

## **The final lap to EU entry**

Croatia's accession date is fast approaching. While you are completing preparations for EU membership, the EU Member States are getting ready to welcome you by ratifying the accession treaty. This is the final lap: in a few months, Croatia is due to become the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the European Union.

Croatia has made huge progress in meeting EU requirements. But as in a race you need to keep up the pace and stay focused, without stumbling, until you cross the finishing line. The time left until accession, less than a year away now, needs to be used to continue the good work done so far in the judiciary and the public service. Efforts need to continue in fighting against corruption, and restructuring the economy. These remaining reforms will first and foremost benefit Croatian citizens.

Looking ahead, I hope that Croatia as a Member State will maintain its active role in regional cooperation. Croatia's accession will bring the European perspective closer for all of the Western Balkans, by anchoring the region more firmly in the EU, and I trust that with its own experience and its understanding of the region, Croatia can contribute to solving bilateral issues. It can thus lead the way for the other countries, facilitating their progress towards EU membership.

In difficult economic times, being part of the world's largest internal market offers tremendous opportunities. I encourage Croatia, its administration, its business people and its citizens to seize them.

I will stand with Croatia as it completes its preparations for EU membership. Support from the EU will actually increase when Croatia fully joins the EU family, not least financially. In fact there will be a considerable increase in EU funds to Croatia. With sound preparations for their use these can make a real difference in the life of all Croatian citizens.

Croatia will soon be fully involved in all areas of EU policy making. This is a great opportunity for Croatia to contribute to the European future. I am looking forward to welcoming Croatia in the EU and to working together in building our common European home.

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