

6th EU BALKANS FORUM - COMMUNIQUE

The sixth EU-West Balkans Forum took place on 6 and 7 November 2008 at Zagreb (Croatia) hosted by the Croatian authorities. The Croatian Prime Minister, Ivo Sanader, welcomed the delegations on behalf of Croatia. The 3 working sessions were respectively chaired by Brice Hortefeux, the French Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Mutually-Supportive Development, and on 7 November by Michèle Alliot Marie, the French Minister of the Interior, Overseas France and Territorial Communities and Rachida Dati the French Minister of Justice.

I) Immigration

The French Presidency presented the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum which was formally approved by the European Council on 16 October 2008. This pact, founded on solidarity between Member States and partnerships with third countries, helps to give a new impetus to a common policy on migration and asylum.

The issue of visas and readmission was studied in the light of the visa and readmission facilitation agreements that came into force in the first half of 2008. The Commission presented its annual progress reports on each country and gave an overview of the implementation of the road maps.

The visa and readmission facilitation agreements are regarded as a very positive first step, but the Balkan countries will have to make more progress in travel document security, border management and in the fight against illegal immigration to achieve the final goal of visa liberalisation.

II) Home Affairs

The Interior and Justice ministers of Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM), Serbia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Kosovo (with reference to Resolution 1244 of the United Nations Security Council), together with the Vice-President of the European Commission, Jacques Barrot, took part in the proceedings, in the presence of the directors of the European agencies Europol, Frontex and Eurojust. The Secretary General of the Council of Regional Cooperation and the representative of the Council of Europe were also given the floor. Towards the end of the Forum, the representatives of the Czech and Swedish presidencies explained their policies for the West Balkans. (The next Forum will be organised by the Swedish Presidency.) A press conference – held jointly by the European Commission, the French Presidency, the future Czech Presidency and the Croatian ministers on behalf of the host country - marked the end of the Forum.

Practical and constructive dialogues were enabled by some case studies of arms trafficking (Croatia, Montenegro, Albania), human trafficking

(Albania, FYRM, Serbia) and also a common threat assessment for the region, involving Europol and the SECI centre. As regards arms trafficking, the Interior ministers agreed on an 8-point plan. The main purpose of this plan is to reinforce operations that crack down on arms traffickers, to set up operational platforms using liaison officers specialised in arms and human trafficking and involving also the representatives of States with liaison officers in the region. With the support of the Commission, the French Interior minister also proposed the swift adoption of an overall plan, specifically for the West Balkans, to detect and neutralise arms and explosives. Regarding the threat assessment involving Europol and the SECI Centre, she expressed the wish that a Europol liaison office be set up rapidly in the SECI Centre and that links be formed between Europol and the civilian ESDP missions. Reports on the measures carried out can be made to the next meeting of the EU-Balkans Forum that will be organised in one year's time by the Swedish Presidency.

III) Justice

Justice ministers dealt with anti-corruption and anti-organised crime activities respectively. These operations mainly rely on financial investigations which call for particularly effective detective means to enable seizing, freezing or confiscating crime proceeds. Although the Ministers mentioned that the signature and ratification of the various conventions are a prerequisite - namely those adopted in the framework

of the Council of Europe - they also agreed to reinforce their cooperation in order to reach tangible results. Thus, several real cases were presented and discussed shedding light on the need for unity to better counter all types of crime. Rachida Dati, the French Minister of Justice, suggested widening the existing EU mechanism of "joint investigation teams" to the Western Balkans. Underlining the fact that 17 of the 35 EU joint investigation teams, were set up by France with Spain, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Romania, the French Minister insisted on the value of such a means.