

The EU and Southeastern Europe need each other

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ATHENS Next year, the European Union will expand from 15 member states to 25. This will change the Union fundamentally. But it will also transform our continent into the largest, most dynamic and most affluent single market in history. Furthermore, enlargement will finally lay to rest some of the most intractable conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries. This is a remarkable achievement, of which all Europeans should be truly proud.

But while this is a historic moment that we should all celebrate, the task of unifying Europe is not complete. Until the whole Southeastern Europe is safely integrated into the European Union, the job will not be complete. And until it is, Europe cannot feel secure about itself.

In recent years, the countries of Southeastern Europe have made great strides in overcoming the legacy of half a century of communism and 10 years of violent instability in the former Yugoslavia. Each of our countries has done this by introducing wide-ranging political, economic and social reforms. At the same time, we have repeatedly stressed our commitment to the goal of full integration in European and Euro-Atlantic structures. Our overwhelming priority, shared by governments and citizens alike, is full membership of the EU.

We know that integration into EU structures requires much effort on our part and that the process, depending on our achievements, will take time. But we are also convinced that the EU summit meeting next month in Thessaloniki, Greece, represents a golden opportunity for the European Union and our countries to establish the common ground that can lead to concrete progress.

We need to focus on some key issues. Governments in the region need to continue their efforts in the battle against organized crime. Furthermore, we must search even harder for effective ways of reducing the unacceptably high levels of unemployment and low investment that plague our region. Human rights should remain in focus.

The tragic assassination of the Serbian prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, brought home to us the deadly threat that organized crime poses to the processes of reform and democratization in Southeastern Europe. Strengthening the rule of law is already an overriding policy priority for all governments in the region. We are continuing to bolster our judicial systems, to speed up necessary legislation and to improve border management. There has been notable progress across the region in fighting trafficking in human beings, drugs and untaxed cigarettes.

But when it comes to stability, policing is just one side of the coin. To rid ourselves of the scourge of organized crime, we need to deprive criminals of their most valu-

able resource - human capital. And to do that we need to find jobs for ordinary people who want a decent living wage for honest work. The focus in our part of Europe is shifting from post-conflict reconstruction to the challenges of sustainable development. We have an educated and resourceful work force, but we need to know how best to deploy their skills.

The long-term stability of Southeastern Europe depends on the region's economic health, but this does not mean the usual plea for more money. Instead, we want to work out with the EU ways that the money we receive could be spent more effectively.

The EU has a remarkable record of triggering economic success by helping poorer regions - Ireland, Greece, Spain and Portugal have experienced veritable revolutions in social and economic development in the last 20 years. This has been the result of following a triple policy prescription: integration into a larger market, sound macroeconomic and fiscal policies and direct EU support from the so-called cohesion and structural funds.

We are committed to opening our markets to our neighbors and to the EU. We have made huge progress in curbing inflation. And we are now greatly encouraged by the proposal by Greece, which currently holds the presidency of the EU, that the Thessaloniki summit meeting focus on the possibility of applying cohesion and development policies in our region.

By coming together this week at the World Economic Forum's Southeastern Europe summit meeting in Athens, our governments want to show that we are ready to make such additional efforts.

We welcome those in the European Union who have suggested that preaccession funding be freed up to finance the focus on cohesion in our region. We fully accept the conditionality that must accompany any shift from reconstruction to cohesion, including a commitment on our part to cofinance European projects.

If our people can see regional governments and the EU working together to solve the thorniest economic problems, this will undoubtedly create the confidence needed for further investment. Let's give Europe the shape and stature it deserves!

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