

The European Union opens the first chapters in negotiations with Serbia

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On 14 December, the European Union opened the first two of thirty-five chapters in its accession negotiations with Serbia. These concern financial control (chapter 32) and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo (chapter 35). The EU granted Serbia candidate status in March 2012; in June 2013 the European Council decided to open negotiations, which were formally launched in January this year. Typically, this stage of the accession process lasts much less time; in the case of Montenegro, it took just a year and a half from receiving the status of candidate to the opening of negotiations. The main reason for the delay was the link between progress in the accession process and the normalisation of Serbia's relations with Kosovo.

Commentary

- The EU's positive decision to open negotiation chapters was caused not so much by Serbia meeting the technical conditions or making significant progress in its internal reforms, but rather by Serbia's more constructive policy (in the assessment of EU members) towards its neighbouring countries. This applies above all to Kosovo, and the progress made in the normalisation of relations between the two countries, as was demonstrated by the agreement signed this August on the status of the Serbian municipalities in Kosovo. Belgrade's relations with Bosnia & Herzegovina and Albania have also significantly improved, which has proved that Serbia is having a positive impact on stability in the region. Another important factor was Serbia's policy towards the European migration crisis, which it has carried out in line with the expectations of Germany, among other countries.
- The EU countries' strategy, of taking advantage of Serbia's aspirations to accession to put its relations with the breakaway republic of Kosovo in order, has proved to be only partially effective. However, continuing to block Serbia's accession process would have led to the progressive erosion of EU influence on Belgrade's policy, the more so as the main obstacle at this time to progress in implementing the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo is growing opposition within Kosovo. Focusing on foreign policy as the main criterion for assessing Serbia has already led to Belgrade neglecting the implementation of domestic reforms. The negotiations on these specific chapters will allow the European Commission to better control the implementation of structural reforms; including the

issue of the Kosovo negotiations (in Chapter 35) will also give the EU the option of pressuring Belgrade to implement its agreements with Prishtina.

- The decision on Serbia, as well as the invitation to Montenegro this December to join NATO, is intended to be a clear signal from the West to the region's countries that the policy of enlarging the EU and NATO will continue. In recent years, the drop in support within the EU for enlargement and the slowdown of the overall process have called the chances of membership for countries in the region into question; this has weakened the determination of the political elites to implement reforms. Concerns about the stability of the region are significant in the context of tensions in relations between the West and Russia. The weakening of the EU's activities in the Western Balkans has coincided with increased activity by Russia, which is further undermining the prospects of the Western Balkan countries joining the EU and NATO by trying to strengthen its influence on them.