

CONSENSUS AND DETERMINATION ON THE WAY TO THE EU

Since gaining independence back in 2006, Montenegro has achieved a lot. A new Constitution was adopted, the country has been successful in maintaining its stability and its multiethnic character, it has been playing a constructive role in regional cooperation and it made its first but decisive steps towards the European Union: it applied for membership and mobilised itself for reforms that allowed the EU to grant it visa-free access for its citizens to the EU member States. This is a milestone achievement and one of the most tangible results of the EU-Montenegro cooperation. It shows that staying focused on reforms and on the EU path does bring concrete benefits to the people of Montenegro.

Our contractual relationship with Montenegro is a so-called Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It was signed by all 27 EU member states, and will enter into force on 1 May 2010. It covers an ambitious cooperation programme in the areas of justice, freedom and security, free movement of workers, right of establishment and free movement of capital and services as well as in the fields of transport and electronic communications. But most importantly it will mark a new qualitative stage in our joint work in view of Montenegro's European integration project.

Montenegro has many advantages on its EU path. The political consensus on EU integration and on economic reform will be a tremendous advantage for the country on its way to the EU, given the reforms that still need to be undertaken. This consensus needs the active involvement of and support from the civil society and the media.

A country aspiring to become a member of the EU family needs efficient democratic institutions, effective prevention and law enforcement, and an independent judiciary and prosecution. All these components of the state

system need to function properly, work in synergy and this needs to lead to concrete and visible results. While much has been done in Montenegro, much is still left to be done. The many EU rules and regulations that were adopted need now implementing and enforcing; the many institutions being set up need now working for the benefit of the citizen; so that all these reforms start bringing social and economic benefit to people and society in the long term. And difficult areas such as fight against corruption and organised crime should take central stage in these efforts.

The Commission is currently drafting its Opinion on Montenegro's application for EU membership. We will prepare a fair and thorough assessment. Fulfilment of the political criteria is one of the prerequisites for moving to the next stages of the process. Our plan is to present the Opinion to the EU Council this year. But in the meantime, Montenegro should continue to implement vigorously its reforms, not only for the sake of its advancement towards the EU, but primarily for the sake of its own people.

The European Commission is committed to supporting Montenegro and other Western Balkan countries to fulfil their European integration aspiration. Our political support is backed up by concrete financial support. In Montenegro, we are currently managing an EU financial assistance portfolio worth more than €100 million for the period 2010-2012. EU funds support consolidation of the rule of law, judicial and police reform, strengthening of capacities and new infrastructure in energy, environment, agriculture and not least, building the civil society capacity, to name just a few areas.

I am certain that EU membership will be key for the country's future prosperity, stability and peace. I praise the role played by Montenegro in the regional cooperation and I count on its continued support and pro-

active attitude in working with its neighbours to address outstanding regional issues.

Ahead of Montenegro lies a period of intensive hard work, and many political and economic challenges. It is important that all sectors of society play an active role. All the country's resources should be mobilised in this process. Pluralism and constructive dialogue between the institutions of the state, including the government, the parliament and the judiciary, and the civil society are essential for a democratic and prosperous Montenegro on its way to the European Union.