



Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić on European integration and on the agreement with Pristina: Relations in the region have been the best since the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. I believe that the Serbs of KiM will understand the significance of the Brussels agreement.

Since the collapse of the former Yugoslavia, relations in the region have never been better than they are now. By this I mean the relationship of Serbia not only with all the neighboring countries, but also countries with which we do not share borders and which belong to this area. The new Serbian government, ever since it was formed, has provided countless evidence through concrete actions that it wants stronger ties with its neighbours.

This is how Serbian Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić replied when asked by "Novosti" whether, after the most recent steps taken by our state leaders with the aim of strengthening relations among neighbours and reconciliation, the process was on an ascending line. He recalled that Serbia signed a dozen agreements, and that the preparation of twenty more agreements was underway with everyone in the neighborhood.

Q: Which are the countries of the region that we have the best of relations with?

A: I met with all my colleagues from the region. I can't even keep track of how many times, with Vesna Pusic five times at least, with Zlatko Lagumdžija as well, we are in contact all the time, and I also have frequent communications with Poposki, Luksic, Erjavec ... We coordinate actions with our colleagues from Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Italy, Hungary. We exchange views on all issues without reservation. I paid a visit to most of my colleagues in the neighborhood, and many of them visited me. Therefore, I recall that there are no flashpoints in the region, and that we are resolutely striving to deal with all the outstanding ones. I am sure that no one in our region has any doubts that the relations are getting better.

Q: INVALUABLE SUPPORT BY MOSCOW * In May, Presidents of Serbia and Russia will sign a Strategic Partnership Agreement. What does this agreement mean for our country?

A: There is no need to explain the depth, strength, diversity and richness of our relations with the Russian people. By signing the strategic agreement soon, Presidents Putin and Nikolic will symbolically mark what has characterized and directed present-day and future relations between the two countries. This is also the way Serbia and Russia are trying to answer all possible questions regarding our actual relations. It is difficult to sum up what Russia has been

doing of late to support us. Let us just recall the loans we have been granted by them for the railway and our budget, and also an immeasurable importance of the support given to our territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Q: Do you expect that the leadership of other countries show good will to cooperate with Serbia and apologize to it for the events in the past?

A: Needless to say that it would mean a great deal to the reconciliation process if the political leaders of some neighbouring countries paid tribute to the innocent Serbian victims of the past wars, which, unfortunately, were great many. Repentance is genuine and touches the heart most swiftly, if it is mutual. I think that there are more and more signs in support of the recognition of the fact that the Serbs, too, were the victims of the civil wars of the 1990s.

Q: Having reached an agreement with Pristina in Brussels, what are the chances for Serbia getting the date for opening accession negotiations with the EU in June?

A: The implementation of the Brussels agreement with Pristina is what matters the most at this time. It seems that our reforms in other walks of life have been, in large measure, well assessed. However, it should be understood that the implementation of the Brussels agreement is not something that is done by saying the magic words, but it is a very complex and politically highly risky undertaking. It is time-consuming and requires level-headedness, visionary and unwavering belief that this is something which is the best for our people.

Q: For the Kosovo Serbs the agreement is unacceptable and they refuse to implement it...

A: I am sure that, this time again, the Serbs of Kosovo will withstand all the temptations, stay in their homes, be stronger and decide their own fate. I am convinced that they will understand that the Brussels agreement means a transition to a better and safer life in which they will continue to enjoy the support of our state.

Q: What will be the strategy of Belgrade if we do not make the next step towards the EU, in June? Will Serbia continue to work on internal reforms and European integration or will there be a U-turn in foreign policy?

A: If we do not get the date to start negotiations with the EU on our full membership, be sure that we will stay in Europe - whether we like it or not. And as we are already in Europe, where under EU sponsorship, many sectors of the economy are being standardized for a better and more efficient life, and where for everything else, it is normal that we continue with our internal reforms for our own sake and for the sake of our own improvement and advancement.