

Speech of Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the ceremony of opening of the new Zezelj bridge

Novi Sad, 1 September 2018-09-01

*Check against delivery!*

Dear Mr. President, dear Aleksandar,

Dear Mrs. Prime Minister,

Dear Ministers,

Dear President Mirovic,

Dear representatives of the Autonomous province of Vojvodina,

Dear citizens of Novi Sad,

Respected Journalists and dear guests,

I cannot think of a better symbol than a bridge to best describe the European Union integration process.

Integration means bridge building: between citizens, between nations, between the past and the future.

This beautiful bridge connects your town with the other side of the river, but also your region and your country with your neighbors and the European Union.

President Vučić and I are here today together *not only* to inaugurate a piece of infrastructure. This bridge is part of your road to Europe. It is symbolic of the European future of Serbia. Today, we stand side by side as partners in a common project; Serbia

is progressing on its chosen path to EU accession with our full support. We are building bridges *with* you, not just *for* you.

The practical benefits this bridge will bring to Novi Sad cannot be underestimated. It will have a real impact on the quality of life of citizens: Traffic flows will improve, reducing travel times and pollution at the same time.

Moreover the bridge is a crucial link of the Trans-European network. It will enable navigation along the Novi Sad section of the Danube and restore full road and rail traffic across the Danube in Novi Sad, as part of the Belgrade-Subotica-Budapest segment of the strategic EU transport "Corridor ten".

In other words: The grant of 35 million Euro the European Union has provided for this bridge, out of the total cost of 54 million, is European money well spent. It is an investment in our shared future.

But the financing of this bridge is only a small proportion of European Union assistance made available to Serbia. Since 2007 we have provided some 2.2 billion Euros in grants. This figure will reach 3 billion by 2020.

In case there are any doubts, let me be clear: these are *not loans*, with all sorts of strings attached, but non-repayable *grants* that we provide to Serbia to improve the quality of life of its citizens in areas such as education, rights for consumers, food safety, a cleaner environment and infrastructure, protection of children's rights and to support farmers.

The European Union is by far the biggest donor for Serbia. Precisely *because* we want you to come closer and join our family of nations!

There are many opportunities for the people of Serbia in the EU integration process. They are real and they can be seen already. This bridge is just one example but also the many other concrete projects around the country illustrate how Serbia's accession process will keep improving Serbian citizens' standards of living. European integration is not an abstract, academic question. It is about your prosperity, about a better way of life!

As I said at the beginning: integration is another word for building bridges. I am happy to keep building these bridges with you, in Serbia and across this region.

Thank you!