



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council No 1068 Vienna, 17 September 2015

EU Statement in Response to the Report by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, H.E. Ambassador Nina Suomalainen

The European Union and its Member States warmly welcome H.E. Ambassador Nina Suomalainen, as the new Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, as well as Deputy Head of Mission Berecz and thank them for their comprehensive report.

The European Union has consistently reiterated its commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, in line with the Thessaloniki Agenda and in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria and the conditionality of the Stabilisation and Association process, including regional co-operation and good neighbourly relations. It is in this framework that the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been granted the status of candidate country. In this regard, we recall the conclusions of the 16 December 2014 General Affairs Council of the European Union.

We underline the importance we attach to the full implementation of the 2 June agreement and its 15 July Protocol between the government and opposition parties. This is an important step to overcome the recent political crisis and towards addressing key challenges facing the country. Political leaders must now swiftly implement the agreement in good faith.

We share the concerns expressed by Ambassador Suomalainen that the political crisis is a distraction from the country's implementation of the reforms required to ensure a democratic and inclusive state. The deteriorating situation in the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights and freedoms, which are core democratic values at the heart of the EU and its enlargement policy, is a source of continued concern. In this regard, we also recall the Council conclusions of 21 April and 23 June this year.

We call on all political leaders of the country to jointly address all issues the country is facing, including those undermining mutual understanding and cooperative interethnic relations, in a spirit of constructive dialogue. More long-term confidence-building measures at the political level are needed to increase trust between communities.

We welcome the Mission's ongoing work, based on its refocused and streamlined programmatic approach initiated as of 2013 and shaped around its three priorities: supporting further implementation of Ohrid Framework Agreement, advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations and maintaining the Mission's effective monitoring and early warning capacity, including through the invaluable role of its field station in Tetovo. We would appreciate the Mission's thoughts on how it can best support the government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to draw lessons from the Kumanovo events.

More specifically, the review of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, particularly important for intercommunity and interethnic relations, needs to be completed and its recommendations implemented, working towards the development of a comprehensive integration policy framework. In this context, we would appreciate more information from the Mission on how it will support the Government's planned review of implementation, and for some concrete examples of Mission's work on implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement over the past 12 months.

Key to fixing the current political crisis in the country is for the parties to honour their political agreements and to deliver credible elections in April 2016. We therefore attach particular importance to the Mission's participation in the working group on electoral reform, chaired by an EU facilitator, who is following up on elements of the 2 June/15 July agreements. At the same time, we call on the national authorities to implement all OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. We welcome ODIHR's readiness to observe the early elections in April 2016. We would appreciate an enhanced election observation mission prior to the elections. We would appreciate it if Ambassador Suomalainen could provide an update on how the OSCE intends to support the government in delivering credible elections next April and support implementation of ODIHR recommendations.

We share the Mission's assessment that the country still faces serious challenges regarding media freedom. The overall climate and media culture need to be improved particularly looking ahead to early elections next year. In this regard we would appreciate further information on how the Mission intends to support progress in this area.

We welcome the appointment of the Special Prosecutor, and underline the importance of a credible and full investigation into the wiretap allegations. We hope that Parliament will now urgently take the next steps and call for the necessary support to be provided to help the Special Prosecutor fulfil her task.

The European Union fully supports the Mission's continuous efforts on promoting the rule of law, including its assistance in the implementation of Criminal Justice Reform and development of a professional police service.

We underline the importance of the Mission investing in enhanced cooperation with other OSCE field operations in the region, the Representative on Freedom of the Media and the High Commissioner on National Minorities including on improving political and inter-ethnic dialogue. Further coordination with national and international counterparts and civil society organisations should also remain a priority.

In this regard, we encourage the Mission, in carrying out its mandate, and in continuing close cooperation with the European Union and other international actors on the ground, to continue assisting the country to implement legislation which meets European standards and complies with its international commitments. In this context, we also support the Mission's important confidence building role on the ground through its monitoring activities and we encourage the authorities of the host country to take full advantage of the OSCE assistance when they pursue their ambitious reform agenda.

With regards to the migration and refugee crisis, we commend the Mission for working with local and international stakeholders on this issue.

We underline that for the Mission to Skopje, and for all field operations, effective evaluation based on benchmarking and performance indicators is essential to ensure efficient use of resources and aids the development of best practices and the process of lessons learned.

Finally, we would like to assure you, Ambassador, of our full support and wish you and your team success in your important work.

The Candidate Countries MONTENEGRO*, ICELAND+ and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA country NORWAY, member of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine align themselves with this statement.

* Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.