

Seventh meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between Albania and the EU

The Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) between Albania and the European Union held its seventh meeting on 18 May 2015. The meeting was chaired by Mr Edgars Rinkēvičs, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, on behalf of High Representative / Vice President Federica Mogherini. The Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Mr Johannes Hahn, represented the European Commission. The Albanian delegation was led by Mr Ditmir Bushati, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

This being the first SA Council following the European Council decision of 27 June 2014 to grant Albania the status of EU candidate country, the SA Council welcomed this very important milestone in the process of EU integration of Albania. This entails a strengthening of EU-Albania relations.

The SA Council noted that the Commission 2014 Progress Report on Albania concluded that the country made further progress towards meeting the political criteria for membership, since the country adopted key judicial and public administration reform measures and took further steps in the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as on human rights matters.

The SA Council noted the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 16 December 2014, which recognised Albania's commitment in the fight against organised crime, with intensified law enforcement activities resulting notably in increased amount of drug seizures, as well as in advancing judicial reform. The SA Council reiterated that the opening of accession negotiations will be considered by the European Council, in line with established practice, once the Commission has assessed that Albania has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. Albania expressed the hope that the decision to open the accession negotiations will be made through a credible and predictable process, on the basis of the country's progress in the fulfilment of the five key priorities. The EU noted that some challenges still lie ahead. It underlined that Albania needs to intensify its reforms efforts, particularly in relation to the five Key Priorities, notably in the rule of law areas. The EU also encouraged Albania to consolidate achievements of the reforms already undertaken and to deliver a sustained implementation.

The SA Council recalled that the EU remains fully committed to the EU integration of Albania and will continue to support the country in this process. The EU welcomed the engagement of the Albanian authorities to pursue the domestic reform agenda, as confirmed in the framework of High Level Dialogue meetings.

The SA Council noted that constructive and inclusive political dialogue in parliament between the ruling majority and the opposition is essential for sustainability of European integration related reforms. In this context, the EU welcomed the 24 December 2014 cross-party political agreement and called on all Albanian stakeholders to ensure its responsible implementation. The SA Council also welcomed the establishment of the National Council of European Integration, chaired by the opposition, as an important instrument for an all-inclusive approach to EU-related reforms. However, the EU noted with concern persisting political tensions amongst political actors.

The EU underlined the importance of ensuring that upcoming local elections are conducted in line with the relevant standards. The election administration bodies need to discharge their duties in an independent way and a thorough application of the relevant legislative framework must be ensured. The EU recalled that these elections provide an additional opportunity for Albania to demonstrate commitment to implement the December political agreement as regards addressing the issue of persons with criminal records in public office.

The SA Council noted that the reform of the public administration remains a key priority for Albania and is also one of the fundamental pillars of the EU Enlargement process. The ability to take on the EU *acquis*

is largely dependent on a de-politicised and efficient public administration. The EU welcomed the steps taken by Albania so far to implement the new Civil Service Law, but cautioned against any amendments to this law that could undermine the long-term perspective and commitment of Albania to develop a professional, merit-based and depoliticised civil service. The EU also welcomed the recent adoption of the Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2015-2020 and the new Code of Administrative Procedures, and called for their implementation.

The SA Council noted that the reform of the judicial system remains a key challenge. The independence, impartiality, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judicial system are central elements in the assessment of the political criteria for EU accession and key to ensure respect for the rule of law and progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime. The EU underlined the importance of a comprehensive and inclusive judicial reform process and encouraged Albania to continue its engagement with civil society and the European Commission for Democracy through Law - the Venice Commission - of the Council of Europe.

The SA Council noted that the fight against corruption remains a key priority for Albania. The EU welcomed Albania's commitment to strengthen efforts to prevent and fight against corruption. The legislative framework and the policy coordination and monitoring have been strengthened, including through adoption of the anti-corruption strategy and action plan. The EU underlined the importance of the action plan's effective implementation, as well as its monitoring. The EU acknowledged the launch of an online web-portal where citizens can lodge complaints and denounce corruption cases, and it stressed the importance of the proper handling and follow-up of the cases. Establishing a solid track record of proactive investigations, prosecutions and convictions of corruption cases at all levels remains a key endeavour.

The SA Council noted that the fight against organised crime remains a key priority for Albania. It noted some positive trends in a number of areas with an intensification of law enforcement activities, and called for these efforts to be stepped up in order to build up a solid and credible track record in dismantling organised crime networks and fighting against any form of criminal activities at all levels. The legal framework in place needs to be fully implemented, and obstacles to effective investigations must be removed, including through adopting amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code.

The EU reiterated its commitment to the short-term visa free travel regime for Albanian citizens and noted the efforts of the Albanian authorities to ensure respect of the conditions attached to visa liberalisation. The EU noted however that manifestly unfounded asylum applications continued to be lodged by an increasing number of Albanian citizens to EU Member States and Schengen associated countries. The EU calls on Albanian authorities to implement both short- and long-term measures aimed at countering this negative phenomenon, including by following up to the last set of recommendations issued by the European Commission in the framework of the Post-Visa Liberalisation Monitoring Mechanism.

The EU noted that Albania made efforts to strengthen the protection of fundamental rights, notably by improving the relevant legislative framework, and stressed the need of effective implementation. The EU called for further efforts, particularly by further strengthening the protection of persons belonging to minorities. In this specific policy area, adoption of a comprehensive legislative framework, in line with the relevant European and international standards, still remains an important achievement to be secured.

The EU welcomed that Albania made some further progress towards becoming a functioning market economy. The EU noted that the Albanian economy continued to grow and that Albania maintained macroeconomic stability; however, the country still faces significant challenges. In line with Joint Conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey, Albania is invited to put further efforts of placing public finances on a sustainable footing, while preserving fiscal space for urgently needed growth-enhancing public investments.

In the field of financial cooperation, the EU noted a satisfactory record in the implementation of most assistance projects. Progress was overall made on overcoming a number of outstanding difficulties. Yet, in some cases, problems related to timely allocation of sufficient appropriations from the Albanian state budget for operating expenses and maintenance still persist. The EU welcomed the full engagement of the Albanian authorities in preparing IPA II, in particular the good cooperation in the consultations for finalising the next period's strategic approach and in the preparation of the sector planning documents for IPA 2015.

The SA Council welcomed the continued active participation of Albania in regional initiatives and structures in South Eastern Europe and its good neighbourly relations and constructive regional stance. In this context, the EU commended the Albanian Chairmanship in Office for the work and efforts invested so far in further strengthening the SEECP. It invited Albania to remain committed to a positive engagement in the region, including through the conclusion of bilateral conventions, and to further promoting regional cooperation. The EU reiterated that good neighbourly relations and regional stability are essential elements of the Stabilisation and Association process and cautioned against any statements with implications for good neighbourly relations.

The SA Council welcomed the 100% alignment of Albania to CFSP declarations and Council decisions.

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