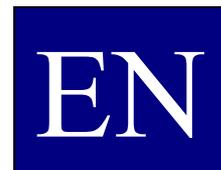




**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Brussels, 11 May 2010  
9696/10 (Presse 117)

**SECOND MEETING OF THE  
STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION COUNCIL  
BETWEEN ALBANIA AND THE EU  
Brussels, 11 May 2010**

**Joint Press Release**

The Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) between Albania and the European Union held its second meeting on 11 May 2010. The meeting was chaired by Mr Ilir Meta, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania. The EU delegation was led, on behalf of the High Representative, by State Secretary Diego Lopez Garrido, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Spain and Commissioner Štefan Füle represented the European Commission.

**P R E S S**

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The SA Council noted the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 7 December 2009, where the Council noted that the 2009 parliamentary elections met most international standards but some shortcomings remained and the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations needed to be followed up. It noted that strengthening the rule of law and notably the fight against organised crime and corruption, as well as the proper functioning of state institutions, especially the independence of the judiciary, remained urgent challenges for Albania. The Council also recalled that administrative and enforcement capacity required further strengthening, and independence of the administration needed to be ensured. It noted that more efforts should be made to improve conditions for media freedom. The Council noted that Albania had made progress in fulfilling the benchmarks set in the framework of the visa liberalisation dialogue. The Council encouraged Albania to continue its constructive role in the stability of the region. The EU also called on all political parties in Albania to pursue a constructive political dialogue, including in parliament.

The SA Council reviewed developments related to the political criteria. The SA Council stressed the importance of a constructive political dialogue between major political parties and actors, which is a key priority of the European Partnership. The EU underlined the importance for all sides to actively cooperate to re-establish uninterrupted full parliamentary activity involving the ruling majority and the opposition. In democratic societies, Parliament is the place for dialogue and the resolution of differences. The EU called on the Albanian political leaders to take into account the possible consequences of the political deadlock for Albania's EU integration path. In the period leading to the preparation of the opinion on Albania's application for EU membership, a fully functioning parliament is essential for demonstrating Albania's democratic maturity and for ensuring progress on key reforms. The EU will continue to follow future developments with a particular attention on progress as regards the political criteria. The EU stressed that a solution to the current political stalemate should be based on two fundamental democratic principles, which are the respect for the constitution and transparency.

The SA Council recalled the submission of the application by Albania on 28 April 2009 and welcomed the submission to the European Commission, on 14 April 2010, of the answers to its questionnaire with a view to enabling the Commission to prepare its opinion on Albania's application for membership to the European Union. This marks an important step on Albania's European integration path. The SA Council was informed of Albania's primary objective and strong commitment to advance in the EU integration process by attaining candidate status.

The SA Council welcomed very good progress made by Albania in meeting the benchmarks of the road map for visa liberalisation. The SA Council noted Albania's aspiration for a visa free travel regime for its citizens as soon as possible. The SA Council welcomed the awareness campaign by the Government informing the citizens about their rights and obligations under the visa free regime.

The SA Council also reviewed progress on judicial reform, which is a key European Partnership priority, stressing the importance of the rule of law and independence of the judiciary as core aspects of the political criteria for EU accession. The EU stressed the importance of adopting a comprehensive reform strategy for the judiciary and called on Albania to safeguard and respect the independence, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary, and in particular the Constitutional Court and of judges and prosecutors. The SA Council was informed of the adoption of the law on the private bailiff service and of amendments to the Law on General Prosecutor's Office, while the law on the High Council of Justice, the National Judicial Conference Law, the Law on Judicial Administration and the Law on Administrative Courts remain to be adopted.

In relation to the fight against corruption, which is a key European Partnership priority, the SA Council noted the recent adoption of the integrated Anti-Corruption Action Plan for 2010. The EU called for rigorous implementation of the Action Plan and the underlying anti-corruption strategy. It underlined the importance of establishing a convincing track record of investigations and convictions free from political interference. The SA Council noted good progress with regard to the work of Joint Investigation Units on economic crime and corruption, with an increased number of corruption cases being investigated, including cases involving judges and police and custom officers. The EU expressed the view that corruption remains widespread and constitutes a particularly serious problem in many areas including in relation to party funding, in the health sector and others. The SA Council noted continuing efforts and steps by the Albanian Government to fight corruption. The SA Council was informed of the need to achieve further progress in implementing GRECO recommendations.

The EU pointed out that unresolved property issues have undermined efforts to develop a functional land market and kept foreign investment below potential. Improving legal certainty is crucial for further enhancing the business climate and addressing risks of corruption.

With regard to freedom of expression, the EU recalled the importance of respecting media freedom and independence and of ensuring an improvement of the overall climate for the media. Media freedom is a fundamental pillar of good governance and accountability.

The SA Council was informed on the efforts made and called for further progress with regard to the implementation of the adopted strategy for the public administration and stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining a stable, professional and merit-based civil service.

The SA Council noted that on human rights and the protection of minorities the legislative framework is mostly in place. The SA Council welcomed the appointment of the Commissioner following the adoption of the law on Protection from Discrimination, which regulates the implementation of and respect for the principle of equality and non discrimination. The SA Council welcomed the adoption of the Roma Decade Action Plan, for which sufficient resources will be necessary to ensure success now that it is being implemented. The SA Council welcomed the decision to conduct the Population and Housing Census, which is planned for 2011, ensuring full respect of the principle of self-identification. It will collect updated statistical data on persons belonging to all minorities, in accordance with the EU and international standards. This should be a step forward in order to further develop and implement appropriate policies regarding persons belonging to minorities.

Concerning gender equality the EU noted that the implementation of the existing legal framework and policies is insufficient. It encouraged Albania to considerably strengthen the protection of women against all forms of violence.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted that Albania has moved closer to a functioning market economy but observes shortcomings on real estate registration and orderly market exit procedures. Economic growth, stability and predictability have been maintained during 2009 despite the global crisis but macroeconomic stability and fiscal discipline need to be ensured. The SA Council noted progress made towards enabling the Albanian economy to cope with competitive pressure within the EU by implementing its privatisation agenda and upgrading the transport and energy infrastructure in the country, while increasing competition in the telecommunication sector.

The SA Council noted that the EU welcomed the progress made by Albania in aligning its legislation and capacity with European standards and in implementing Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) commitments. In this regard, the EU welcomed the progress made in areas such as free movement of goods, competition, energy, and SME policy, whilst encouraging Albania to step up efforts in other areas, such as audiovisual policy, transport and intellectual property rights where progress has been limited. The SA Council welcomed the progress on some sectoral policies and Albania took note of the information by the European Union regarding required further efforts, including as regards improving administrative capacity in sectoral policies.

In the field of justice, freedom and security, the SA Council welcomed progress made in several areas, especially in the context of visa liberalisation dialogue, including the fight against organized crime, but called for more efforts to consolidate reforms, including through further implementation of new and existing legislation.

The SA Council reviewed the implementation of the SAA, noting that overall Albania has been implementing well the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and has contributed to the smooth functioning of the various joint institutions. In particular, the SA Council welcomed the progress achieved in aligning with the SAA provisions in the field of competition, as well as the alignment with the SAA on the taxation of imported printed materials. Further efforts are needed to implement the commitments of the SAA in the field of electronic communications and networks.

Following the political decision of the European Council in Thessaloniki in June 2003, a Framework Agreement opening the door to the country's participation in Community Programmes entered into force in August 2005. CARDS and IPA funds are used to meet a part of the costs for the participation in the programmes. The EU welcomed the participation of Albania in the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for research, technological development; in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation component of the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme; and in the Europe for Citizens Programme.

Since the beginning of 2004, as part of the Thessaloniki agenda, Albania is invited to align with Common positions, declarations etc on a regular basis in order to co-ordinate its foreign and security policy with the EU. The SA Council took note of the alignment policy taken by Albania to that end.

The SA Council exchanged views on the developments in the Western Balkans region and commended Albania's constructive role in fostering regional stability and good neighbourly relations with other Western Balkan countries. The SA Council welcomed the continued active participation of Albania in regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe, such as the South East European Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA).