

Visegrad Group Ministerial Statement on the Western Balkans (Bratislava 22 October 2010)

On 22 October 2010, the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group met in Bratislava under Slovak Presidency at the second ministerial meeting especially dedicated to the Western Balkans. Recalling their joint Budapest statement from 6 October 2009, the ministers firmly stated that the future of the Western Balkan countries lies within the European and Euro-Atlantic community, in line with Thessaloniki Agenda and the Stabilization and Association Process, confirmed by the EU-Western Balkans High-Level Meeting in Sarajevo on 2 June 2010. The EU enlargement is one of the main priorities for the V4. Hungary and Poland will pay special attention to that issue throughout 2011 when they hold successively the EU presidency.

The EU should focus on a successful completion of the accession talks with **Croatia** in 2011. The accession of Croatia to the EU should give an incentive to further EU enlargement in the whole region. In this respect, Western Balkan aspiring countries should advance their reforms on the basis of the Progress Reports by the European Commission, strengthen the regional cooperation and settle the open bilateral issues. Commission's opinion on the membership applications by **Montenegro** and **Albania** will pave the way to candidate status and further on to opening of the accession negotiations. Along with the progress of the integration process, strengthening the rule of law and intensifying the efforts to fight corruption and organized crime, increase the efficiency and independence of the judicial system are key areas for further reforms. The current parliamentary crisis in Albania should be solved in a way that will strengthen the democratic institutions. In line with the recommendation of the European Commission, the accession negotiations with **Macedonia** should be open as soon as possible. A swift solution to the name issue will require leadership, flexibility and commitment of both sides involved. In the meantime the focus should be on upholding the dynamics of the integration process.

The V4 expects the EU Council to submit the EU membership application of **Serbia** for the opinion of the European Commission as soon as possible. Full cooperation with the ICTY remains a key condition throughout the integration process of Serbia. The V4 ministers welcome the agreement reached by the EU and Serbia on the UN General Assembly Resolution on 9 September 2010 as a starting point for new quality of mutual relations. The newly elected political leaders of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** should focus on prompt forming of the state institutions and on key issues for its European and Euro-Atlantic integration, including the remaining 5+2 criteria for the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), a reinforced EU presence, and a successful submission of the EU application. We support the continuation of the executive military role of Operation ALTHEA, under a renewed UN mandate, to support, as necessary, the OHR and maintain safe and secure environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ministers express their conviction that **Kosovo**, as part of the region, also shares the European perspective. The process of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina facilitated by the EU should start without delay. The V4 countries support the work of EULEX mission and urge all parties concerned to fully cooperate with it.

The V4 sees merit in the results gained by the visa liberalisation last year and welcomes both the fulfilment of requirements for a **visa-free** travel regime by Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina and the related European Parliament position adopted on 7 October 2010. The V4 urges the decision on a visa liberalisation for both countries by the November Council of the EU. Visa-free travel should be open to all people of the Western Balkans.

The V4 firmly supports NATO's "**open door**" policy, welcomes the entry of Montenegro into the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) and encourages Bosnia and Herzegovina to solve the issue of defence property as the prerequisite for the participation in MAP. As NATO members, the V4 countries will actively provide experience from their own Euro-Atlantic integration to Western Balkan partners.

After 20 years of successful activities, the V4 is open to share its know-how on efficient **regional cooperation** and on coordination of EU and NATO integration efforts. The Visegrad Group remains committed to promoting the integration efforts of the Western Balkan countries within bilateral and multilateral frameworks. V4 stands ready to assist the Western Balkan countries in their **integration processes** by transfer of relevant expertise, consultations on efficient management of IPA funds, twinning projects, joint research and student programs, and V4 twinning projects in areas such as energy security, transport, and infrastructure networks, Roma integration and others.