

The process of joining the European Union, reaching EU standards, fulfilling the criteria, negotiating chapters - all these are concepts that scattered us last week from the front pages and social networks. The European Commission has published a long waited Progress Report on Serbia in the process of European integration, giving its assessment of how we have progressed on this path from the previous report, which was published in November 2016. In the sea of phrases and high-profile diplomats, the point was hidden - what does that mean for us? Why does the EU require some progress from us, how it measures it, and how far have we arrived?

Serbia is in the process of Euro Integration since 2001, and in 2008 a Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed between the European Union and its member states on one hand and Serbia on the other. Until the final goal - EU membership - we are adopting EU legal acts deployed in 35 chapters (of which we have so far opened 12, while we have temporarily closed 2). Among the negotiating chapters, Chapter 27 is - they say - the most expensive, most complicated, largest, and most demanding. They say - 10 billion euros. Or 15. And since it's like that - they say - we cannot deal with it seriously now, but we better solve some easier, more important and urgent issues. And we will consider Chapter 27 later on when we reach the goal.

What exactly this Chapter 27 stands for?

You are sitting by a river - you are fishing and besides the trout, you caught a plastic bottle and waste from a nearby slaughterhouse (because inspection supervision in Serbia is insufficient, and the implementation of the penal policy is poor). That is chapter 27. You are swimming on the local Ada bay where you go for a swim your entire life. A few days later you notice a swelling on your left leg. The doctor says - infection. You were exposed to a bacteria of a faecal origin (because in Serbia waste water is most often discharged directly into rivers, without purification). Do not swim on Ada bay anymore, where you swam your entire life. The water is too polluted. This is chapter 27.

It's December and you live in Valjevo, Užice, Pančevo or Lazarevac. Your child has asthma and for many times in a row this winter, you are in the doctor's waiting room. Reports say - polluted air, exceeds the upper limit values, it affects your child and you. This is chapter 27. Right next to your house, there is a building of a new road, and the forest that once was there is cut down. You do not know if and how it's going to affect your health, on water and air quality. Nobody asked you anything, and you could only see the notice of this construction if you went to the municipal notice board. Where, usually, you never have the need to go. This is chapter 27.

How far have we arrived, what kind of assessment did we receive from the EU when it

comes to the environment? According to the Report - we have not made much progress since 2016. Somehow, we are stuck in the assessment that we have reached “a certain level of preparedness” in this area. What does it mean? It means that we are not ready to fully transfer our legal system in the field of environmental protection or to apply this system at all.

First of all, we have not provided a stable system of financing the environmental protection. The Green Fund, which was supposed to start operating in early 2017, still doesn't function in April 2018. This means that all those works on landfill treatment, wastewater treatment, protection of species and habitats, and the improvement of the air quality that are ahead of us - for which finance is needed - are stagnating. Or they are in a very slow process and limited scope. This is a main recommendation from the European based on the previous report, which is being repeated this year. We did not make progress.

Chapter 27 also regulates the manner in which environmental decisions are taken and ensures participation by all stakeholders in this process. Public hearings continue to be conducted sporadically and their quality depends on the competence and intention of the administrative body that conducts the discussion, especially at the local level. Laws that regulate criminal offenses and liability for environmental damage have not yet been brought. We did not make much progress.

The European Commission received air quality reports that show an alarming level of pollution in some cities in Serbia. Alarming. An unusually strong word for a commonly mild diplomatic dictionary. Furthermore, the air quality monitoring system is unreliable. Alarming. We did not make much progress.

Waste management is assessed by the Commission with almost the same words. Still in the early stages of implementation. From 2016 - until today. Which means - we still have landfilling as the dominant waste management method, we still have a large number of dumpsites and a low percentage of waste that we recycle. We did not make much progress. In the area of water management, besides the adoption of the Water Management Strategy, also - you are guessing - we have not made much progress. In environmental protection we stayed in one place. Industrial pollution and risk management also did not go much further than the previous areas. The report says - the harmonization of regulations is at an early stage. Let's not even speak about the application of regulations. We did not make much progress.

At the end, in the case of climate change, we have made visible progress. We ratified the Paris Agreement, completed the draft law on climate change which should regulate the method of monitoring and reporting the level of emissions of greenhouse gas effect. The

strategy for fighting the climate change with the action plan is in the final stages of development. We submitted the Second National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Finally progress, right? Until we read the continuation saying that the accuracy of the data we have presented has to be improved. Reading between the lines - we did not really say the truth. And we did not make much progress.

Chapter 27 is nothing but the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the quality of life we live in health. Or in sickness. And the fact that it will cost us so much is that, as a state, for decades, we have behaved towards the environment as consumer goods that has no economic value. Now it's time to repair the damage that we created ourselves. We need to ask the right question - how much does it cost if we do not invest in environmental protection? How much do the health consequences of air pollution cost? How much does climate change cost? How much did the flood cost? A lot? And does our health and our future cost more than or equal to those 10 billion? European Union standards require a healthy environment for their citizens. The same thing should be for us - the citizens of Serbia - whether we are part of the EU or not. And we cannot accept a situation in which we have not made much progress.