

WESTERN BALKANS - Council conclusions

The Council was briefed by United Nations status envoy Marti Ahtisaari on the process underway regarding the status of Kosovo and it held an exchange of views.

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"VISA FACILITATION AND READMISSION AGREEMENTS

1. Recalling the European Council conclusions of June 2006, the Council adopted the negotiation mandates for visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Bosnia and Herzegovina, former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia. The Council also adopted the negotiation mandate for a visa facilitation agreement with Albania, recalling that the EU already has a readmission agreement with Albania.
2. The Council urged the Commission to start the negotiations in the course of November, and expressed its confidence that the negotiations could be concluded as soon as possible. The conclusion of these agreements will be important in fostering people to people contacts between the Western Balkan countries and the EU.
3. Recalling the Thessaloniki agenda, the Council reiterated that the EU is aware of the particular importance the peoples in the Western Balkans attach to the visa issue. It underlined that visa facilitation and readmission agreements will be an important and necessary step forward. The Council also noted that further progress will depend on implementing relevant reforms and encouraged the countries of the Western Balkans to step up their efforts in implementing reforms in the area of rule of law, combating organised crime, corruption and illegal migration, and strengthening their administrative capacity in border control and security of documents.
4. In this regard, the Council welcomed the holding of the EU-Western Balkans JHA Forum in Tirana on 17 November, 2006. The meeting will be organised for the first time in the region, which also highlights the importance of regional cooperation in fostering reforms in the field of Justice and Home Affairs.

REGIONAL CO-OPERATION

5. The Council welcomed the progress achieved so far in the negotiations on the enlarged and amended Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), which was on 9 November initialled by eight Parties. It noted that the door was open for the two countries that were not yet in a position to initial the agreement to sign it with all the other countries in December. The new CEFTA agreement, which was facilitated by the Stability Pact and the European Commission, will be a substantial step economically and politically. Recalling the key importance of the regional co-operation in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process and the April Declaration of SEE Prime Ministers, the Council expressed its hope that all Parties will work to ensure that the new CEFTA agreement to be signed before the end of the year will be a truly inclusive one."