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We can build together a larger and stronger European Union

As the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy I look forward to welcoming Croatia in the European Union very early in my five-year mandate, and to possibly finalise negotiations already this year, if all remaining issues are addressed.

Being an EU member is a demanding task, for which one must be properly prepared. I myself come from a country that worked hard in order to join the EU in 2004. I was personally involved in my country's efforts to rejoin the European family of democracies. I can bear witness to the enormity of the task. This is why I can fully appreciate the substantial progress made by Croatia over the last years in its EU membership preparations. I strongly commend all those in Croatia who consistently and determinedly work towards the country's EU accession.

We now need to build on these achievements and make the final, decisive leap. The to-do list is not short, but I believe it is feasible, even if it includes difficult areas such as judicial reform, fight against corruption, capacity building in the public administration, as well as issues of minority rights, refugees return, investigation and prosecution of war crimes and full cooperation with the ICTY.

Legislative alignment with the EU is important, but the implementation and enforcement of law is even more so. This is especially true in areas such as environment, justice, freedom and security, agriculture and regional policy. Business environment needs support too, in order to unleash the economic potential of the country. The reforms, together with the prospect of EU membership, can bring enormous benefits to the country itself, and to Europe as a whole. They give people more freedoms, businesses more markets and societies better governance. I strongly believe that, because I've seen it happening in my own country.

Croatia has never been alone in this tremendous exercise of national mobilisation towards EU accession. As before, I will continue to offer the Commission's support through all our instruments, be it financial assistance or technical expertise, to make sure that Croatia is fully prepared when it joins the EU. For it is important that we build together not only a larger Union, but also a stronger one.

Accession to the EU can only be a success if people both in Croatia and in the EU believe in it and benefit from it. We need well informed citizens who are engaged in this European project. I count on the political leaders, as well as on the mass media and the civil society to make sure that EU integration is not seen as a subject matter for elites and academics only.

We have to ensure that reforms produce tangible results on the ground - and that results are visible both in Croatia and in the EU, at the level of the citizen - so that we overcome the feeling of *fatigue* that some claim with the enlargement process. For I believe that nobody is too tired to have a better life or to secure one for the generations to come.

Štefan FÜLE

EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy