

Remarks by Ambassador Alexandros P. Mallias
At the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) Conference:
“COMPLETING AMERICA'S MISSION IN THE BALKANS”
Monday, April 13, 2009 (8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.)

Dear friends and colleagues,

1. With my tenure as Ambassador of Greece to the United States coming to an end in a few weeks, I am pleased that one of my last presentations in Washington DC is about the Balkans, an area where I devoted twenty years of my service, almost two thirds of my career. I am equally happy, if not happier, that this event is taking place at the CSIS. I like to thank my good friends John Hamre and Janusz Bugajski for their availability and openness these past few years.

I will try to share with you briefly the lessons-learned from my journey through the Balkans and the developments in the region, which led to the regional architecture we all experience today.

“The Western Balkans and support to their preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU. The Balkans will be an integral part of a unified Europe”.

This is an excerpt from the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans, jointly adopted back in 2003 in Thessaloniki by the European Summit and the Heads of State and Governments of the Balkan countries.

Since I was heading the team that drafted this Agenda and the Thessaloniki Declaration, allow me to stress that this excerpt constitutes the core-message of the Summit, as well as the way ahead. The Thessaloniki Summit was a milestone in the European Union’s privileged and inclusive relationship with the Western Balkans; a milestone, in terms of semantics, essence and timing.

2. In terms of semantics, European Union Leaders in the Thessaloniki Summit sat at the same table with their Western Balkan counterparts, including, under UNMIK's umbrella, Kosovo's leadership.

In terms of essence, in the Thessaloniki Summit, the EU reiterated its unequivocal support of the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries as potential candidates, while the countries of the region committed themselves to step up their efforts for reform that would bring them closer to EU accession.

In terms of timing, the Thessaloniki Summit renewed the European Message to the Western Balkans three months after the Treaty of Athens, namely European Union's big-bang enlargement, when the first signs of enlargement fatigue were already becoming visible within the EU.

In other words, the Thessaloniki Summit marked the advent of a new era for the Balkans.

It was an appeal to the peoples and the political leadership of the countries in the region to leave the past behind and join forces for a common future.

3. Greece has important strategic interests at stake in the Balkans. Stability of the region is a national security issue. As the oldest member of both EU and NATO in South East Europe, Greece realized the merits of membership in those Organizations at an early stage. Nonetheless, at that time, it was cut from the mainland, from EU's and NATO's geographic space.

In the early '90s, the then twelve EU member-states saw twelve different trees and missed the forest.

4. Since then, Europe has rightly recognized two things:

Firstly, that the Western Balkans lie within the heart of the European mainland itself, and therefore constitute a European challenge.

Secondly, the EU came to terms with its own true potential. It emerged as a soft-power. It offered a tangible perspective to the countries of the region; a new vision towards EU membership, while creating the mechanisms to generate and monitor the necessary reforms, criteria and conditions, the fulfillment of which would eventually lead to membership.

Greece's role in this process was critical, both bilaterally and multilaterally, within the framework of the EU. On the bilateral level, Greece became the most active player in the region as a political, economic and security provider. It offered active political support to the countries of the region. It invested more than 25 billion USD, thus generating more than 200.000 new jobs. It also elaborated an 850 million worth development assistance project for the Balkan countries.

5. Greece's greater vision for the Balkans was clear: a geographic region, where peace, stability democracy, the rule of law, prosperity, good neighborly relations and peaceful resolution of disputes were the rule rather than the exception; a conflict-free zone of peaceful inter-ethnic coexistence, where respect for the difference prevails; a region without physical, economic and trade barriers; a region fully integrated into the European and Euro-Atlantic family.

6. Today, this vision is moving forward. The Balkans no longer appear on the front page nor do they make headlines in the international media, unless an election here and there is not compatible with OSCE standards. Much progress has been made by the countries of the region. But we are not there yet.

Still, much needs to be done in order to achieve the ultimate goal, namely, membership in the European Union.

Bulgaria and Romania were the first Balkan countries to join NATO and the EU. Greece was the first to advocate Bulgaria's and Romania's European bid, almost 15 years ago, while many Europeans nodded with disbelief and reticence. Yet, on January 1st, 2007, these two countries set the example for the rest of the Balkan countries. Courageous and brave politicians demonstrated leadership.

They also sent a clear message: the doors of the European Union remain open to those aspiring countries that abide by European standards and principles.

The doors of the EU are open to those leaders who abandon anachronistic and nationalistic policies.

They are open to those countries, which pursue policies of good neighborly relations.

This clearly was not a message of exclusion but a message of inclusion.

7. This brings us to the question of free will and choice over fatalism. In his existential dilemma, Jean Paul Sartre uses "The Oresteia", Aeschylus' tragedy to embody his view that freedom lies with choice. Aeschylus taught us that fate depends on your perspective: if you are a God, fate is something determined - it is as if it has already happened. If you are a mortal, you appear to have choices.

Dear friends, there is no doubt that we are mortals.

So this is what the future of the Western Balkans is about: choice. The governments, leaders and the political elite of the countries in the region have a choice:

- a choice between the past and the future;
- a choice between unilateralism and multilateralism;
- a choice between unilateral decisions and consensus-based decisions;

- a choice between ethnic or national agendas and European agendas;
- a choice between anachronistic policies and future-oriented policies;
- a choice between inclusion and isolation;
- a choice between renaming airports and highways after Alexander the Great or following his example by cutting the Gordian Knot; not with the sword, but through diplomacy and mutually acceptable solutions for existing differences.

Dear friends,

Today the Western Balkans are at a crossroads. Some political leaders have to make a choice. The outcome of that choice will depend on their political maturity and their political vision.

Thank you.