



Step by Step in a Positive Direction

Serbia is a key partner for the EU and is poised to move ahead in its membership accession negotiations during 2016.

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This has been a remarkable year. First of all, on 14th December we opened the first two chapters in Serbia's EU accession negotiations. This offers a major opportunity that needs to be seized. A poll that we commissioned in October showed that 59 per cent of the population support Serbia's membership in the EU and 53 per cent expect Serbia to join the Union in 10 years or less.

In August the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina resulted in four key agreements on energy, telecoms, the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities and Freedom of Movement/Mitrovica Bridge. EU facilitation also helped to resume the flow of people and goods between Serbia and Croatia in September. Serbia has also taken serious steps towards improving relations with other countries in the region. Visits in both directions by the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Albania are a case in point.

We have seen tolerance develop in other areas as well. You will remember that the Belgrade Pride Parade and the first ever Trans Pride took place without incident and in a relaxed atmosphere.

Encouragingly, Serbia's economic reforms started to produce the first signs of a return to growth, supported by enhanced regional cooperation and plans for major regional infrastructure projects.

I will also remember this year for Serbia's humane response to the migration crisis, symbolised so powerfully by the picture of a Serbian policeman holding a refugee child in his arms in Preševo. The European Union has allocated more than €20 million to support the Serbian authorities and aid organisations and to help transiting refugees and migrants. More is to come, if and when needed.

In April Serbia and the EU signed an agreement by which Serbia joined the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Serbia received significant assistance from EU Member States through this mechanism after last year's floods, and again this year during the migration crisis. We have helped rebuild over 1,000 houses, many schools, and supported over 20,000 Serbian farmers and hundreds of businesses in flood affected areas. And with EU support Serbia is now modernising its flood defences.

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in its membership accession negotiations during 2016. The mandate of the EU Delegation in Serbia is to support Serbia in preparing for membership.

A key priority will be to implement commitments to build an independent, impartial and efficient judiciary and drive forward an effective fight against corruption, as well as creating conditions for full exercising of freedom of expression. These commitments are enshrined in action plans which the government and parliament have adopted under chapters 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (justice, freedom and security). The EU is committed to providing significant support to Serbia in all these areas.

As Serbia enters 2016, it is encouraging that economic growth is set to return, as Serbia's reward for its responsible economic and fiscal policies. We will continue strongly supporting the integra-

tion of the Serbian economy with the EU. Last year some 80 per cent of foreign investment in Serbia came from businesses in EU Member States. Further improvements to the business climate, including through an effective fight against corruption and more efficient and independent courts, will help Serbia attract new investors.

Building on achievements in regional co-operation will also be a high priority. The EU stands ready to offer further political and financial support in driving forward projects to extend and modernise transport and energy networks.

Serbia should start feeling the impact of €150 million in preferential loans for small and medium-sized enterprises, infrastructure, as well as investments of local authorities from the European Investment Bank (EIB), the EU Bank, channeled through local financial institutions. We expect the Ministry of Agriculture to start contracting the first non-refundable grants from the €175 million allocation available over the next six years from the Rural Development Programme; this would lead to a total investment in the sector of approximately €400 million. On a smaller scale, EU assistance will reach flood-hit farmers in Eastern Serbia.

Our step-by-step approach takes time, but it is very well-founded and thought out. The prospects for Serbia are good. ■

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