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**Ninth 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 ninth meeting on 24 July 2012. The meeting was chaired by H.E. Dr. Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, on behalf of High Representative Catherine Ashton. Commissioner Štefan Füle also attended the meeting, as did EEAS Director for the Western Balkans Division, Mr. Fernando Gentilini. The delegation of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was led by H.E. Mr. Nikola Poposki, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, Dr. Teuta Arifi, also attended the meeting.

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 agreement provides the contractual framework within which the EU and the country co-operate and take stock of developments in their relationship.

The SA Council reviewed key developments since the 8th SA Council in January 2012 related to the fulfilment of the political and economic criteria and the country's state of play concerning alignment with the EU *acquis*, as well as the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

The SA Council took note of the country's primary objective and strong commitment to open accession negotiations, taking into account the Commission's recommendation to that effect.

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The SA Council welcomed the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) and the new impetus it has provided to EU-related reforms. The EU recalled that the HLAD was introduced without prejudice to the standard pre-accession procedures. The EU further appreciated the commitment demonstrated by the government to tackle specific concerns under the five priority areas of the HLAD: media - freedom of expression and professional standards; rule of law and fundamental rights; public administration reform; electoral reform and strengthening of market economy. The EU underlined that progress is needed in all the areas identified by the HLAD and encouraged the government to continue efforts to meet the ambitious targets.

Concerning the fulfilment of political criteria, the SA Council noted that the political dialogue has continued across the political spectrum and needs to be maintained. It highlighted the importance of parliamentary scrutiny over government work and of an expert-staffed and functioning Parliamentary Institute in providing specialist assistance on the accession process.

The SA Council emphasised the importance of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which remains an essential element for democracy and rule of law, as enshrined in the country's constitutional and legal order. It welcomed the adoption of an OFA implementation report by the government. The SA Council acknowledged the importance of continuing progress in the equitable representation, decentralisation, use of languages and integrated education, as well as in implementing measures for further strengthening inter-ethnic understanding and confidence.

Regarding the Roma community, the SA Council noted that the budget for the Roma community has been maintained despite the difficult economic situation, and encouraged implementation of concrete projects to support the improvement of the situation of the Roma community in the country. The efforts taken to improve their living conditions and to tackle discrimination need to continue.

The SA Council reviewed the situation as regards freedom of expression in the media and took note of the continuation of the dialogue between the government and the stakeholders. The EU noted that the draft law on civil liability for insult and defamation will be a good step forward once adopted by parliament. It is important that the law is finalised in line with European standards. The EU encouraged stakeholders to continue the dialogue and apply a similar approach on the remaining issues of concern in order to take forward reforms. The EU underlined that freedom of expression is a fundamental right and that the media has the important task of providing citizens with accurate, objective and balanced information which is of public interest.

The SA Council reviewed developments in other areas of protection of human rights and noted in particular the efforts made to strengthen implementation of the legal framework for the promotion and enforcement of human rights, and increase the capacity of relevant institutions.

Concerning the judiciary, the SA Council was informed of the ongoing measures to improve efficiency of the judiciary, reduce the backlog of cases and develop reliable court statistics, as well as of the measures to strengthen professionalism, by reducing the transitional period for enforcement of new professional requirements for the selection of judges in higher courts. The EU emphasised the importance of merit-based recruitment by the Judicial Council and continuous support for the work of the Academy for Training of Judges and Prosecutors.

Concerning the fight against corruption, the SA Council welcomed activities aimed at strengthening anti-corruption measures and verifiable enforcement, including the preparation of quarterly reports on the track record in the fight against corruption, new methods for addressing conflicts of interest and draft legal amendments aiming to improve the management of interception of communications. The EU stressed that these measures need to be implemented in full and a track record needs to be established.

The SA Council discussed developments in the public administration reform and welcomed in particular the decision to prepare a new Law on General Administrative Procedures as well as a Law on Administration that should establish a comprehensive framework for public employment. The SA Council stressed the importance of the high quality of the adopted measures, and their full implementation.

The SA Council welcomed the government's commitment to finalise the work on electoral reform, in line with OSCE/ODIHR and GRECO recommendations, well ahead of the local elections in March 2013, while involving all relevant stakeholders.

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

The EU welcomed the continued active participation and the constructive approach in regional cooperation including in initiatives in South Eastern Europe. In particular, the EU saluted the country's chairmanship of the South East European Cooperation Process between June 2012 and June 2013. It also welcomed the country's contribution to EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and to the EU Battle Group II/2012.

The SA Council reviewed the progress made towards fulfilment of the economic criteria and the functioning of the market economy. It welcomed the country's appropriate macroeconomic policy in the context of the global crisis. With respect to the country's accession perspective, important challenges remain to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the labour market, to strengthen administrative capacities and regulatory and supervisory agencies, and improve the rule of law and contract enforcement. The EU welcomed the steps undertaken to reduce unemployment.

In connection to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), the SA Council was informed of the ongoing measures to strengthen the decentralised implementation system, improve the programming and monitoring process and the coordination of donor activity. The EU underlined the importance of visibility, transparency and impact of IPA projects and called for continued efforts to improve administrative capacities across institutions and supplement them as the needs arise in the future. The SA Council was informed of the country's progressive participation in EU Programmes and its initiation of the procedure for participation as observer in the Fundamental Rights Agency.

The SA Council welcomed the fact that the country continues to fulfil its commitments under the SAA. It discussed progress achieved in various areas covered by the SAA, such as energy, agriculture, internal market, trade, customs and agriculture. It underlined the key importance of strengthening the capacity of the administration to ensure the implementation and enforcement of laws. With regard to trade issues, the SA Council noted that a free trade area is in place for goods under Article 15 of the SAA and acknowledged the requirement to adapt the SAA to accommodate the future accession of Croatia to the EU and its withdrawal from CEFTA.

The SA Council recalled the Commission's proposal of 2009 on the transition to the second stage of the SAA and noted that the proposal is under consideration. In this regard, the EU welcomed the readiness expressed by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to assume the additional commitments for the country foreseen by the second stage of the SAA.
