

## **The EU is your gateway to the future**

**10 years ago, leaders from the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans came together for a historic summit in Zagreb.** It was confirmed then that the future of the Western Balkans was within the European Union. We came a long way since, but we covered less ground than we could have.

**In 2009 a leap forward was made - the country qualified for visa-free travel and the Commission recommended to start EU accession negotiations.** In 2010, the challenge has been to maintain the momentum of reforms. Overall, we have seen further progress although at an uneven pace. **These reforms are necessary not only for the country's preparation for the EU, but also, and most importantly, for the benefit of its own citizens.** In particular, the independence of the judiciary and the public administration need to be strengthened, so that people can trust that they receive good value for the taxes they pay, in terms of public services and justice being served in a professional and impartial manner. Also, freedom of expression, notably in the media, and the development of civil society are priorities for the accession process. In this way, society as a whole can participate in the reform process.

**EU accession preparation acts as the key transformative power for all countries involved.** There is no reason that it should not do so for your country as well. I've seen this happening first hand in the case of the country I know best.. The EU can make a real difference in the daily lives of the people of your country. Opinion polls show that the absolute first priority is creating more jobs and reducing unemployment which, at over 30%, is higher than in any EU country. People are rightly concerned about their living standards, about their opportunities and about the future of their children.

**Preparation for EU accession and then membership of the European Union will benefit your economy.** It will boost job creation and will help increase foreign investment which is currently a very low level of GDP. Foreign investors will increasingly see your country as a base in which to invest and from which to export into other parts of the EU's single market, the largest in the world. Also, EU membership preparation strengthens social cohesion by supporting the less developed regions, investing in education and infrastructure to increase competitiveness. In the aftermath of the economic crisis, the EU financial support, if wisely used, can play an important role in the economic recovery of the country.

**However, lack of progress on the name issue meant that the EU Member States could not act upon the Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations.** It is a political reality that the resolution of the name issue will greatly facilitate your country's journey towards the European Union. It is time for the talks held under the auspices of the United Nations as well as the direct contacts between Prime Ministers Gruevski and Papandreou to produce concrete results. Now that trust between the parties has been built, I believe the time has come to make the necessary efforts to resolve the remaining points of disagreement. This way your country will be able to focus its energies on carving up its future into the EU.

**The latest EU enlargement sought to reunite a divided continent.** This historic project will not be completed unless your country becomes one day a full member of the EU.

**Stefan Füle,**

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy

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