

Joint press statement following the fourteenth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the European Union

The 14th **meeting** of the Stabilisation and Association Council between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the European Union (SA Council) took place on 13 July 2018. The meeting was **chaired** by High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission, Federica Mogherini, while Commissioner Johannes Hahn represented the European Commission. The delegation of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was led by Mr. Nikola Dimitrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Mr. Bujar Osmani also participated.

The SA Council recalled that the **Stabilisation and Association Agreement** (SAA) remains at the core of the relationship between the EU and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia until the country's accession to the EU. The SA Council took note of the country's primary objective to open accession negotiations and acknowledged the government's strong commitment to this purpose. The SA Council welcomed the EU's recent setting out of the path towards opening accession negotiations in June 2019 based on continued progress and tangible results, maintaining and deepening the current reform momentum. The SA Council took note of the intention of the Commission and government to begin the necessary preparatory work.

On **good neighbourly relations**, the SA Council strongly welcomed the signature of the agreement on the name issue and establishment of strategic partnership with Greece, as well as the entry into force of the Treaty on Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, which set a strong example for others in the region to strengthen good neighbourly relations. The SA Council urges all leaders, political parties and citizens to recognise the benefits that the resolution of the long standing name dispute will bring and to engage constructively in the ratification and implementation of this agreement.

The SA Council reviewed the **key developments** over the previous period relating to the fulfilment of the political criteria, as well as the state of play concerning the economic criteria, financial cooperation and the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, including institutional reforms. It noted the results of the **Stabilisation and Association Committee** held on 19-20 June 2018.

Concerning the **political criteria**, the SA Council discussed key political developments. It welcomed that the country has overcome its deep political crisis and the significant steps the government has taken to gradually

restore a culture of compromise by reaching out to all stakeholders, including the opposition, to strengthen democracy and rule of law and the genuine desire to reform in an inclusive and transparent manner. The SA Council welcomed the first concrete progress towards restoring the independence of the judiciary, by implementing the Urgent Reform Priorities, and thereby starting to reverse the backsliding of previous years. The SA Council noted positively the improvement of the work of the courts and the follow-up to the work of the Special Prosecutor's Office. The SA Council acknowledged that concrete efforts have been made towards increasing transparency and accountability and involving external stakeholders in policy making, welcomed the improved climate for media freedom and noted that the environment in which civil society operates has substantially improved.

The SA Council welcomed the continuous implementation of the **Pržino agreement** and the substantial progress in the implementation of the **Urgent Reform Priorities**. The SA Council agreed on the importance of continuing and deepening current reform momentum, including through the "Plan 18", and effective implementation of on-going and planned reforms, in particular as regards judicial reforms and the fight against corruption and organised crime, including at high level, as well as intelligence and security services reform. It also recalled the importance of a depoliticised and merit-based **public administration**. The SA Council welcomed the country's participation as an observer in the Fundamental Rights Agency. The SA Council recalled the importance of long-term confidence-building measures and more pro-active policies to further increase trust and build bridges **among communities** and welcomed the steps taken in this regard by the government.

The SA Council welcomed the country's continued active participation and constructive approach in **regional cooperation** initiatives, as well as the country's inclusion in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and their organisation of the first Regional Digital Summit which contributed to strengthening the digital economy in the region.

The SA Council also acknowledged the country's efforts to address the challenge of the European **migration** and refugee crisis and expects that mutually beneficial cooperation continues in the future.

Regarding **economic developments**, the SA Council recalled the targeted policy guidance agreed in May 2018 between the EU and Western Balkans and Turkey, on the Economic Reform Programmes, and encouraged the government to focus on their implementation and follow-up. It noted the good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy and called on the country to address remaining key challenges.

The SA Council welcomed the commitment of the government to invest greater efforts into increasing the **absorption of EU funds**. It welcomed the adoption of long awaited Strategies on Public Finance Management and Public Administration Reform, which will permit EU budget support. It noted the importance of sound financial management and the need for full compliance with the sector approach criteria, as well as implementation of the European Court of Auditors' recommendations.

The SA Council noted progress in various **areas covered by the Stabilisation and Association Agreement** and welcomed the high level of trade integration with the EU. It outlined the importance of continuing to align with the EU *acquis*, especially in relation to the internal market, and welcomed progress on other international commitments, including on energy and transport connectivity. In this regard, it welcomed the adoption of the new energy law.

The SA Council also welcomed the upcoming passage to the **second stage** of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

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