



**COUNCIL OF
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**THIRD MEETING OF THE STABILISATION AND
ASSOCIATION COUNCIL BETWEEN ALBANIA AND
THE EU
Brussels, 19 July 2011
Joint Press Release**

The Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) between Albania and the European Union held its third meeting on 19 July 2011. On behalf of the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, the meeting was chaired by Mr Dowgielewicz, State Secretary for EU affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Poland. Commissioner Štefan Füle represented the European Commission. EEAS Managing Director Miroslav Lajčák also participated. Albania was represented by Mr Edmond Haxhinasto, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The SA Council noted the conclusions of the Council of the EU of 14 December 2010, which welcomed the Commission's Opinion on the Albanian application for EU membership and endorsed its recommendations. The Council acknowledged the progress made towards meeting the political criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council and the Stabilisation and Association process requirements. The Council noted that Albania's track record in implementing its obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement is positive overall. The Council considered that Albania has achieved a certain degree of macroeconomic stability and would be in a position to take on the obligations of membership in the medium term in most of the *acquis* fields. The Council noted that Albania will need to intensify its efforts, in particular on the implementation of the twelve key priorities set out in the Commission's Opinion on Albania. These key priorities focus on the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, judicial reform, the fight against organised crime and corruption, electoral reform, public administration reform, and the protection of human rights including property rights. The Council strongly

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encouraged the political parties to overcome the current political stalemate by establishing a constructive and sustained political dialogue to ensure the proper functioning of parliament. Further, the Council recalled 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 and has met in particular the key priorities set out in the Commission's Opinion on the country. The European Council of 16/17 December 2010 confirmed this position.

Further, the SA Council noted the conclusions of the Council of the EU of 20 June 2011, which stressed that the EU had closely followed the 2011 municipal elections and noted that they were generally conducted in a transparent and competitive manner, albeit with procedural difficulties. However, the situation in Tirana remained a matter of concern. The EU deplored the deterioration of the political situation and increased tensions that followed the elections and conduct of the process. The EU, while noting the decisions by the Electoral College, underlined that it is essential that the election process, including the appeals procedure and the declaration of the final results by the CEC, should be completed transparently, independently and in full compliance with the existing legal framework. It was also essential for all parties to recognise the supremacy of the Rule of Law over any other interests. The EU called on all political leaders to support the finalisation of the election process calmly, constructively and with a focus on the European future of the country. The EU would closely follow the assessment of the process by the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission. Also, the EU urged the Government and the opposition, in collaboration with civil society, to agree on thorough electoral reform, addressing all recommendations by OSCE-ODIHR in 2007, 2009 and 2011 before the next elections are called. The EU noted the intention of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe to ask the Venice Commission for an opinion on how to avoid similar situations in future elections. Moreover, the EU called on the Government and the opposition to urgently restore the political dialogue and overcome the long-standing political stalemate. Such a dialogue would be indispensable for the normal functioning of any democratic society and its institutions, including the effective functioning of the Parliament, as well as for the advancement of the country's European integration. The EU urged the Albanian authorities to renew and strengthen efforts on the reform agenda and its implementation. These are essential in order to achieve the necessary degree of compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, including the twelve key priorities identified in the European Commission's 9 November 2010 Opinion on Albania's application for membership. Only upon fulfilling the key priorities will Albania be able to move forward towards the EU, in line with Council conclusions of December 2010. The EU remained committed to the European perspective of Albania and will continue to support the country's efforts in this process.

The SA Council also noted the successful completion of the visa liberalisation process in 2010, which marked an historic achievement for Albania. The EU reiterated its commitment to the short-term visa free travel regime for Albania and expressed its confidence in the commitment of the Albanian authorities to ensure the respect of the conditions attached to the waiving of the visa regime. The SA Council noted that the implementation of the readmission agreement continued to proceed well.

The SA Council welcomed the joint work by the ruling majority and opposition in the parliamentary committee on European Integration on the Albanian Action Plan to address the priorities of the Opinion. The SA Council was informed that the Albanian government had adopted the Action Plan on 10 June 2011 and that it had taken into consideration the comments and suggestions presented by the European Commission as well as by the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee of European Integration representing the opposition, and civil society. The SA Council was also informed that the Action Plan was currently being analysed by the European Commission.. The EU encouraged building on these achievements as an avenue towards creating an inclusive political environment in the country.

The SA Council noted some procedural developments regarding the functioning of the Parliament, the efforts made by Albania to fight corruption, as well as the improvement of the institutional and legislative framework on human rights and respect for minorities, whilst underlining that more needs to be done in these areas. In particular, it noted that corruption remains a particularly serious problem in the country. Establishing a convincing record of investigations and convictions of those found guilty, including in cases of high level corruption, is essential.

The SA Council stressed that establishing an independent and professional civil service, achieving the reform of the judiciary, as well as addressing unresolved property rights' issues, remain key challenges for Albania's EU integration. The rule of law and the independence, impartiality, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary are central elements in the assessment of the political criteria for EU accession.

The SA Council noted the legislative amendments adopted in the fight against money laundering and the ratification of an agreement between Albania and Serbia on cooperation in the field of the fight against organised crime, whilst noting that the strengthening of regional and international cooperation in this area must continue. In addition, the SA Council agreed on the importance of effective implementation of legislation for the fight against organised crime, including through the provision of adequate resources and enhanced coordination between different law enforcement bodies. This is a key priority of the Opinion.

As regards freedom of expression, the EU noted that political and business pressures continue to affect media independence. The media coverage of the May 2011 local elections marked an improvement over previous practices but there are still concerns over partiality of reporting. The EU once again recalled the importance for Albania to decriminalise defamation and libel.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted that Albania has made efforts towards establishing a functioning market economy and towards enabling the Albanian economy to cope with competitive pressure. The SA Council observed remaining shortcomings regarding the issue of property rights, enforcement of rule of law and orderly market exit procedures. Further efforts are required on structural reforms and in upgrading the transport and energy infrastructure, building on the good progress made in this latter area.

On the key issue of Albania aligning its legislation and capacity with European standards, the SA Council welcomed the progress made over the past year in the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). Albania's taxation of imported used vehicles and the application of road charges has been brought into line with the SAA. However, further efforts are required to ensure compliance with SAA deadlines. The strengthening of Albania's administrative capacity to effectively implement the SAA must continue. The SA Council noted the progress made in areas such as free movement of goods, competition, and SME policy, while noting the need for stepping up efforts in other areas, such as audiovisual policy, transport and intellectual property law where progress has remained limited.

The SA Council welcomed Albania's constructive and co-operative foreign and regional policy, as well as its active participation in regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe and exchanged views regarding developments in the Western Balkans.
