could do the same in Bosnia where it is already in charge of international assistance to the local police forces. The Europeans have thus become responsible for the bulk of the international peacekeeping and reconstruction effort in the region, in close cooperation with the United States.

Admittedly, every Balkan country has to move at its own pace towards Europe. But the EU forms a whole, Europe à la carte is not an option. Membership of the European Union cannot be reduced to a simple series of technical formalities: every country has to embrace the European project, that of an ever-closer Union between States and peoples. The representatives of civil society in the Western Balkans, from Sarajevo to Pristina, from Belgrade to Skopje, from Zagreb to Tirana, are urging us to ensure that the accession of their countries, when the time comes, sets the seal on a radical transformation of their societies. They are asking us not to relax the criteria for EU accession, conscious that there would be no point in joining a Europe which set little store by its values.

It is in this spirit that we are preparing Thessaloniki: our watchwords are not only ambition and hope – because it is absolutely clear that Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro are destined to join Europe – but also responsibility, because the path to Europe is an exigent one, demanding compliance with political, moral, economic and social conditions. To deny this would be acting irresponsibly vis-à-vis our fellow European citizens. Asserting it means signalling loud and clear our confidence in a future of peace we shall all share./.