



*Repubblica Italiana*  
*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*



REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA  
Ministrstvo za zunanje  
zadeve

*Dear Karel,*

at the General Affairs and External Relations Council on 23rd February we started a constructive political debate on the EU strategy towards the Western Balkans. It was a useful stepping stone.

Italy and Slovenia believe that the European perspective for the region should remain at the top of the EU agenda and we need to devote our discussion to this issue at the forthcoming GAERC. We cannot recede from our goal of extending the area of freedom and democracy, peace, stability and prosperity throughout South-Eastern Europe.

We must keep working on a carefully managed and gradual accession process of the Western Balkans to the EU. To this end, we need to support the efforts of the pro-European and democratic Governments of the area. Our first priority has to be adopting urgent and concrete measures aimed at helping them to keep their focus on the European agenda.

The European Union should deliver something tangible as soon as possible in order to keep alive the confidence of the public opinion of Western Balkans towards Europe. The liberalization of visa regime within 2009 could help us reach this goal, as it would have considerable impact on the day-to-day life of people. The work of the European Commission missions in the region is proceeding according to the road maps. According to the Commission, chances of a breakthrough in 2009 are realistic.

While appreciating the efforts of the Commission, political support from the member states to accelerate the ongoing initiatives aimed at starting a gradual transition towards visa liberalization is paramount. We should keep in mind this year's election into the European parliament and subsequent nomination of the new collegium of the European Commission. In this regard we should do our utmost to help the region achieve needed progress by this summer.

H.E. Mr Karel Schwarzenberg  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the  
Czech Republic  
Prague

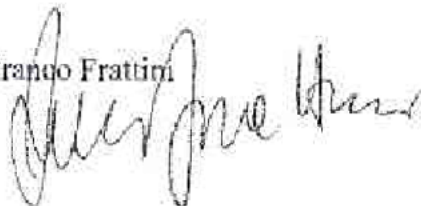
For the Western Balkans region, signing of the SAA with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008 were the last major steps. In the circumstances when financial crisis is seriously affecting Western Balkan economies, the standstill of the EU impetus might put the local Governments in a very difficult position when trying to advance the required reform process. We need now more than ever to bring all the levers at our disposal into play to make the European perspective for the region more concrete.

Italy and Slovenia are well aware that the Czech Presidency fully shares the priority of visa liberalisation. Therefore, we strongly support every initiative taken by the Presidency aimed at achieving the afore-mentioned goal, in the belief that this measure, strongly requested by the Western Balkan Countries, will motivate them to proceed with determination in the reform process and to maintain the momentum towards EU.

Rome, Ljubljana...

*best regards,*

Franco Frattini



Samuel Zbogar