

Vidovdan 2013: a historic milestone on Serbia's road to the EU

28 June 2013 will enter the history books as the day when Serbia started accession negotiations with the European Union.

Vaclav Havel once said, talking of the new era that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall that "*something is happening, something is being born, that we are in a phase when one age is succeeding another, when everything is possible*". And we have indeed a new era in EU-Serbia relations this 28 June.

This step forward is of great significance for Serbia and the entire Western Balkan region: it is remarkable that Serbia is entering this decisive new phase in its relations with the European Union at the very moment when another country from the region, Croatia, is joining the Union, on 1 July.

This is all but a coincidence of dates. It is first and foremost Serbia's fundamental and strategic choice to set its course towards the European Union with determination and enthusiasm and to decide to break from the past with the desire to contribute to lasting reconciliation in the region by giving precedence to peaceful and pragmatic solutions for its relations with Kosovo^[1] as well as its neighbours. And it is also thanks to the credibility of the EU's enlargement policy, by which the EU delivers on its promises once an applicant country meets the necessary criteria.

I wish to pay tribute to the current Serbian leadership for their vision and courage which have given Serbia a good image across Europe, one of a country strong in its resolve to move towards its European future, one of a country definitely seen as a source of stability in the region. Today's achievement also owes to the persistent efforts of the different Serbian leaders over the past 12 years, starting with late Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic.

Above all, the EU accession is a question that requires a wide national cross-partisan consensus. Serbia is a great example – it is now moving forward on its way to the European Union on the basis of such consensus. This has to be maintained and nurtured as Serbia embarks in the accession negotiations which are a very demanding process, over several years, and for which continuity and determination will be indispensable.

The European integration process will also from now on become increasingly tangible for the administration, civil society, business people, students, researchers and for Serbian society at large, truly for all citizens of Serbia, in many aspects of their daily lives.

The EU accession process will firmly underpin reforms and their effective implementation in Serbia. It will no doubt generate an entirely new impetus across all sectors. Experience with other applicant countries tells us that while this transformative process is demanding and sometimes painful, it is also conducive to sustainable socio-economic development: we expect many new opportunities for the Serbian economy as foreign investors renew their interest in Serbia.

^[1] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Consistent efforts will be required from Serbia because the end point is highly ambitious: preparing Serbia to meet all membership criteria which are the common set of values and rules that form the foundations of the European Union. The process is as important as the end game: benefits and opportunities will gradually build up, until accession and beyond.

The date of 28 June resonates, in Serbia as well as in common European history, with the echoes of the past. Let it resonate loudly from now on with the vibrant sound of a common future, the starting point on Serbia's journey towards becoming an EU member state.