

EU enlargement process – Europe's underdog or part of Europe's DNA?

Five years ago when I took over the enlargement portfolio, our greatest challenge was to strengthen the credibility of the process to regain the support of our citizens for enlargement. We needed to make sure the process brought tangible results in terms of reforms delivered on the ground, rather than being perceived as a mere box-ticking exercise once this or that law in an aspirant country had been aligned with EU standards.

The aim was not to introduce new conditions, but to build on lessons learnt from the past. We had to ensure that the countries joining the Union were fully prepared for membership. And it was equally important to achieve a real change on the ground in the aspirant countries using the full potential of the *transformative power* of enlargement. Through strict but fair conditionality, the Western Balkans countries and Turkey carry out structural reforms. They transform their economies, strengthen their democratic institutions, modernise their judicial systems and public administrations, fight organised crime and corruption.

These are all difficult issues which take time to address. We are therefore accompanying the aspirant countries in their gradual efforts to tackle them. Our new approach has been based on three pillars – rule of law, economic governance and public administration reform. As regards the first pillar – the *rule of law* – key issues such as judicial reform and the fight against organised crime and corruption are now addressed early in the accession process. Thanks to this approach, on the day of accession the changes should be well rooted, sustainable and irreversible.

As regards the second pillar – *economic governance* – we have naturally drawn on lessons learnt during the recent economic crisis. We have put emphasis on competitiveness and creating a more stable and transparent business environment favourable to foreign investment and domestic growth. As of next year, we will offer better guidance to the Western Balkans on their macroeconomic, fiscal and structural policies inspired by the European Semester.

This year, we are concentrating on the third pillar – *public administration reform*. With this we will help the aspirant countries to put in place modern, efficient and depoliticised public services for their citizens.

I am proud that this credible enlargement policy has already been bearing fruit. Although the pace of reforms differs from country to country, the situation is improving almost everywhere: Montenegro and Serbia have fulfilled the conditions to open accession negotiations. Albania has earned a candidate status. Kosovo has initialled the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The reasons for these different achievements are largely similar: stepping up the fight against organised crime, respecting human rights and tackling corruption. And the EU continues to be a benchmark for further deepening of democratic reforms and transformation in Turkey, one of our key partners.

Recent developments in our Eastern neighbourhood and in the Mediterranean have once again put the spotlight on the wider question of security and stability in Europe. A credible enlargement process, covering the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey, is gradually transforming our immediate neighbourhood, with impressive results. This is a good deal for them and a good deal for us: a route to a more secure, stable and prosperous Europe.

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