

Opening remarks by Commissioner Štefan Füle

Dear President, dear Prime Minister, dear Ministers, honourable members of Parliament, dear friends,

It is a great pleasure for me to address you today on the occasion of this conference organised by the National Council for European Integration on Montenegro's EU integration process.

Last December, upon a proposal by the European Commission, the European Council decided to grant candidate status to Montenegro. This was an acknowledgement of progress already achieved towards the fulfilment of the criteria for EU membership.

Such progress was possible thanks to the commitment and determination of Montenegro, the work and the results achieved and of course the outcome of the consensus which exists among both the political parties and the Montenegrin people.

However, candidate status also brought new responsibilities and obligations. The Commission Opinion set out for Montenegro seven key priorities which need to be addressed to move to the next stage of European integration. I am positively impressed by the increasingly high commitment and efforts of the government and the parliament to address the shortcomings identified in the Opinion and in particular the key priorities. Today's meeting is another sign of your commitment.

The Commission follows very closely the efforts undertaken by Montenegro. I had the opportunity to witness myself the commitment and ongoing efforts during the visit of President Barroso to Montenegro on 8 April. I would like to commend the overall inclusive approach and the quality of the dialogue.

However, there is still significant work ahead. The Commission will continue to remain engaged with you through policy dialogue and technical assistance. I would briefly like to set out the main challenges covered by the 7 key priorities.

[Elections-Parliament]

As regards the law on elections I would like to commend the work done by all political parties and the efforts to find a compromise accepted by all. It is important that efforts are made to ensure a broad acceptance of this law by the political forces and its smooth implementation should be ensured. The Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR gave a positive assessment to the draft; it needs now to be adopted and smoothly implemented. Election issues are at the centre of democratic governance and they have to be addressed with special attention.

As I said during my speech to the Parliament of Montenegro last November, I believe that the Parliament of Montenegro has a crucial role to play in the process of European integration. It is a legislator and controller of the executive, and the place where political consensus on key choices for the country is forged.

The achievements of the Parliament so far are impressive. I am impressed by your commitment to reform. However, we do need also to see concrete steps to strengthen the parliament's capacity and its oversight role.

[Public administration]

Another key priority is related to public administration. Work has been ongoing for some time regarding this area. Such work is crucial: it is crucial for the impartiality and the efficiency of the action of the administration. It is crucial for your European integration efforts. I expect that in the next two months the government will propose and the Parliament will adopt a civil servants law in line with the European standards and introducing the principles of merit-based recruitment and professionalism.

The government adopted recently a strategy in this area which contains a number of important commitments. It is important that all activities and measures are coherent in view of strengthening the de-politicisation and professionalism of the administration in line with European standards but also its efficiency and impartiality in view of strengthening the administrative capacity in all areas covered by the EU acquis.

[Rule of law]

As regards rule of law, I would start with a positive word on the work done by DPM Markovic. It is true that many things are still in the pipeline and need to be finally approved. But if this happens, the step forward is magnificent. And his work and commitment are

really remarkable. In 2006 the European Union Member States renewed their consensus on enlargement. One essential element of this renewed consensus is the importance attached to the rule of law.

Related reforms have to take place early enough in the process of European integration in order to ensure that basic criteria are fulfilled.

This is a key priority not just in the context of European integration but for the daily lives of each and every citizen of Montenegro.

As regards the judiciary I have taken note of your commitment to reshuffle judicial institutions by amending both the constitutional and the sub-constitutional framework. I would like to underline that it is important to seek actively the right model which provides for the independence of the judiciary but also for appropriate checks and balances.

Recruitment and career development of judges and prosecutors should be merit-based and de-politicised. For its part the judiciary must demonstrate that it applies and enforces the law in an efficient independent manner.

The timing of the final definition and adoption of the above reforms is challenging but I am sure you can manage to achieve it. We are in close coordination with the Venice Commission to assist you in this.

[Anti-corruption and fight against organised crime]

I understand that a number of key deliverables on anti-corruption are under preparation. It is important to pass the legislation and to find the right institutional framework. The law on conflict of interest needs to be substantially beefed up to ensure that its scope covers all situations of conflict of interest and also that appropriate checks and sanctions are introduced. Furthermore a new law on financing of political parties is needed in order to ensure transparency and efficient controls over party finances. The laws to be adopted have to be solid and recommendations of GRECO from December 2010 need to be thoroughly followed. Financial investigations have to be thoroughly and systematically done in all major corruption cases. The most important issue of course, also in this area, is implementation, what we call the track record, including for high-level corruption cases.

The same goes for the fight against organised crime. I understand that you are preparing or finalising key deliverables including instruments used by the police and the investigators.

I suggest that you make full use of existing and foreseen tools to build up your track record. Coordination between law enforcement bodies needs to be strengthened. Investigations need to be proactive and thorough. No culture of impunity should prevail in a country aspiring for EU membership.

[Media and civil society]

Freedom of expression and of media is a critical issue in many enlargement countries. This is why we organised a conference in the beginning of May in Brussels. We are very attached to freedom of expression. It plays a key role in the checks and balances in any democratic society.

The measures announced in Montenegro go to the right direction. Defamation trials should not be used to put pressure against free speech neither against investigative journalism. The jurisprudence of the European Court needs to be followed. The mindset of the society has to change and the impunity against attack to journalists must come to an end.

But media have responsibilities as well: we need to ensure that they apply high standards when reporting – therefore media self-regulation is also required.

As regards the civil society, I have noticed a positive change of climate – it is now important to ensure sustainability of progress achieved.

[Anti-discrimination – displaced persons]

Anti-discrimination is an important EU policy and we expect measures foreseen in the government's plan to be fully implemented. Whatever the form of discrimination, conditions for implementation need to be in place including the adoption of the amendments to the ombudsman law in line with the Venice Commission recommendations and the adoption by the Parliament of the law on prohibition of discrimination of persons with disabilities. Anti-discrimination is a responsibility of the whole

society. It requires both a change of the mindset, and sound efforts by the Government. I am notably concerned with the difficult situation faced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people, persons with disabilities and Roma. I was pleased to hear that the seminar dedicated to Roma at the end of April led to agreed conclusions.

Dear friends,

Montenegro is at a crucial stage. Convincing results are needed in order to be able to move to the next stage of European integration.

In this process, all actors within Montenegrin society are needed. I welcome the recently enhanced dialogue with the civil society. In addition, the private sector should play its vital role, strengthening economic stability and paving the way for further socio-economic development. The state could further enhance its relationship with both the civil society and the private sector, based on trust and transparency.

I note with satisfaction that the country is moving in the right direction. Do not slow down, on the contrary, the closer you get to the arrival, the faster the pace. However, allow me to stress once more that Montenegro needs to strengthen its administrative capacity including in view of managing EU funds.

As regards the next steps, the Commission applies strict and rigorous conditionality. But once a country delivers we will acknowledge it. The future of Montenegro is in your own hands. The Commission stands ready to support Montenegro at every stage of the enlargement process.

I am positive that Montenegro, with its constructive, open and inclusive approach, but most importantly with the energy of its people and the solid political consensus which already exists, will make good progress on its European path, and become an example to follow in the region.