

Speech held by the Minister for European Integration of the Republic of Croatia,  
Mr. Neven Mimica

"Forum for European Integration"  
Skopje, 15-16 March, 2003

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

Is it the right time to begin contemplating some enhancements of the Stabilisation and Association Process? This Forum should give an answer to this question. A very much Brussels like answer would be - no, there have been too few of own efforts of the Western Balkans countries directed towards stabilising their countries and the region, in order to justify an additional European input into the Process. A very much Western Balkans answer would be - yes, because we cannot move forward without a substantially increased development and political assistance and engagement of the European Union. My answer would be - both of us, the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process as well as the European Union, must be more attentive to finding a realistic balance between the new inside and outside inputs that would give an additional value to the Process.

The European Union cannot expect that its Southeastern neighbourhood will become stable only by relying on the internal stabilisation and democratisation efforts to be performed by the countries of the region. The latest tragic event in Belgrade only underlines this statement. On the other hand, the countries of the region can't expect the European Union to be the only player, which will address all of their development and political needs without a manifestation of their own clear commitment and contribution to the Stabilisation and Association Process.

Therefore, today's gathering represents a unique opportunity to strike that much needed balance, which will realistically inaugurate some proposals for the future of this volatile region. It is important to recognise at the beginning of that endeavour that final reconciliation and coexistence in the area of former Yugoslavia will be possible only once we all become part of the European Union. That is why we must help each other in order to achieve this goal as soon as possible, and why we must continue to jointly remind the European Union of the need for its stronger presence in the Western Balkans. This will help us all to move towards the European Union at a faster pace. In order to reach that goal, coordinated regional initiatives are welcome, but individual approach to the EU is a must.

Three weeks ago, Croatia has presented its application for the membership of the European Union. We are encouraged by the EU reaction, because it has reconfirmed our own view of the regional importance of our application. This application is beneficial for Croatia, because it reflects the progress achieved in meeting the goals set by the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It is beneficial for the EU, because it proves that the Stabilisation and Association Process is a well-designed process and offers the EU an opportunity to deliver on its existing principles of individual merits, differentiation and catching up. It is beneficial for the region as well, because it motivates other countries to follow Croatia's example of building stable democratic state structures capable of meeting the EU criteria.

The issue of regional co-operation has been additionally strengthened by the EU's comments on Croatia's application. It became very obvious that there was no political platform, neither in Brussels, nor in the countries of the Western Balkans, that would call for creating of new state structures in the Balkans. Therefore, all that remained was a contribution to regional networking. The promotion and strengthening of good neighbourly relations through the respect of the EU model of

interdependence and interaction of strong nation states, is the valuable basis of that regional networking in the Southeast Europe.

Bilateral relations between countries in the region are progressing well, while the multilateral level offers great opportunities, particularly in trade, energy, transport, justice and home affairs, as well as various political initiatives. Croatia will increasingly assert itself as an important regional player, an economic leader, and a political model. Its application for the EU membership shall increase, not diminish, its regional responsibility and presence in the region. Furthermore, the Stabilisation and Association Process can prove to be viable and sustainable only if it can generate a new candidate for the EU membership. The regional stabilisation will gain ground only if such a clear enlargement signal is received.

On its path towards the European Union, Croatia does not intend to compete with other countries. We shall compete with ourselves by challenging our best endeavours and potentials in meeting the standards and criteria of the European Union. All our reforms are being carried out for our own sake, but it is only the prospect of EU membership that can keep them afloat.

This Forum and Croatia's application for the EU membership actually confirm the complementary relationship of the regional and individual approaches, as well as the complementarity between the stabilisation and association aspects of the Process. In that context, it is of equal importance for us that a credible regional platform on possible outcome of the Thessaloniki Summit is reached, and that the Thessaloniki agenda reinforce and keep the individual approach running. We expect the Summit to reaffirm the regional context and ensuing commitments as a precondition for further advancement by stressing and enabling a tailor-made speed towards the EU membership of the individually capable SAP countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me return to the issue of realistic proposals for intensifying the Stabilisation and Association Process. Some leading European think tanks have expressed the view that without a stronger cohesive instrument, Europe is threatened with a new crisis in the Western Balkans, this time not a war conflict, but an economic and social crisis likely to turn into political and institutional impasse, accompanied by rising radical right-wing alternatives. The situation on the ground gives rise to those who advocate that the EU must transit from the policy of containment to the policy of cohesion in the Western Balkans. But, what are the key elements of that needed cohesion policy?

We must not overburden the transparent and able Greek presidency with unrealistic demands and expectations for the Thessaloniki Summit agenda. This would be counterproductive. At the same time, we must not stir up too high expectations of the public in SAP countries on the outcome of the Thessaloniki Summit. Too big disproportion between publicly declared requests of the region and the realistically possible results of the Summit could even provoke anti-EU sentiments in the SAP countries. That is certainly the least desirable option. Therefore, we should instead concentrate on a realistic regional platform. And what is equally important, that regional platform must be discussed, assessed and agreed on not only among SAP countries. It will be more productive if it can emerge as a mutual action plan discussed and agreed with the EU Troika and the European Commission well before Thessaloniki. In order to achieve that goal, this Forum must be followed by preparatory meetings of the political directors of the SAP countries, the EC and the EU presidency.

In my view, a realistic and achievable Thessaloniki agenda could contain some of the following elements and commitments:

On the SAP countries side:

- Strengthening the commitment of the governments of the countries in the region to pursue a clear policy of building stable democratic state structures and market economies by following principles laid down in the Stabilisation and Association Process;

- Reiterating their commitments to facilitate trade flows by promoting the idea of geographic transposition of CEFTA to the Southeast Europe, once all the countries of the region become WTO members, thus ensuring a transparent, predictable and rule-based trade policy;

On the EU side:

- Sending a clear political signal of the EU future of the region that shall be reached on the basis of principles of individual merits assessment, differentiation and catching up.

- Improving the structure and volume of the CARDS programme, and opening the pre-accession funds to the SAP countries in order to emphasise economic cohesion and development component of the EU engagement in the region.

- Offering pre-accession assistance to SAP countries, particularly through the assistance of the EC in legal harmonisation, similar to some forms of the pre-screening process.

- Allocating more experts in EC services who will deal with each SAP country.

After all, if the EU is ready to clearly recognise and declare in Thessaloniki that the EU enlargement shall eventually encompass all SAP countries, under the known conditions and criteria, and within the still undetermined time frame, it would be possible and even desirable that the EU already now take a decisive turn in treating those countries in its development, financial and expert assistance programmes. In that regard, it would be not so unimaginable to contemplate overcoming the

existing administrative barriers in the EC, namely those of different treatment of candidate and non-candidate countries or those of having and not having a Stabilisation and Association Agreement already signed.

Allow me to conclude by saying that it is not 1968 any longer. We cannot simultaneously be realistic and ask for the impossible. It is time to be realistic and ask for lot of achievables, because we need a lot of them. It is time to coordinate the regional initiatives that will not overshadow individual capacities. Let us all coordinate our common and our individual best road to the EU that would reflect our common aspirations and responsibilities, and our individual potentials.

I thank you for your kind attention.