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MINUTES

**of the 16th EU Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee meeting
of 19 July 2023, 13.30-16.30 and 17.00-19.30**

Tirana, Albania

The meeting opened on Wednesday, 19 July 2023, at 13:30.

1. Adoption of the draft agenda

The draft agenda was adopted without comments.

2. Adoption of the minutes of the 15th meeting of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee held in Brussels on 1 and 2 December 2022

The draft minutes of the 15th meeting were adopted and distributed to both the EU and Albanian delegations.

3. Opening remarks by H.E. Ms Lindita NIKOLLA, Speaker of the Parliament of Albania, Mr Toni GOGU and Mr Manolis KEFALOGIANNIS, Co-Chairs of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, and exchange of views on the state of play of EU-Albania relations with:

Ms Olta XHAÇKA, Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs, on behalf of the Government of Albania.

H.E. Mr Álvaro RENEDO ZALBA, Ambassador of Spain to Albania, on behalf of the Spanish Presidency-in-office of the Council.

H.E. Ms Christiane HOHMANN, Ambassador of the EU to Albania, on behalf of the European Commission and the European External Action Service.

Ms Isabel SANTOS, European Parliament's standing Rapporteur on Albania.

Ms Majlinda DHUKA, Minister of State and Chief Negotiator.

In his opening remarks, **Mr Toni GOGU** (SP, Parliament of Albania of Albania), Co-Chair of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, welcomed the participants and stated that this meeting is an obligation stemming from the Stabilization Association Agreement between EU and Albania, and is now held in Tirana since the last meeting took place in Brussels.

Mr Manolis KEFALOGIANNIS, Co-Chair of the EU-Albania Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC), stated that the Committee strongly supports Albania's accession to the EU. He stressed that Albania and its society belong to the European family due to the country's culture, history, geography and will of its people. Mr Kefalogiannis expressed gratitude to the members who voted for the report by Isabel Santos the previous week in the Plenary of Strasbourg, reminding that the report got a vast majority of the votes coming from the parties of the democratic angle and was supported by most European parliamentarians. Furthermore, Mr Kefalogiannis said that those MEPs believe that steps and reforms have been implemented but that there is a lot that Albania still has to fulfil in order to meet all the requirements needed for the EU accession. In his belief, in terms of economy or population it is easy for Albania and other Balkan candidate countries to become part of the European family.

H.E. Ms Lindita NIKOLLA, Speaker of the Parliament of Albania, in her opening remarks said that it was a pleasure to host the EU-Albania Stabilization and Association Parliamentary Committee in the premises of the Parliament of Albania. The Speaker ensured the support of the Parliament for the integration process of Albania in the European Union. Ms Nikolla said that the support of the European Parliament for the integration of Albania and the region has been visible and has preceded other EU structures, and expressed her gratitude for the work and the progress that has been done, especially by this Committee. She stressed that the monitoring and leadership of the screening process by the Parliament will continue, promoting structural changes, development, increasing the well-being and improving the quality of the life of citizens. She concluded by saying that the closer Albania gets to the European family, the faster Albania moves towards it.

Ms Olta XHAÇKA underlined that Albania is doing its utmost to meet all the requirements that would pave the way for an accelerated EU integration perspective, despite the challenge of addressing the economic and social consequences of the triple shock of the 2019 earthquake, the pandemic and of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. She stressed the role of the European Parliament in ensuring institutional and public support for the Albanian EU integration process and also brought to attention that Albania chairs the Berlin Process and intends to make economic convergence the main topic of the Leaders' Summit on 16 October 2023. Minister Xhaçka stated that Albania is committed to the core values of the European Union, including respect for all human rights, especially the rights of minorities, democracy and the rule of law. Ms Xhaçka said that Albania has maintained and will continue to maintain its policy of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy statements and Council's decisions, declarations and the sanctions.

H.E. Mr Alvaro ZALBA confirmed the support of the Spanish Presidency for Albania and other Balkan countries on their path towards the EU membership. He said that the Presidency encourages Albania to continue the progress, notably in the crucial areas of rule of law, fight against corruption, and environmental policy, constructive political dialogue in the country,

increase parliamentary oversight engagement in the deeply transforming process of European Union accession. Ambassador Zalba stressed that Albania should proactively work with the European member states on regular migration. He recognized the role of Albania in the regional cooperation and confirmed that this is a benefit for Albania.

H.E. Ms Christiane Hohmann confirmed the support of the European Commission and of the EU Delegation to Tirana in following, helping and monitoring the Albanian institutions on completing the needed reforms. Ambassador Hohmann underlined the crucial role of the Parliament in supervising the way, as well as the speed of the steps taken by the government. Ambassador Hohmann further explained that the judiciary sector remains one of the pillars of the reforms that have to be undertaken by the government, underlining the importance of the judiciary keeping its integrity and distance from the political influence. Ambassador Hohmann highlighted the need of finding common ground to work and move ahead together for a big purpose like the integration of Albania in the EU.

Ms Majlinda Dhuka, started by thanking Ms Isabel Santos, the European Parliament Rapporteur for Albania, and the European Parliament, for the approval of the resolution. Albania considers it as a sign of support to the progress path of the country, to the accession reforms undertaken and promised to achieve the criteria given by 2030. In this dynamic progress, Albania will do its best to steadily proceed with progress this year, and conclude the screening for 27 chapters out of the total 36. Ms Dhuka confirmed that the country will be ready on the technical level to meet the political will of the Commission and the Member States later this year for the opening of the negotiations for Cluster One, and informed that a self-assessment was conducted for two other clusters, and that the country was ready to advance on those two clusters. In conclusion, she asked for the political support of the European Parliament and ensured to stay completely available to all MEPs regarding any related to Albania.

Ms Isabel Santos, stated that despite the scepticism because of the Covid pandemic, earthquake and the war in Ukraine, Albania has made a lot of progress in the reforms. She underlined the importance to anticipate, as part of the process of EU accession, the opportunities that the EU is giving and to be prepared to have the real profit from the opportunities of membership. For Ms Santos, reforms in sectors such as environment, digital and energy transition remain crucial. She underlined the importance of keeping focus on young generations, minorities, media freedom, rule of law and democracy. Ms Santos stressed that it is important to take in consideration the recommendations of the OSCE ODIHR and the Venice Commission regarding the electoral law.

4. Rule of law; the fight against corruption and organised crime

Ms Jorida TABAKU (DP, Parliament of Albania) emphasized that it is not important how many representatives of the Albanian Government go to Brussel to attend working groups - 500 or maybe 600, but that the important issue is the will to conduct reforms. She referred to the report of Transparency International that has raised concerns that Albania is a captured state, as has the conclusion of the Specialised Anticorruption Unit. The Progress report, as well as the report of the American Department of State, have raised concerns over the spread of corruption on all levels of central and local government administration. As result, 41% of Albanians want to leave the country, which is one of the main problems facing Albania. She underlined that the average in the Western Balkans is 26%, and that the result of 41% in Albania makes it clear that there is a real problem with corruption.

Ms TABAKU also mentioned that the Special Prosecution Office (SPAK) should be congratulated for the work done in the investigation and arrest of high-ranking officials, and underlined that no political pressure should be put on the new justice system bodies. She pointed out that the EU Delegation in Albania announced that audit detected a corrupt scheme, and that the disbursement of IPARD funds for agriculture will be suspended. This pyramid scheme raised with IPARD funds should be an alarm signal, and this happened because of corruptive involvements, she concluded, adding that according the Report by the European Commission and the report approved by the European Parliament make the fight against corruption the Challenge of Challenges. As result, she pointed out that it should be the task of this Committee, but also the Members of the Parliament of Albania, to engage in changing things.

Mr Fatmir XHAFAJ (SP, Parliament of Albania) noticed that after the European Commission Progress Report and the Resolution of the European Parliament, which was introduced by the Rapporteur, it is redundant to speak about the Rule of Law, and the fight against crime and corruption. Both of these important documents underlined that Albania has made extraordinary progress in these areas. The justice reform is in its implementation stage, it has gone through the set up and now it is in the process of consolidation. Important steps have been taken by the government to narrow the corruptive spaces through valid mechanisms, and that have been mentioned in both documents. Due to what was mentioned before, Mr Xhafaj proposed that all participants support the Resolution of the European Parliament and to commit, as MPs, to make all the relevant efforts to turn it into reality, and to consider it as a recommendation by the EU Commission.

Mr XHAFAJ recognised that Albania has entered an important and delicate stage, because of certain problems that have been exposed. In the 10 years of governance, one should not only refer to statistics when it comes to law enforcement. He expressed his belief that corruption issues are not specific for Albania; Albania is a society in development, and the issue is how the society is prepared to cope with it and to create efficient mechanisms to handle with such problems, and added that in his point of view Albania has made steps forward. As conclusion, he suggested that this is a long process, and in this context suggested a change of approach, since the Progress Reports have been the same for the past 10 years and the bureaucrats of the European Parliament have been using the same standards and same approaches, which has perhaps influenced the way Albania operates, but should be improved.

Mr Gazment BARDHI (DP, Parliament of Albania) said that there is no necessity to speak too much about the Justice Reform, because justice can speak with its own work. He pointed out the problems derived by the implementation of the Justice Reform. Mr BARDHI recognised as positive the fact that corrupt judges and prosecutors have been removed and new vacancies created in the Justice System, yet pointed out that it does not guarantee any strength of the system. The main goal of the Justice System is efficiency, which has not been achieved and a high number of cases are still open in the Courts.

Mr Toni GOGU (Co-Chair, SP, Parliament of Albania) mentioned some figures regarding the progress made in the Judicial Reform. At the moment, the number of the Magistrates that have passed vetting is 88%, so there are 12% more to go to reach 100%. Referring to the School of Magistrates, Albania has an increased number of candidates applying, which means that there are still young professionals who want to contribute in this sector. The School of Magistrates will prepare them to cope with the new challenges. In the Supreme Court, the number of cases judged by the High Court was 6000 compared with 3000, which was the case previously. The number of cases has doubled, which is an optimistic figure showing the speed with which the

judiciary is developing.

Wednesday, 19 July 2023, 17:00 to 21:00

The second session of the meeting opened at 17:00 on Wednesday, 19 July 2023.

Mr Toni GOGU opened the second session of the meeting, with the next item of the agenda dealing with the Rule of Law, and fight against crime and corruption, and gave the floor to Mr Arbri AGALLIU.

Mr Arbri AGALLIU (DP, Parliament of Albania) noted that in the previous 15th meeting of the EU - Albania SAPC, held in Brussels, the text of the resolution was agreed by both the majority and the opposition from the Albanian side, and among other addressed the recommendations of the OSCE-ODIHR and the opinion of the Venice Commission regarding the necessary legal changes of the electoral reform, which were not approved before the local elections of May 14, 2023.

Mr AGALLIU stressed that the Democratic Party's proposal in the Special Reform Commission on Elections consisted of prohibition of employment or dismissal of legal entities until the formation of a new government, opening of lists, financing of parties only with funds from the state budget, increasing the active role and strengthening of KAS, the possibility of the voting of emigrants, the monitoring of the campaign by competent bodies, banning candidates with criminal records from running for office, not using platforms that violate personal data of any individual, punishment of violations found in each case by the Central Election Commission, and not granting funds in the form of annual financial aid and advance payments to parties participating in elections for local government bodies.

5. Media freedoms

Mr Thomas WAITZ (Greens/EFA, EP) stressed that despite the number of media outlets available to listeners and viewers in Albania, no TV stations are able to sustain themselves from the income obtained through advertising. He outlined that some media outlets in the European Union also struggle to be profitable and underlined that no media that continuously fail to make profit manage to continue to produce content. He concluded that there must be another way, different from direct income, for Albanian media channels to make profit.

Mr WAITZ suggested that the MPs should evaluate possibilities to strengthen the public broadcasting service, because citizens do not have a clear way to conclude what media publish well-researched or fake news and opinions to create a certain motion in population that spread propaganda misleading citizens. Media freedom is one of the key pillars of democracy, and it provides balance between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, for which it is called the fourth pillar of democracy. Mr WAITZ concluded that politicians are sometimes uncomfortable when challenged by journalists, but that this is part of the democratic discourse and keeps politicians reflecting on their role, their own work and proposals, and at the end of the day enables a higher quality of work on legislative proposals and ensures more transparency and accountability.

Ms Sunčana GLAVAK (EPP, EP) noted that the European Parliament highlights the crucial need for transparency, accountability and inclusiveness in the accession process. She pointed out that the Albanian government should integrate civil society and media into democratic governance and policy dialogue, recognizing their role and also emphasizing the effective involvement of media and civil society in fighting corruption and their inclusion in consultative mechanism. The IPA resolution highlights the importance of the independence of the public broadcaster and media regulator as well as transparency of media ownership financing and public advertising. Ms Glavak was concerned about the lack of sustainable business models and transparent funding for most Albanian media outlets. In conclusion, Ms Glavak recommended steps to ensure safety of journalists, enact strong legal protection, enhance ownership transparency and strengthening media regulations to guarantee free and independent media as a cornerstone of democracy. She concluded by saying that colleagues from media are elected officials' friends, and not their enemies, and that they must work together to improve media freedom as the only way forward.

Ms Eslemvera ZAKE (SP, Parliament of Albania) welcomed the guests from the EP. She noted that media freedom addresses a crucial issue that is at the heart of democracy. She highlighted the competences of the Audiovisual Media Authority, which are of great importance, provided by the specific law that makes it a qualified body appointed by the Parliament of Albania for a maximum of two 5-year terms, and whose members act with impartiality and independence. She further elaborated that they address all the complains to ensure the protection of the relevant rights, and that financial sustainability is one of the main goals of this authority. The latest amendments that have been approved by the Parliament of Albania show the commitment to comply with the international standards ensuring the partial approximation with EU guidelines. The authority is entitled to take issues to court to ensure honesty and accountability. The regulatory authority has a key role in ensuring diversity, innovation and in protecting the interests of the public. She reminded that the authority criticised an attack which was made against a media outlet. Ms Zake closed her speech by recalling that members of Parliament bear the responsibility of ensuring the right of the media as one of the main pillars of democracy.

Ms Ina ZHUPA (DP, Parliament of Albania) described the situation with press freedom in the country as critical, since it shows that the most serious threats come from physical violence and verbal attacks against journalists. She continued by branding the offensive and threatening rhetoric of state leaders as extremely disturbing. She mentioned Prime Minister Rama saying that journalists who ask critical questions should be sent to 're-education'. She also noted that Ricardo Gutierrez, Secretary General of the European Federation of Journalists, reacted through a post on Facebook following the statement of Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj towards BIRN's investigative journalist, Ola Xama.

Ms ZHUPA mentioned the statement of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) where special concern for Albania is related to violence against journalists and attacks on other businesses of media owners to influence or punish them for their editorial line. She specifically referred to the case of Prestige Resort and News 24 media.

Mr Manolis KEFALOGIANNIS (Co-Chair, EPP, EP) stressed the significance of media ownership as a focal point of free media. He added that countries can address present challenges only by assuring transparency of public procurement, transparency of public works, media ownership and control of expenses of political parties and political finances.

6. Youth and measures to address emigration

Ms Zheni GJERGJI (DP, Parliament of Albania) highlighted that the Albanian youth is permanently facing challenges that affect the economy and politics of the country, as well as the Albanian government's stagnation and procrastination in decision-making on matters relevant to this population group. According to INSTAT, a contraction of almost 0.74 percentage points, or in the nominal value 27,000 young people, has been recorded. Reports often use the underlying factors on which these data are based, such as declining births per family, or migration.

As regards of the efficiency of government support policies and programs towards youth, Ms GJERGJI mentioned the lack of prioritization and Government's inefficiency as regards policies promoting employment among young people, as well as the disincentive policies for their training, the lack of entrepreneurial and technological knowledge, significant levels of informality, unmet needs for investment in human and physical capital, and persistently low R&D spending. Ms GJERGJI concluded by referring, with concern, to the loss of confidence of young people not only in employment promotion policies but also in employment institutions in Albania.

Mr Pandeli MAJKO (SP, Parliament of Albania) congratulated all the participants on the useful discussion, and highlighted the great importance of discussing issues related to youth and the measures against emigration for the nation. Mr MAJKO shared some of the opinions outlined by the opposition, and accepted that some of the problems relate to implementation issues. Now that Albania has opened the accession negotiations, the screening process should come up with the summary of what has been achieved in the course of these years by both the representatives of the government and the opposition, he added, underlining that as far as this point is concerned, the issue of youth and the measures against emigration, the Albanian Government has focused on three strategies: the strategy on youth, at the level of the relevant ministry, the strategy for emigration, and the Department of Diaspora. He followed by saying that the issue of emigration must be addressed very carefully, and that while it is considered as a tragedy by some, not everybody is leaving the country, and some people choose to live in Albania, while some decide to return after having emigrated.

Mr Saimir KORRESHI (DP, Parliament of Albania) referred to INSTAT data, where the number of emigrants in 2022 was 13,963 people, which is 51.9% more than the previous year. Meanwhile, the number of emigrants was 46,460 people, which is 10.5% more than in 2021. He stressed that despite this panorama, which is still worrying, this calculation does not include the number of citizens who leave the country irregularly and apply for asylum. Referring to the progress report, Mr KORRESHI said that Albania remains under close monitoring for emigration, which comes mainly from citizens exceeding the free visa regime. Again citing the progress report of the EC for 2022, he emphasized that the Commission is closely monitoring the trend within the monitoring mechanism after visa liberalization.

Mr KORRESHI mentioned that Albania loses nearly 550 million euros in opportunity costs from emigration every year. He elaborated that the market is looking for more and more employees to replace the flight of the citizens with other foreigners, and the latter stay in Albania temporarily and use the entry into the country as an opportunity to immigrate to other countries of the EU. At the end, Mr Korreshi said that Albania should also implement return procedures in accordance with the alienation law and ensure that its return mechanism for irregular migrants is in line with the EU acquis, including fundamental rights.

Ms Anila DENAJ (SP, Parliament of Albania) shared her opinion on what was discussed earlier looking at it as former Minister of Finance. Ms Denaj said that it is important to understand that the labour market will rely on what the vocational schools, general school or universities prepare. Albania has 35 vocational schools but has much fewer student than the labour market would require. She therefore referred to the need for a change in mentality, notably in cities where such vocational schools would be located, such as Vlora or Saranda. Finally, regarding employment, Ms DENAJ pointed out that this issue will take time but that the labour market today must be oriented towards remuneration. The battle against informal economy in the labour market is as important as that in the fiscal sphere.

7. Environmental Issues

Mr Thomas WAITZ (Greens/EFA, EP) congratulated on the decision to establish the Vjosa National Park, stressing he had been engaged on that issue for a number of years. He also noted the good advertisement this decision has made for Albania. Mr WAITZ shared feedback from European citizens who previously knew little about Albania and decided to come and visit the country after having read about its fantastic natural treasures as result of the Vjosa campaign. He further explained some decided to visit Albania again this year after doing so last year, and have been spreading good news to others and motivated them to come. He concluded that Albania is trending as a destination. Mr WAITZ questioned the constructions of the Vlora airport, pointing out the issue of the missing construction permit. He raised the issue of airplane security due to the bird migration paths, and the risk from air traffic to the birds. In conclusion, Mr WAITZ referred to possible additional projects, asking if there are any plans to further reduce the protected area by constructing additional roads, terminals, hotels or tourist infrastructure at the coast, since this could lead to negative views now that the whole world believes that Vjosa River has been put under protection.

Ms Anila DENAJ (SP, Parliament of Albania) highlighted that the protection of nature is in the focus of Government's policies. Ms DENAJ referred to the Vlora Airport, and to the decision of the Council of Ministers no. 694, of 26 October 2022, that changed the status and surface of the natural/wetland ecosystem "Pishe Poro - Narte" from "Managed Nature Reserve" to "Protected Landscape". She noted that the airport runway and the proposed development area of the project are away from the protected landscape area and not necessarily in the pelicans' flight path to the Nartes Lagoon. However, a number of protective measures are listed to be implemented during the construction of the airport and during the operation of the airport, clearly defined where possible to single out the obligation for an Ecological Management Plan, which necessarily includes the components of scientific monitoring.

Mr Arbri AGALLIU (DP, Parliament of Albania), being deputy from this constituency, stressed the concern about the airport of Vlora, not only in terms of the rare species in the lagoon, but also in terms of security of the planes take off and the danger that the construction of this airport may present. Mr AGALLIU further elaborated on Albania's continuous failure to consider the advice of the Council of Europe regarding the incineration process. Mr AGALLIU mentioned the Investigative Commission set up by the Parliament of Albania to follow the procedures of awarding three incinerators with a concession/public-private partnership, which proved not only as corruption but as causing environmental damage. Various investigative reports have pointed to pollution of the environment, namely the Erzen River in Tirana, by the toxic substance lixivate that is discharged into the river and its source from the Tirana Incinerator.

Mr AGALLIU said that the environmental problems can also be seen in the case of rivers, which are unfortunately filled with waste coming from sewage canals. In addition, waste continues to be a vital problem for the beaches of Albania, while the municipalities of Durrës and Kavaja continue to suffer from the problematic situation of improper waste management. Although Albania is not a country that produces electricity using fossil fuels, it has an area that is rich in oil and its extraction is carried out. Mr AGALLIU said that it is important to take measures to reduce air pollution and improve air quality in these cities. INSTAT data on river water quality in the years 2014-2021 show that most water quality parameters monitored have acceptable values in most of the year. For example, for Drini River in Topojan, the values of pH and O₂ have shown an increase since 2020. He therefore called for continuous commitment to monitoring water quality and action to maintain and recover the state of purity of river waters.

Mr Arben PËLLUMBI (SP, Parliament of Albania) Pointed out that Albania's priority is to develop a circular economy and to move from a linear economy to a circular one in waste management. In order to coordinate the implementation of the law and implementing acts that prohibit single-use plastic bags under 70 microns each side in Albania, the National Task Force was created by order of the Prime Minister. Likewise, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment has allocated, for the second year in a row, a budget for the support of six coastal municipalities this year (compared to four in 2022), specifically: Durrës, Kavaja, Rrogozhina, Vlora, Himara and Saranda for the tourist period (June - September 2023), for cleaning, collection and transportation of solid waste in these municipalities.

Related to climate change, Mr PËLLUMBI mentioned that Albania took an important step towards building a safer and more resilient nation by adopting the new National Disaster Risk Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (2023 - 2030). It also serves as an example to other countries in the region dealing with the effects of disasters and climate change. Mr PËLLUMBI continued that in order to transpose Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 11, 2018 on the governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action, the Council of Ministers adopted the decision "On the adoption of the Regulation on monitoring and reporting of gas emissions greenhouses and other information related to climate change at the national level", which partially transposes the said Regulation. Parliament approved the law no. 2/2023, dated 26 January 2023 "For fluorinated greenhouse gases" which partially transposes the relevant EU Regulation. The Directorate for Climate Change was created in the Ministry of Tourism and Health in January 2023.

8. Good Neighbourly Relations and Regional Cooperation

Mr Thomas WAITZ (Greens/EFA, EP) highlighted that Albania has played a substantial role in stabilizing the region, and has provided the whole region with a good example of neighbourly relations. According to him, Albania has been able to overcome conflict relations with their Greek neighbours. Mr WAITZ noted that this is especially remarkable as ethnic Albanian citizens live in several parts of the region and are numerous in some countries, notably in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro. He added that in all these regions/countries the positions of the Albanian government and of the opposition have played a constructive role, investing in depolarising and not fuelling polarisation, by helping ease tensions and find common ground. Mr WAITZ continued by stating that when it comes to neighbourly relations, other countries do not always take the same approach as Albania. He underlined it is particularly the case at times when there is a lot of foreign influence on the Balkan region, most prominently from Russia, but also from China and countries in the Middle East. Albania has chosen full alignment

with the EU in acting against fake news, foreign influence of Russia and is a very important pillar of the common approach to regional security and prosperous development of the region. In conclusion, Mr WAITZ in the name of the European Parliament expressed his sincere thanks and respect for this political decision and for the way Albania has been dealing with good neighbourly relations, keeping peaceful relations and avoiding any violence from emerging.

Mr Kreshnik ÇOLLAKU (DP, Parliament of Albania) highlighted that Albania has a good and consolidated tradition of friendly relations with its neighbours, and has played a conciliatory and constructive role in regional relations. He continued by saying that Albania has been a centre that has exerted clear influence on peace and stability in the region, as well as one of the most proactive actors of its Euro-Atlantic integration. This role of Albania is undoubtedly determined by the fact that in three other Balkan states - Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro - Albanians represent an important ethnic group, determining or influencing the political developments of these three countries of the region. Mr ÇOLLAKU stressed that, however, the region faces significant and subtle challenges. The region is moving slowly and with difficulty towards full membership in the EU and needs a strategic and political approach towards its European perspective. The restored Berlin process is good news and gets maximum support.

Mr ÇOLLAKU noted that Serbia remains the only Balkan country with unclear trends regarding the alignment of its foreign policy. The Serbian claims against the Republic of Kosovo are not simply a matter of protecting human rights, but a clear territorial claim to a third of the territory of the Republic of Kosovo. Serbia also intervenes when it senses an internal crisis, such as was the Serbian intervention during the crisis over the status of the church in Montenegro. In conclusion, he said that Kosovo remains the focal point of Albania's attention in the Balkans. The recognition of Kosovo's independence and its intact territorial integrity remain non-negotiable conditions for peace and stability in the region and its Euro-Atlantic perspective.

Mr Pandeli MAJKO (SP, Parliament of Albania) stressed the importance of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, adding that the whole region has been put to a test following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and expressed pride that Albania, Kosovo and the Albanian people who live in North Macedonia and Montenegro have also sided with Ukraine. Mr MAJKO pointed out the fear of anti-western tendencies in the region following the Russian aggression against Ukraine. He further stressed the importance of Albania's chairmanship of the Berlin Process, pointing out that this is the first time that a country that is not in the EU takes the presidency of the Process. Mr MAJKO concluded by underlining the situation in the North of Kosovo where steps need to be taken to mitigate the situation which is taken very seriously by the majority. He concluded by pointing out that anti-Western attitudes will persist and that all actors should be aware of that.

9. Adoption of Recommendations

Amendments tabled by the DP and by the MEPs were adopted. The text of the Joint Recommendations, as amended, was adopted unanimously.

10. Any other business

No other issues were raised.

11. Date and place of the next SAPC meeting

The 17th EU-Albania SAPC meeting was proposed to take place on 4 and 5 October 2023¹, in Strasbourg.

¹ Date and place later changed to 22 January 2024, in Brussels.