



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Brussels, 12 May 2014
9731/14
(OR. en)
PRESSE 284

**Sixth 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 sixth meeting on 12 May 2014. The meeting was chaired by Mr Ditmir Bushati, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania. The Albanian delegation included the Minister for Integration, Ms Klajda Gjoshaj and the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on EU integration, Ms Majlinda Bregu. The EU delegation was led by Mr Evangelos Venizelos, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece, on behalf of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Commissioner Štefan Füle represented the European Commission. EEAS Director for the Western Balkans Division, Mr. Fernando Gentilini, also participated.

The SA Council noted that the Commission 2013 Progress Report on Albania concluded that the country made further progress towards meeting the political criteria for membership and had adopted key judicial, public administration and parliamentary reform measures that had been identified as necessary for the granting of candidate status.

P R E S S

Rue de la Loi 175 B – 1048 BRUSSELS Tel.: +32 (0)2 281 6319 Fax: +32 (0)2 281 8026
press.office@consilium.europa.eu <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press>

9731/14

1
EN

The SA Council further noted the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 17 December 2013:

"In December 2012, with a view to deciding whether to grant candidate status, the Council invited the Commission to report as soon as the necessary progress had been achieved, also taking into account the further action taken by Albania to fight corruption and organised crime, including by proactive investigations and prosecutions of such cases. In this regard, the Council welcomes the adoption by Albania of the relevant key judicial, public administration and parliamentary reform measures with cross-party consensus as well as the successful conduct of the parliamentary elections in June. The Council welcomes the further action taken in the fight against corruption and organised crime, the commitment of the new government and commends its intensified efforts in these areas and encourages the authorities to maintain this new momentum. The Council will examine, on the basis of a report to be presented by the Commission, continued implementation of anti-corruption and judicial reform strategies and of recently adopted relevant legislation as well as a continued trend of pro-active investigations and prosecutions, including in the area of organised crime. In the light of this report, and on the understanding that Albania continues to build on the encouraging progress made so far, the Council looks forward to a decision regarding granting candidate status to Albania in June 2014, subject to endorsement by the European Council.

In line with its 5 December 2011 conclusions, the Council notes that the opening of accession negotiations will be considered by the European Council, in line with established practice, once the Commission has assessed that Albania has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. Further to the Commission's 2010 Opinion and recalling the conditions set out in its 11 December 2012 conclusions, the Council underlines that Albania will need to meet the key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations.

The Council underlines in particular the need to intensify efforts in the rule of law area, particularly reform of the judiciary, fight against organised crime and corruption and protection of human rights and anti-discrimination policies, including in the area of minorities, and their equal treatment, and implementation of property rights. Sustained implementation of reforms will also be required. The Council welcomes the launch of a high level dialogue on the key priorities.

The Council underlines that constructive and sustainable dialogue between the government and the opposition on EU-related reforms will be vital in securing Albania's EU future. It encourages the Albanian government to pursue its policy aimed at improving economic governance and investment climate. It welcomes Albania's continued constructive engagement in regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, which remains essential".

The SA Council noted the reform efforts made by Albania and its firm commitment to advance on the EU integration path. Noting that EU remains fully committed to Albania's EU integration and will continue to support and assist the country in this regard, the SA Council recalled that a sustained constructive political dialogue remains essential for Albania to fully address the EU-reform agenda and for the sustainability of the reform process. It encouraged Albania to pursue it in a spirit of compromise and inclusiveness. In this regard, the SA Council welcomed the Parliament Resolution on EU Integration, which was unanimously adopted in November 2013. The SA Council stressed the importance of further concrete results under the key priorities identified for the opening of accession negotiations with particular attention to the rule of law, including the reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

The SA Council underlined the importance of ensuring the professionalism of state institutions, including the judiciary, regulatory authorities and independent agencies, and the respect for and non-interference in their work as key elements of the functioning of the country's democratic institutions. The SA Council stressed the importance of full transparency and respect of the applicable legislation in the reform of the public administration and called for further efforts to strengthen its professionalism, depoliticisation and meritocracy. It welcomed the efforts made to ensure the implementation of the new Civil Service Law. The SA Council also underlined the importance of addressing the territorial administrative reform and decentralisation in a spirit of constructive political dialogue, aiming at enhancing good governance at local level.

The SA Council recalled that the reform of the judicial system remains a key challenge for Albania's EU integration process. The SA Council underlined that the independence, impartiality, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary are central elements in the assessment of the political criteria for EU accession, and are key for ensuring respect for the rule of law.

As regards the fight against corruption and organised crime the SA Council noted Albania's efforts to strengthen the legislative framework and the development of a positive track record. Underlining that these areas are key priorities for Albania's EU-integration future, the SA Council stressed the need for further efforts to consolidate and strengthen a track record of investigations, prosecutions and convictions at all levels.

The SA Council underlined the need for realistic and sustainable reforms in the area of property rights, including the adoption of an action plan for the setting up of an effective restitution mechanism according to the European Court of Human Rights case law. The SA Council welcomed legislative developments and the ratification by Albania of a number of international conventions in the field of human rights and encouraged further efforts to reinforce the protection of human rights and anti-discrimination policies, including in the area of minorities.

The SA Council noted that the EU remains committed to the short-term visa free travel regime for Albania and welcomed the efforts of the Albanian authorities to ensure respect of the conditions attached to visa liberalisation. The SA Council encouraged Albania to pursue its efforts to ensure the fulfilment of all conditions of the visa roadmap and to take further steps to address the issue of unfounded asylum applications lodged by Albanian nationals. In this respect, the SA Council welcomed the smooth implementation of the readmission agreement.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted Albania's positive, albeit moderate, economic growth and the efforts made towards establishing a functioning market economy. It noted the approval by the IMF of an Extended Fund Facility to support Albania's economic recovery and encouraged Albania to enhance economic governance and implement pro-growth policies and structural reforms. The SA Council underlined that addressing shortcomings in the rule of law and on property rights would improve the environment for business and investment.

The SA Council noted that overall Albania has been implementing well the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), and called for substantial further efforts as regards the protection of intellectual and industrial property rights. The SA Council welcomed the signature of the Protocol to the SAA to take account of the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union. Furthermore, the SA Council noted the progress made by Albania in aligning its legislation with European standards and encouraged Albania to continue strengthening its overall administrative capacity to effectively enforce legislation and implement the SAA.

The SA Council exchanged views on the developments in the Western Balkans region and underlined that good neighbourly relations and regional stability are essential elements of the Stabilisation and Association process. It also commended Albania's constructive regional stance and positive role in maintaining regional stability and reiterated the importance of remaining committed to these objectives. The SA Council noted with satisfaction Albania's continuous alignment with EU statements in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy.