

Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU: the toolkit for the do-do list

Policy Briefing – 10 October 2014

Summary

The European Commission recently published the 2014 progress reports on countries aspiring to EU membership, including on Serbia - a candidate state since 2012. Aside from the progress made in terms of public administration, the independence of judiciary and the fight against corruption, the progress report mentioned that the pace of negotiations between Brussels and Belgrade would depend on the ability of Serbia to move ahead in key areas, such as the rule of law and the dialogue with Kosovo. At this briefing, Ivica Dačić, Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs talked about the reactions to the progress report in Serbia and discussed some of the reform priorities of the Serbian government.

Full Report

Ivica Dačić, Serbian First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, started the briefing with the observation that the European Commission's 2014 progress report on Serbia was mainly positive. There were some concerns raised by Brussels' executive but he said that this was normal at this stage of the negotiations.

Then he went on to say that Serbia's number one foreign policy priority was full EU membership, and that the key factor in the negotiations would be the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. However, he expressed hope that through the accession talks and the EU perspective, significant progress could be made regarding the normalisation of relations with Kosovo.

Important decisions had been made with respect to the harmonisation of the common foreign and security policy and the reform of financial institutions, which he expected to be finalised during the Italian Presidency. He acknowledged that some EU member states, including Germany, wanted Serbia to deal with chapter 35 - regarding relations with Kosovo - before any other chapter could be opened, but he declared that Serbia would remain committed to fulfilling all EU requirements. The Minister reassured the audience that the Serbian government was aware of the EU-related priorities and would continue to reform.

Dačić remarked that Serbia's level of alignment with EU conditions was already very high and that the Serbian authorities were even contemplating fulfilling criteria they did not agree/may not have agreed with in the past. That led him to discuss the position of the current Serbian government on the EU sanctions against Russia; the Minister explained that although Serbia supported the territorial integrity/sovereignty of Ukraine, it could not join the sanctions against Russia, nor could it side with the Russian resolutions against Europe. Dačić claimed that Serbia was still fully committed to EU accession but it also wished to remain on friendly terms with Russia. If the EU wanted Serbia to completely align its foreign policy with its own, the Minister said that the Union had to include the Serbian authorities in its consultation process and maybe invite them to attend meetings of the AFET Committee. But since Serbia has never been consulted by the EU on issues of international security, Dačić noted that Serbia had its own national interests to take into consideration, and having a good relationship with Russia was one of them. However, according to Dačić, this should not be taken to mean that Serbia is "drifting away" from 'Europe' and moving ever closer to Russia.

From the Minister's point of view, Serbia chairing the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) next year will present a great opportunity for the country to show that it can play a credible and impartial role on the international stage.

Discussion

Corina Stratulat, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre, pointed out that a potential dilemma could emerge in the coming years: despite the progress made by Serbia, its workload is still sizeable and the path to the EU is likely to be long. How confident are the Serbian authorities that they will be able to implement all the costly reforms while maintaining popular support for EU accession, given that full membership could be ten years into the future?

Dačić answered that Serbia's ambition to become an EU member was very strong, for three main reasons. First, the Minister characterised his country's search for EU membership as an important incentive to reform Serbian society on the basis of respect for human rights and the rule of law. Second, he suggested that the high living standards of people in the EU, even after the financial crisis, exert a great appeal for Serbia, which is in dire need of swift economic growth in order to catch up with its neighbours, some of which have already become EU members. Third and finally, Dačić highlighted the role of European integration for regional stability, arguing that past experience has shown how the EU can have a "soothing effect" on longstanding conflicts and the power to generate mutual trust. This potential is crucial in a region that has been torn by crises ever since the 1980s, the Minister remarked.

In the words of Dačić, Serbia needs to take radical steps to not only turn a new page, but "change the book entirely". Regardless of the many problems the EU is facing at the moment, it is still the best alternative to achieve all three goals – the Minister underscored.

A more prosaic reason given by Dačić for Serbia to join the EU was money. Other countries that have entered the 'club' have received generous financial assistance to help them with reforms, and that is why – in his opinion - other member states are now hesitant to allow further enlargement. Dačić mentioned that the EU could provide the financial means to start linking together the different countries in the Balkans, such as via the possible construction of a new highway between Belgrade and Pristina. He called upon the other Balkan countries to work more closely together in order to better articulate their standpoints, including in their relations/dealings with the EU, arguing that divisions in the region were the reason why Balkan countries have so much catching up to do in the first place. He identified the Nordic states as a good example of how sharing information and cooperating could make a region prosperous and stable. The fight against terrorism was the other example given by Dačić of an area in which the Balkan countries could make common front.

When asked whether the Serbian authorities felt torn between Russia and the EU, Dačić stressed again that Russia was not opposed to Serbia joining the EU. He underlined that Serbia's experience with Russia was very different from that of the rest of Europe: the former Yugoslavia was never a part of the Soviet Union and managed to stay largely out of the Cold War. Furthermore, Serbia had been liberated by the Red Army during World War II, so the amiable ties between the two countries went way back in his view.

He also emphasised that Putin's visit to Belgrade was not an attempt by Russia to coerce Serbia into allowing the South Stream pipeline to be built on its territory, but simply an official visit to commemorate the liberation. Dačić believes the EU is in no position to tell Serbia not to have friendly ties with Russia or to forbid the construction of South Stream. A functional gas pipe would have to cross the territory of several EU member states – which incidentally have also agreed to the construction – so any unilateral decision and action by Serbia in this regard would in fact be irrelevant to making the South Stream a reality, the Minister explained.

On the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, Dačić made it clear that Serbia was not going to help Kosovo become an independent nation. The status of Kosovo has not yet been discussed during the accession talks but he was hopeful that somewhere down the line, with the prospect of EU membership, a solution could be found that would be acceptable to both sides.

He closed the briefing by reaffirming Serbia's full commitment to the reform agenda for EU membership, even though the long path into the Union was clear to him and the other countries in the Balkan region.