

Speech – European Integration Council

Dear Prime Minister, distinguished Members of the European Integration Council, Excellencies,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address your Council today. In particular, I appreciate the large representation of civil society in this forum.

Over the past year, Serbia has taken **great strides on the path to** European Union accession. The time has come to build on this progress.

Prime Minister, I am among the first to acknowledge the efforts that your government has made and can only congratulate you for all of your hard work.

I am also very appreciative of the involvement of the European Integration Council in the process, since - as you know - preparations for EU accession **cannot be the domain of the government alone.**

European Union policies cover a very wide range of topics, from the rule of law to human rights and the protection of minorities, from the business environment to transport, energy or the information society. Indeed, the reforms triggered by the whole process are directed towards Serbian society as a whole. It is therefore vital that all stakeholders in society are consulted on, and participate in, the accession process.

A large number of reforms are underway in Serbia and we expect even more progress in the period to come. Above all, I would like to emphasize one important point: all of these reforms, even if presented or "sold" with an EU label are implemented first and foremost for the **good of your country** and to create a **better, more prosperous future** for the citizens.

Some of Serbia's citizens understand this clearly: they see that the process of joining the European Union addresses **the concrete concerns** they have in their daily lives.

However, other conflicting factors, not least the tough implications of the economic crisis on the population, can also lead to discouragement and a loss of enthusiasm towards the EU. Some recent polls confirm this trend and this troubles me deeply.

For this reason, I stress the importance of communication to explain the EU project, as well as the direct benefits it can bring to citizens in their daily lives. I believe that this goal forms one of the core missions of your Council.

Visa liberalisation provides a very convincing example of how the European Union can deliver real benefits if and when Serbia delivers real reforms. This Council has an important role to play in spreading this message to the citizens of Serbia.

Mr Chairman, I would now like to turn to the main points of my presentation. I will **first** explain in more detail about the Opinion, its significance and how it will be prepared. **Second**, I will stress some of the main challenges that Serbia will have to address. These concern not only the opinion but Serbia's **entire path** to the European Union.

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1. The Opinion

On 25 October, the Council asked the Commission to submit its opinion on Serbia's membership application. This decision:

- Confirms the progress that Serbia has made in its reforms so far
- Underlines the will of the European Union to support Serbia's reforms

- And sets out the great hopes we have about opening a new phase in our relations.

The preparation of the opinion indeed offers a **unique opportunity** to bring EU-Serbia relations to a higher level.

This new phase will build upon the **very considerable progress** achieved so far by Serbia, not least in the last couple of years.

In 2009, Serbia made decisive steps forward in the area of rule of law and freedom, justice and security. It earned visa liberalisation thanks to its excellent work on security of documents, integrated border management, migration policy and the fight against organised crime and corruption.

Over the period 2008-2010, Serbia also consolidated the democratic foundations of the state:

- **Parliament** became increasingly effective in the adoption of EU-related reforms;
- the **Government** adopted a National Plan for European Integration which aims at facilitating the demanding process of approximation;
- The **Ombudsman's** office has strengthened over the period and has widened its activities, both centrally and regionally;
- the **constitutional framework** for the Status of **Vojvodina** was established;
- The **National Minority Council** elections were on the whole successfully organised.

Serbia has also taken **decisive steps towards its neighbours**, with a view to achieving lasting reconciliation. A radically new atmosphere has emerged from the important gestures made by Serbia and President Tadić towards Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, but also towards many other countries in the region.

This **new credibility** of Serbia in dealing with the past and preparing for its European future is all the more promising. The commitment that Serbia has taken with regard to the dialogue with Kosovo is seen with a lot of respect.

In the same period, Serbia also had to work hard to alleviate the impact of the economic downturn and, as a result, the economy already began its **recovery in 2010**.

There were many more achievements in the work on alignment with European standards in which many of you -- members of the European Integration Council -- took an active part.

Today, I have handed over the questionnaire to the Prime Minister. I would normally say that tomorrow the hard work starts. However, I know that the **hard work has already been going on for some time** in Serbia.

This is important. The European Commission must prepare an objective, fair and balanced assessment of the country's readiness to assume all relevant obligations. To do this, we must examine how well Serbia complies with the EU accession criteria and the Stabilisation and Association Process conditions.

Your efforts have already put in place a **strong foundation**. The anticipated implementation of the interim agreement and the work on visa liberalisation has shown that when Serbia is determined to make progress, the benefits are wide-ranging.

2. The Challenges ahead

Mr Prime Minister you can rightly take pride in the efforts Serbia has made so far. However, I now invite you to look to the future.

The preparation of the opinion should be seized as an **opportunity** to address outstanding issues by making the best of the time available. **Fulfilling the political criteria is essential.** It is **the key factor** that can result in obtaining a positive opinion, the granting of candidate status and ultimately, the **opening of accession negotiations.**

I encourage all concerned institutions to be **particularly vigilant on human rights and the protection of minorities**, including the more vulnerable groups such as the Roma.

The 2010 progress report should serve as a roadmap for the Serbian government to focus its action and build consensus on a number of crucial milestones.

EU-related reforms need to be high on the agenda. Not just during the time the opinion is being prepared but also afterwards. I therefore warmly welcome the fact that the Government is preparing an Action Plan that will cover all key issues. :

- The top priority must continue to be **full cooperation with the ICTY leading to the arrest** of Ratko Mladić and Goran Hadžić. Efforts to engage actively in reconciliation should also be pursued.
- The **judicial reform** will play a particularly important role in view of the opinion. It is of utmost importance that a **full review of the re-appointment procedure** is conducted according to **European standards.** I appreciate the commitment we received from the Minister of Justice, Ms Malovic, this morning, but I am also aware of the challenges involved.

- In line with the Stabilisation and Association process, **regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations** are an integral part of the assessment that will be conducted.
- Other key priorities include the fight against **corruption and organised crime** and **the independence of regulatory bodies**.
- Regarding issues such as the revision of **electoral legislation** and **financing of political parties**, it is important to apply clear **European standards** and to ensure that key democratic principles take precedence over day-to-day politics.
- Property rights also need to be clarified. This will **remove a major obstacle** to investors.

Overall, we want to see progress across the board with more attention being given to the quality of reforms and the level of implementation.

This is a demanding process. The Questionnaire consists of some 2480 questions. **Quality must always take precedence over speed.**

This is not an exercise in ticking boxes. The questionnaire is highly visible but it is only one aspect of this exercise. In the preparation of the answers, attention should be given to the results of **implementation**. Problems need to be **honestly identified** and plans to address them prepared.

We expect Serbia to approach this process with the **highest level of coordination**. Serbia will need to steer the reform efforts undertaken in the framework of the opinion and in the process of answering the Questionnaire. This is essential to achieve Serbia's ambitious targets for this coming year. It will also build up the necessary capacity for the next steps in the preparations for EU membership, in particular for accession negotiations themselves.

Most instruments to intensify work on the EU agenda are already largely in place. I am therefore highly confident that Serbia will be in a position to accelerate its efforts and meet the expectations of the European Union.

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Conclusion,

Prime Minister, in conclusion I am convinced that the preparation of the opinion will give a **further impetus** to Serbia's process of European integration.

The Commission is your **partner** in this process. Since 2000, the European Union has provided over €2 billion to Serbia, through various non-reimbursable assistance programmes. This is concrete proof of our commitment to Serbia, especially during the difficult times of the international financial crisis.

It is excellent to see that your Council is closely involved in these preparations. We hope that Serbia can seize the occasion of the opinion to mobilise all sectors of society and generate a stronger cross-party consensus on European integration.

The more closely you work together the easier it is for us to assist you in meeting our common goal: seeing Serbia become a Member State of the European Union!