

Štefan Füle

European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood
Policy

Discussion on the Kacin Report and the European integration process of Serbia

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament, plenary session

Strasbourg, 18 January 2010

Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to address the European Parliament today for the vote of consent to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the Republic of Serbia.

I would also like to express my warm gratitude to the Rapporteur for Serbia, Mr. Jelko Kacin, for his report on the European integration process of Serbia.

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement is a major step forward for Serbia on its path towards the European Union. The fundamental objective of this agreement is to pave the way for further European integration and reforms and to prepare Serbia for EU membership. This important milestone shall serve as an encouragement for Serbia as it has renewed its efforts to promote reconciliation in the region.

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement sets up a comprehensive institutional framework, through the SAA Council and SAA Committee, a renewed framework for political dialogue and a web of subcommittees covering extensively most EU policy areas. And, naturally, it also establishes a specific body between your Assembly and the Serbian parliament, the Joint Parliamentary Committee.

From an economic standpoint, the SAA foresees the gradual establishment of a free trade zone and the gradual integration of Serbia into the EU's internal market, thus bringing economic benefits to both the EU and Serbia. Like in Central Europe in the 90', the agreement will boost investment, in particular Foreign Direct investments. It will make a key contribution to the growth of the Serbian economy and help Serbia move towards a functioning market economy.

The benefits for the EU of this agreement are equally significant. Serbia's market is now open up to EU exporters. Previously relatively high tariffs will be totally dismantled within 6 years, with the exception of a few very sensitive agricultural products. Furthermore, by gradually integrating Serbia into the internal market, conditions for investors become more stable and predictable. Rules on competition and state aid are aligned to those of the EU. Protection of intellectual property rights is gradually also brought up to EU standards. Progressively, the sizable Serbian public procurement market is also opened up to European bidders.

Forging closer ties with Serbia entails a number of other advantages for the EU, in particular as it will facilitate cooperation in the areas of justice, freedom and security, environment, transport and customs just to mention a few. It therefore contributes to making the EU policy in South East-Europe more credible and effective.

Finally, it is particularly noteworthy that Serbia anticipated on the implementation of the Interim agreement, which officially entered into force in February 2010, but which Serbia decided to apply already shortly after its signature in April 2008. Serbia has thereby demonstrated commitment to its economic integration with the EU and has so far established a positive track record.

Since the Council decided on 14 June 2010 to launch the ratification process for the Agreement, 9 Member states have notified their ratification and two more have secured the approval of their Parliament. Today's vote by the European Parliament should therefore bring additional impetus to this process, thanks to the unanimous support across political groups. I therefore hope that ratifications by other Member states will follow soon.

Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

Let me conclude my remarks by focusing on the draft Resolution on the European integration process of Serbia, a well prepared contribution to today's political debate for which I am grateful to the Rapporteur, Jelko Kacin. The resolution sends to Serbia both a message of support for the furthering of EU-Serbia relations and one of expectation regarding the key challenges on Serbia's path to the EU membership.

This is particularly timely in the context of the preparation of the Opinion on Serbia's membership application.

I was in Belgrade last November to hand over a detailed questionnaire to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister for European integration. The Serbian authorities are currently working hard on their replies, which we expect by the end of the month. I am encouraged by the adoption by the Serbian government on 30 December of an Action Plan as a follow up of the Commission's Progress report. The European Commission will thoroughly analyse the replies to the questionnaire and measures undertaken by the Serbian authorities in the coming months to complete its assessment with a view to issuing the Opinion in the second half of 2011.

Mr President, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, 2011 is an important year for Serbia, a year of demanding challenges as well as a year of opportunities. The path has been set and the objectives are well known. Yet, it is up to Serbia to walk down this path, fulfil the required criteria and once ready, engage into the negotiation process with the European Union.

I am convinced that with our joint support, Serbia will continue to make the right European choices and move ahead in its integration efforts. This will deliver a positive message for the whole region, at a time when we need to reaffirm its European perspective in order to consolidate peace and foster economic prosperity in the Western Balkans.

Thank you.