



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



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**SIXTH MEETING OF
THE STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION COUNCIL
BETWEEN THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF
MACEDONIA AND THE EU
Brussels, 27 July 2009**

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

The Stabilisation and Association Council between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the EU (SA Council) held its sixth meeting on 27 July 2009. The meeting was chaired by Antonio Milošoski, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Vasko Naumovski and Deputy Prime Minister Mr. Abdulaqim Ademi also attended the meeting. The EU delegation was led by Mr. Carl Bildt, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sweden. Mr. Carlos Fernandez-Arias, PSC Ambassador, Spain, Michael Leigh, director general of the European Commission's Directorate General for Enlargement, and Mr Zoltan Martinusz, director in the General Secretariat of Council also attended the meeting, together with the EU Special Representative and European Commission Head of Delegation for the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Erwan Fouéré.

P R E S S

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The SA Council noted the conclusions of the Council of Ministers of the European Union adopted on 8 December 2008.

The SA Council welcomed the positive assessment that the country has met all the benchmarks of the road map for visa liberalisation and the legislative proposal of the European Commission to establish visa free travel regime for the citizens of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The SA Council noted that the Council of the EU will examine the proposal without delay, in order to achieve a visa-free regime, ideally by the end of 2009.

The SA Council noted the country's primary objective and strong commitment to advance in the EU integration process by opening accession negotiations and welcomed the progress made in the implementation of key priorities of the Accession Partnership. The SA Council recommended to the Government to keep up its efforts in order to fully meet the benchmarks related to the opening of the accession negotiations before the next Progress Report of the Commission.

The SA Council reviewed key developments over the previous year related to the fulfilment of the political criteria. The EU welcomed the findings of the ODIHR observation mission that the conduct of the presidential and municipal elections met most international standards and noted that the citizens of the country showed their strong attachment to democratic values throughout the electoral process and the state institutions have worked hard to ensure peaceful and orderly elections. The EU called for all of the recommendations of ODIHR to be fully implemented as soon as possible. The EU also welcomed the constructive and inclusive political dialogue pursued within the democratic institutions, resulting in improved functioning of the Parliament. However, further measures such as the Law on Parliament remain to be adopted.

Significant progress was noted in the implementation of the police reform, where the human resources strategy is being efficiently enforced and the work of the regional and local police commanders is effective. The SA Council noted the recent adoption of the Law on internal affairs. The EU welcomed the continued progress in judicial reform, the functioning of the new judiciary bodies and court structure, the measures taken to improve efficiency and strengthen the budgetary framework. It encouraged the country to keep up the implementation efforts, with reference to the key principles of independence and impartiality of the judiciary. Progress was noted in the fight against corruption, notably in the prosecution of high level corruption, strengthening of the legal framework and of the capacity of anti-corruption institutions, and the country was encouraged to vigorously continue its efforts. The amendments to the Law on Financing of Political Parties remain to be adopted. Some progress was also noted concerning the public administration reform, particularly as regards the training and the functioning of the human resources units, although further efforts are needed, in particular to amend the Law on Civil Service.

The SA Council welcomed the progress made in implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which remains a key part of the political criteria and will remain crucial for the process of EU integration, being an integral part of the country's constitutional and legal order. It underlined the need to ensure full implementation of the law on languages and to make further progress towards equitable representation and to promote the integration of the ethnic communities, in particular in education. It noted the progress achieved in the process of decentralisation, in particular the entry into force of the law on inter-municipal cooperation. It welcomed the creation of a specialised agency for the protection of ethnic minorities.

The EU expressed the view that further efforts are needed so that freedom of speech, including in the media, is effectively ensured in practice.

The EU recalled that regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations form an essential part of the process of moving towards the EU.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted that the country has moved closer to becoming a functioning market economy. Economic stability and predictability have been maintained. Market entry procedures have been further simplified and bankruptcy procedure and property registration have been accelerated. Impediments to job creation have been reduced and the tax wedge on labour has been lowered. However, in view of the global financial and economic crisis, the EU urged the country to monitor closely the economic developments and stressed the importance of pursuing a prudent fiscal policy. It also stressed the importance of pursuing the structural reforms rigorously so as to further reduce the obstacles to employment creation and further improve the business environment.

As regards alignment with the *acquis*, the SA Council noted that the country has made legislative progress in various areas such as electronic communications, customs, taxation, the internal market and competition. Continued efforts are needed to strengthen the capacity of the administration to implement and enforce the *acquis*. It welcomed the revised version of the National Programme for the Adoption of the *Acquis* (NPAA) and the practice by the authorities to annually update the NPAA on the basis of the Commission's Progress Report.

The SA Council also discussed the state of play of the IPA assistance. The SA Council recalled that for the period 2008-2010, a total of € 244 million has been allocated to assist the country on its road to European integration. The EU welcomed the progress made with the establishment of the required structures and the legal set-up for decentralisation of the EU funds management and encouraged the country to step up the efforts in this regard in order to achieve the conferral of management as soon as possible.

In examining the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), the SA Council welcomed the finding that the country has achieved full compliance with the SAA provisions and has contributed to the smooth functioning of the various joint institutions. Recalling the Commission's assessment in the 2008 Progress Report that the country fulfils all the commitments foreseen under the first stage of implementation of the SAA, the SA Council noted that it is expected that the Commission will adopt a decision on the transition of the second stage of the SAA. The SA Council welcomed the steady progress in the ongoing negotiations on an Agreement on conformity assessment and acceptance of industrial products (ACAA), to be concluded in the form of a Protocol to the SAA.

The SA Council discussed developments in the Western Balkans region and welcomed the continued active participation of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in regional cooperation including initiatives in South Eastern Europe, such as the South East European Cooperation Process, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and its contribution to the EU ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina.