

Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003

**Address by Pat COX,
President of the European Parliament
to the EU- Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki**

President,

It is a privilege for me to address you at the Summit today on behalf of the European Parliament.

The Western Balkans have for too long been emblematic of European failure. I believe that this Summit and the Declaration we adopt today can mark a new departure for Europe and for the countries of the Western Balkans. I thank Mr Simitis and Mr Papandreou for giving a new leadership impulse to this relationship from the very first day of the Greek Presidency.

The European process moves like a large and heavy ship, but the ship is turning. Ours is no rhetorical or merely declaratory commitment. Something deep, and something deeply meaningful is taking place here today. The future of the Western Balkans is in the European Union and the European Parliament will play its part to bring that about.

There is much to be done. Sensitivities and concerns at slow progress on cross-border criminality, organized crime and trafficking in persons, mean that we need to work together on policing, intelligence sharing and border security questions. We have a common interest in tackling these problems together. We need to talk frankly to our friends in the region, to say, 'you have some heavy lifting to do in terms of the reform commitment, in terms of fighting crime, in terms of taking the steps towards sharing this vision in substance.'

It will not be quick and it will not be easy. This is a two-way process. Each part and all parties have to raise the level of mutual commitment to make the vision real, even if the eventual date of completion of the process may, for some, be relatively distant.

The effort will be differentiated by the respective capacities to cope with the pace of change and transformation. The four freedoms, and, eventually, membership, are available for those countries who can sustain them. But it should not be forgotten that attaining the Copenhagen criteria demands consistent and sustained effort over a long period.

What we hope to achieve today is to lay a firm basis for a clear, determined political and economic strategy for South-East Europe. We need clear annual benchmarks for each country. We need actions plans, investment in young people - students and young professionals - and the extension of Community programmes. We need to focus on developing the network of Free Trade Agreements into a Free Trade Area. We need to establish a regional strategy for infrastructure development, for transport, for communications, for energy. And, with our free trade perspective, we need to develop a 'free movement of people' perspective and to deal with the visa question. We need to develop our stabilization and association process with the Balkan states into something which can become more 'association' than stabilisation. This is an important step.

We know that there are complex and unsettled political questions in the Balkans. As Europeans, we need to give time to their settlement.

But we also know this: we have a vision for this region. It is a region that is willing to engage and determined to succeed. The signature in Athens on 16 April of accession treaties by ten new states marked the culmination of what had earlier seemed an impossible dream. But we lived the impossible dream. We can live that dream again. That is the invitation.

As President of the European Parliament, I will to make a personal visit later this year to speak to my parliamentary colleagues in Parliaments in the region. I want to carry this message: "We want to do business. And we want you to do business with us." I also hope to stimulate meaningful dialogue between parliamentarians as an integral part of building-up awareness, commitment and structures.

In the next European Commission I believe there should be a task force for the Balkans to look at the enlargement challenge with the strategic focus needed to set out the road-map.

Together, we can build this Europe. A Europe which, as Zoran Djindic reminded us, is based on values, pluralistic democracy, respect for the rule of law, respect and promotion of individual and minority human rights, respect for our cultural diversity, solidarity with each other and with the rest of the world.

This is my Europe. This is our Europe. It is where the Western Balkans belong.