

EU-Serbia: a new window of opportunity

10 years ago the European Union and the countries of the Western Balkans held a historic summit in Zagreb. This was in response to the momentous developments that took place in October 2000, when the people of Serbia acted decisively to shift the course of their country. The European leaders made it clear then that the future of all countries of the region lies within the European Union. The EU has reiterated its unequivocal commitment to the EU perspective of the Western Balkans several times since, most recently at the Sarajevo EU-Western Balkans ministerial meeting in June 2010.

Ever since October 2000, the European Union helped Serbia to transform its economy and society and to prepare for closer European integration. Over the past ten years, two billion Euros of grants and five billion in loans were made available to Serbia by the European Union alone (and more came from individual Member States). This was used to reconstruct, to stabilise, to alleviate economic downturns and to initiate a vast set of profound reforms in all sectors. Above all, this massive support was meant for good of Serbia's citizens.

Over the past year, we made important steps to bring Serbia and the EU closer together. Visa liberalisation at the end of 2009 was a major achievement to the direct benefit of citizens. Serbia has also since then applied officially for membership of the EU. On 25 October, the Council asked the Commission to prepare its Opinion on Serbia's membership application. The common resolution of European Union and Serbia at the UN General Assembly opened new prospects for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. This is an opportunity to turn a page of history and start anew in a true European spirit, focusing on the final destination for both: the European Union.

When this destination will be reached depends predominantly on Serbia. The key is the determined continuation of reforms. The progress report published [yesterday] on 9 November should serve as a roadmap for the Serbian government to focus its action and build consensus on a number of crucial milestones to advance further in its European perspective.

It will come as no surprise that **I consider that the top priority must continue to be given to cooperation with the ICTY** for the successful tracking and arrest of two fugitives, Ratko Mladić and Goran Hadžić. This is not only an international obligation, but a fundamental step to reconciliation both within Serbia and the region. I have no doubt as to the authorities' commitment to this goal. We all now expect them to go the last mile and bring these two remaining indictees to justice.

Other priorities include the rule of law and judicial reform, the fight against corruption and organised crime and the independence of regulatory bodies. A lot was already done, and it is necessary to continue. Fighting organised crime and corruption should be continued with redoubled efforts. No efforts should be spared in this endeavour. An impartial and effective judiciary is a prerequisite for functioning democracy. This is a vital element to reassure Serbian citizens of the reliability of their judicial system. As for the reliability of their political system, I am sure Serbians would want to see that the issues of electoral legislation and financing of political parties are addressed. Property rights also need to be clarified, thereby removing a major obstacle to investors.

As having experienced the enlargement process in my own country, I cannot stress enough that **ongoing reforms are for the benefit of Serbian citizens and not for the sake of EU**

accession. All of these actions contribute to economic recovery and provide real and tangible benefits for Serbian society. At the same time, they will bring Serbia back to the heart of the European project.

The 2004 and 2007 enlargements have done much to reunite the European continent, both politically and economically. But for me this project will not be concluded before Serbia, and the whole region of the Western Balkans, join the EU as well.

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