Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following her meeting with Serbian leadership

Can I begin by saying what a great pleasure it is to be back in Belgrade and especially to be here after what is a historic decision of the European Council.

This meeting at the end of June took the decision, as you know, to open accession talks with Serbia and this is historic. It is also a signal of the great achievements of the leadership of Serbia and I want to commend you, Mr President, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the ministers and the team who have worked so hard over these last few months.

All of that work has been acknowledged by every Member State of the European Union and they proved it when they took the unanimous decision to open negotiations on the accession of Serbia to the European Union, a decision that came without any new conditions.

In my meeting just now with you, Mr President, with the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister I wanted to express my great respect for your vision, your courage and how I have seen you take what are often painful decisions and I have seen you address difficult political challenges.

I was very pleased when I was able to go to Member States and show that following the 19 April Agreement we have had some good and concrete results in implementing that agreement. And I remind all of you that the purpose is to ensure a better life for the people, in particular the people who live in the north.

Yesterday, I met with Prime Minister Dačić and Prime Minister Thaçi for the 13th time and I will meet them again before the end of July. They have agreed to continue their efforts in the coming weeks and months. Indeed there will be no summer break for everyone because it is important to show the progress that we want to see if people's lives are going to get better and quickly.
The main thing we have to do now is to implement the agreement that has been reached. As you would expect, the technical work that needs to go to translate political decision into practical action is not easy.

What we have said is that two things should happen. One is that, as we work through that technical work, there will be issues that still need to be resolved. And secondly, that we should continue to talk about issues that are of enormous importance here and in Pristina, and to see where we would take that in the future. This must be an ongoing process but the process is, as I have said, about ensuring that we support people to a better life.

I was really pleased also to know that Serbia has already started the preparations for the start of the accession negotiations. This takes time. It is a challenging process as you, Mr President, have indicated and it is really good to see that Serbia is getting ready and will be thoroughly prepared. But on the European Union side we have also started the work to prepare for the negotiations. The European Commission is already working on the negotiating framework which is our mandate for the upcoming talks, which needs to be presented to Member States. It takes time too to get that framework ready but officials are doing so with great enthusiasm.

I also want to say, wherever I go in the world, people are talking about this country and talking about the importance of the way in which people of Serbia, through the leadership that they have elected, have moved forward and have decided to move towards Europe and to try to normalise relations with Pristina.

And I want to pay tribute not just to the leadership here, but to the people of Serbia for the inspiration that you have given not just in this region but all over the world. I have seen articles and Op Eds, some of them I have written, in every possible language in many many countries right across the globe and it is their way of being tribute to the work that has been done here. Mr President, Mr Prime Minister, you are an inspiration. It has been an enormous privilege to work alongside you and I look forward to continuing our work and to Serbia moving to the European Union.

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