

Serbia knocking on the EU's door

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On 21 January, Serbia formally embarked upon negotiations prior to it joining the EU. The member states granted their consent to the commencement of accession talks with Belgrade on 17 December 2013, taking into account above all the progress made in the process of normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

The special feature of the talks with Serbia was the screening process which was launched before negotiations were formally opened. Furthermore, a chapter concerning the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo will be introduced. Serbia, like Montenegro, will start negotiations on the most problematic chapters concerning the judiciary system and fundamental rights, as well as justice, freedom and security issues.

Commentary

- As compared to the other countries from this region, Serbian accession to the EU has been relatively the slowest thus far. Serbia submitted its application for EU membership in 2009, and was granted candidate status in 2012. The factor which inhibited the process was the lack of consensus on the domestic political scene on European integration and the meeting of EU requirements, which affected the co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, and the slow process of reform. Since 2008, Belgrade's policy towards Kosovo has played an increasingly important role in its relations with Brussels.
- At present, all major political parties support Serbia's integration with the EU. The Serbian public are more divided on the issue: 42% believe that Serbia will benefit from EU membership, and 32% are of the opinion that it will not. The consensus on the Serbian political scene will act as a catalyst on the reform process. Regardless of this, accession in 2020, as promised by politicians, seems rather unlikely, given the scale of the problems Serbia and the EU itself need to deal with.
- The greatest challenge for Serbia will be to build efficiently operating institutions which guarantee the rule of law (the administration, judiciary system, etc.) that would be capable of successfully dealing with such problems as the ubiquitous corruption and organised crime. In turn, the Serbian government is likely to attempt to capitalise on the issue of Kosovo to improve its position in negotiations with the EU. Serbia also needs to tackle its serious economic problems: high unemployment (20.1%), especially among young people and slow GDP growth (1.7% in 2012). Furthermore, it is definitely much

poorer than the present EU member states. Its GDP at purchasing power parity *per capita* is as low as 36% of the EU average (for comparison, Bulgaria's is 47%, and Croatia's 62%).

- However, the main challenge will be convincing the EU member states to grant their consent to a further enlargement. At present, only 37% of EU citizens are in favour of more states being accepted, and 52% are against (69% are against in Germany and 76% in Austria). Moreover, some EU member states insist that future members be deprived of part of the privileges vested in the present member states. If such rhetoric becomes entrenched, the EU could find itself deprived of its only instrument to influence the states within its neighbourhood, namely the enlargement policy, which – as proven by the example of normalising relations between Serbia and Kosovo – is still effective.