



**EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Conference  
(Thessaloniki, May 8, 2014)**

**PRESIDENCY STATEMENT**

An EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Conference was hosted by the Hellenic Presidency of the Council on May 8, in Thessaloniki. Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle, Ministers for Foreign and EU Affairs from Member States and the Western Balkans, as well as senior officials from the EEAS and the European Commission participated at the Conference. Representatives of financial institutions and regional organisations attended the conference as well. Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Evangelos Venizelos chaired the event, which consisted of two sessions.

During the first session, the unequivocal commitment of the EU to the European perspective of the Western Balkans region was reaffirmed, in line with the 2003 Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans summit documents. Marking the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary from the biggest EU enlargement and with three new member states having joined since 2004, EU participants reaffirmed their commitment to the enlargement agenda for the whole region, within the framework of the accession and the Stabilization & Association processes and on the basis of the Copenhagen criteria, the 2006 renewed consensus on Enlargement and the relevant European Council and Council Conclusions. Participants stressed that enlargement is one of the EU's most successful policies. The remaining challenges that the region faces were also highlighted. The Western Balkans participants committed to undertaking all necessary efforts in order to speed up the internal EU-related reform process. They recognized the need for further efforts, especially in the fields of rule of law, protection of fundamental rights, regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations and the economy, notably in consolidating macroeconomic stability and enhancing growth and jobs.

The second session of the ministerial conference focused on the issue of transport and energy connectivity between the EU and the Western Balkans as well as within the region. Particular emphasis was given to the synergies and cooperation at the EU, regional and international level. Participants exchanged views on the opportunities to build on specific achievements in the energy and transport fields, including on the future of the Energy Community and on the possibility of reaching an agreement on the Transport Community Treaty. They further exchanged views on the role of regional initiatives, regional organisations and on mechanisms for better coordinating financial support to the region; they also stressed the importance of regional infrastructure for ensuring connectivity within the region and with the rest of the EU. The presentation of the current state of play in the fields of transport and energy offered the opportunity for comprehensive and detailed exchange of

information on the sectors needs, both in terms of projects and available or potential funding. While recognizing the challenges ahead, participants agreed on the need for closer cooperation, coordination of investment strategies and joint prioritisation as far as transport and energy infrastructure projects in the region is concerned.

The European Commission confirmed in this context its intention to use up to €1 billion from the new Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for infrastructure investment in the six IPA beneficiaries in the Western Balkans region for the 2014-2020 programming period. Combined with funds from the Financial Institutions, the EU funds aim to attract private capital that could finance at least €10 billion of investment in the Western Balkans, targeting key priorities of the beneficiary countries. Major regional projects could include the motorway and rail Corridor X from Zagreb to Athens, the rail Corridor VIII from the Black Sea ports of Bourgas and Varna in Bulgaria to the Adriatic Sea ports of Vlore and Durres in Albanian, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline connecting Greece to Italy, and the Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline running along the Adriatic coast from Albania to Croatia.

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