

Romano Prodi

President of the European Commission

South-Eastern Europe's turn

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

South-Eastern European Cooperation Process Summit

Belgrade, 9 April 2003

Presidents, Ministers, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you in Belgrade today. Let me start by thanking you, our host Serbia and Montenegro, for your hospitality. I congratulate you on your successful chairmanship of the South-Eastern European Cooperation Process. You have done a wonderful job.

I also want to congratulate you on your accession to the Council of Europe. This is a very important step along the road to European integration. In a way it represents the fulfilment of Zoran Djindjic's vision -- of a Serbia and Montenegro no longer isolated, but firmly set on the road to European integration. I am convinced the authorities of Serbia and Montenegro will keep on that road.

This is a crucial time -- for both the European Union and the countries of south-eastern Europe. In Athens next week, the Accession Treaty will be signed with ten new Member States -- a truly historic occasion. The Union will grow from 15 to 25 members, from 370 to 450 million people.

Romania and Bulgaria, two other candidate countries present here today, will join soon. And next year the Commission will deliver its recommendation on the possible opening of accession negotiations with Turkey.

It has cost the acceding countries much hard work and far-reaching reforms to get to this stage. But it has paid off. And as a consequence they can offer their citizens the prospect of security, stability and prosperity as future members of the Union.

These are formidable achievements. But let me stress that the historic process of Europe's unification will not be complete until the countries of the Balkans join the Union.

And I want to take this opportunity, here at this Summit, before all the countries in the region, to say that the Commission is fully committed to achieving that goal.

We want you to become members of the Union -- with no "ifs" and no "buts".

Europe's history is your history, Europe is your home. Our peoples all want and deserve the same things: democracy, peace and prosperity. Enlargement is based on the sharing of these values -- and we want to share these values with all the countries in the region.

Enlargement is a tough process. It calls for determination, commitment and dedication.

There are no short cuts on the road to European integration. No political agreement can set aside or soften the criteria that must be met for membership of the Union.

But in this tough process, the Union and the Commission will be by your side. They will help you. They will provide guidance and expertise. They will also provide financial assistance.

I do not underestimate the importance of financial assistance. But let me tell you quite frankly it is not the only key to success in the enlargement process.

The key is political will. And that is something no form of assistance can provide.

Together with the Greek Presidency of the Union -- and I am glad to say this in the presence of the Greek Prime Minister -- we are developing ideas for a common EU-Balkans agenda to take you from Stabilisation to Association, and from Association to Membership.

What I am trying to define is a process, not a quick fix.

But where the process takes us must be clear and unambiguous, and the process must embrace the whole region.

There are clear differences between the region's actors, and these differences need no further stressing. The principle of flexibility must apply fully, and each country must be treated according to its merits. And all this must take place within the common framework of the regional perspective.

Regional cooperation is also an integral part of preparing for integration into European structures. We need to make sure the region's countries cooperate with each other as they would as members of the Union.

The South-Eastern European Cooperation Process plays an important role here. The countries are the owners of the process. And they have demonstrated their firm belief that regional problems can best be solved through regional cooperation.

From this viewpoint, the candidate countries have an important role to play in -- and for -- the whole region. They have recent experience of transition and reform. They know the realities and mechanics of the European integration process. By sharing their experience and know-how with their neighbours, they can make a meaningful contribution to their development and stability, and indeed to that of Europe as a whole.

Let me conclude by wishing every success to the new Chairman-in-Office, Bosnia and Herzegovina. I want to reiterate the Union's support for you, and for the valuable work you are doing to promote your countries' -- and your region's -- future in Europe.

Thank you.