

Opening remarks by Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the meeting with Belgrade University faculty and students

5 December 2016

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of the academic and civil society communities, dear students,

I am delighted to be back in Belgrade and particularly happy to meet you in the prestigious premises of Belgrade University.

During my last visit, just three months ago, I met young successful Serbian entrepreneurs and we discussed the importance of the economy for EU-Serbia relations. And I want to repeat what I said to them: the country's future and potential depends on its youth. You hold the key to Serbia's future and prosperity. How dynamic and prosperous your country will be depends on you. Your talents, skills and creativity are crucial for Serbia's growth and competitiveness.

EU invests in Serbia's education and future

That is why support for education is an essential part of our enlargement agenda. It is an investment in the young generation and in our joint future, because Serbia belongs to the EU family.

Just this morning together with Prime Minister Vučić, we signed an agreement which will see **EUR 80 million** being provided to support the **transformation of Serbia's public administration**, to make it more efficient and transparent and, thus, improve the quality and speed of the services delivered to the education sector amongst others.

I also visited the pavilion at the **botanical garden**. It has been renovated with support from the EU, which is good news for biology and agriculture students who now have a proper working environment.

Finally, I just **donated books** to the library of the Faculty of Law, so that professors and students can have access to top level academic literature.

These are part of the wider support of EUR 30 million we have provided to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development to **upgrade the infrastructure of almost 30 Faculties, not only in Belgrade but around the country**. And to put it in the wider context, these are part of the EUR 2 billion of support that the EU has provided to Serbia since 2007.

Next year, we also plan to invest **EUR 27 million in the Serbian education sector**.

Last year, almost 2,000 Serbian students and teachers were able to visit or study in the EU under the **Erasmus programme**.

Serbian academics and researchers are also well represented under the **Horizon 2020 programme**, which is strictly focused on supporting European research excellence. We want more EU students and researchers to come to Serbia. For this to happen, we will invest more in further promoting Serbia's attractiveness to leading EU academics and in establishing a Serbian Erasmus Agency.

Rule of law reforms foster a better future for all

Our support to the country is of course not limited to education. Because education alone is not enough to guarantee a better future with opportunities to find jobs close to their homes and their families.

In this respect, **rule of law reforms are equally important**. A rule of law system aligned with EU standards provides the legal certainty and predictability that strategic investors are looking for. At the same time, an efficient rule of law system also means equal opportunities and equal treatment for all, irrespective of gender, origin, religion, or ethnicity.

Finally, strengthening rule of law helps fight corruption, which is unfortunately perceived by many as particularly prevalent in the higher education sector. This is why we are putting so much emphasis on chapters 23 (Judiciary and fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, freedom and security) in our negotiations with Serbia. Because ultimately, and improved rule of law environment can foster a healthy environment for business which can translate into growth and jobs for all of you.

The right skills for the job

Of course, education is not only about knowledge alone. In particular **secondary education** is also about improving access for young people to the labour market by making sure that they acquire the right skills. We have been working together for years to upgrade and improve many **vocational training schools** so that they efficiently address market needs.

We are also paying a lot of attention to the acquisition of core skills in the **general education system**, such as ability to learn and listen, capacity to take initiative or to anticipate changes. One of the priorities of our sector budget support is to provide Serbian teachers with the necessary training to introduce these core skills in the classroom.

Education key to preserving peace and stability in the region

Education also has a key role to play when it comes to **preserving peace and stability** in the region. The accession process is based on reconciliation, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation.

It is only through constructive dialogue and mutual respect that open issues from the past can be resolved. The involvement and commitment of the youngest generation is key in this respect.

This is why countries in the region and a number of Member States have agreed to focus their actions under the **Berlin process** on contacts between young people in the region.

Serbia has already responded swiftly and agreed with Albania on the establishment of a youth cooperation office in Tirana which will facilitate youth exchanges in the region. This is a key development with a great potential, where Serbia has been a frontrunner.

Similarly, following the designation of **Novi Sad as the 2021 European Capital of Culture**, the organisers have proposed to liaise their capital of culture with culture providers from the region and from the European Union. As these ideas are coming from the same people who prepare the EXIT summer festival every year, I have no doubt that the European Capital of Culture will be a big success for Novi Sad and for the region. All the more so as Novi Sad will also be the European Youth Capital in 2019.

Looking forward to progress in negotiations

Let me conclude by referring to my core business – EU accession negotiations. My visit today confirmed the Commission's assessment that Serbia is sufficiently prepared in the key research and education sectors.

And I am confident that Member States will very soon agree unanimously to make progress on **chapters 25 (science and research) and 26 (education and culture)** of the negotiations.

I am now looking forward to our debate and to your questions.

Thank you.