

### **A decisive period in Montenegro's modern history**

In the Western Balkans, Montenegro is at the forefront of the EU accession process. Since taking charge of the EU enlargement portfolio in 2010, I have had the privilege of accompanying Montenegro on its EU journey. Progress has been commendable: candidate status in 2010, negotiations launched two years later, and now as many as twelve negotiating chapters opened, two of which are already provisionally closed. I have no doubt that this will go down in the country's modern history as one of its most decisive periods.

In many respects, Montenegro has been leading the way in the region. You are the first country to apply our new approach to negotiations on the rule of law, which now start early in the accession process. Negotiations with Montenegro in this crucial area started in December 2013, on the basis of ambitious and comprehensive action plans adopted by the government.

The adoption of the action plans was a key milestone, but it is now their implementation that matters most. One year on, there are already positive results to be proud of. Reform of the judiciary is moving forward at a steady pace, already resulting in improvements in efficiency. Montenegro also adopted substantial constitutional reforms in 2013 which are now being put into practice.

The key challenge now is to ensure that the tangible effects of these changes are felt by citizens. Citizens deserve to be able to rely on the swift, efficient and impartial administration of justice. They deserve to live, work and do business in a corruption-free environment. They deserve a society where the rights of the vulnerable are protected, where the freedom of the media is respected, and where all accusations, for example relating to corruption and attacks against the media and journalists, are investigated thoroughly.

In order to continue to fight corruption, the legislative framework must be strengthened further. Even that, however, will in itself not be sufficient. Montenegro needs to make sure that cases of corruption, including high-profile cases, are thoroughly investigated and, where appropriate, the perpetrators prosecuted. The degree to which the fight against corruption and other rule of law related reforms produce results will determine the overall pace of the accession negotiations. If no tangible progress is made, negotiations would have to slow down, as agreed in our negotiating framework.

These are not easy reforms and they require a strong political commitment – perhaps even, as some have put it, a change in mentality. And this is exactly what the process of EU integration is all about: deep and lasting changes in the country, for the benefit of its citizens and of Europe as a whole.

In these efforts, Montenegro can count on EU solidarity. The European Commission will continue to provide expertise, guidance and financial support. In financial terms, the Commission has allocated over €270 million in grants for the years 2014-2020 to Montenegro 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.

So it is up to Montenegro to make best use of these opportunities: for its citizens and for Europe.

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