

Enlargement - Accession negotiations with Serbia

Fulfilment of the opening benchmark on Chapter 23, Judiciary and fundamental rights

Statement by Bulgaria

The European Union is founded on the principles of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These principles need to be complied with by all candidate countries.

As a consistent supporter of the European integration of the Western Balkans Bulgaria firmly believes that the European project would not be completed without Serbia joining the EU. Therefore in a spirit of good neighborliness, Bulgaria is giving its consent to the Opening benchmark assessment Report for Chapter 23.

Nonetheless, Bulgaria reiterates its position of principle on the issue of minority rights in Serbia by emphasizing the importance of practical implementation and adequate financing of the measures provided for under the AP23 and further elaborated in the dedicated action plan on national minorities, namely in the areas of education, use of language, and access to media and religious services in minority languages.

Likewise, as stated in the Resolution of the Committee of Ministers of the CoE on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Serbia should guarantee *“the effective participation of national minorities, including numerically smaller ones, in the electoral processes”*, address *“the under-representation of national minorities in public administration”*, and *“pursue efforts to create a multi-ethnic police force”*. Furthermore, in order to ensure equal treatment of all minorities, efforts should also be vested in eliminating the disparities in minority protection standards across Serbia by aligning standards with those applicable in AP “Vojvodina”.

Bulgaria considers the respect of minority rights and the respect of human rights generally as a universal value. The responsibility for minority protection lies with the State concerned and could not be regarded as a bilateral issue with any third country.

In consonance with the above, Bulgaria’s consent at future stages will be conditional upon the adoption and implementation of the expected reforms in the field of minority rights, including their adequate financing.

Notwithstanding its consent to the opening benchmark assessment report, Croatia underlines that this cannot be interpreted as its endorsement, in any form, of the Government of Serbia's strategic documents on processing of war crimes adopted on the basis of the Serbia's Action Plan for Chapter 23, as these are based on political and legal qualifications that continue to undermine the reconciliation and regional cooperation. These unacceptable qualifications also call into question Serbia's commitment to the implementation of its Action Plan for Chapter 23, which will be subject to monitoring and evaluation in the subsequent stages of the process.

Croatia will continue to follow closely the implementation of necessary measures in these and other policy fields under Chapter 23, as well as in the context of other relevant negotiation chapters throughout the accession process. Croatia remains committed to the continuation of the enlargement of the EU, based on the fulfilment of all necessary criteria.