

## **Time to accelerate**

Each time I visit Belgrade and walk down Knez Mihailova, I see a vibrant European metropolis. Lined with magnificent houses, Belgrade city centre is bustling with colourful crowds and pulsing with dynamism. I am in Belgrade but could be in Paris, Brussels or my home town Prague.

There is much more to it than just the architectural coherence of Belgrade and some other European capitals, or the resemblance of their cosmopolitan arts scenes. The close links between Serbia and the EU go far beyond such comparisons. I believe quite simply that the construction of the EU will not be fully complete without Serbia. Equally for Serbia: its future is undeniably with the EU. Our societies are based on the same founding principles of democracy and freedom. Our economies are closely linked: 56% of Serbian trade is with the EU, more than three times higher than trade with any other trading partners. These close links are also reflected in the level of support for the country's transformation: assistance from the EU and its Member States totalled some EUR 3.7 billion in grants between 2001 and 2011. This is seven times more than the largest non-EU donor, which is, by the way, the United States.

The EU has recognised Serbia's important reform efforts by granting it candidate status. This has both symbolic and practical implications. At a time when Serbia has been severely hit by the consequences of the economic and financial crisis, its European course will help consolidate the country's democratic foundations, bring socio-economic development, strengthen the rule of law, and provide new opportunities and equal access to rights for all citizens.

It is up to Serbia to manifest in further deeds its commitment to the EU perspective. I am confident that Belgrade will take the necessary steps. First, to normalise relations with Pristina, there's no way around it. Second, to accelerate reforms, in particular in the areas of judicial reform, the fight against corruption and organised crime. Third, to make significant efforts to restructure its economy.

We remain committed to accompanying Serbia, as we have done so far, as it travels this challenging road. I believe Serbia will do so with reinforced focus and determination in the years to come.

There is a real chance for you to move forward on the European path. The time is NOW for the new Government to energise its efforts and move on.

### **Štefan Füle**

Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy

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