

ARTICLE by JAVIER SOLANA,

EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy

on the occasion of the Thessaloniki Summit

FOR VIJESTI (Montenegro)

"Thessaloniki: closer to Europe"

This weekend's meeting in Thessaloniki, Greece, between Heads of State and Government from European Union member countries, the acceding and candidate countries and the countries from the Western Balkans will mark an important new phase in the relationship between the EU and the region.

The process, that has seen the countries of the region moving ever closer towards the EU, began in Zagreb in November 2000 – when EU and Western Balkan leaders met together for the first time. At the Zagreb Summit, EU leaders and for the first time democratically-elected governments from all the countries of the region jointly laid out a European vision for the region and underscored their commitment to support democracy, stability and promote the rule of law and economic development. This commitment has since intensified, moving beyond the primary goal of post conflict stabilisation and developing a genuine European perspective for the entire Western Balkans.

Last December in Copenhagen, EU Heads of State and of Government committed themselves to support the Western Balkans in their preparation for further European rapprochement and ultimate membership. You are now in the process of building and consolidating the joint institutions of the new Union of Serbia and Montenegro and soon a feasibility study would provide the opportunity to examine whether you are ready to move on in signing an Stabilisation and Association Agreement and get a step closer to the EU.

The Stabilisation and Association Process will remain the cornerstone of the path towards the EU. At the Thessaloniki Summit the Stabilisation and Association Process will be strengthened and enriched by applying in the Western Balkans some of the mechanisms used to support the enlargement process of the Central and Eastern European countries that are about to join the EU next year. There will be additional incentives and financial support to assist the efforts by the governments in the region to move closer to the EU.

However, progress towards integration will depend on each country's performance in implementing reforms. This process will be supplemented by more frequent periodic meetings between governments of the region and the EU counterparts, whose aim is to develop a more intense working relationship between the region and the EU. However, there are no overnight miracles. The EU's assistance will only succeed if it is matched by a genuine commitment of the governments and the peoples of the region.

Together with your neighbours, you must redouble your efforts to make the necessary reforms. And you must ensure the establishment and consolidation of your common institutions between Serbia and Montenegro, including the adoption of the Action Plan on economic harmonisation in order to proceed towards the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. You must establish an adequate administrative capacity, modernise your economy and strengthen your judiciary. You must continue with your successes so far in curbing organised crime, human trafficking and smuggling. There is a lot of work to be done.

There is no doubt that the future of the region is within the EU. The region is an integral part of a united Europe. Thessaloniki is not the end of a process. Thessaloniki is the beginning of a reinforced partnership which should be translated into reinforced efforts, most importantly on the part of the countries of the region, to move towards our common future of peace and security as well as economic and social development across our European continent.

Brussels, 18 June 2003 / 550 words