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# EU membership remains 'top priority' for Serbian government

Joining the European community of countries will 'encourage modernisation' of the Serbian state and economy, says Duško Lopandić

So far, 2014 has been an important year for Serbia and its path towards membership of the EU. Membership negotiations began on 21 January; in March, parliamentary elections resulted in a narodna skupština (national assembly) composed entirely of pro-European parties and MPs, both on the government side and in the opposition. The new government, headed by Aleksandar Vučić, announced a very ambitious economic reform agenda – aiming specifically to curb the budget deficit, complete the privatisation process and amend systemic laws, such as those on labour, liquidation procedures and privatisation, as well as measures designed to cut red tape and to attract foreign investment. Even though Serbia had some positive economic developments in 2013, such as a 26 per cent increase in exports and a 25 per cent decrease in the foreign trade deficit, this was largely overshadowed by the misbalance in public finances, the rise of external debt, and the persistently high level of unemployment. Problems were amplified by this year's massive floods that hit several countries in the Balkans in May, to which the European commission reacted, with the help of France and Slovenia, by organising a donors' conference for Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, scheduled for 16 July in Brussels.

Membership of the EU remains the top priority of the government. At the same time, this process is closely linked with the political and economic reforms at home. Membership of the European Union is supported by a majority of public opinion; around 55 per cent of citizens are in favour, despite the awareness that the process of accession will be neither simple nor quick. Membership of the EU is seen as a way of joining the community of countries which share the same political and social values as Serbian society, as well as a way of encouraging modernisation of state services and of the economy.

In a way, the enlargement of the EU became a victim of its own success in the eyes of the general public in member states, which led to a certain fatigue reflected in the meth-

odology and pace of ongoing and future membership negotiations with western Balkan countries. The commission's new approach to negotiations means that several topics which were not treated with that much attention before, such as the functioning of the judiciary and internal affairs, became central to the negotiation process. According to the



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negotiating framework for Serbia, chapters 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (justice, freedom and security) should be opened in the early stages of the negotiations, which in turn is interpreted by some member states as a precondition for opening any other chapters. Serbia's accession negotiations are unique because one of the conditions for their successful completion is the comprehensive normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The dialogue between the two sides is, in a way, supervised by the EU through chapter 35, where the degree of implementation of agreements stemming from the Brussels agreement of 19 April 2013 will be monitored.

During the Greek presidency, 32 screening meetings, which form an analytical overview of the degree of adjustment of

the Serbian legal framework with the *acquis*, took place. Explanatory screenings were held for six chapters, whereas both explanatory and bilateral screenings were completed for 13 chapters. The whole screening process could be completed in the first trimester of 2015. It is expected that the first negotiating chapters – financial control and Kosovo-related issues – will be opened at an intergovernmental conference during the Italian presidency, probably in October 2014. The goal of the Serbian government is to finish negotiations by

*“Serbia is very much supportive of an ever stronger, functional and democratic union of national member states”*

2018, and to become a member state by the beginning of the next financial cycle of the EU, around 2020.

However, it is there that the following question arises: What kind of union will

Serbia join once the negotiations are brought to an end? Over the last couple of years, the EU went through a difficult exercise of implementing reforms brought about by the Lisbon treaty. At the same time, the severe financial and economic crisis, both in the EU as a whole and in the eurozone, highlighted some crucial issues related to the competences and the functioning of the union. This year marks the beginning of a new political cycle. On one hand, the European elections confirmed the rise of the Eurosceptic and extreme parties in some member states; on the other, the Spitzenkandidaten election process gave additional democratic legitimacy to the union's institutions and confirmed the continuing development of the EU as a unified political area, where specific issues are debated on the European level. Serbia is very much supportive of an ever stronger, functional and democratic union of national member states. We support the continuing advancement of the EU, a unique community based on the values of peace and prosperity, which should bring adequate economic and social responses to the needs of its citizens, as well as a capability of representing the interests of its member states in the international arena. ★

*Duško Lopandić is head of the Republic of Serbia's mission to the EU*

