

Serbia faces historic turning point

By Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia Miroslav Lajcak

Having visited Belgrade after its recent presidential elections, I returned home with a strong impression that once again Serbia finds itself at a crossroads.

The meetings with newly-elected President Tomislav Nikolic, with deputy prime minister Ivica Dacic, defence minister Dragan Sutanovac and foreign minister Vuk Jeremic have all revealed a strong consensus by the main political forces about Belgrade's European path.

It is time that this vision takes concrete form in the very near future. It is important for the people of Serbia, for the stability of the region and for Europe as a whole.

The news about the outcome of presidential elections in Serbia reached me - as well as almost all my European colleagues - in Chicago where we had been attending the Nato Summit.

The victory of Nikolic, until then the opposition leader, proved that the country's political landscape had become more complex and that the EU needs to be involved in an intensive dialogue with Serbian authorities and all political leaders from the very first moment.

We had an immediate exchange of views with EU high representative Catherine Ashton. A joint invitation by Baroness Ashton and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso for the new Serbian President to visit Brussels is a confirmation that the EU wants to continue its open approach towards Serbia in line with the country's European future.

Serbia has gone a long way to becoming a candidate country for EU membership. Now it stands at an important point - the opening of accession negotiations.

Such a step would ultimately bring the European agenda to Serbia's politics and would make future EU membership a visible and tangible goal. Serbia is looking for same perspective as Croatia - now due to become an EU member in 2013.

This year could be a turning point in Serbia's European history.

In order to ensure the opening of accession negotiations, the criteria set by EU member states and the European Commission must be met. Reforms started during previous years must continue.

Slovakia as an EU member state stands ready to support Belgrade and share the lessons learned during the integration process. The European Union expects the new Serbian government to be fully focused on necessary reforms with EU integration as its ultimate goal.

Among the criteria, normalisation of relations with Pristina is given prominence. The issue of Kosovo is a very sensitive one in Serbian politics.

Many representatives have tried to find a balance between the national interest in European integration and this issue. However, this is no longer a progressive method. Full focus on accession to the EU will be necessary in order to succeed.

The process of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina - as agreed by the UN General Assembly resolution proposed jointly by the EU and Serbia in September 2010 - has so far led to agreements on various issues from the mutual recognition of university diplomas to regional representation.

The latter contributed to the fact that Serbia was granted candidate country status. Resumption of the dialogue, its continuation as well as the implementation of previously achieved agreements is necessary.

The EU has played a very important facilitating role in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and it should continue to do so as only the Union provides a perspective of shared reality to both sides.

A form or structure of the dialogue can be refined in order to make it more regular, to involve higher political representations, but the essence is clear - talks must be continued and they should result in agreements and their implementation.

Achieving a viable and functional situation in north Kosovo will be very sensitive for the parties involved. The international community expects Serbia's contribution towards this goal. We have to avoid creation of another frozen conflict in Europe, a conflict that would spoil chances of another generation to live their lives as European citizens.

Historical moments require leaders to take responsible decisions.

The new political reality in Serbia underlines the importance of a responsible approach of all relevant political forces. The decisions to be taken shall open a European chapter in Serbia's future. A broad political consensus will be the most important factor that can bring Belgrade - as an important part of the Western Balkans region and the European Union - to a new level of co-operation.

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