

**José Manuel Barroso**

President of the European Commission

**Opening speech at 10<sup>th</sup> meeting of  
SEECF**

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

South East Europe Cooperation Process meeting

**Zagreb, 11 May 2007**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first thank our Croatian friends for their hospitality in organising this meeting. I wish to congratulate Prime Minister Sanader and Croatia on its very successful chairmanship of the South East Europe Cooperation Process, but also on the substantial progress it has made along the road to EU membership.

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the European Union. We are proud of this achievement, which has brought peace, prosperity and solidarity to a continent wracked by war. In Berlin, we reaffirmed our shared values, like freedom, democracy, the rule of law, tolerance and mutual respect. We made clear our determination to preserve these values and use them to shape our fast-changing world, by continuing to work closely together.

Those values formed the very foundations of the European Union. They remain at the core of our activities today. Successive waves of enlargement mean that millions more benefit from these values, who previously languished under the dead hand of dictatorship.

You, the countries of the Balkans, have made difficult and often courageous decisions to help those values take root here. You can rest assured that the European Union will always be at your side to assist you in this endeavour.

But the desire to continue consolidating those values must be yours. No-one can impose them from outside, and certainly not the EU.

And yet you remain Europe's 'missing limb'. When addressing your summit in Belgrade four years ago, my predecessor Romano Prodi stressed that the historic process of Europe's unification will not be complete until the countries of the Balkans join the Union.

Today, I can repeat that statement with clear evidence that the European Union is respecting its commitments to this region. In the meantime, Bulgaria and Romania have joined and all the other countries have moved closer to the Union.

Relations between the EU and the countries of South East Europe have steadily intensified:

- We are presently negotiating accession with Croatia and Turkey. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has obtained candidate status.
- We are in the process of completing the network of Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the countries of the Western Balkans. We look forward to resuming negotiations for such an agreement with a democratic government in Serbia, as soon as the necessary conditions are fulfilled.
- We are developing relations with Moldova, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Over the last few years, we have witnessed impressive progress in the area of democratic and economic reform in your region.

But we are also aware there is still a long way to go. In some cases, the pace of reforms is too slow. Strengthening the rule of law, ensuring respect of human and minority rights, combating organised crime and corruption, promoting a market-oriented economy and social inclusion, and strengthening administrative capacity are high priorities. They are also conditions for advancing towards the EU. The Commission will continue to support the reform processes, politically and financially.

Regional cooperation is an integral part of the road towards the EU. So I welcome the significant steps made recently, in particular the new Central European Free Trade Agreement, the Energy Community Treaty and regional energy projects, as well as initiatives in the area of transport.

I am also pleased that the EU is now able to increase the number of scholarships awarded to students from the region for post-graduate studies in the EU.

Today, a new phase in regional cooperation has dawned. I warmly commend the Stability Pact for the work done since 1999. Its very success allows us now to move towards a more regionally-owned cooperation structure, with the establishment of the Regional Cooperation Council.

More regional ownership will go hand in hand with increased EU and Commission involvement in the region. Regional cooperation brings you closer to EU accession, as good neighbourly relations and cross-border cooperation is the very essence of the European Union itself.

We are highly aware of the importance of free travel between the Western Balkans and the European Union, especially for the younger generation. We have successfully negotiated visa facilitation and readmission agreements with the countries of the region. These agreements should enter into force by the end of the year.

As a next step towards liberalisation, we will now focus on establishing road-maps which set out the way to visa-free regimes for each of the Western Balkan countries concerned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This meeting takes place at an important moment for the Western Balkans. A moment when the last, outstanding issue from the tragic events of the last decade must be solved. Settling the status of Kosovo is a matter of vital importance for the region and for Europe. We aim at a sustainable solution that will fully respect European values and contribute to regional stability. President Ahtisaari's plan is considered a realistic way forward by the Member states of the European Union. The Commission fully supports it.

We expect a positive outcome from the UN Security Council without undue delay. The Commission, in close coordination with the EU Member States and other international actors, will play its full part in implementing a settlement, and we are actively preparing for it.

Let me be frank. Today your region is at a crossroads. Some countries are faced with decisions that will either put them definitively on the road to normality and membership of the European Union, or lead them back to stagnation, instability, isolation, possibly even turmoil. The European Union will support you in making the right choice. But as I said earlier, the choice is ultimately yours. Yes, we can assist and will be happy to do it. But no one will replace you in the decisions you will have to take in each of your countries and in the whole region. It is at the end of the day your responsibility.

I want to send a special message to Serbia, a country that at this very moment is facing crucial choices for its future. It's up to the Serbian leaders and Serbian people to decide if they want to go back to their nationalist past or to the European prosperous future. We are offering Serbia a future of stability and economic and social progress in the European Union, if Serbia has the courage to take the decisions that will confirm that European orientation.

Let me conclude by wishing every success to the incoming Chairman-in-Office, Bulgaria. The Commission sees in the South-East Europe Cooperation Process and its strengthened role, a valuable actor for promoting regional cooperation and stability in South East Europe. You have my every best wish for continued success.

Thank you.