

Serbia and the EU: an ever closer partnership

Who could have imagined five years ago that Serbia's application for EU membership would have brought us so far into the accession process? This year started on a very positive note, with the opening of EU accession negotiations with Serbia back in January. This happy moment, unfortunately, was soon overshadowed by the severe floods and the unprecedented destruction they caused both in material terms, and in human suffering. I will never forget the images of the flooded areas: both the devastating scale of the damage, but also the encouraging spirit of human solidarity.

These two events, albeit so different, have strongly testified to one thing: Serbia and the EU are close partners. The opening of accession talks was a turning point in our relations, bringing Serbia to an entirely new level of a negotiating country, with both new responsibilities and opportunities this entails. The EU response after the floods showed that we are determined to stand by Serbia not only in good, but also in difficult moments. After responding to immediate humanitarian needs, the European Commission hosted an international donors' conference in Brussels that yielded almost €1 billion of grants and soft loans ready to help rebuild the flooded areas in Serbia.

The Serbian government has set an ambitious timetable for the negotiations. We will play our part in helping the government implement the necessary reforms. At the same time, the substance is as important as the timetable. Negotiations are a unique opportunity for Serbia to make progress in the many areas covered by the accession process: from human rights, freedom of expression and the rule of law, to environmental protection, health standards and consumer protection. A modernised country, adhering to EU standards, will benefit all citizens. This is how the transformative power of EU enlargement has worked in the past, and how it can work for Serbia.

Let me be frank: this will continue to be a demanding process. The pace of negotiations will depend on Serbia's ability to deliver on key structural reforms in the areas of rule of law, public administration and economic governance. In particular the serious economic challenges that Serbia faces, aggravated by the recent floods, will require both courage and determination from political leadership and citizens alike. Enhanced regional cooperation and continued normalisation of relations with Kosovo are also indispensable. I am encouraged by the ambitious economic goals the Serbian government set itself in this respect, and by its good start on both structural reforms and continuation of the dialogue with Kosovo.

In these efforts, Serbia can count on EU solidarity. The European Commission will continue to provide expertise, guidance and financial support: over €1.5 billion will be available for Serbia from now till 2020 under the EU's pre-accession assistance (IPA), and additional funds will come under cross-border projects.

Indeed, we are partners in what I am convinced, regardless of the difficulties that we may face on the way, is a mutually beneficial process. The demanding reforms required from Serbia will contribute to a better business and legal environment in a modernised country, improving the security and quality of life of its citizens.

And these reforms will contribute at the same time to building up a bigger, more integrated and more prosperous EU internal market. But even more importantly, Serbia's commitment to regional cooperation will be key for the EU in consolidating peace and stability across a continent that was scarred by division and strife. It is about values and ideals of peace, democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Štefan Füle

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy

This article is published on the occasion of the publication by the European Commission of its progress report on Serbia, on 8 October 2014.