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Moving closer to the EU: political responsibility and joint efforts will be rewarded

Albania has just come out of a difficult political period. As the European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy I would like to see Albania making significant steps forward on its EU integration path. The European Commission Opinion and the recommendations that the Commission could make on abolishing visa obligation for Albanian citizens are the next benchmarks on this path.

Efforts leading to progress in 2009. Considerable work was done in the last year and significant milestones were achieved on Albania's path towards EU integration. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU entered into force in April. Parliamentary elections in June were assessed as meeting most international standards, although some shortcomings were identified which need to be addressed. The country applied for EU membership on April 28 2009 and the European Council invited the European Commission to prepare an 'opinion' on Albania's application.

Building on success and addressing challenges in 2010. The outcome of the Commission's current work on its opinion on Albania's EU membership application cannot be prejudged. The assessment will be objective and fair. Particular attention will be given to the political criteria, including the efficient functioning of state institutions. Fulfilment of the political criteria is a prerequisite to move to the next step on the EU integration path. Albania has come a long way in meeting conditions for visa free travel to the EU. Visa liberalisation is based on own merit. Decisively addressing weaknesses in this context and demonstrating a credible track record of implementation of relevant legislation will be rewarded. Progress in the rule of law area, including fighting corruption and organised crime, is essential for Albania for both visa liberalisation and the EU integration process in general.

Constructive political dialogue within parliament as foundation for democracy and requirement for further progress. I come from a country in which political debate has at times been heated and confrontational. If such debate takes place constructively in parliament and helps new ideas to emerge and proposals to be thoroughly scrutinised, this can bring a country forward on its reform path. Political responsibility on all sides and joint efforts are the recipe for moving closer to EU membership. Seeking strong consensus within society and mobilising civil society are also part of it.

A partnership to support EU integration efforts. 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. In the years to come EU technical and financial assistance will continue to be available to Albania and will further increase as our relations intensify. Responsibility for Albania's future, however, lies in the hands of the people and the government of Albania. Based on your achievements you will be able to move closer to EU accession. I intend to work closely with Albania's government and institutions, political parties and civil society in order to make solid progress towards our joint goal of Albania's future accession to the EU.

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