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Serbia's Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić said Belgrade will apply for EU membership before the end of the year, with the aim of joining within seven years. Speaking to us during his visit to the European Parliament on 5 November, the youthful Mr Jeremić (34) stressed his view that disagreements over Kosovo independence should be separated from negotiations over the EU. He also spoke of the cultural heritage and the strong relationship with Moscow that Serbia can bring to the Union.

When do you think Serbia will join the European Union?

It is very difficult to predict, but I think it will be in about five to seven years. For some Western Balkan countries EU accession is becoming imminent (Croatia is close to joining). It is also a political decision amongst existing EU members. Serbia has to make sure it gets there as soon as possible.

When are you going to table Serbia's application?

We have a very strong intention to apply before the end of this year. Our domestic debate, about which way we want to go politically, is already over. We had two different polls last year with Presidential and Parliamentary elections and both answered "yes" to an EU future.

The Serbian people have not always been favourable towards the EU, what is the level of support at present?

At the end of last year and the start of this one support reached a high of 85%. Polls now show that 70% of the population is favourable towards membership of EU.

Did opinion change when many EU countries recognised Kosovo (which was part of Serbia) in 2008?

Well, it is something that isn't adding to the support, it is not positive. We have managed to compartmentalise this issue with our European partners who have recognised Kosovo. We are maintaining strict separation between EU integration and determining the future status of Kosovo. This is the official policy of Serbia and the official policy of the EU. It is very important we keep it this way.

What can Serbia contribute to the EU?

The biggest contribution is peace and stability. Other contributions would include our historical and cultural legacy. Our customs would also add to the diversity in the EU.

It's very difficult to imagine a stable, peaceful and prosperous part of Europe that has a big black hole right in it. I am an optimist and I hope the entire Western Balkans is going to accede to the EU in this generation.

Would you describe Serbia as an anchor of stability or as a bridge between Europe and Russia?

In the sense of peace and stability in the Balkans it is definitely an anchor. If you look at the map physically, you would definitely know where to put that anchor.

As for Russia, we have a historical relation which goes back centuries. We have the same alphabet, we share the same faith. We are culturally very close, we have been partners and allies in world conflicts and today Russia is also an important supporter when it comes to our diplomatic efforts to defend our territory and sovereignty.

Russia also supports us when it comes to our wish to become a member state of the EU. So,

Russia is a good friend and Russia is always going to stay a good friend of Serbia. And I think one day when Serbia joins the EU, Serbia can help improve the understanding between Russia and the EU.

Visa free travel is a matter of weeks away. What benefits will it bring to Serbian citizens and particularly to the young generation?

It is going to be a great relief, like the falling of a huge boulder. It has been particularly frustrating for us in the former Yugoslavia because we used to travel freely everywhere in the world - both east and west. So that was really a time that lots of people remember and going back to that situation is going to bring a sigh of relief: "We are normal again".

This is especially important for the younger generation because they have grown up in an atmosphere of isolation, this new generation has never had a chance to see what Europe is about. We say that being an EU member is a great thing and these guys have to see what exactly that means.

You held talks with EP President Jerzy Buzek. How can the EP help Serbia in its European ambitious?

The European Parliament is going to play an increasingly important role in the life of Europe after the Lisbon Treaty. We are looking forward to working very closely with the EP. There are interesting times ahead.