South-Eastern Europe: stability pact, stabilisation and association agreements

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The Commission Report remarks that the words chosen for the "Stabilisation and Association Agreements" (SAP) were done so with great care. At its inception in 2000, following years of violence and aggression in the five country region, the international community, with the European Union at the helm, offered these countries greater association with the west whilst simultaneously encouraging progress towards enhanced stability. SAP draws heavily from the European Agreements which the EU has been forging over the past years with candidate countries from central and eastern Europe. As with the European Agreement, SAP holds out the promise of eventual accession to the EU. From the outset the EU has set the policy that ultimate membership of the EU is both possible and desirable for the south east region - on the understanding that certain conditions are met, not least of which is a commitment to democratic principles and the renunciation of violence as a means to an end. This Report is the first annual report prepared by the Commission and is an overall audit of progress to date within SAP. Annexed to the document are assessment reports on the individual countries participating in SAP namely, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Overall, the Report notes that many countries are showing a clear commitment towards change and reform. Nevertheless,the region remains volatile and potentially unstable - as witnessed by the political and military disruptions in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2000. The challenge for the EU therefore is to cope with this political volatility and institutional fragility while holding a steady course towards the strategic goal of integration of the countries of the region into the EU. In terms of structure, SAP is organised along both bilateral and regional lines. The basic building blocks of SAP are through contractual links, trade preferences and financial assistance (channelled through the CARDS programme).These building blocks enable the EU to make a lasting contribution to institution building and sustainable development in the region. On the question of progress made and lessons learned the Report notes that the process needs to be tailored to the needs and specific conditions of the individual countries and that a proper balance needs to be struck between stabilisation and association. Indeed, one of the clear lessons learnt has been that it is difficult to move very far along the association path unless there is a certain degree of stability - especially respect for the rule of law and the functioning of political and judicial institutions. Bearing this later point in mind the Report emphasises that one of the continuing challenges for the EU under SAP will be the encouragement of regional cooperation. The EU's foundations are built on the concept of regional co-operation. Political understanding as well as economic and social prosperity depend on close co-operation with neighbouring countries across the broadest range of activities. Integration with the EU for the south eastern region of Europe is only possible if future members can demonstrate that they are willing and able to interact with their neighbours as EU Member States do. The Report urges SAP participants to recognise the importance of regional understanding in order to tackle the very real problems associated with the area including organised crime, refugees, theneeds to forge ahead with trade agreements and the need for properly functioning regional agreements in the energy and transport sectors. Within this context, the authors of the Report call for a particular and determined effort to entrench the rule of law as a sine qua non for stability and progress with reform. For its part the EU is offering continued assistance in an attempt to reach these ambitious goals, not only through financial assistance, but also through actions such as the newly proposed political forum, known as the Zagreb process.