The last SAPC meeting during the mandate of this current legislature began on 14th of February, at 08:30, with introductory remarks by the Chairman of the European Parliament Delegation Mr Tonino Picula, who welcomed all participants, and Co-Chairman Mr Memli Krasniqi. Mr Picula expressed his hopes that the future EP would support the enlargement policy and advocate for Kosovo’s accession to the EU just like the current one. Furthermore, he reminded that the Parliament had adopted its draft resolution in Kosovo in plenary last November, stating its position and recommendations. Finally, he congratulated all the people of Kosovo for the upcoming 11th anniversary of independence and gave the floor for a speech to his co-chair Mr Krasniqi, Chairman of the Kosovo Delegation.

Mr Krasniqi underlined that Kosovo had taken numerous important decisions concerning the country’s national and European future since the last meeting. He appreciated the support from the EP and the members of the joint SAPC, and on behalf of the Kosovo delegation and Kosovo Parliament thanked for the support, and wished success to all MEPs in the upcoming elections. Finally, he said that he hoped for future support of the European Parliament.

1. Adoption of draft agenda
The agenda was adopted without amendments, as in the draft document.

2. Approval of the draft minutes of the 5th meeting of the EU-Kosovo CSP
The draft minutes were approved without amendments, as in the draft document.
3. State of play of EU-Kosovo relations: exchange of views with H.E. Mr. Bernard NIKAJ, Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo to the Kingdom of Belgium, on behalf of the Government of Kosovo; Mr David CULLEN, Head of Unit for the North Macedonia and for Kosovo, on behalf of the European Commission and Ms Bianca MAIER, Expert at the Western Balkans Division on behalf of the European External Action Service

H.E. Mr Bernard Nikaj expressed gratitude for the EP for its attention and support of the Kosovo’s European integration characterized by an ever-growing intensification between the Kosovo Assembly and the Parliament based on regular meetings. He underlined that his country’s 11th year of independence was characterized by state-building and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. He expressed hope to be able to bring the issue of visa liberalization to a closing as soon as possible. Concerning Kosovo institutions, the Ambassador presented their continued reforms efforts, such as adopted legislation related to the justice system and strengthening of the rule of law, including appointment of new judges and prosecutors also from among the minority communities. In terms of migration, the number of asylum seekers from Kosovo is low, with no pending cases of readmission, and the country continues its cooperation with EU member states in the field of police and security. Furthermore, he spoke of continued reforms in economy, public administration, and the voting for the state delegation for the Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Concerning the 100% tariffs, he reminded Serbia’s aggressive de-recognition campaign against Kosovo in international organizations, and reminded that the tariffs should not be the only issue in the Dialogue.

Mr David Cullen underlined the immense importance of the SAPC, and reassured that the Commission would continue to provide support and develop relations with Kosovo. He said however, these relations were currently overshadowed by Kosovo’s decision of imposing a unilateral tariff against products from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. This step represented a violation on the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and was contrary to the spirit of the Stabilization and the Association Agreement (SAA), while also undermining efforts on building a regional economic area and negatively impacting the Dialogue process. Furthermore, Commissioner Mr Johannes Hahn, with HR/VP Ms Federica Mogherini and Trade Commissioner Ms Cecilia Malmström offered to set up a specific forum to address Kosovo’s trade grievances, as the current situation cannot continue indefinitely. The sooner the tariffs are lifted, the sooner the forum can address the implementation of reforms in the areas of rule of law, public administration, economic development and education in order to deliver on the EU facilitated Dialogue and progress on Kosovo’s European path. The European Reform Agenda launched in November 2016, is the main joint framework that guides reforms and their implementation within SAA, and the governing coalition along with the Kosovo Assembly have made important progress most importantly in the area of rule of law and public administration. Mr Cullen asked that the recently adopted laws be implemented, however he expressed concern about fiscal sustainability. Furthermore, he spoke of economic and structural obstacles to growth and competitiveness, and employment especially among youth that could be best tackled by education. On visa liberalization, according to the Commission, Kosovo fulfilled the necessary criteria, however the Council has not yet decided, and called for the country to continue the good work. Finally, he pledged that the Commission would continue financially supporting Kosovo in the fields of rule of law, public administration, economy and education, and asked to make better use of it.
Ms Bianca Maier expressed that in the difficult context of the visa liberalization, Kosovo should focus on rule of law, migration and security in the wider context of its EU path. She fully agreed with Mr. Cullen concerning the need to lift the tariffs in order to normalize the bilateral relations with Serbia and reach a legally binding agreement. She also welcomed the appointment of the Kosovo delegation for the Dialogue and the efforts to reach a united position. Concerning the transformation of the KSF, the EU and the NATO called for an inclusive and gradual process in accordance with the Kosovo Constitution, and expect it to take place in a transparent and inclusive way involving all communities and uphold the current security arrangements.

Mr Tonino Picula, reminded that the 5th SAPC had been characterized by the Parliament’s support for visa liberalization, however deliberations were still ongoing in the Council where there was currently no majority in favor. In the meantime, he expects Kosovo to fully cooperate with EULEX and the Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office, particularly in criminal and civil cases. Nevertheless, he reminded that the Romanian Presidency remained fully committed to visa liberalization and so did the EP and EC. He criticized the extension of the import tariffs to international brands including EU countries, which was against CEFTA and SAA while also undermining regional cooperation and going against EU values. Thus, he called for their suspension in order to find a political solution and reach a legally binding agreement. On the EU side, he said it was important to continue facilitating the Dialogue but also to call for Kosovo recognition by five EU non-recognizers. Concerning the KSF, he shared the opinion of Mr. Cullen and Ms. Maier, while expecting Kosovo to uphold its obligations under the First Agreement concluded in Brussels in April 2013 and its security arrangements.

4. The Dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia

MEP Ms Dubravka Šuica welcomed the overall progress in specific areas. But, problems persist year after year, she reminded. Normalization with Serbia is crucial and key for both countries’ EU path. The action of the armed Kosovo Special Forces at the Gazivode Lake in September had installed an atmosphere of fear and further destabilized the region. Furthermore, the assassination of Oliver Ivanović was a major blow to the constructive and moderate voices of the Kosovo Serb community. She warned about the dangers of a territorial swap, which could have disastrous consequences creating ethnically homogeneous states. Concerning the issue of tariffs, she stressed that they needed to be lifted as soon as possible. Finally, she said that the recognition by the remaining 5 EU countries would also improve the status of Kosovo, however, in terms of visa liberalization, the Council members needed to be convinced.

Mr Memli Krasniqi, reminded that the Assembly of Kosovo had approved a resolution and mandated a state delegation for the Dialogue co-chaired by a representative of the coalition and of the opposition, but the two major opposition parties were not part of it. At the end of the process,
Kosovo expects recognition by Serbia, membership within the UN and more concrete results concerning Euro Atlantic integration. However, outstanding issues need to be resolved such as the fate of missing persons and justice for victims of war crimes. He underlined that there was a consensus in Kosovo on its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which should not be impacted. Currently, the Dialogue is suspended due to Serbia protesting against the tariffs, and according to him, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina had continuously violated the CEFTA agreement with regard to Kosovo. Finally, he stressed that Kosovo had continued the Dialogue even though Serbia continued its de-recognition campaign and refused to implement agreements through the EU-facilitated Dialogue.

Ms Tanja Fajon regretted the suspension of the Dialogue and the imposition of tariffs, and welcomed the news that the government of Kosovo was ready to discuss following EU and US pressure. At the moment, there is an uncertain future for Kosovo citizens, particularly Serbs living in the north, she said. The Kosovo issue carries history, emotions and tradition, and the stakes are so high that only future oriented leaders will be able to solve it, she added. On the Serbian side, only those who to take risk of not being re-elected, will be the ones normalizing the life of Kosovo citizens, she stressed. On the other hand, Kosovo needs patience and openness to compromises, in order to strive for a more promising future for both countries and the Western Balkans in general, she concluded, expressing hope that the dialogue will continue as soon as possible.

Ms Vjosa Osmani Sadriu, Chairwoman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of the Republic of Kosovo, rejected the dangerous ideas of border correction and territorial swap between Kosovo and Serbia, which would negatively impact the fate of people in Kosovo and the region. As for LDK, the biggest party in Kosovo, which is currently in opposition, the Dialogue should resume on a State to State level. Eleven year after independence, Kosovo is still facing attacks from Serbia against its territorial integrity and independence, she said. So far, 13 resolutions were adopted in the Kosovo Parliament to try to put conditions on the Dialogue, but they were never allowed to do so, unlike Serbia. According to her, the 33 agreements signed, which Kosovo checks on their implementation, are being breached by Serbia. Likewise, Kosovo respects 90% of its engagements whereas Serbia is breaching them, she said. Finally, she underlined that no agreement was better than a rushed one undermining regional stability. The state delegation was appointed with 59%, but LDK was against it, she said. Finally, she also rejected the call for the President to represent Kosovo in the Dialogue as parties and public opinion were against it. In addition, she recalled the advisory opinion of ICJ, which is ignored by Serbia.

According to Mr Jasenko Selimovic the President has a mandate. He opined that every country believed that they were doing most of it while the others were not doing anything.
The following members participated in the debate: Mr Haxhi Shala (Kosovo MP), Ms Dominique Bilde (MEP), Ms Time Kadrijaj (Kosovo MP), Mr Bilall Sherifi (Kosovo MP), Ms Julie Ward (MEP).

5. Transformation of Kosovo Security Forces (KSF)

Ms Time Kadrijaj reminded that on 14 December 2018 the Assembly of Kosovo had transformed the KSF into KAF and had passed 3 laws, which process was made possible through consultations with partners for the past two years. The transformation will prepare Kosovo for NATO accession and peacekeeping missions within full compliance with KFOR’s mandate and based on multi-ethnicity and professionalism. she stressed. She reiterated that NATO’s presence in the country was always more than welcome, and she reassured Kosovo’s future cooperation with the organization. The laws entered into force on 27 January 2019, she reminded. She outlined the 10-year plan, which will includes 3 phases beginning with training and education, and inviting partners to join in the process of transformation.

MEP Mr Jozo Radoš said that the creation of a 5000-strong army with 3000 reservists was a logical symbolic step, and it represented a right of sovereign countries. However, it encountered opposition from Serbia and according to NATO it was ill-timed, however Mr. Radoš did not think it was the case. The reaction of the EU was positive, and it should be in accordance with the Kosovo Constitution, based on transparency, while being inclusive and gradual in order to build multi-ethnic forces. Furthermore, it was seen as a sovereign right by eight EU member states within the UN Security Council. Finally, he opined the formation of KSF was a step towards membership within NATO.

Mr Armend Zemaj, pointed to the existence of a very widespread consensus concerning the KSF, including the minority population even though the MPs representing them were unable to give their vote due to pressure from Serbia. The implementation of the 3 new laws will be a long-term process in coordination with the EU and USA, he said. However, Belgrade continues to portray KSF as a threat, being a continuation of its policy of weakening Kosovo, Mr Zemaj opined and demanded the EU to exert its influence not to curtail the project. Finally, according to him it was a “NATO-child”, created by NATO standards and committed to future integration.

The following members participated in the debate: Ms Vjosa Osmani Sadriu (Kosovo MP), Ms Bianca Maier (EEAS), Mr Bilall Sherifi (Kosovo MP), Mr Elmi Reçica (Kosovo MP), Ms Ruža Tomašić (MEP).

6. Social and economic situation in Kosovo

MEP Ms Julie Ward highlighted that Kosovo currently had a 73,5% ease-of-doing business score according to the World Bank, being an indicator of business environment in the country. Furthermore, it is one of only 4 countries in Europe to experience growth every year since the global financial crisis in 2008, whereas it started as the poorest province of former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, there is a need to reduce the high rate of unemployment with a special focus on young people and women’s participation in the labor market, and the current growth and poverty
reduction strategy needs to address these issues, she opined. Infrastructure is also one of the challenges, and Kosovo needs to provide financial protection to citizens to achieve a better performance in the health sector. For her, quality jobs that foster proper inclusion are needed while getting rid of gender gap is important. Lastly, she stressed the issue of the widespread lead-poisoning in UN-run camps in Kosovo, affecting Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities who are struggling to receive compensation and accessing health-care. She reminded of her efforts to push the UN to ensure full accountability for these violations.

Mr Elmi Reçica, underlined that the most pressing issue was the social and economic development in Kosovo after the war, adding that the two main topics dealt with on a daily basis were the European agenda and the economic situation. During the phase of reconstruction, urgent issues were dealt with through the support of institutions worldwide and was overcome with great speed. Furthermore, Kosovo started setting up the institutions in order to establish and increase their capacities with a view to enter the phase of investments for meeting the EU criteria, FDI and production in agriculture. However, more focus need to be put on social policies as Kosovo is one of the most underdeveloped countries in Europe, without health insurance despite initiatives, and it costs a lot. The most important resources in households come from remittances sent from compatriots abroad. Kosovo had a noticeable economic development, however it is insufficient, and more citizens are looking for jobs than those employed. This is a clear indicator that state institutions need taxation laws and fiscal measures, but also to leverage salaries through public and private sector. In 2018, fiscal reforms were undertaken to improve the situation. The GDP increased to 4.23% in 2018 with a real economic growth of 4.9%, whereas the national budget of 2.3 billion euros in 2019 represents a significant increase. Finally, an increasing the level of education in Kosovo is crucial, he concluded.

Mr Glauk Konjufoća reminded that the industry based regime installed in the 70s and 80s had been destroyed by the Milošević regime. After the war, the UN economy of total privatization proved to be unsuccessful. He expressed regrets that it was run through the 4th pillar of UNMIK under EU authority. In Kosovo, poverty and unemployment are widespread, and no government was able to provide an effective remedy to create new jobs, he said. The latest figures show that more than 30% people live on less than 2 euros per day, the most vulnerable being the youth and women. Furthermore, 80% of women in Kosovo are not active in the labour market. Currently, there is a desperate lack of concrete plans for education, as the 2016 PISA assessment put Kosovo at very end of the table in reading performances. At the moment, Kosovo is the only country in Europe with no public system of health insurance, while the healthcare system is faced with mismanagement of services and shortages of basic medicals. Mechanisms of social protections are weak or non-existent, as workers’ rights are not well protected, especially private workers can be exposed to brutal violation of elementary rights as many work without legal contracts. Accordingly, 19 workers died in working places 2018. Finally, Kosovo’s law on salaries of workers in public sector triggered but dissatisfactions among trade unions who disagree with the huge gap between salaries of public officials and other workers of public sector. The law is expected to enter in force in December 2019, and Mr Konjufoća expects that it will damage workers of the private sector and increase prices, the salaries however will remain the same.

The following members participated in the debate: Mr Igor Šoltes (MEP), M. Vjosa Osmani Sadriu (Kosovo MP), Mr Memli Krasniqi (Kosovo MP), Mr David Cullen (EC).
7. Visa liberalisation

Ms Blerta Deliu Kodra, Chairwoman of the EU Integration Committee of the Kosovo Assembly underlined that the country undertook reforms including legislative changes and after the Parliament’s green light, Kosovo was currently waiting for a positive decision from the Council. Kosovo achieved to fulfil all the requested benchmarks, and the institutions will continue to maintain them. Finally, she expressed hope that Kosovo would be able access free movement by the end of this year.

MEP Mr Igor Šoltes said that making Kosovo wait was not fair and not good for the EU institutions as they lose credibility vis-à-vis Kosovo citizens who do not make a distinction between them. Finally, he expressed hope that after EU elections, a more positive signal could be expected.

MEP Ms Tanja Fajon expressed regrets that until today the visa liberalization had not received a green light from the Council and governments. The approach should be based on a step-by-step basis in order to preserve the mandate before moving to the next composition of the parliament. Visa liberalisation will need to be put to vote during the plenary in March or April, so that that the issue and mandate could be secured for the next EP. Within the Council, the biggest obstacles are Netherlands and France among others. Finally, she reassured her support and expressed hope to be able to secure the mandate before this parliamentary cycle was over.

Mr Arben Gashi said that the failure to conclude visa liberalization since 2012 represented a failure of the EU to keep its obligations vis-à-vis the Kosovo institutions, and there was end date known. One of the members of the Kosovo Assembly was held up for hours to check the authenticity of his visa even though it was legitimate and was accompanied by a diplomatic passport, he told participants. This topic has worn out Kosovo citizens for 7 years and it represents an administrative burden, depriving 1,5 million inhabitants of visas. Finally, Kosovo has fulfilled 98 burdensome and unfair criteria, and upon their fulfilment, the country is still deprived of visa liberalization, he argues. Recently, the trust of the Kosovo citizens is declining towards the EU institutions due to their action or statements.

MEP Mr Jasenko Selimovic asked Kosovo not to make things easier for its enemies with the introduction of tariffs. Serbia will continue doing its de-recognition crisis, as the political prize is too big, so Kosovo is only hurting its position in this regard and is giving arguments on Serbia’s side, he argues. If the tariffs are revoked, there will be a more clear position within the Council, he opined.

The following members participated in the debate: Ms Vjosa Osmani Sadriu (Kosovo MP), Ms Albulena Haxhiu, Mr Bilall Sherifi (Kosovo MP), Mr Andrey Kovatchev (MEP), Mr Elmi Reçica (Kosovo MP), Mr David Cullen (EC).

8. Any other business
The Co-Chairs announced to release a joint statement, which would be general, listing the topics discussed and major issues and agreements. Due to time constraints, this time there will not be a joint declaration and recommendations, but they hope to have it for the next meeting.

A Kosovo MP requested that the joint statement should include the position held by most MPs in Kosovo saying that the territorial integrity of Kosovo was non-negotiable. Mr. Krasniqi however rejected this request arguing that the Kosovo position could not be imposed on their partners within the SAPC.

9. Date and place of the next SAPC meeting

The next meeting will be held in Pristina on 27 and 28 October 2019.

The meeting ended on 14 February, at 12:00.