

Stronger together

Iceland and the EU share the same fundamental values of democracy and human rights and already work together to promote these in the world at large. As Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, I warmly welcome the start of the accession negotiations with Iceland. The way in which Iceland dealt with the political, economic and institutional consequences of the banking collapse demonstrates the vigour, quality and strength of Iceland's well-established democratic tradition.

Iceland and the EU enrich each other. On the one hand, the European Union already counts on Iceland's expertise in issues specific to the North Atlantic and Arctic areas and in finding solutions to climate change. Iceland's ability to address the challenges and opportunities as an Arctic nation could be considerably strengthened by membership of the EU. We also strongly value Iceland's experience and knowledge of renewable energy technologies. On the other hand, joining the EU - with its market of 500 million consumers and a common currency –can form a crucial part of Iceland's strategy towards long-term growth and stability.

I understand that EU accession represents a fundamental choice for Icelandic society. As a Czech citizen, I personally experienced enlargement when my country acceded to the EU. This process requires reflection and broad public debate, based on facts and figures rather than on fears and myths.

The first progress report on Iceland provides a snapshot of Iceland's current position in preparation for its possible accession to the EU. This report presents a clear overview of the remaining challenges, in particular those concerning fisheries, agriculture and financial services, which need to be addressed on the road to membership.

We are committed to working in an open and constructive spirit to find solutions that bring mutual benefits. We will take into account Iceland's specificities and expectations, while safeguarding the principles and rules of the Union. Our cooperation is intensifying as we now enter the technical phase of the negotiations. Experts from Iceland and the Commission will meet to assess the differences between our respective laws and administrative structures. Following this, we will discuss how and when issues of concern should be addressed.

It is not only legitimate but also essential that Iceland's citizens become active participants in the debate about EU accession, so that they decide the future direction of their nation for themselves. Stimulating intensive public discussions, ahead of the accession referendum, is first and foremost the responsibility of Icelandic policy makers and citizens. I will always be available to contribute to the discussions and to support the people of Iceland as they make their own sovereign decision. I am convinced that a well-prepared and thoroughly debated accession to the EU is mutually beneficial. This objective features highly on my agenda.

I have no doubt that Iceland and the European Union have so much in common that we will be better off together than apart.

Stefan Füle,

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy

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