

PRESS RELEASE

EU and Western Balkan Chambers successfully conclude PARTNERS programme

EUROCHAMBRES' PARTNERS Programme concluded today in Brussels with a conference inaugurated by Olli Rehn, EU Commissioner for Enlargement.

Assessing the status of Western Balkan economies and the prospect of EU membership, Mr Rehn said: *"The Western Balkans is a key responsibility for the EU, and the state of that region is critical to the security and welfare of our own citizens. 2006 will be a crucial year for the Balkans: the Commission is working with the forthcoming Austrian and Finnish Presidencies of the EU on promoting greater economic and political integration in the region, and on showing benefits to citizens in the region."*

Arnaldo Abruzzini, Secretary General of EUROCHAMBRES, added: *"The prospect of EU membership represents an incentive for growth of the Western Balkan economies. The PARTNERS Programme has offered concrete tools to prepare for membership and to increase the potential of EU-Western Balkan trade and investment flows, using the capacity of the Chambers of Commerce network. We very much count on the European Commission to continue this successful initiative."*

The conference highlighted the achievements of the PARTNERS Project since its launch in 2004:

- **15** partnerships established between EU and Western Balkan Chambers, leading to the implementation of concrete projects such as the "Agency for Investment Promotion & Business Support in Central Serbia", the launch of a new service for start-ups to promote local development in Karlovac (Croatia), the promotion of women entrepreneurship in Nis (Serbia), etc.
- **670** Chamber staff from Western Balkan Chambers benefiting from intensive trainings and workshops on International trade promotion, bilateral Free Trade agreements and preparation to EU accession;
- **2** thorough studies (in 2004 and 2005) on the state of regional competitiveness to which **2,000** companies participated each year;
- **35** scholarships for EUROCHAMBRES high level training awarded to executives of Western Balkan Chambers.

Overall, 11 EU countries* and 5 Western Balkan countries** were involved by the Programme.

* Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, The Netherlands. ** Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro.

EUROCHAMBRES has member organisations in 44 countries representing a network of 2,000 regional and local Chambers with over 18 million member companies.



PARTNERS (Project of Assistance to Regional Trade and Networking for Economic Recovery and Stability) is a two-year project of EUROCHAMBRES under the EU CARDS Regional Programme for the development of national and regional Chambers of Commerce and Industry in the Western Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia and Montenegro). It has the total budget of €2.15 million and was launched at the beginning of 2004.

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