



Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee

MINUTES
of the 7th meeting of the
**EU-SERBIA STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION
PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE**
Belgrade, 20-21 December 2017

The meeting began on 20 December, at 16:00, by opening remarks of Mr. Vladimir ORLIĆ, Head of the National Assembly Delegation to the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC).

Mr. ORLIĆ extended welcome to the European Parliament (EP) delegation, led by Mr. Eduard KUKAN, as well as to other distinguished guests: H.E. Mr. Daniel Erik SCHAEER, Estonian Ambassador to Serbia, the representative of the official Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU, Mrs. Jadranka JOKSIMOVIĆ, Minister for European Integration in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, H.E. Mr. Sem FABRIZI, Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, distinguished guests – ambassadors and representatives of the EU Member States' Embassies, as well as other present participants.

In his opening remarks, Mr. ORLIĆ expressed pleasure of the progress Serbia had achieved in the European Integration process, and extended his gratitude for the strong support of the European Parliament to Serbia on its path to the European Union membership.

Co-Chair, Mr. KUKAN welcomed the opening of two negotiating chapters at the last Intergovernmental Conference. He emphasised that in the enlargement process of the European Union, one had to bear in mind the wider picture that encompassed a strong Union, a formal legal framework based on the EU acquis, respect for the rule of law principle, an opportunity for citizens to freely express their political will, independence of the judiciary and freedom of the media. He said that the negotiation process meant building a state that operated in accordance with European legal mechanisms.

1. Adoption of the Draft Agenda

The Draft Agenda was adopted without any amendments, in the same form as the draft document.

2. Adoption of the Draft Minutes of the 6th EU-Serbia SAPC meeting

The Draft Minutes were adopted with no amendments, in the same form as the draft document.

3. State of play of the accession negotiations and the EU-Serbia relations, in the presence of representatives of the Serbian Government, the current Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission

Minister JOKSIMOVIĆ, on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, informed the participants that in 2017 Serbia had opened six negotiating chapters. She said there was some disappointment with regard to the number of open negotiating chapters at the last Intergovernmental Conference, as it had been expected that at least three negotiating chapters would be opened. She emphasised that speeding up the process of opening the chapters could give way to a faster implementation of reforms. Minister JOKSIMOVIĆ particularly stressed the importance of applying the criteria of evaluations of each EU candidate country individually as the only valid criterion of the process. She informed the gathering that during the Bulgarian and Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union three negotiating positions would be fully prepared, for Chapter 9 – Financial Services, Chapter 13 – Fisheries, and Chapter 33 – Financial and Budgetary Provisions, and that negotiating positions for several more chapters were being under intensive preparations.

Ambassador SCHAER, on behalf of the official Estonian Presidency of the Council of the EU, commended the opening of two new negotiating chapters, as an indicator of Serbia's progress in accession negotiations and progress in meeting the membership criteria. In the light of the latest European Commission Progress Report on Serbia, in particular the part referring to Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security, it could be noticed that progress had been made in these areas, but that further work lied ahead. Ambassador SCHAER said that Serbia had to strengthen its efforts in the fight against corruption and organised crime, the implementation of judicial reforms, ensuring the freedom of expression and freedom of the media, implementation of action plans related to national minorities and implementation of structural reforms. He welcomed foreign policy cooperation of Serbia with the EU and called for harmonisation with the EU foreign policy and in the domain of all restrictive measures. He called for the further development of regional cooperation and good neighbourly policy, the continuation of the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština, and the acceleration of the European integration process.

Ambassador FABRIZI, on behalf of the European Commission, said that 2017 had been a good year for Serbia regarding European integration, because six negotiating chapters had been opened, which affected the beginning of the implementation of reforms in those areas. Continuing his presentation, Ambassador FABRIZI emphasised that the process of progress of Serbia depended on commitment to the rule of law, as well as on the progress made in the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština. He commended the role of Serbia in regional cooperation, but he also recalled the importance of harmonising the policy with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. Ambassador FABRIZI emphasised that the EU would continue to be the economic and investment partner of Serbia.

MEPs urged Serbia to take advantage of the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Council, since the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans was highlighted as one of the priorities. It was said that Serbia should invest additional efforts in building up administrative and development capacities in its provinces, counties and municipalities, along with a clear national strategy for regional and rural development. They thanked Serbia for the role it played in migration crisis and pointed out that EU would provide all necessary assistance in the light of the fact that the Balkan Route still existed. MEPs appealed to Serbia to adopt a long-term and strategic plan for combating human trafficking, and to continue a regional cooperation on this issue. Serbia was the largest recipient of EU funds in the Western Balkans, and the use of these funds was an excellent opportunity to learn about the use of future Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund once Serbia became an EU Member State. Reform of the judiciary, respect for fundamental civil rights, and independence of the media were recognised as significant conditions for further European integration of Serbia.

Representatives of the Serbian Government said that the term 'Southeast Europe' would be more appropriate than the term 'Western Balkans' with regard to identifying non-EU Member States.

Moreover, they added that the latest research had shown that the percentage of citizens recognising EU as the largest donor to Serbia had increased, which was an indicator of the success of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. With regard to normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, the Serbian Parliamentarians insisted on the establishment of the Community of Serbian Municipalities. They provided information that as of March 2016 the number of migrants arriving to Serbia had been reduced, noting that Serbia was still considered a country of transit for the migrants. They listed numerous amendments to the laws in which the principle of proportional representation of national minorities had been applied, which had been introduced by the Law on Employees on Autonomous Provinces and Local Self-Government Units in 2016. Serbian MPs emphasised Serbia's interest in connecting Western Balkan countries and enhancing cooperation among them in the field of energy, digitalisation and transport connectivity, because these were the key areas for attracting investments and for the development of the whole region. They listed peace-keeping missions in which the Serbian Army participated, and provided data that for the past five years Serbia had had 44 military exercises with the US Army, 23 within the NATO, and six with Russia, which led to the conclusion that Serbia may not be considered a factor of instability in the region. MPs of the National Assembly said that the EU was the largest trading partner of Serbia, with the share of over 63% in its total export and import for the past two years, and signing of the financial agreement between Serbia and the European Commission, based on indirect funds management model, was expected. MPs of the opposition parties said that the influence made on the media and the existing economic reforms were the causes of the increase in Euro-scepticism with citizens and the factors slowing down the European integration process of Serbia. They warned the participants that during the adoption of the media laws, there was mainly insistence on the laws' application on the market, and that particular attention should be paid on the functioning of the Parliament. MPs agreed that for Serbia, the whole European integration process was particularly significant because it was both a control mechanism and it enabled transparency in the work of the state.

Participants in the discussion were: Mr. KUKAN (Head of the EP delegation), Mr. ORLIĆ (Head of the National Assembly delegation), Ms. JOKSIMOVIĆ (representative of the Government of the Republic of Serbia), H.E. Mr. Daniel Erik SCHAEER (Estonian Ambassador to Serbia), H.E. Mr. Sem FABRIZI (Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia), Mr. STOJMIROVIĆ, (NARS MP), Mr. HÖKMARK (MEP), Mr. WEISS (MEP), Mr. DJURIĆ (NARS MP), Ms. FAJON (MEP), Mr. MIJATOVIĆ (NARS MP), Ms. MARJANOVIĆ (NARS MP), Mr. ŠORMAZ, (NARS MP), Mr. RISTIČEVIĆ (NARS MP), Mr. BOGOVIČ (MEP), Ms. FILIPOVSKI (NARS MP), Ms. KOVÁCS (Deputy Chairperson for Serbia), Mr. DELI (MEP), Ms. STOJKOVIĆ (NARS MP) and Ms. TOMIĆ (NARS MP).

4. Adoption of recommendations

They agreed not to discuss the amendments and that the draft joint text should be adopted as the final version.

5. Any other business

There was no discussion under this item of the agenda.

6. Date and place of the next SAPC meeting

Next SAPC meeting will be held on 4 – 5 July 2018¹ in Strasbourg.

The meeting finished at 11.45 on 21 December 2017

¹ The Bureau later agreed to change the date of the meeting to 13 and 14 June 2018.