

### **Confirming Kosovo's European perspective**

When I joined the European Commission five years ago to deal with EU enlargement, who could have imagined that Kosovo would have made so much progress on its European path since?

To start with, a major building block of our relations has been put in place this July: Kosovo has initialled a Stabilisation and Association Agreement – SAA for short – with the European Union. It is not just a formality. This first contractual agreement between the EU and Kosovo will establish mutual rights and obligations in important areas such as trade, legislation, social cooperation, education and training. The SAA seals Kosovo's commitment to the rule of law and supports the development of Kosovo's democratic institutions. It enhances their capacity to deliver the services its citizens expect and deserve. It supports the construction of Kosovo as a common home where all communities can thrive and prosper. Once concluded, the SAA will give companies in Kosovo access to the EU internal market of some 500 million consumers and enable them to provide their services across the EU and compete for public contracts. It will allow Kosovo citizens to benefit from EU quality and safety standards for a variety of products.

The EU-facilitated dialogue continues to help Kosovo normalise its relations with Serbia. Its positive effects go well beyond the interests of Pristina and Belgrade. Kosovo joined the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in December 2012, followed by the European Investment Bank in June 2013 - international institutions crucial for Kosovo's development. The dialogue also allowed Kosovo to play its full part in regional fora. In February 2013 Kosovo joined the Regional Cooperation Council as a member of the board. In November 2013 the Regional School of Public Administration accepted Kosovo as a member and in June 2014 Kosovo became a participant in the South-East European Cooperation Process, allowing it to partake in all meetings, at all levels, on equal terms. That same month, Kosovo joined the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

Kosovo has also made good progress in its efforts to ensure the lifting of Schengen visa restrictions for its citizens in the future. Kosovo has agreed to establish a specialist court to address the sensitive issues of missing persons and allegations, deriving from the Council of Europe January 2011 report, and 2014 also saw Kosovo take on new responsibilities from the EU rule of law mission EULEX.

These achievements should motivate the new government to take up the remaining challenges. Kosovo cannot afford to idle, the stakes are too high. The failure to constitute the new legislature smoothly and in a timely manner has been a setback to reform. The post-election impasse needs to be overcome and the assembly and the government established urgently. The new government will need to live up to Kosovo's EU prospects and carry out the necessary reform, from comprehensive public administration and electoral reforms to economic restructuring. It needs to deliver in the fight against corruption and organised crime, and enable the specialist court to be set up promptly. It also needs to continue improving the independence of the judiciary and the media, and to further strengthen human rights and

fundamental freedoms. Finally, it needs to play an active and constructive role in the region, confirming its commitment to the normalisation process with Serbia.

Work on these issues will require political courage and determination. The reward will be a better life for people in Kosovo. In financial terms, the Commission has allocated over €645 million in grants for the years 2014-2020 to Kosovo through its IPA funds national envelope. Additional funds will come from IPA multi-country and cross-border projects and from bilateral programmes of individual EU Member States.

The EU will support Kosovo through its European journey; it is now for Kosovo to seize the opportunity.

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