



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Speech: Western Balkans on their road towards the European Union

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

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Mr Chairman,

I am delighted to have the opportunity to attend this conference on the Western Balkans' European perspective. These exchanges of views, notably with Members of the European Parliament, have enabled me to understand the position of key stakeholders and collaborate with others in driving forward our policy since the beginning of my mandate as Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy.

The past year has seen major progress by a number of countries of the Western Balkans on their road towards the European Union. Croatia is a few months away from becoming the 28th member state, Serbia is a candidate country and accession negotiations have been opened with Montenegro.

In 2013, it is crucial that the momentum for enlargement is maintained and that the reforms necessary for progress on the European path in the enlargement countries are pursued with vigour. Maintaining the momentum of enlargement and the momentum for reforms are two sides of the same coin. Both are crucial for the credibility of our enlargement policy.

A credible enlargement policy is part of the solution to some of the problems that our continent is facing, and not – as some would argue – part of the problem. Enlargement means promoting economic and financial stability and supporting increased trade and business opportunities in the aspiring countries which, with our interconnected economies, is in all our interests since it translates into more growth and jobs. At the same time, taking account of the major challenges facing the European Union, enlargement policy should reflect a prudent, cautious approach based on strict conditionality.

Following the adoption of the Commission's Enlargement Package in October, the Council conclusions on enlargement of last month have set an ambitious programme for the first half of 2013. This will involve considerable work for all concerned. First and foremost it will be for the enlargement countries to meet the expectations and to deliver on the necessary conditions.

Before taking you through the enlargement agenda for the Western Balkans countries in the year ahead, let me touch on a couple of horizontal issues which I think are extremely important and which will define enlargement this year.

The first is bilateral issues and here we face a challenge because we clearly say that:

- we don't want major bilateral issues to be imported into the European Union; and
- we don't want bilateral 'mines' to explode in the middle of the accession process.

And that begs the question: how are we going to handle bilateral issues? Some may be solved easily between parties concerned, others may be solved with the help of the European Union, and as Croatia and Slovenia have shown, an arbitration mechanism could help. Ultimately we have the International Court of Justice in The Hague. What is most important in 2013 is that this issue is acknowledged as a major element of good neighbourly relations, a principle to which we will refer more and more as we move ahead. And it is important that we start to tackle these issues so that they don't hold up the accession process.

The second horizontal issue which will be very important in the coming year is to reconcile approximation with the *acquis*, all 130,000 or 140,000 pages of it, with what is in the pipeline and what is being decided in each and every Council and European Parliament session. The crisis has shown that as it is important to deliver on the *acquis*, it is also important that all enlargement countries are associated to the changes in economic governance of the European Union.

It is clear that the European Union must continue to evolve if it is to overcome the significant challenges it is facing and if it is to be successful in an increasingly competitive global economic environment. The European Union that the Western Balkan countries should eventually join will no doubt look quite different from the European Union of today.

In its 2012 Strategy paper the European Commission underlined the importance of further associating enlargement countries to the strengthening of the European Union's economic governance, as well as implementing measures to support economic recovery. Familiarising enlargement countries already now with the changes underway in the European Union will not only support economic reforms but also strengthen accountability in these countries.

Looking to the work that lies ahead on enlargement, in the spring the European Commission will publish its last monitoring report on Croatia and also reports on several candidates and potential candidates. On the basis of these reports, if sufficient progress has been made, the Member States will consider whether to open accession negotiations with Serbia and with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and whether to approve a mandate to start negotiations with Kosovo on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Depending on progress, a report on Albania is also possible, while the prospect of a credible membership application from Bosnia and Herzegovina remains open, subject to well-known conditions. In 2013, I also look forward to the advancement of accession negotiations with Montenegro and progress in the visa dialogue with Kosovo.

Mr Chairman,

For all the countries of the Western Balkans, important milestones on the European path are within reach, if the conditions are met.

We look forward to everyone playing their part to facilitate further progress on the enlargement agenda in the coming period, so that we can deliver on the ambitious programme set out in the December Council.

We are ready to do our part.

Thank you for your attention, I look forward to our discussion.