

The Dialogue is an opportunity for both the Government and the Opposition to deliver for all Serbian citizens

Mr Vladimír BILČÍK, European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Serbia

Ms Tanja FAJON, Chair of the Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee

*Mr Bilčík and Ms Fajon will join Mr Eduard Kukan and Mr Knut Fleckenstein as facilitators of the Inter-Party Dialogue. The second dialogue on the conditions for holding of Elections is starting today in the Skupština. Mr Bilčík and Ms Fajon represent the two largest political families in the European Parliament - the European Peoples Party and the Socialist and Democrats respectively. They were recently appointed to the two most important positions vis-a-vis Serbia for the 9th Legislature of the European Parliament. Their engagement as Facilitators, follows the proposal of Mr McAllister, the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and is endorsed by the European Parliament's Conference of Presidents, demonstrating the highest level of commitment of the European Parliament to the Inter-Party Dialogue Process.*

We come from different political families in the European Parliament, but we both share a deep commitment to work for a democratic and pro-European Serbia.

Serbia is the largest country and economic leader in the Western Balkans. Its success is critical for the European perspective of the whole region, especially now after the European Council was not able to agree on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

Members of the European Parliament responded immediately, criticising the impasse in the Council, and adopted a resolution urging progress on membership and greater engagement in the Western Balkans, particularly focusing on the role of Parliaments as key democratic drivers for membership in the region.

We hope that all our partners in Serbia will remain fully engaged in the enlargement process, for which a well-functioning and strong Parliament is essential now more than ever.

We are here at the request of the overwhelming majority of Serbia's political forces to help facilitate dialogue between the government and the opposition and improve working conditions of the parliament as well as improving the conditions for holding parliamentary elections..

To make meaningful progress ahead of the elections both the Government and the Opposition need to engage with an open mind and constructive approach.

We are at the crucial half-way point in our proposed three rounds of dialogue and this is a moment where the European Parliament will be asking all parties to step-up their engagement to improve the conditions that will allow a fair and level playing field so that all Serbians can exercise their democratic rights.

To make it happen, the government must step-up on implementing the ODIHR recommendations from previous elections. According to our analysis, only 20 percent of the Government's commitments announced by the Working Group on elections in October have so far been implemented and a further 50 percent have not been implemented at all.

We expect the Government to implement all recommendations as a matter of urgency.

Priority must be given to initiatives to make election day run smoothly (like training for elections officials or greater accuracy and transparency in the voter list), and to ensure a level playing field for all political forces during the electoral campaign. People in Serbia should have confidence in the bodies which oversee the electoral process and all political actors taking part in the campaign should have fair access to, and coverage by, the public broadcasters and other media.

The opposition also has responsibilities to engage seriously through the dialogue with the government. The dialogue is a unique opportunity for the opposition to put forward timely, concrete and realistic proposals for improving the electoral conditions before the campaign period, taking into account best international practices.

In short, both government and opposition must engage seriously and agree new initiatives to improve the conditions, in particular equal access to the media (following the 12 November debate in the *Skupština*) and ensure that all parties can take part in the elections on a level playing field.

Time is of the essence and both the government and the opposition need to move beyond their initial positions in order to avoid missing this major opportunity. The clock is ticking and the last dialogue is foreseen just in one month's time.

As politicians, we fully understand and take very seriously the arguments of both the opposition and the government about the grave challenges they face. But our role is not to validate their positions or arbitrate between them. Any agreement can only come through the sincere engagement of all political actors to deliver on the expectations of the Serbian citizens for genuinely democratic and fair elections.

As Mr McAllister, the Chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee already stated in a recent article for Blic - "we firmly believe that parliaments are the natural place for a democratic debate. A democratic system cannot function properly without a strong parliament."

It is therefore important that all parties know that the European Parliament's commitment to facilitate dialogue will not end in December with the last of the three dialogues on the conditions for holding the Elections. The European Parliament also plans to continue facilitating dialogue after the elections and improve the working conditions in the *Skupština*.

We therefore hope that the newly elected Assembly will include all political forces committed to working with us constructively on the EU-reform agenda.

We both have the privilege of starting in our roles as Standing Rapporteur and Chair of the Delegation at the very beginning of the process. We hope that all political forces will work with us for Serbia's democracy and for Serbia's future in the EU.