



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council Conclusions on the WESTERN BALKANS

*2771st EXTERNAL RELATIONS Council meeting
Brussels, 11 and 12 December 2006*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

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1. The Council had an exchange of views on the Commission's Progress Reports covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo, as defined by the UN Security Council Resolution 1244. The Council shared the assessment by the European Commission.
2. The Council welcomed the progress achieved in the region and reaffirmed that the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans is based on a clear European perspective and a fair and rigorous conditionality as set out in the Stabilisation and Association Process and the Thessaloniki Agenda. In this context, the Council also recalled the relevant parts of the European Council conclusions of December 2005 and June 2006, including full cooperation with the ICTY. To further support this progress the Council called for a swift and effective implementation of the priorities identified in the European Partnerships, which will continue to be a key tool for guiding the countries' efforts in moving closer towards the EU.

P R E S S

Albania

3. The Council welcomed the entry into force of the SAA Interim Agreement with Albania. It encouraged Albania to focus on establishing a sustained and effective track record in implementing the Interim Agreement as well as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. While noting recent encouraging steps, the Council stressed the importance of further determined action and continued progress on judicial, political and economic reforms including the fight against organised crime and corruption, and the full respect of independent judicial institutions as well as freedom of the media. The Council stressed that the government and the opposition need to work together constructively to ensure the free and fair conduct of the forthcoming local elections.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

4. While noting the progress made on the negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the Council regretted that a number of important issues remain to be tackled by Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Council recalled that Bosnia and Herzegovina's performance in all the areas set out in the General Affairs and External Relations Council conclusions of 12 December 2005 will be jointly reviewed by the Council and the Commission before the negotiations can be concluded. The Council calls upon all parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina to work together in order to overcome the remaining obstacles as soon as possible.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

5. The Council welcomed the continued progress made by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia but regretted that the pace of reforms has slowed down in 2006. In particular, the country needs to intensify its efforts in implementing the reforms of the police and judiciary, the fight against organised crime and corruption. It needs to secure the independence and capacity of the public administration. It also has to sustain its efforts in implementing the Ohrid framework agreement and in complying with the obligations of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The Council welcomed the political dialogue recently resumed by the government and the opposition, and encouraged the parties to step up their cooperation in order to further implement reforms.

Montenegro

6. The Council noted the progress Montenegro has made in putting in place the legal and institutional set-up required by its new competences as an independent state. The Council encouraged Montenegro to adopt a new constitution, in line with European standards. It stressed the need for further efforts in enhancing the administrative capacity and pursuing judicial reform and fight against organised crime and corruption. The independence of the judicial system and of the media need to be further strengthened.

P R E S S

Serbia

7. The Council welcomed the progress in Serbia, notably in further strengthening the administrative capacity and ensuring macroeconomic stability. The Council called on Serbia to carry forward its reform agenda and in particular to intensify efforts to reform the judiciary and ensure its independence and improving civilian oversight of the security sector. The Council, confirming its conclusions of October 2006, underlined its readiness to support Serbia in its European course.

Serbia/Kosovo

The Council noted progress in Kosovo in the transfer of responsibilities to the provisional institutions of self government, while recalling the crucial importance of further effective implementation of the Kosovo Standards. Enhanced efforts are needed to create an administrative environment that will allow for further approximation towards European standards. The Council stressed the need for further efforts in full respect of the rule of law and the independence of the judicial system, fight against organised crime and corruption, macroeconomic stability, and in particular, the protection of minorities and cultural heritage. Progress on all these issues will remain important".

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