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The enlargement policy: Serbia in the spotlight

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On 12 October the European Commission published annual reports regarding the state of preparation for EU accession in the Balkan countries and the assessment of Serbia's EU membership application. In the EC's opinion, the reforms implemented by Serbia allow it to be granted official EU candidate status if Belgrade continues talks with Pristina and respects agreements already concluded. The EC believes that the accession negotiations with Belgrade should begin on the condition that Serbia takes further measures in order to normalise its relations with Kosovo. The EC expects Serbia to agree to the incorporation of Pristina in structures of regional co-operation and to settle the issue of energy supplies, telecommunications services and the mutual recognition of university degrees as well as to implement the already signed agreements and supports the EU EULEX mission in extending the jurisdiction to the territories inhabited by the Serbian minority. The EC has also recommended the launch of accession negotiations with Montenegro and announced the beginning of visa dialogue with Kosovo. In the case of the remaining Balkan states there has not been any substantial progress in the reform process. Following the EC's recommendations the Council of the EU is set to make a decision about further measures under the enlargement policy on 9 December.

Commentary

- The enlargement policy has succeeded in finalising the accession negotiations with Croatia and announced the possibility of launching these talks with Montenegro. Both countries are meant to set positive examples for the region. However, the prospect of EU membership is not a sufficient impetus for the majority of the Balkan states (Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) to overcome external and bilateral conflicts which are blocking the reform process and EU integration. Due to the EU's internal problems and a relatively stable situation in the Balkans it cannot be expected that measures intended to counteract these negative trends will be undertaken.

- Compared to the countries of the region, Serbia distinguishes itself in a positive manner since over the last year it has consistently been implementing reforms and has fulfilled the condition of full co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) by arresting Goran Hadzic and Ratko Mladic. It is worth noticing that the EC, under pressure from the EU member countries (mainly Germany), for the first time explicitly made Serbia's progress in its integration with the EU dependent on relaxing

Serbia's policy towards Kosovo, which may be difficult for the Serbian government in the context of the parliamentary elections planned in spring 2012.

- The declining support for Serbia's EU membership in society (46% for, 37% against) and its negative attitude towards meeting further conditions set by the EU do not facilitate the relaxation of the Serbian policy towards Kosovo either. The government is rather counting on the EU member states granting Serbia EU candidate status in December this year, fearing that Eurosceptic parties could take over power after the parliamentary elections, which would trigger a slow-down in the transformation process. This assumption may not be accurate because of Germany's principled position.

- The launch of the visa dialogue with Kosovo gives the EU a tool for boosting reforms in key areas. The EU, divided over the issue of Kosovo, has not been so far able to develop a coherent policy towards Kosovo and has thus deprived itself of a possibility to positively bear impact on the situation in this country.