Article by the High Representative, Carl Bildt:”A Regional Plan For The Balkans”

The European Union is the greatest force for peace and stability in the western part of the continent. By its integrating force it has managed to turn nations which for hundreds of years were enemies into partners and friends within just one generation.

But the job is far from finished. The task of assuring stability and securing peace in the turmoil of the post-communist world is more challenging than it has been for nearly half a century. We have still to see the appearance of a European security order to replace the one which disappeared between 1989 and 1991.

In no other region is this more apparent than in southeastern Europe. The Yugoslav wars between the summer of 1991 and the autumn of 1995 represented the most bitter and brutal conflict on the continent of Europe since 1945.

Now there is a peace process in Bosnia and a process of normalisation between the different successor states – most importantly between Croatia and Serbia. But we have no reason whatsoever to be complacent concerning the future of peace and stability in this part of the continent. The price that Europe would have to pay if things went wrong in terms of security, refugee flows and lost economic opportunities would be huge.

The first year of implementing the peace in Bosnia is gradually coming to an end.

The meetings in Paris on 14 November and in London on 4 and 5

December will mark the transition to a consolidation phase which will cover the period up to and beyond September 1998, when the first true postwar elections will take place in the country.

The problems of Bosnia should never be seen in isolation from the problems of the region. And it is only by tackling the problems of the entire area that we can have any hope of averting new Balkan disasters in the decades to come. This cannot be done primarily by military force, although a deterrence capability will be crucial to the effort.

Any serious consideration of security structures for Europe must now take into account the need for military forces to be able to deter open conflicts throughout the region. We must not repeat the mistakes of 1991 and 1992.

However, it is integration rather than deterrence that must be the key instrument for long-term stability – in this part of Europe as well as in others. It is not by building military bastions, but by dismantling the barriers to trade and human contacts that societies and regions torn apart by war can gradually be brought together. And here the European Union will face one of its most challenging and most important peace-creating tasks.

There is in my opinion no alternative to integration when it comes to creating peace and stability in the region – and there is no alternative to the European Union when it comes to achieving it.

In military circles, especially across the Atlantic, there is often talk of a need for a Bosnian “exit strategy”. But from a wider political point of view what is needed is an “entry strategy” for southeast Europe into the frameworks and structures of European integration. The European Union is now on the verge of formulating its so-called regional approach to this area. It comes at a critical time.

This will be the most important contribution that the Union can make to the consolidation efforts in Bosnia in the next few years. It must also be seen as the starting point of a longer-term effort.

In certain circles the regional approach is viewed with suspicion, and seen as an attempt to recreate Yugoslavia. But those are often the circles of unrestrained nationalism which see every form of integration as a threat to their concepts of purity.

The essence of the regional approach must be to enhance the chances for co-operation and integration within the region and the rest of Europe. If there are identical arrangements for trade and co-operation between the EU and key countries such as Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, this also means that there do not need to be any barriers or borders to trade and co-operation between them.

With the ties that now exist between Serbia and Croatia on the one hand and the respective satellites in Bosnia on the other, this would eliminate the risk of Bosnia being torn apart by open or hidden trade barriers. However, the regional approch must be more than a level playing field for trade and economic co-operation. It must open up a political dialogue between the region and the EU and it should look at developing the infrastructure of a region which links different parts of Europe as well as Europe and the Middle East.

We need a European political vision for southeastern Europe. Burdened by the conflicts throughout their history, the peoples of the region desperately need new visions and horizons for the future. As long as this is not the case, they risk continuing to be so obsessed with their past as to block their future.

Socialism, if they ever believed in it, is gone forever, along with its simplistic slogans of “brotherhood and unity”. And

the ferocious nationalism that often replaced it has shown itself to be a force for war and “ethnic cleansing”.

Nationalism in this region of historic fault lines, cultural mosaics and religious diversity will remain a dangerous force for generations. A European vision and perspective for this part of our continent could turn a downward spiral and nationalist fears and dreams into an upward spiral of co-operation and tolerance. It will not come easily, and it will require patience and persistence, but in much the same way as in other parts of Europe, there is simply no alternative if we want to avoid further carnage and conflict.

Such a vision would also give Europe the leverage needed in order to facilitiate the solution of the outstanding issues in the region. The diverse Albanian issues in the southern Balkans and the not yet resolved issues between Serbs and Croats in the north and in the centre, stand out as much as the future of the Bosnian Muslim community.

External co-operation will over time force internal reform. A liberal trade regime will strike a blow at the unreformed dinosaurs of socialism in Serbia and will at least curb the authoritarian tendencies in Croatia. It will allow the re-emergence of a middle class – now to a large extent crushed by hyperinflation and war profiteers – which can form the basis for democratic development.

The regional approach is just the beginning of a long-term commitment to southeastern Europe. It is far more than a technical approach to trade talks or the conditions of the day.

The European Commission has presented a number of ideas to the Council of Ministers, and they must now give the concept a political dimension.

But at the end of the day it will be up to the European Council to open up in this part of our continent those visions

of co-operation and integration that are so desperately needed in conflict and strife are not going to come back and haunt the region – and us – for many generations to come.