

## Erklärung der Internationalen Balkan-Kommission vom 9. Mai 2006

*Rome, 9 May, Europe Day 2006*

*Two years after the beginning of its work and a year after the publication of the report *The Balkans in Europe's Future*, the International Commission on the Balkans held its final meeting on 8-9 May 2006 in Rome.*

*In its declaration issued today, the Commission members warn the European Union about the dangers of not giving a clear membership perspective to the countries of the Western Balkans.*

### **Rome Declaration**

In the report we issued one year ago, we concluded that the current status quo in the Western Balkans is dangerous and unsustainable and that European integration is the only way to bring development and prosperity to the region. Today, our views remain unchanged.

We are concerned, therefore, that European leaders have lost their courage to implement the commitment they made in 2003 to bring the region into the EU. Alarmed by the results of the referenda in France and the Netherlands on the ratification of the EU constitution, the leaders of the EU have retreated into policies that, instead of transforming the Balkans, propose merely to manage the status quo.

Two months ago at Salzburg, the EU failed to reassure the peoples of the Western Balkans that it is irreversibly committed to integrating them as soon as possible. The Salzburg meeting conveyed the message that the EU is neither ready nor willing to offer credible membership perspectives.

We can only regret this unfortunate development. It is in the Balkans that the EU must show that it has the power to transform weak states and divided societies. This is imperative for the Balkans, but no less so for the EU. Unless the EU adopts a bold accession strategy which integrates all Balkan countries into the Union within the next decade, it will remain mired as a reluctant colonial power at enormous cost in places like Kosovo, Bosnia and even Macedonia. The real referendum on the EU's future will take place in the Balkans.

Regrettably, at Salzburg the accession date for those in the Western Balkans aspiring to EU membership drifted into the unforeseeable future. The countries of the Western Balkans were offered never-ending accession talks. What constitutes a breach of promise is that this date will be determined not only by the readiness of the accession countries, but also by the so-called 'absorption capacity' of the EU. The truth is that the population of the small Balkan countries is about 4 percent of the EU population today. The challenge is not to the "absorption capacity" but to the moral capacity of the Union.

The Salzburg meeting has turned the need for 'smart visa' policies aimed at winning the trust of the public into a vague and unattractive promise of 'visa facilitation'. The result will be further marginalization and isolation of European-minded youth in the Balkans for whom Europe is today blocked by the Schengen wall. As things stand now, the citizens of countries like the Russian Federation and Ukraine will enjoy a more generous visa regime than people from potential EU candidates in the Balkans. This is not what Europe committed itself to in Thessaloniki in 2003.

In our view, the retreat from the Thessaloniki commitment and of the policy consensus that was born of it can lead to serious and damaging developments in the region. Lacking sufficient economic growth, functioning states and credible European prospects, the region risks becoming a ghetto on the outskirts of the EU. The crisis of the European perspective is at the heart of the crisis in the Balkans today. In the case of Kosovo, the absence of a credible European prospect of membership removes a crucial incentive for Belgrade and Pristina to agree on a solution. What is needed today is a return to the spirit of the 2003 Thessaloniki consensus and to the policies that follow from it. The EU must offer a realistic route for membership to the countries and societies from the Balkans. It must develop policies that will guarantee free visas, educational opportunities and freedom of movement for the younger generation, especially students, as well as the business community in the countries of the Western Balkans. Without such policies, all efforts of the EU to build trust and hope in the European future of the region are doomed to fail.

We expect Europe to live up to its promise.