

Press statement of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group at their meeting in Budapest, 6 October 2009

The foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group met in Budapest at a special ministerial meeting dedicated to the Western Balkans. The ministers acknowledged the crucial role European and Euro-Atlantic integration played in the transformation of Central Europe and wish to see the enlargement policy fostering stability and prosperity in the same manner in the Western Balkans. The region is geographically encircled by the European Union and the upcoming entry of Croatia into the EU will give further impetus to the process of integration and encouragement to the applicant countries to carry out reforms.

The Visegrad countries recognise the importance of the Thessaloniki Agenda as well as of the political and legal framework the Stabilization and Association Process provides for the region. They are committed to the principle of progress based on the individual performance of the applicants.

Drawing lessons from their own experience, the members of the Visegrad Group also stress the importance of the countries of the region working together and encourage them to fully explore the opportunities of regional cooperation.

The Visegrad Group stands ready to promote the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans throughout the next presidencies of the EU, including the handling of their membership applications. The V4 also draws the attention of the countries of the region to the fact that only a positive *avis*, including satisfactory track record in implementing Stabilisation and Association Agreements, would speed up the integration process therefore they should take this into account when they decide on the timing of presenting their application or their programme for meeting membership criteria. The Visegrad countries offer their help and recent expertise in drawing-up and implementing integration strategies, including the effective utilisation of pre-accession funds provided by the EU. In order to enhance the local administrative capacity of the Western Balkans countries the V4 are ready to make full use of their present experience in twinning cooperation and offer joint V4 twinning projects for partners from the region.

Providing visa-free access for Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia as of 1 January 2010 is a significant step in bringing them closer to the European Union and a testament to the fact that efforts made for meeting the conditions bring tangible results. The Visegrad countries stand ready to help both politically and at expert level in the catching-up of those states currently not proposed for a visa-free regime.

Having had a discussion about the timely issues concerning the Western Balkans, the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group support a speedy entry into force of the Interim Agreement with Serbia, as there is a significant improvement in Serbia's cooperation with the ICTY. They also stress that all political forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina should unite their efforts to fulfil the "5+2 criteria" for the OHR-EUSR transition. V4 countries support the continuous presence of EUFOR in BiH and recommend to maintain its current mandate until the OHR-EUSR transition is completed. They highlight the importance of reforming the constitution

and reaffirm that only Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole has the perspective of EU membership. Without prejudice to further decisions by the Alliance, they welcome the application of Bosnia and Herzegovina for accession to NATO's Membership Action Plan. The Visegrad Group supports in both political and practical terms the aspirations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro with a view to participation in MAP. They reiterate their commitment to the enlargement process based on individual merits of the aspirant countries. The Visegrad Group expresses its conviction that Kosovo, as a part of the whole region, also shares the European perspective. They look forward to the upcoming study of the European Commission aiming to intensify the EU's efforts to assist the political and socio-economic development of Kosovo. They also express their strong commitment to the work of the EULEX mission and urge all parties concerned to fully cooperate with it.

Connecting road, rail and energy networks among the countries of the region and between the region and the EU should be a high priority for all sides. This could help the integration of the Western Balkans into European economy benefiting both the countries of the region and the member states of the Union.

The foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group wish to enhance their cooperation by requesting the foreign policy institutes in their countries to design and carry out joint research programmes, and by harmonizing bilateral assistance programmes towards the region to the fullest possible manner. They continue to offer student exchanges and grants bilaterally as well as through the International Visegrad Fund.

The foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group intend to dedicate their next regular meeting to the Eastern Partnership.

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