Remarks By The High Representative for BiH, Paddy Ashdown At The Trans-Adriatic Interreg IIIA Conference

Thank you for inviting me to the official launch of the "Trans-Adriatic Conference – Interreg IIIA". Thank you, especially, to Italy and to Foreign Minister Frattini for the strong support you have given to this initiative: and thank you, and congratulations, to BiH, and to Minister Ivanic, for hosting the first conference.

The extension to the countries of Southeastern Europe of this EU regional programme is welcome. Regional development and cross-border co-operation on the regional level is what the EU itself is all about: the more we can do to transfer that experience beyond our borders, the better.

Border regions in Europe have long borne the stamp of the continent's history. They have often symbolised the divisions of the old continent and all too often have been at the centre of territorial disputes that tore Europe apart.

The elimination of economic frontiers within the EU, and freedom of movement within those borders, have given the border regions new opportunities for co-operation and opened new horizons.

The history of the Balkans has been all too often marked by disintegration and fragmentation. So has that of Europe itself. But now Europe has found a new way. Making borders less important and co-operation across borders more important. We are starting to make borders less symbols of division and hostility, and more into examples of co-operation and fruitful exchange. It is the first step towards the long-term prospect

of EU membership.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is now on the threshold of taking that step. A glimpse on the map shows that BiH **is** part of Europe at the cross roads from Central Europe, to the Adriatic.

Let me say a word about borders. There are many in this region, and many new kilometres have been created in the last decade. We do not want to change them: let me be very clear about that. That is not in any way what this conference is about. But, as we have shown in Europe, borders needn't be barriers: borders need to be properly controlled and managed – of course they do. But they also need to be open to legitimate trade, to legitimate traffic, to the daily business that takes place between countries.

The Neum-Corridor and the Port of Ploce ARE examples where two countries of the region, BiH and Croatia, benefit if they co-operate, and will be damaged if they don't.

Interreg III is part of the strategy for the stabilisation and development of the Western Balkans area, bringing these countries closer to the EU, making this region more like the EU, and fostering the border and regional co-operation that is one of the EU's hallmarks.

Co-operation within this region is, of course, a pre-requisite for closer relations between the region and the EU, and for progress within the Stabilisation and Association process. Indeed regional co-operation – and the stitching together of a network of co-operation agreements between the countries of the region is a central element of that process – not because we want to re-create the former Yugoslavia, as is occasionally and destructively claimed. But because the EU, which is itself built on the concept of regional co-operation, is entitled to expect its aspirant members to show their commitment to that concept too.

Prime Minister Terzic has recently announced that he wants BiH

to be ready to join the EU by 2009. That is a noble – and very ambitious – objective. The European Commission is just embarking on its feasibility study for the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The degree to which this country is co-operating actively with its neighbours is exactly the sort of thing which the Commission experts will, I am sure, be looking at in order to assess whether BiH is ready to accept the obligations that a Stabilisation and Association Agreement entails. So I hope BiH will indeed co-operate enthusiastically in this regard, as I know PM Terzic and Foreign Minister Ivanic are determined to do.

I see from the existing Interreg II projects that there are plenty of useful initiatives already underway all over Europe, involving EU and non-EU countries: a Finnish-Russian co-operation on a railway line from Helsinki to Saint Petersburg, for example, or a German-Czech initiative on rural landscape protection in Saxony, or a Greek project with Albania, Bulgaria, and FYR Macedonia on cross-border public health centres.

Let me just say that I look forward to the development of this initiative. I hope it will help further reinforce the regional co-operation that has already been gaining strength and vitality in recent years, as democracy has started to take root in the Balkan region.

Let me make a final point: every step forward in regional co-operation is also a further step forward on the road to Europe and a further step towards peace and stability in the region. The more steps you take, the faster that journey will go.