

Brussels, 15 Feb 2010

Our joint journey towards lasting peace in Europe

As the European Union's Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy I look forward to opening accession negotiations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia very early in my five-year mandate, indeed already this year, if the necessary consensus is reached.

I have personally experienced the transformative power of the enlargement process as my own country joined the European Union in 2004. I am convinced that EU membership is the key to the future of the countries in the region.

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In 2009 your country moved significantly closer to Europe. Visa liberalisation has opened a new era of freedom of travel and of opportunity for all citizens of the country. There was enough progress on the political criteria field to enable the Commission to recommend the opening of accession negotiations. The country's progress in the accession process means that there is now a unique window of opportunity for a solution to the name issue as well, under the auspices of the UN. This opportunity should be grasped. The leaders have a huge responsibility and a fantastic chance to make a lasting contribution to wider regional stability and prosperity.

The lesson of 2009 has been that reforms at home bring results in Brussels. Now the major challenge for us all is to capitalise on that. It is vital at this stage that the country keeps up the momentum of the reforms. Further progress is due in key areas such as public administration reform, the fight against corruption and reform of judiciary, as well as the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

The EU is a successful peace project which might be the best antidote to old rivalries and our gateway to the future. I look forward to making that journey with you.

Štefan FÜLE

EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy