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**Fourth 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 fourth meeting on 15 May 2012. The meeting was chaired by Mr Edmond Haxhinasto, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania. The Albanian delegation included the Minister for Integration; Mrs Majlinda Bregu, and the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on EU integration, Mr Ditmir Bushati. The EU delegation was led by Mr Villy Søvndal, Danish Minister for Foreign Affairs, 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 the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 5 December, confirmed by the European Council of 9 December 2011.

The SA Council noted the generally smooth implementation of the visa-free regime by Albania, and recalled the commitment of the European Union to the short-term visa free travel regime for Albania. The SA Council expressed confidence in the commitment of the Albanian authorities to ensure respect of the conditions attached to visa liberalisation and underlined the need for consistent and active engagement, in close cooperation with the Commission and EU member states, in taking necessary actions to enforce these conditions. The SA Council called on Albania to also pursue its efforts as regards information to the public on the rights and obligations of travellers to the Schengen area. The SA Council welcomed the current satisfactory implementation of the readmission agreement and encouraged Albania to continue its measures in this context.

P R E S S

The SA Council welcomed the November 2011 political agreement and the resumption of parliamentary cooperation and political dialogue between ruling majority and opposition, which led to encouraging progress on the reform agenda. The SA Council underlined that consolidation of the political dialogue is essential to address the Opinion's recommendations and in particular the 12 key priorities. The SA Council welcomed the adoption by the government of the revised Action Plan to address the Opinion's recommendations following an all-inclusive process. The SA Council recalled the need for rigorous and targeted implementation of the Action Plan focusing on delivering tangible results within the defined timeframes.

The SA Council underlined the European Union's commitment to continue supporting Albania in its integration process while recalling the responsibility of Albanian political leaders of all sides to work constructively on building consensus on needed reforms and for EU integration to become part of the country's national agenda for government, opposition and civil society. Consequently making progress and delivering on key reforms should be seen as part of a process of shared responsibilities as well as a shared success for government and opposition. The SA Council underlined the importance of ensuring a smooth process for electing a President which represents the unity of the people in line with the letter and the spirit of the constitution.

As regards fulfillment of the key priorities, the SA Council noted positive developments with the establishment and work achieved to date by the working group for the revision of the Parliament's rules of procedure and the cross-party parliamentary committee on electoral reform. The EU reiterated the importance of addressing the recommendations made by the OSCE/ODIHR for the 2007, 2009, 2011 elections and by the Council of Europe Venice Commission in order to improve over past practices and ensure compliance with EU and international standards for democratic elections. The SA Council recalled the need for a timely completion of these reforms through a cross-party consensus process. It also welcomed the adoption of all laws requiring a reinforced majority in Parliament and the appointment of the Ombudsman, while encouraging adoption of forthcoming laws that require reinforced majority and, ensuring transparent and orderly procedures for hearings and voting for pending constitutional and high court appointments.

The SA Council called for further efforts in public administration reform, including adoption of pending laws, such as amendments to the civil service law, and implementation of existing legislative and policy tools. The SA Council noted the adoption of the judiciary reform strategy and recalled that ensuring independence, impartiality, transparency, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary are central elements in the assessment of the political criteria for EU accession, and key in ensuring the respect for the rule of law. The EU underlined that appropriate judicial follow-up is given to the events of 21 January 2011 through a full and independent criminal investigation, and that the investigation is followed by prosecution and convictions as appropriate. The SA Council stressed that introduction of measures to limit or lift the immunity of high-level officials and judges would help to remove obstacles to proper investigation. The SA Council was informed on Albania's efforts to improve the legal and operational framework and inter-agency cooperation and, underlined the need to strengthen political commitment in order to achieve a solid track record in the fight against corruption. It noted the efforts made in fighting organised crime and recalled the necessity to establish a solid track record of prosecutions and convictions in cases of corruption and organised crime, including at high level.

The SA Council recalled that adoption and implementation of a property rights strategy and action plan, covering restitution, compensation and legalisation, is a key priority of the Opinion and preparations thereof need to be accelerated. The EU called on Albania to develop the strategy in full consultation with all stakeholders, and taking ECtHR case law into account. The SA Council welcomed the adoption of amendments to the civil and criminal code on defamation and recalled the importance of improving openness and transparency in the media market to further enhance freedom of expression. The SA Council noted that the institutional and legislative framework for human rights is largely in place and recalled the necessity to ensure implementation and sustainability of legislative and policy tools in this field. It welcomed efforts made in improving the treatment of detained persons and development of the probation service which needs to be further strengthened. The SA Council encouraged swift adoption and implementation 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 policies towards minorities.

As regards the economic criteria, the SA Council noted that the economy continued to grow, albeit at a lower pace. It noted efforts made towards establishing a functioning market economy and improving the regulatory framework for business to address shortcomings regarding property rights, enforceability of contracts and rule of law. The SA Council encouraged Albania to take measures to strengthen fiscal consolidation thereby ensuring a lasting decline in the debt-to-GDP ratio.

The SA Council welcomed progress made by Albania in aligning its legislation and capacity with European standards and noted the satisfactory implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). It noted progress in aligning with EU standards in areas such as free movement of goods, SME policy, external relations and financial control while noting the need for further efforts in areas such as intellectual property law, information society, transport, energy and environment. The SA Council noted that Albania had adopted almost all the *acquis* on electronic communication services and networks in line with its SAA commitments. Further efforts are needed in the area of protection of intellectual and industrial property in order to make sure relevant SAA commitments are met. The strengthening of Albania's administrative capacity to effectively implement the SAA must continue.

The SA Council noted with satisfaction Albania's continuous alignment with EU statements in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy. The SA Council welcomed the decision of the Foreign Affairs Council on 22-23 March 2012 to authorise the signing of a framework agreement for the participation of Albania in European crisis management operations. It also welcomed the adoption by the Albanian Parliament of the law concerning cooperation with the EULEX Special Investigative Task Force.

The SA Council exchanged views on developments in the Western Balkans region and commended the constructive role of Albania in maintaining regional stability, promoting reconciliation and fostering good neighbourly relations with other Western Balkan countries. It acknowledged Albania's active participation in regional cooperation initiatives and its successful chairmanships of the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) and A5 – Adriatic Charter, as well as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). The SA Council also welcomed Albania's chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.
