



REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

GOVERNMENT

INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONFERENCE

ON THE ACCESSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

THE OPENING STATEMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

*Brussels, 21 January 2014*

1. The decision of the European Council of 28 June 2013 to launch accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia and the convening of the first Intergovernmental Conference open a new chapter in the relations between Serbia and the European Union.

2. The start of the EU accession negotiations has historic importance for the Republic of Serbia and its citizens. It is therefore a great honour and privilege to be here today and present the Opening statement that Serbia's process of accession to the European Union will be based upon. Serbia's endeavours to become a member of the European Union are a result of its strong commitment to the fundamental ideas, values and achievements the European Union is founded on. The EU membership is a strategic goal of the Republic of Serbia and, at the same time, a means for Serbia to modernise its legal, economic and institutional system. In addition to its historic importance for Serbia, the decision of the European Council also has a wider significance. The start of accession negotiations between the Republic of Serbia and the EU is an affirmation of success of the EU enlargement project and shows the commitment of the European Union to continue the process and fulfil the obligations undertaken.

3. The decision of the Republic of Serbia to join the EU is based on its firm determination to fully engage in a half-a-century old wish of the European peoples to build a Europe of peace, justice, freedom, solidarity and security. Just like the EU Member States, the Republic of Serbia strives to build a society whose key values are pluralism, tolerance, solidarity, non-discrimination, the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions as a guarantee that these values will be cherished and enhanced. The Republic of Serbia is, to an extent, already integrated in the European economic processes. Serbia wants to take its place in the EU, respecting the market economy rules and social justice and building its own capacities so that once it has joined the EU it is a prepared and competitive European economy. The Republic of Serbia is ready to fully transpose the EU law, and build efficient administrative and judicial capacities for its full implementation. In this regard, the Republic of Serbia sees the EU accession as a mechanism for changing and adjusting to the conditions required from all EU members, and as a way to improve the overall efficiency and competitiveness of the EU, as well as its own reputation both in Europe and worldwide. The accession process gives a great boost to the political and economic reforms in Serbia.

4. Simultaneously, Serbia's membership in the European Union will contribute to the stability in the region and to the accomplishment of a zone of peace, justice, freedom and security in Europe. The start of accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia sends a strong message to the other countries of the Western Balkans to persevere in their efforts to overcome the remaining obstacles, whether they are internal, structural issues or bilateral issues with their neighbours, and to commit to the reforms whose aim is the EU membership for the entire region.

5. Fully understanding the challenges that the EU and its Member States are facing at the moment, we wish to point out that, in its opinion on Serbia's application for the membership of the European Union in 2011, the European Commission stated that "Serbia would be in a position to take on the obligations of membership in the medium term", and that "Serbia's accession would have a limited overall impact on European Union policies and would not affect the Union's capacity to maintain and deepen its own development".

6. As part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia's political and economic relations with the European Economic Community developed after the signing of the Trade Agreement in 1970, and over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, which proves decades-long relations and connections between Serbia and the EU Member States.

7. As part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Serbia became a participant in the Stabilisation and Association Process in November 2000, having accepted the main principles that the process is based upon, and that its movement towards the EU will depend on the individual progress in meeting the Copenhagen criteria and implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, with a special focus on the importance of regional and good neighbourly cooperation between the Western Balkans countries.

At the summit of the EU Member States and the Western Balkans countries in Thessaloniki, which took place in June 2003, it was made clear that the future of the Western Balkans lies within the European Union. The European perspective of the Western Balkans was reiterated in the conclusions of the European Council of December 2005, December 2006 and June 2008, and as such it should continue to constitute a foundation for the permanent political and economic stability and development of the region.

Serbia believes that the historic process of the EU enlargement cannot be complete until the entire Western Balkans is included in the European Union. In this light, Serbia wants to contribute to the region's stabilisation and the continuation of the EU enlargement process across the Western Balkans and to help its neighbours on this path.

The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) negotiations between the Republic of Serbia and the EU were officially launched on 10 October 2005 and successfully finalised when the SAA was initialled on 7 November 2007. The SAA and the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-Related Matters (IA) were signed at the meeting of the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council in Luxembourg on 29 April 2008. The National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia ratified both agreements on 9 September 2008.

Meeting the obligations under the Interim Agreement, the Republic of Serbia unilaterally began the application of the Interim Agreement and liberalisation of trade with the EU on 30 January 2009. On 7 December 2009, the Council of Ministers of the EU adopted a decision to start the application of the Agreement with the Republic of Serbia. Under the same decision, the Council recognised Serbia's unilateral application of the Interim Agreement as a proof of its preparedness and capacity to apply the Agreement smoothly.

8. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement entered into force on 1 September 2013, giving Serbia associated country status. The first meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council was held in Luxembourg on 21 October 2013. It was a new step in the relations between Serbia and the EU. The application of the Interim Agreement and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement has been smooth to date. As from 1 January 2014, the trade between the EU and Serbia is completely tax free except for some particularly sensitive agricultural products for both parties.

9. By signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement Serbia has committed to gradually aligning its legislation with the EU *acquis* and to consistently applying it. Complying with this provision, Serbia adopted the National Programme for Integration of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union (NPI) as early as October 2008, which contained a plan of legislative activities to enable Serbia to align its legislation with the EU *acquis* as much as possible by the end of 2012. As a continuation of this process, in February 2013 the Serbian

Government adopted the National Programme for the Adoption of the EU *Acquis* (NPAA) for the period 2013-2016.

The NPAA is currently being revised with the aim to achieve full internal alignment of the Serbian national legislation with the EU *acquis* by the end of 2018, taking into consideration the requirements and dynamics of the EU accession negotiations. In addition to the legislative measures, the National Programme for the Adoption of the *Acquis* will also define the necessary institutional and financial preconditions for their implementation.

10. The progress Serbia made towards the free movement of its citizens in the Schengen countries is of equal importance. Visa facilitation and readmission agreements, signed in May 2007, were an important step on this journey. These were followed by the visa liberalisation dialogue, during which great efforts were made towards meeting the Road Map requirements. The decision of the EU Council of Ministers of 30 November 2009 enabling Serbian citizens visa-free travel was much more than a symbolic act, for it was a strong signal of political acceptance, certainty of Serbia's European perspective and a confirmation that the fulfilment of obligations leads to progress in the integration process. In cooperation with the EU Member States and with the support of the European Commission, the Republic of Serbia makes sincere and concrete efforts to prevent any attempts to circumvent the procedures and abuse the visa-free travel regime.

11. Recognising the importance of producing a national version of the EU *acquis* as one of the conditions for the EU accession, the Serbian Government has set up a system for drafting the national version of the EU *acquis*. The translation of the European Union's primary legislation is in its final stage. So far, over 50,000 pages of European regulations have been translated into Serbian. The Republic of Serbia is ready to put its current and future results in this area at the disposal of all interested parties in the region with a view to improving regional cooperation.

12. Serbia has been and remains fully committed to improving the cooperation in the Western Balkans, with regional cooperation as one of the key pillars of Serbia's foreign policy. Serbia has confirmed its commitment to regional cooperation by actively participating in the work of the numerous regional organisations and initiatives, such as: the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the Danube Commission, the

International Sava River Basin Commission, the Tisza Group, Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), the Southeast European Cooperation Initiative (SECI), the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Southeast European Law Enforcement Centre (SELEC), the Southeast Europe Police Chiefs Association (SEPCA), the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECF), the Central European Initiative (CEI), the Brdo Process and the Regional Rural Development Standing Group in South Eastern Europe (SWG RRD). Serbia is also actively participating in about fifty regional initiatives, which, although autonomous, are linked to the Regional Cooperation Council. Signing the CEFTA 2006, the Energy Community Treaty and the European Common Aviation Area Agreement added to the strengthening of cooperation between the signatories.

13. Having regard to the geographical position of the Republic of Serbia, its accession to the EU will greatly contribute to connecting the Trans-European Transport and Energy infrastructure networks. Serbia is an important transport hub with Belgrade as a meeting point of the road, air, river and railway transport of the Southeast Europe. With Serbia's accession to the European Union the Danube will become, in its entirety, an EU inland waterway.

14. For the period of 2007-2013, under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the Republic of Serbia received various forms of financial assistance with the aim of implementing political and economic reforms, building institutional capacity, and strengthening cooperation and economic and social development. For the current financial period, Serbia has successfully managed the IPA funds. The assistance was well directed towards aiding the alignment of the Serbian legislation with the EU *acquis* in order to get closer to the accession negotiations with the EU. Serbia has successfully completed the programming of the IPA for the period 2007-2013 worth EUR1.5 billion. Its experience in the absorption of the IPA funds has been positive with the annual use of the IPA funds of 98%. The elements of the sectoral approach have been established and the transfer of responsibilities to the Serbian authorities for decentralised management of the IPA funds is expected.

The Republic of Serbia has accepted to use the IPA for gradual adjustment and establishment of the best European practices in the areas of strategic planning, good financial management and

creation and implementation of various investment programmes in the domestic system as the best way to prepare the Republic of Serbia for the participation in the EU Cohesion Policy. The EU Cohesion Policy is a specific example of solidarity among the EU Member States and an important driving force of their economic recovery and convergence. After the accession, along with the co-financing from the states, the EU Cohesion Policy has a very significant share in total public investment in a country and adds considerably to the economic strengthening and realisation of common European goals.

15. Unlike the previous EU candidates negotiating the EU accession, the Republic of Serbia is in a specific situation. In good faith and wishing to find sustainable and long-term solutions, and notwithstanding the complexity of the challenge it is facing, Serbia participates in a high-level dialogue with Pristina that is facilitated by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton.

Since 19 October 2012 when the first dialogues at the highest political level were held, there have been 20 meetings. The most significant achievement is the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations between Belgrade and Pristina, which was signed in Brussels on 19 April 2013.

With the facilitation of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Belgrade and Pristina also agreed on the implementation plan on 22 May 2013.

The application of the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalisation of Relations and the overall normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina largely depend on the results of local elections on Kosovo and Metohia and on the establishment of a Community of Serb Municipalities in accordance with the citizens' electoral will.

Fully understanding that the EU accession process and normalisation process should run parallel and support one another, Serbia will remain entirely committed to the continuation of the normalisation process and its dialogue with Pristina.

16. The rule of law, judicial independence and fighting corruption and organised crime, a comprehensive reform of the public sector, reinforcing the independence of key institutions, protection and strengthening the freedom of the media and respecting human and minority rights,

especially the rights of vulnerable social groups, is what the Republic of Serbia aims for. By adopting the judicial reform strategy, strategies to fight corruption and prevent and protect against discrimination (June 2013), strategic foundations for further strengthening of the rule of law were established, as well as guidelines to create plans, measures and activities that will translate strategically defined goals into concrete activities. Establishing high criteria and meeting them when it comes to the rule of law, as a precondition for the accession to the European Union, is a key objective of the Republic of Serbia that guarantees security and equality of all its citizens.

17. In the Republic of Serbia, there is a wide social and political consensus of all relevant political actors concerning its future membership in the European Union. The consensus is embodied in the *2004 Resolution of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia on the Accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union*. It was recently reaffirmed in the *Resolution of the National Assembly on the Role of the National Assembly and the Principles of Serbia's Accession Negotiations* in December 2013.

18. The Republic of Serbia fully shares the values of the European Union defined under Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and it fully accepts the goals of the European Union defined under Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union. The Republic of Serbia wants to be an active and a constructive Member State whose actions will contribute to the realisation of the goals and values that the EU is based upon.

19. Serbia's national and cultural identity is a part of the common European cultural heritage and the EU, based on the motto "United in diversity". The use of the Serbian language as one of the official languages of the European Union and the Cyrillic script as one of the official scripts of the European Union will add to the broadening of the cultural richness and develop diversity that the European Union rightfully fosters, and to the preservation of the national identity of the Serbian people and the Republic of Serbia as a future EU Member State. Serbia also fosters common European values. As a state which has over twenty national minorities in the population of its citizens, Serbia fully encourages the culture of respecting diversity, equality and partnership among states and advocates preservation of cultural identities, languages and traditions of all nations.

20. In the accession negotiations, the Republic of Serbia will strive to ensure that its political, economic and financial position as an EU Member State is proportionate to the EU Member States of the similar size.

21. The Republic of Serbia is well aware that the internal market is a cornerstone of the European Union. Serbia will continue to harmonise its legislation with the *acquis communautaire* with a view to removing obstacles to the free movement of goods, workers, services and capital.

22. In framework of the accession process, the most important objective of Serbia's economic policy is to strengthen the competitiveness of its economy with a view to strengthening the capacity to cope with the competitive pressure on the single market and reduction of unemployment by creating new job posts. Therefore, we expect that the outcome of the negotiations will provide conditions for the stable financial and macroeconomic environment and a competitive market economy with the strong industrial and agricultural sector.

23. Serbia will negotiate its accession to the EU bearing in mind the need to improve social and economic cohesion with a view of reducing the regional disparities and developing underdeveloped regions, which are also the objectives of the Union's Cohesion Policy.

24. The Republic of Serbia shares the objectives of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and will continue to take further steps to harmonise its monetary and fiscal policy with the policy of the European Union in order to reach the EMU goals. After meeting the Maastricht Criteria, Serbia will be ready to take part in the Economic and Monetary Union.

25. The Republic of Serbia accepts the EU *acquis* in the area of justice, freedom and security. In this context, the Republic of Serbia intends to fully contribute to the efforts of the EU in fighting organised crime, drug trafficking, money laundering, illegal migrations and illegal employment. We are aware that until the accession to the EU of other countries of the Western Balkans the Republic of Serbia will make part of the external border of the European Union, and we are ready to provide the efficient functioning of that border.

26. The Republic of Serbia shares the goals of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. It is dedicated to intensive cooperation with the EU and it actively

contributes to its implementation. Serbia's contribution in the field of foreign and security policy of the EU reflects in supporting declarations and other international acts of the EU in this area.

27. Through its participation in the missions under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, the Republic of Serbia contributes to the international peace and security and to promoting the stability in the crisis areas. Serbia and the EU entered into two important agreements in 2011: an agreement on Serbia's participation in the EU missions and an agreement on the exchange of classified data with the EU institutions (both entered into force on 1 August 2012). These agreements allow for the engagement of our military and civilian representatives in the EU operations and for the exchange of classified data with the EU institutions.

Serbia is currently involved in the EU missions in Somalia, Uganda and in the naval Operation ATALANTA, and it will soon join the EU mission in Mali. On 13 December 2013, Serbia signed the Administrative Arrangement with the European Defence Agency (EDA) that enables closer cooperation with the EU in the area of defence industry by including the Serbian Ministry of Defence in the EDA projects and programmes.

28. The aim of the accession negotiations is the membership of the Republic of Serbia in the European Union with all the rights and obligations stemming from the membership. We expect the negotiations to run smoothly and in good faith, and its results to be mutually beneficial for both Serbia and the EU. We also expect that Serbia's accession to the European Union will protect the vital interests of its citizens.

29. The Republic of Serbia has a favourable starting position in the accession negotiations bearing in mind that it has started organised approximation of its legislation with the EU *acquis* as far back as 2004. Meeting its IA and SSA obligations, implementing the 2008-2012 National Program for Integration of the Republic of Serbia into the European Union and the 2013-2016 National Programme for the Adoption of the EU *acquis*, Serbia has largely aligned its legislation with the EU *acquis*.

30. Over the course of the accession negotiations Serbia will ask for transition periods for those sectors where, at the moment of its accession to the European Union, full approximation and implementation of obligations pertaining to the EU membership will not be possible. These

periods will be of limited duration and scope and they will be accompanied by plans with clearly defined phases for the fulfilment of membership obligations.

31. Fully understanding the new methodology of conducting accession negotiations laid down in Chapters 23, 24 и 35, and the importance of these chapters for the dynamics of negotiations, the Republic of Serbia will pay special attention to the approximation with the *acquis* and international standards, and to the application of the agreements reached in the following areas:

1) Agriculture and rural development

Serbia's strategic goal in the field of agriculture is to increase the competitiveness of agricultural production for Serbian agriculture so that it makes a transition from being a base of raw-materials to being a modern sector producing high-quality agricultural and food products that will find their place on the European market and be recognised for their quality and geographical origin. We will strive for the results of negotiations to bring the same benefits for our farmers as those enjoyed by the farmers in other Member States participating in the Common Agricultural Policy. At the same time, we will work on capacity building at all levels of decision-making and implementation of the Union's Common Agricultural Policy to be an equal partner in its creation and implementation.

2) Environmental protection and climate change

Environmental protection is acknowledged as one of the most demanding and the most complex chapters when it comes to approximation of legislation, investments needed and adopting technologies necessary to reach EU standards. In addition to the alignment of national legislation in this area with the EU standards, setting up and enforcement of the institutional system, when it comes to the infrastructure in the field of environment the priorities will be to establish the system of waste management, improve air quality, water management and water protection, nature protection, industrial pollution prevention and control and chemicals management. Among priorities in this area are also activities concerning the fight against climate change.

3) Energy

The Draft Energy Sector Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia by 2025 with Projections by 2030, adopted on 3 January 2014, introduces new priorities and development directions of the energy policy such as to ensure energy safety and develop the energy market, and envisages an overall transition to sustainable energy. Strategic directions of the Serbian energy sector development are reflected in the use of own resources, especially renewable sources of energy, enhanced energy efficiency, establishment of a budget fund for energy efficiency, launching of big infrastructure projects and opening the market of electric energy and gas.

#### 4) Cohesion policy

Chapter 22, Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments, is essentially a country's development policy after joining the EU (the so-called Cohesion Policy) implemented with the help of the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund. Fully understanding the nature of the requirements of the Union's Cohesion Policy, preparations for this chapter will be intensive and complex and directed towards the establishment of appropriate institutional framework, strategic planning, public procurement, financial control. Successful programming of IPA 2007-2013 and a high level of absorption of funds as well as the expected transfer of responsibilities for the management of IPA funds demonstrate that Serbia is preparing well for Chapter 22. Republic of Serbia is also committed to better and constant building of the institutional and programme framework necessary for the efficient management of the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund, which will require intensive and committed cooperation with the EU.

#### 5) Industry

The main strategic direction in this area focuses on the corporatisation of management of public enterprises and continued restructuring and privatisation process. In order to create a safe, stable and efficient business environment and establish a legal framework for investment, a continued process of harmonisation with the EU standards in this area is required. The emphasis will be on alleviating the levy on personal income and on creating favourable business conditions, primarily for small and medium enterprises.

## 6) Transport

The Republic of Serbia follows the Transport Policy of the EU and is preparing for an overall improvement of its transport market operation by removing the main transport barriers, improving safety and protecting the environment. Therefore, Serbia's strategic direction in this area focuses on the liberalisation of rail transport market, creation of the quality surrounding for road operators and general enhancement of the multimodal transport capacity. Republic of Serbia will continue to realise projects and objectives defined under the General Master Plan for Transport in Serbia, which is in line with the White Paper on European transport, with a view to making the main transport axes in Serbia part of the Trans-European Transport Network.

32. Endorsing the 2003 Thessaloniki conclusions of the European Council, the Republic of Serbia fully accepts and supports the principle of individual progress as a basis of the accession process.

The Republic of Serbia is aware that the duration of the negotiations will largely depend on its readiness to fully respect the EU membership obligations and therefore intends to be fully prepared to become the member of the European Union.

In the European Commission's opinion of 2011 it is stated that Serbia has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the political criteria concerning the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of the rights of minorities, as well as the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Process, stating that Serbia's constitutional, legislative and institutional framework generally corresponds to European and international standards. Commission stated that Serbia will be in a position to take on the obligations of membership in the medium term (i.e. five years) in nearly all fields of *acquis*, provided that the approximation process continues and that further efforts are made to ensure the implementation and enforcement of legislation.

33. Considering all of the above, our aim is for the Republic of Serbia to be fully prepared to take on the obligations of the EU membership by the end of 2018 in order to become the EU Member State at the beginning of the next EU budgetary period.

34. The accession negotiations and Serbia's progress in this process will be regularly monitored by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, as defined in the *Resolution of the National Assembly on the Role of the National Assembly and the Principles of Serbia's Accession Negotiations* of 2013. Civil society organisations will have a special role in the accession negotiations. In this way the process will get full legitimacy and it will become the ownership of all citizens of the Republic of Serbia.

35. Upon the signing of the Accession Treaty between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union, the final decision on the accession of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union will be made by the citizens of the Republic of Serbia at the referendum.

36. We believe that the accession negotiations that we are opening today are of historic importance for the relations between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union, and that the enlargement process itself is of utmost importance for the EU Member States as well as for Serbia.