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**Eighth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council
between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
and the EU**

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

The Stabilisation and Association Council between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the EU (SA Council) held its eighth meeting on 23 January 2012. The meeting was chaired by Nikola Poposki, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Teuta Arifi also attended the meeting. On behalf of the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, the EU delegation was led by Villy Søvndal, Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs. Commissioner Štefan Füle also attended the meeting, as did EEAS Managing Director Miroslav Lajčák.

The SA Council took note of the conclusions of the EU Council of 5 December 2011.

Further, the SA Council noted the country's primary objective and strong commitment to open accession negotiations without any further delay, taking into account the Commission's recommendation to that effect. The SA Council was informed of the government's dedication to further effective implementation of reforms, particularly in the key areas of the judiciary, public administration, fight against corruption, media sector, economic reforms, in order to further advance the degree of application of EU accession criteria and standards in the country. In this regard, the SA Council noted the high level accession dialogue and the economic policy conference pursued by the European Commission and the government.

Recalling that visa free travel is a cornerstone of the EU's integration policy, the SA Council acknowledged that the national authorities have taken a number of measures to prevent abuse of the visa free regime.

P R E S S

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The SA Council reviewed key developments over the previous year related to the fulfilment of the political criteria. It welcomed the conduct of the elections of 5 June which were assessed as competitive, transparent and well administered throughout the country, and stressed the importance of the government's commitment to follow up on the OSCE/ODIHR final report's conclusions and recommendations on the electoral process. The SA Council also welcomed the progress made in the reform of Parliament while noting the need to enhance its scrutiny role. Implementation of its rules of procedure and the law on languages has moved forward. The fresh impetus given to the EU reform process by the new government was welcomed and further encouraged.

The SA Council welcomed the 10th anniversary of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which remains a key part of the political criteria and an essential element of democracy and the rule of law, as enshrined in the country's constitutional and legal order. It welcomed the progress made in the equitable representation, decentralization, the law on languages and encouraged continuous efforts in these important areas. Welcoming the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's presidency of the Roma Decade, the SA Council noted the enhanced integration of the Roma community in the education system and was informed of the government's commitment to improve their socio-economic and living conditions. It also took note of the developments in the area of anti-discrimination policies.

The EU voiced concerns about the freedom of expression in the media. In this regard, the SA Council welcomed the dialogue pursued by the government and the media with a view to effectively addressing the challenges such as improving legislative framework, government advertising, public service broadcasting, professional standards in the media and decriminalization of defamation.

Concerning the reform of the judiciary, the SA Council was informed of the adoption of the wide-ranging legal package to further strengthen the independence, efficiency and professionalism, including the criminal procedure code, gradual increase in the judicial budget, creation of the High Administrative Court, abolition of the voting rights of the Minister of Justice in the Judicial Council and his removal from the Public Prosecutors Council, as well as the continuing recruitment of graduates of the academy for training of judges and prosecutors into the judicial system. The EU encouraged continued efforts on judicial reform and further steps to improve the independence and transparency of justice, as well as professionalism in practice.

The SA Council noted further amendments to the legal framework in the fight against corruption, where the legal framework was reinforced. The GRECO recommendations were addressed and systematic verification of asset declarations begun. The SA Council was informed that legislative steps were taken to improve the transparency of the political party financing; the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption continued its work as a professional body and adopted a new state program for prevention and repression of corruption and of conflict of interest 2011-2015. The EU stressed that a track record on handling high-level corruption cases has to be established and transparency of public expenditure and of the funding of political parties remained insufficient.

The SA Council discussed developments in the public administration reform, taking note of the progress made, particularly as regards the framework for public administration with the creation of a ministry responsible for public administration reform. The SA Council was informed of the commencement of several projects to improve efficiency, professionalism and independence of the public administration in line with the public administration reform strategy 2010-2015. The EU called for significant further efforts in the overall implementation of the reforms, notably as regards recruitment and promotion policy and respect for the principles of transparency, professionalism, independence and accountability of the civil service. In this regard, the SA Council was informed of the constructive contribution of the special group on the public administration reform under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

The EU recalled that regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations form an essential part of the process of moving towards the EU.

The SA Council reviewed the progress made towards fulfilment of the economic criteria and the functioning of the market economy. It welcomed that the country has facilitated company registration, accelerated judicial procedures, adopted a new employment strategy and improved the functioning of financial markets. It noted the country's appropriate macroeconomic policy mix in the context of the global crisis, achieving positive economic growth rates, low indebtedness and maintaining inflation at a stable level. The EU called for further efforts to be made in order to tackle the unemployment of around 30% and reduce structural problems in the labour market. The EU urged the authorities to continue to monitor economic developments closely and pointed to importance of pursuing a prudent fiscal policy and use available resources in the most efficient way.

As regards alignment with the acquis, progress was noted in a number of areas, especially internal market, customs, agriculture and rural development, energy sector, economic and monetary policy, environment and justice, freedom and security. The SA Council underlined the key importance of strengthening the capacity of the institutions to ensure effective implementation and enforcement of laws. In this regard, it was informed of the adoption by the government of the 2012 national programme for adoption of the acquis (NPAA) and the practice to annually upgrade the NPAA on the basis of the Commission's progress reports, which requires appropriate administrative capacity.

The SA Council was informed of the progress achieved in the institutional preparations for decentralized implementation of IPA. In this regard the EU welcomed the conferral of management power decisions for four IPA components, while for the remaining one component preparations are on-going. The SA Council was informed of the country's progressive participation in the community programs and its initiation of the procedure for participation as observer in the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.

The SA Council noted the full trade liberalisation for industrial products and a high degree of liberalisation of trade in agricultural products in line with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. It welcomed the implementation by the country of its obligations under the Agreement. The SA Council recalled the Commission's proposal on the transition to the second stage of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement of October 2009, and noted that the proposal is under consideration. In this regard, the EU welcomed the country's readiness to assume the additional obligations foreseen by the second stage of the SAA.

The EU welcomed the country's continued active participation and the constructive approach in regional cooperation and the contribution to the EU ALTHEA mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as to the EU Battle Group II/2012.
