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[Consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans](#)

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► European Parliament resolution of 24 April 2009 on consolidating stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans (2008/2200(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Presidency conclusions of the Copenhagen European Council of 21-22 June 1993,
- having regard to the Declaration made at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki on 21 June 2003,
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 27 January 2006 entitled "The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity" ([COM\(2006\)0027](#)),
- having regard to the EU-Western Balkans Declaration, which was unanimously approved by the Foreign Ministers of all the Member States and by the Foreign Ministers of the Western Balkan States in Salzburg on 11 March 2006,
- having regard to the Presidency conclusions of the European Councils of 14 December 2007 and 19-20 June 2008, as well as the Declaration on the Western Balkans annexed thereto, and the conclusions of the General Affairs and External Relations Councils of 10 December 2007, 18 February 2008 and 8-9 December 2008,
- having regard to the Commission Communication of 5 March 2008 entitled "Western Balkans: Enhancing the European perspective" ([COM\(2008\)0127](#)),
- having regard to the Brdo Statement: New focus on the Western Balkans, issued by the EU Presidency on 29 March 2008, underlining the need to give a fresh impetus to the Thessaloniki agenda and the Salzburg Declaration,
- having regard to the Commission's Enlargement Strategy and individual country progress reports of November 2008,
- having regard to its resolution of 18 December 2008 on development perspectives for peace-building and nation building in post-conflict situations⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 January 2009 on Trade and Economic relations with the Western Balkans⁽²⁾,
- having regard to Rule 45 of its Rules of Procedure,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the opinion of the Committee on International Trade ([A6-0212/2009](#)),

A. whereas the Western Balkans undeniably form part of Europe, and whereas the future of all the countries of the region lies in being fully integrated Member States of the European Union,

B. whereas the prospect of EU membership and its associated benefits is the primary guarantor of stability and the main driver of reforms for the countries of the Western Balkans, a part of Europe which has in the distant and recent past been plagued by wars, ethnic cleansing and authoritarian rule,

C. whereas the legacy of the wars of the 1990s continues to be a significant impediment to the establishment of lasting security and political stability in the region; whereas this poses new and unique challenges for the EU's enlargement policy and whereas recourse must be had to all Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)/European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) tools at the disposal of the Union as a part of an overall approach tailored to the needs of post-conflict societies,

D. whereas a number of regional partners of the EU continue to have unresolved issues with their neighbours; whereas the EU and the Western Balkan countries are agreed that good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation remain key factors in advancing towards EU membership,

1. Points out that the leverage of the European Union and its ability to function as an agent of stability and a driver of reform in the Western Balkans depend on the credibility of its commitment to allowing those States in the region that fully satisfy the Copenhagen criteria to become full members of the EU; stresses therefore that the Commission and the Member States must maintain a firm commitment to future enlargement encompassing the Western Balkans;

2. Points out the need for the Western Balkan countries to assume ownership of their rapprochement to the European Union; stresses that the integration process must be driven from within and that successful accession depends on the existence of a strong civil society, a low degree of corruption and an overall change-over to knowledge-based economies and societies;

3. Points out that, pending the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the current Treaties would still technically allow for the institutional adjustments necessary for further enlargements; believes nevertheless that ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is of crucial importance;

4. Stresses that Member States must not unduly delay the preparation of the Commission's opinion in respect of potential candidate countries that have submitted an application for membership, and urges the Council and the Commission to deal with recent and forthcoming applications for membership with all due speed;

5. Stresses that the accession process must be based on a fair and rigorous application of the principle of conditionality whereby each country will be judged solely in the light of its capacity to meet the Copenhagen criteria, the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association process and all the benchmarks laid down in relation to a specific stage of the negotiations, and, consequently, that the accession process must not be slowed down or blocked for countries that have satisfied the requirements previously set;

6. Points out that the accession process must maintain a clear regional perspective, and that efforts must be made to avoid a situation whereby differences in the pace of integration result in the erection of new barriers in the region, in particular with regard to the process of visa liberalisation; supports the role of the Regional Cooperation Council in strengthening regional ownership and in serving as the key interlocutor for the EU in all matters concerning regional cooperation in south-east Europe;

7. 7 Calls on the Parliaments of Member States to give their assent promptly to those Stabilisation and Association Agreements which are currently in the process of ratification;

8. Stresses that all parties concerned must make serious efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding bilateral disputes between Member States and countries of the Western Balkans and among countries of the Western Balkans themselves; stresses in this context that good-neighbourly relations and acceptance of the respective cultural and historic heritage are extremely important for preserving peace and enhancing stability and security; believes that the opening of accession negotiations with the countries of the Western Balkans and the opening and closing of individual negotiation chapters should not be obstructed or blocked over questions relating to bilateral disputes and that, for this reason, countries should agree on procedures for solving bilateral issues before the start of accession negotiations;

9. Notes, in this respect, the decision by certain Western Balkan countries to lodge complaints or seek advisory opinions from the International Court of Justice on bilateral disputes; takes the view that the EU should make every effort to assist and facilitate a comprehensive and lasting settlement of the pending issues;

10. Considers it necessary to continue to promote inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue in order to overcome both the burden of the past and tensions in relations between the countries of the Balkan region; believes that civil society organisations (CSOs) and people-to-people contacts (both between Western Balkan countries and between those countries and the EU) are instrumental in advancing reconciliation, facilitating mutual understanding and promoting peaceful inter-ethnic cohabitation; consequently, calls on the Commission to pay greater attention to, and provide increased funding for, initiatives promoting reconciliation, tolerance and dialogue between different ethnic groups, and to support the implementation of inter-ethnic agreements;

11. Lends its full support to the ESDP missions and the EU Special Representatives (EUSRs) deployed in the region, which still have key roles to play in maintaining stability and ensuring progress in the process of building functioning states capable of meeting the Copenhagen criteria; stresses that no ESDP mission or EUSR office may be wound up until their respective mandates have unambiguously been fulfilled;

12. Fully supports the efforts aimed at establishing by 2010 a comprehensive Western Balkans Investment Framework for the coordination of grants and loans offered by the Commission, by international financial institutions and by individual country donors;

welcomes the Infrastructure Project Facility (IPF) and points out that IPF projects in the fields of transport, the environment, energy and the social sector should be developed and carried out with a clear regional perspective; stresses the need for closer coordination in order to ensure effective complementarity, coherence and efficiency of assistance in the Western Balkans; believes that these coordinated loan/grant facilities should be directed in particular towards those potential candidate countries which do not have access to funds from all five components of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance⁽³⁾ (IPA); stresses the importance of regional cooperation in the area of best practice as regards access to the pre-accession funds;

13. Recalls that the dispute over gas supplies between Russia and Ukraine in January 2009 caused serious disruptions in the supply of energy to the Western Balkan countries; calls for the diversification of transit routes and better interconnection of the energy networks in the region with the help of EU funding;

14. Recalls that transport infrastructure is important for economic development and social cohesion; consequently, urges the Commission to support the establishment of an adequate intermodal system for transport between the European Union and countries in the Western Balkans area, and, within that area, to promote the free and speedy movement of goods and persons, in particular by developing Pan-European Transport Corridor VII;

15. Welcomes the new Civil Society Facility established under the IPA, and the consequent tripling of funding available to CSOs; urges the Commission to strengthen local ownership of civil society development and to create opportunities for regular interaction and consultation with local CSOs with a view to taking their views and needs into account in the planning and programming stages of assistance under the IPA; urges the Commission to encourage the creation of a regional discussion forum consisting of CSOs, as a means of disseminating best practice as regards access to the pre-accession funds;

16. Further urges the Commission to devote greater attention to the promotion of small to medium-sized and non-urban CSOs in the region, notably by allocating a greater share of its assistance to such organisations, by facilitating the procedures for applying for EU funding, and by reviewing the rules and increasing the co-financing of projects for small and medium-sized CSOs;

17. Stresses the importance of a liberalisation of the Schengen visa regime for the citizens of the countries of the Western Balkans as a means of acquainting the people of the region with the European Union; welcomes the dialogue on visa liberalisation and urges the Council and the Commission to conduct the process in as transparent a manner as possible and with clearly defined benchmarks, in order to facilitate external monitoring and increase public accountability of the process;

18. Points out that a cumbersome visa procedure, compounded by the understaffing of consulates and embassies in the region, is liable to generate hostility towards the EU among the people of the region, at a time when the Union's popularity is implicitly the biggest stimulus to reform;

19. Encourages the countries of the Western Balkans to accelerate their efforts to fulfil the requirements set out in the individual roadmaps, so as to ensure the removal of the visa regime for their countries as rapidly as possible; believes that the fulfilment of these conditions is crucial to accelerating the process of accession to the European Union; is in this context of the opinion that the IPA should support the efforts made by the beneficiary countries to meet the requirements laid down in the roadmap for visa liberalisation;

20. Fully supports the increased funding and number of scholarships for study and research in the EU available to students and researchers from the Western Balkans under the Erasmus Mundus programme in order to familiarise the people and institutions of the Western Balkan states with the EU agenda and to boost educational skills; urges the beneficiary countries to make all the necessary arrangements, including publicity and information campaigns, in order to allow their citizens to take full advantage of these opportunities; calls on the countries concerned to intensify the preparatory administrative measures in order to meet the entry criteria of the Lifelong Learning programme;

21. Stresses the vital role of education and training in today's knowledge-based economies; in this context, emphasises the need to strengthen and stimulate entrepreneurial and innovative skills at all educational levels;

22. Fully supports the participation of the countries of the Western Balkans in Community programmes and agencies; in particular, points to their participation in the Energy Community Treaty and their envisaged participation in a Transport Community Treaty as model examples of full integration of candidate and potential candidate countries into Community structures and alignment of legislation with the *acquis communautaire* at an early stage of the accession process;

23. Stresses that environmental protection is an important element of sustainable development in the Western Balkan region; therefore calls on the Western Balkan governments to adhere to the principles and targets of the Energy Community of South-East Europe so as to promote sound environmental policies and strategies, particularly in the area of renewable energy, in line with EU environmental standards and the EU's policy on climate change;

24. Supports the inter-parliamentary dialogue at regional level and stresses the importance of fully involving the national parliaments of the countries of the Western Balkans in the process of European integration; believes that the European Parliament and the national parliaments of the Member States have an important role to play in engaging in dialogue and cooperation with the parliaments of the countries of the Western Balkans; believes that the nature of the European Parliament's inter-parliamentary

meetings should be improved in order to provide a functional and effective system for organising more focused, practice-oriented debates and workshops;

25. Stresses the importance of working towards a reduction of all tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade within the region and between the Western Balkans and the EU as a key priority for furthering economic development, regional integration and people-to-people contacts; underlines the central role of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in furthering trade liberalisation in the region, and welcomes the Commission's financial support to the CEFTA secretariat;

26. Expresses its solidarity with the countries of the Western Balkans in the global economic crisis and reaffirms its support for the economic and social consolidation of the region; welcomes, therefore, the recent proposal by the Commission to extend its European Economic Recovery Plan to the Western Balkans and urges it to remain vigilant and, if necessary, to adopt adequate measures in order to guarantee the smooth continuation of the Stabilisation and Association process;

27. Urges continued efforts on the part of the CEFTA parties towards a reduction of all non-tariff barriers and of all tariffs and quotas for trade in agricultural products; calls on the members of the Pan-Euro-Med group to continue working towards a resolution of the outstanding issues that are currently barring an extension of the Pan-Euro-Med diagonal cumulation scheme to the countries of the Western Balkans;

28. Calls on the Council and the Commission to implement all appropriate measures to encourage deeper integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into the world trade and economic system, in particular through WTO accession; underlines that liberalisation of trade must go hand in hand with reducing poverty and unemployment rates, promoting economic and social rights and respecting the environment; calls on the Commission to duly submit in a timely manner, for approval by Parliament, any new proposals aimed at providing exceptional budgetary assistance to Western Balkan states;

29. Calls on the states in the region to attach high priority to the fight against corruption, as corruption seriously hinders societal progress; calls on those states to take all necessary measures to combat organised crime and trafficking in humans and drugs;

30. Urges continued EU support for regional cooperation initiatives in the field of justice and home affairs (JHA) and efforts aimed at legal and judicial harmonisation such as, *inter alia*, the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe, the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC) and the Southeast European Prosecutors Advisory Group (SEEPAG); takes note of the ongoing and planned financial assistance to the Prosecutors' Network in South-Eastern Europe (PROSECO) and to the establishment of International Law Enforcement Coordination Units (ILECUs), and urges the Commission to coordinate these projects with the aforementioned initiatives;

31. Urges the Commission to identify priority projects and to clarify the requirements it imposes on the various national and regional institutions with regard to interstate and inter-institutional cooperation in the field of JHA; stresses the importance of developing initiatives in the field of e-justice as a part of EU support for e-governance initiatives in order to improve cooperation and increase transparency in judicial processes and internal administrative systems;

32. Expresses its criticism of the constitutional and/or legal provisions in force in all countries of the former Yugoslavia, which prohibit the extradition of their own nationals facing indictment in other states of the region, and of the legal obstacles which hamper the transfer of serious criminal proceedings between courts in different countries of the region; calls on the Council and the Commission to urge the countries of the region to take steps towards a coordinated abolition of all such prohibitions and legal obstacles;

33. Points out that legal provisions restricting extradition can foster impunity for high-level crimes including crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war, trans-national organised crime, illicit trafficking and terrorism, and that such provisions are one of the main causes of the widely criticised yet continuing practice of holding trials *in absentia*; supports the efforts of national prosecutors to overcome the above-mentioned legal impediments by means of pragmatic cooperation arrangements; commends the work of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in promoting increased cooperation, and encourages states in the region to further facilitate mutual legal assistance and extradition while fully respecting human rights standards and the norms of international law;

34. Stresses that full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as regards the arrest and extradition of the remaining fugitive indictees, the transfer of evidence and full cooperation before and during the trial process, is an essential requirement of the accession process; urges the Commission to support, jointly with the ICTY, the OSCE and the governments of the region, initiatives aimed at strengthening the capacity and efficiency of national judiciaries engaged in determining accountability for war crimes and other lesser crimes, and ensuring that trials are conducted in an independent and impartial manner and in accordance with the standards and norms of international law;

35. Notes the fundamental role of educational programming and structures in promoting inclusiveness and reducing inter-ethnic tensions; consequently, calls on the Western Balkan governments to improve the quality of education by including civic, human and democratic rights as fundamental European values in the relevant curricula and to put an end to segregation in schools; points out that the teaching of history in schools and universities in the Western Balkans must be based on documented research and must reflect the different perspectives of the various national and ethnic groups in the region if lasting results are to be achieved in

promoting reconciliation and improving inter-ethnic relations; fully supports initiatives, such as the Joint History Project of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, aimed at writing and disseminating joint history-teaching materials that provide a multi-perspective account of Balkan history, and calls on the competent ministries, educational authorities and educational establishments in the region to endorse the use of joint history teaching materials; calls on the Commission to support such initiatives financially and politically;

36. Emphasises the importance of an effective framework for enhancing, protecting and guaranteeing the rights of ethnic and national minorities in a region that has a multi-ethnic character and has witnessed widespread and systematic ethnically motivated violence in the past; calls on the governments of the region to strengthen their efforts aimed at ensuring that all laws in the field of minority and human rights are properly respected in practice and that appropriate action is taken when those laws are infringed; urges that further efforts be made to ensure that initiatives to improve minority inclusion and the situation of disadvantaged minority groups (notably the Roma) are properly financed and implemented;

37. Stresses the need to draw up and implement programmes to promote gender equality and strengthen women's role in society as a guarantee of the democratic spirit and commitment to European values;

38. Points out that greater efforts are needed on the part of the governments of the region in order to guarantee the sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons, including the return of property and restitution of temporarily occupied houses, in line with the Sarajevo Declaration issued by the Regional Ministerial Conference on Refugee Returns on 31 January 2005; urges the Council and the Commission to insist that the governments of the region develop and implement programmes for access to housing and social services for returnees, and to strengthen their efforts aimed at combating discrimination against returning minorities; takes the view that these measures should already be in place when the countries in question reach the stage of candidate status and should be resolutely implemented and completed during the accession process;

39. Expresses its concern at the political interference suffered by the media in all Western Balkan states and the intermingling of business, political and media interests as well as the climate of threats and harassment against investigative journalists; calls on the Western Balkan states to fully respect the rights of journalists and independent media as a legitimate power in a democratic European state;

40. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, the governments and parliaments of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, the Chairman-in-office of the OSCE, the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the secretariat of the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and the secretariat of the Central European Free Trade Agreement.

(1) Texts adopted, [P6_TA\(2008\)0639](#).

(2) Texts adopted, [P6_TA\(2009\)0005](#).

(3) Council Regulation (EC) No 1085/2006 of 17 July 2006 establishing an Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) (OJ L 210, 31.7.2006, p. 82).