

What it means to negotiate SAA with Kosovo

[Last Friday] the EU Member States authorised the Commission to start negotiations with Kosovo on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. This may sound as arcane and abstract to some, but the decision marks a seismic shift in the European Union's relationship with Kosovo. A Stabilisation and Association Agreement – SAA in short – is a formal 'contract' between the EU and Kosovo with mutual rights and obligations in such important areas as trade, legislation, investment promotion, social cooperation, education and training.

With the SAA come a number of practical benefits. It will allow for the free flow of goods between the EU and Kosovo. It will allow Kosovo companies to access the EU's internal market of some 500 million consumers, provide their services across the EU and compete for public contracts. It will allow Kosovo citizens to benefit from a host of EU product quality and health and safety standards that will be directly applicable in Kosovo.

But an SAA is more than this; it is the cornerstone of the EU's enlargement policy, a policy whose ultimate aim is EU membership. How has this opportunity come about for Kosovo?

In December last year, the EU Member States promised that if Kosovo continued to work hard to improve its relationship with Serbia and continued to strengthen the rule of law, its public administration, its capacity to trade and the protection of its minorities, they would authorise the Commission to start SAA negotiations this year. On 19 April, Prime Minister Thaçi reached a historic agreement with Serbian Prime Minister Dacic that should progressively allow for the integration of the Serb majority municipalities in northern Kosovo in the interest of the local population and the Kosovo population at large. In May, the Prime Ministers agreed on a plan to turn this agreement into reality. Throughout spring, there was intensive activity to make this happen; working groups met on a daily basis to discuss issues such as municipal elections, justice and police, and the financing of services to citizens...

This hard work has now paid off. Kosovo's progress has allowed the European Union to deliver on its promise, a promise to help Kosovo develop and prosper as part of the European family.

It is essential that Kosovo and the EU now get to work. We would want negotiations to start as soon as possible. They are likely to be intense and will require hard work on both sides. There will be difficult issues to solve and compromises to be reached. But I have no doubt

that they will be concluded successfully, hopefully already next year. I am looking forward to the challenge!