Remarks by High Representative Paddy Ashdown At the Seventh Summit of Heads of State and Government Of Southeast European Cooperation Process Member Countries

President Tihic, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my congratulations to the BiH Presidency and Foreign Ministry. In the course of the last year BiH has chaired the SEECP process ably. Sarajevo has hosted the SEECP foreign ministers and parliamentarians; and it has coordinated the crucial follow-up meetings to the London, Palermo and Thessaloniki Conferences, spearheading the regional anti-crime drive and coordinating efforts to promote economic and political cooperation within a regional context. The momentum behind these initiatives is growing and that is to no small extent thanks to the efforts of BiH's yearlong leadership of this process.

Two things are striking about this conference – the participants and the topics.

Every country in the region is represented here and the focus of discussion is on

- fighting organized crime
- promoting free trade
- creating a regional power market

- developing a modern regional transport network
- modernizing and liberalizing border controls
- developing youth programmes and,
- pushing the pace of refugee return;

And what do all these add up to? Building peace and security.

The right people are here talking about the right issues.

And all of us are moving down the same path to Europe. Some are further down the path than others – which is why meetings such as this are so important. Those with a long way to go can learn from those who are already almost there.

On Monday I was in Zagreb. It was impossible not to catch the mood of anticipation I found among the officials with whom I had meetings, including President Mesic, Prime Minister Sanader, and Foreign Minister Zuzul.

They have accelerated Croatia's progress towards the EU. They have created a great deal more than optimism – they have developed a solid record of reform in line with EU requirements. And yesterday they reaped the rewards of sustained and genuine reform: the European Commission has recommended that Croatia should be accepted as a candidate for EU membership.

Croatia has shown that what matters is not words, not what party is in power – but actions, reforms. Croatia has shown that Europe is not an impossible dream for the countries that were so recently ravaged by war in the former Yugoslavia – but a real prospect that is waiting for all of you, if you are prepared to undertake the necessary reforms. Europe has shown that it takes the region seriously – it is now up to countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina to follow Croatia's example, and show they are prepared to take Europe seriously.

This requires focus. It requires discipline. It requires political, economic and social transformation. That means

difficult decisions, hard choices. But you should be doing these reforms not for Europe – but for your citizens.

This is a point worth making. Every single one of the reforms, every single item on the legislative agenda, every bilateral agreement and every institutional change *benefits* citizens. The citizens in all our countries benefit from the introduction of modern and equitable taxation systems, from the spread of EU-standard policing, from the consolidation of the rule of law.

Go to Hungary, or Poland, or Slovenia or any of the other seven countries that are joining the EU this year and you'll see what I mean. The process of European Integration has led to more jobs, more wealth and a higher standard of living.

The incentive is clear. This is not a question of jumping through hoops to satisfy bureaucrats in Brussels. It's a question of getting on with the work that is necessary to provide peace, security and a better life for citizens.

In yesterday's decision on Croatia, Europe showed it was truly committed to the region. And a major country of the region showed it was really committed to Europe.

There is a lesson there for all of us. We cannot compromise in European standards or the requirements of international law. If we do, we risk losing the only future we can have. Some things are simply not up for negotiation.

The Rule of Law is paramount in the new Europe. In the Western Balkans that includes cooperation with the ICTY.

No cooperation, no EU integration.

It's that simple.

There is no getting into Europe as long as regimes support – materially or politically – those indicted for war crimes.

There is a choice to be made. And it is a choice that this region is facing right now. But as Croatia has shown, it is a choice that in the end will pay off.

Thank you