

Remarks by the EU Special Representative/High Representative Paddy Ashdown to the EU-Western Balkans Summit

Let me add my words of congratulation to the Greek Presidency for this summit.

This has been a good discussion.

It has underlined three things very clearly.

First, the European Union wants the Western Balkans countries to join – ‘no ifs, no buts’, as Romano Prodi put it.

Second, that you must first meet the same standards and values that make the Union worth belonging to. No ifs, no buts.

And, third, that when you join depends not so much on the EU, but on your own efforts and the pace at which you reform. For its part, the Union is committed doing everything it takes for as long as it takes to support that difficult transition. The Union will be your loyal companion, every step of the way. You will not have to walk the road to Europe alone.

BiH is now firmly on that well-trodden road to Europe. It is making steady headway – sometimes more slowly than some of us would like, but it is only fair to acknowledge that it is carrying a lot of baggage.

But a million refugees have gone home, the physical infrastructure of the country has been largely repaired, freedom of movement is taken for granted, and Sarajevo is once again an relatively normal European city, with supermarkets and DIY stores. BiH has come a long way. The worst is behind us. But there is a long way still to go.

The grip of organised crime, a largely stagnant and still unreformed economy, expensive, cumbersome and too often largely dysfunctional governments, two – or even three – commands for the armed forces show how far BiH still has to go. Can we really fight crime with 11 police forces? These are the issues ahead.

BiH has to make its own way to Europe. The route cannot lie through the Office of the High Representative.

But the international community also needs to be clear about the scale of the commitments it has taken on, and the degree of hope invested in the ultimate success of its efforts.

Last week I spent the night with two refugees in their decrepit UNHCR tent near Visegrad. They are both 77 years old. For Ahmed Setkic, this is the third time that he has lost his home – twice in WWII, and then in 1992 at the hands of Arkan. Yet there he is. Building his home again, so he can pass it on to his children. Foreign policy decisions really do matter at the human level.

So a lot of rides on us – all of us – seeing through to permanent success this great enterprise. It matters for Europe. It matters for BiH. It matters for the security and stability of our continent. And it matters too for families like the Setkics, camped on their Balkan hillside, but daring to hope that the promises made at summits like this become reality. It's up to all of us to make sure they do.