



**COUNCIL OF
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**Fifth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council
between Albania and the EU**

Joint Press Release

The Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) between Albania and the European Union held its fifth meeting on 23 April 2013. On behalf of the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, the meeting was chaired by Ms Lucinda Creighton, Minister of State for European Affairs, Ireland. Commissioner Štefan Füle represented the European Commission. EEAS Managing Director Luis Felipe Fernandez de la Peña also participated. The Albanian delegation was led by Ms Majlinda Bregu, Minister of European Integration.

The SA Council noted that the Commission 2012 Progress Report on Albania concluded that overall, the country had made good progress towards meeting the political criteria for membership and the twelve key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations, as identified in the Commission's Opinion endorsed by the Council in December 2010.

The SA Council noted the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 11 December 2012, confirmed by the European Council of 14 December 2012.

The SA Council noted that the EU remains committed to the short-term visa free travel regime for Albania and welcomes the renewed commitment of the Albanian authorities to ensure respect of the conditions attached to visa liberalisation. The SA Council called on Albania to take further steps to address the issue of unfounded asylum applications lodged by Albanian nationals. Particular attention needed to be paid by the authorities on all issues set out in the first post visa liberalisation monitoring report.

P R E S S

The SA Council noted the improved political dialogue and co-operation in parliament between ruling majority and opposition which led to encouraging progress on the reform agenda in 2012. Underlining that sustained constructive political dialogue remained essential for Albania to fully address the EU-reform agenda, the SA Council called for this political dialogue to be reinvigorated. The SA Council stressed that the reform agenda needs to be pursued relentlessly, leading to delivering concrete results on outstanding issues under the 12 Key Priorities of the Opinion and completing, in a spirit of consensus and inclusiveness, the key measures, as identified in the 2012 Commission's recommendation in view to deciding whether to grant the status of candidate country, notably finalising the revision of the parliamentary Rules of Procedure, adopting the Civil Service Law and passing amendments to the High Court Law.

The SA Council underlined that the EU remains fully committed to the EU integration of Albania and would continue to support and assist the country in this process. Yet, the SA Council recalled that it was the responsibility of the Albanian political leaders to ensure the EU agenda remains high on the political agenda throughout the current pre-election period and beyond. The SA Council noted that the 2012 presidential elections were in line with the Constitution; yet they did not meet all expectations for inclusiveness.

As regards fulfilment of the key priorities, the SA Council noted reforms achieved by Albania, particularly addressing the proper functioning of parliament, the adoption of legislation requiring qualified majority, electoral reform, and the appointments of key officials. The SA Council welcomed the consensual adoption of the amended Electoral Code and underlined the importance of its effective implementation. It called for particular attention to ensure the election administration bodies discharge their duties in a professional way, independent from political considerations. The SA Council reiterated the importance of conducting the June parliamentary elections in line with EU and international standards and welcomed the recommendation of the OSCE/ODIHR to deploy an election observation mission, following an official invitation by the Albanian government.

The SA Council welcomed the adoption of legislation for the reform of the public administration, and called for its effective implementation. Furthermore, it called for the consolidation of an efficient, merit-based, independent and accountable public administration. Recognising the importance of the rule of law for the process of EU integration, the SA Council recalled that the independence, impartiality, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary are central elements in the assessment of the political criteria for EU accession. The SA Council noted the developments in the case of the events of 21 January 2011 and reiterated that a thorough, credible and independent judicial process is essential for the credibility of state institutions and for the confidence in the judicial system. The SA Council acknowledged the importance of the fight against corruption and noted the adoption of legislation for restricting the immunity of high-level officials and judges, stressing the need for further measures to render this legislation effective. The SA Council noted the efforts made in fighting organised crime and recalled the need to develop a solid track record of investigations and prosecutions at all levels in cases of corruption and organised crime.

The SA Council noted the adoption of the strategy and action plan on property rights and called for further efforts to ensure their effective implementation, including as regards consultation with stakeholders throughout the process and taking ECtHR case law into account. Noting the adoption of the audio-visual media law the SA Council underlined that guaranteeing the independence of the regulatory authorities is important to further enhance freedom of expression. The SA Council noted developments in the protection of human rights and the fight against discrimination and called for further efforts to step up implementation of legislation and policies in these fields, including LGBT rights. It encouraged quick finalisation and adoption of the draft law on persons with disabilities, further efforts on Roma inclusion and on implementing commitments as regards respect for and protection of minorities, including further development of legislation and policies. The SA Council welcomed efforts made in improving the treatment of detained persons and the development of the probation service.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted Albania's positive economic growth and the efforts made towards establishing a functioning market economy. It encouraged Albania to take measures to complement stability-oriented fiscal and monetary policies by structural reforms to ensure long-term sustainable economic growth and enhanced competitiveness. Addressing shortcomings in the rule of law, property rights, infrastructure, human and physical capital and VAT reimbursement would improve the environment for business and investment.

The SA Council noted the overall satisfactory implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) by Albania, and called for further efforts to implement the SAA commitments on protection of intellectual and industrial property rights. The SA Council also noted progress made by Albania in aligning its legislation and capacity with European standards and underlined the importance of a strong administrative capacity to ensure effective implementation of legislation and of the SAA.

The SA Council welcomed the continued active participation of Albania in regional initiatives in South Eastern Europe and acknowledged Albania's chairmanship of CEFTA and of the Council of Ministers of the Council of Europe in 2012. The SA Council commended Albania for cooperating fully with EULEX to allow full investigation of allegations raised by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The SA Council exchanged views on developments in the Western Balkans region and underlined that good neighbourly relations and regional stability are essential elements of the Stabilisation and Association process. Noting Albania's reaffirmed commitment to playing a constructive role in the region and promoting cooperation and good neighbourly relations, the SA Council stressed the need to remain committed to these objectives and to avoid statements running counter to them. The SA Council noted with satisfaction Albania's continuous alignment with EU statements in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy.