

**SEVENTH REReP TASK FORCE MEETING,  
Belgrade, September 30 – October 1, 2004.**

**- Opening speech by Dr Aleksandar Popovic, Minister of Science and  
Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia**

Ladies and gentleman, dear colleagues,

Please, let me first of all welcome you to Serbia and Montenegro, and let me wish you successful work and a pleasant time in Belgrade during this meeting.

After the Thessalonica Summit in June 2003, which reaffirmed the Stabilisation and Association Process, at a ministerial-level meeting of the five South Eastern European countries which took place in Skopje on 15 October, the ministers of environment of the five Western Balkan countries affirmed the importance of regional cooperation through the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme. The ministerial declaration adopted at that meeting reaffirmed the importance of regional cooperation with respect to environmental protection.

The EU sent a strong message that it is committed to the Western Balkans as a long-term investment in peace, stability, democracy and economic development. At the European Summit in Thessalonica, in 2003, the European Union offered to Western Balkan countries European partnership as the main instrument of the pre-accession strategy of the EU to potential member countries. In European partnership, short-term and medium-term priorities for WB Countries are set out, and WB countries are expected to make plans for their implementation. The most important implication of European partnership is that the financial help of the EU is determined by the fulfilment of priorities of European partnership.

At the November 2003, REReP Task Force meeting in Brussels, the country representatives made a strong plea for more funding of investment projects, and the challenge will be how to maintain the regionalism of REReP.

At that time, the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme (REReP) modified its priorities to focus on the goal of EU integration, one of which is support to environmental cooperation mechanisms and cross-border projects. However, other donors (e.g. CARDS, bilateral

donors, GEF) have now increased their activities in such areas as institution-building and biodiversity protection. Support for cross-border cooperation is still needed.

One of the principal conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Process is to promote regional co-operation and dialogue, which REReP is primed to do. It is therefore recommended that REReP should continue to play a major role in the SEE countries' efforts to come closer to the EU, but with a shift in focus from capacity building at national level (i.e., inside ministries) to regional experience sharing with respect to the Stabilisation and Association Process. REReP also plays a unique role in capacity building among local authorities for managing shared natural resources across borders.

Future support of the European Commission will redirect REReP programmes from national capacity building programmes to those strengthening regional cooperation, i.e. regional experience-sharing with respect to the Stabilisation and Association Process and for implementation of EU requirements linked to multilateral agreements where cross-border cooperation is necessary, as well as to those continuing support for capacity building at local level for cross-border projects involving local governments and civil society.

Some of the priorities in the region are grants programmes aimed at supporting local environmental protection activities, support for long-term coordination for issues requiring a regional problem-solving approach, e.g. waste management, and cross-border projects for other shared natural resources in the region, reducing environmental health threats and loss of biodiversity, introducing a "greening privatisation" approach, increasing funds for quick "hot spot" clean-up where there is a pressing regional need, etc.

The common goal of all countries in the region is to reach the environmental standards of the European Union, and promotion of sustainable development. I hope that Regional Environmental Reconstruction Programme and this meeting will contribute to fulfilling those goals.

Thank you for your attention.