



**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Luxembourg, 21 June 2011
11901/11
PRESSE 191

SECOND MEETING OF THE EU - MONTENEGRO STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION COUNCIL

Joint Press Release

The Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) between the European Union and Montenegro held its second meeting on 21 June 2011 in Luxembourg. The meeting was chaired by Milan Roćen, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, on behalf of the Government of Montenegro. The delegation of the European Union was led by Mr Zsolt Németh, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, on behalf of High Representative Catherine Ashton. Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle was also present.

The SA Council recalled its first constitutive meeting held on 14 June 2010 and reaffirmed the continuation of constructive relations and cooperation between the European Union and Montenegro. The SA Council welcomed the progress achieved by Montenegro in implementing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). The first meeting of the SAA Committee was held on 13 May 2011 and meetings of all eight Subcommittees have been held since the last SA Council. The SA Council welcomed the holding of two Parliamentary Committees for Stabilisation and Association that intensified parliamentary cooperation between Montenegro and the EU.

The SA Council recalled that the European Council granted candidate status to Montenegro on 17 December 2010 on the basis of the November 2010 Opinion of the European Commission. The SA Council welcomed the adoption of the “Action plan for Monitoring the Implementation of the Recommendations from the EC Opinion” following consultations with the European Commission and a wide public debate with civil society and other actors.

P R E S S

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The SA Council commended the constructive role of Montenegro in maintaining regional stability and strengthening good neighbourly relations with other Western Balkan countries. It noted that cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) remains satisfactory and recognised the overall respect and fulfilment of international obligations. In particular, it acknowledged Montenegro's successful chairmanship of the South East European Cooperation Process, of the Central European Initiative and of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative and the Adriatic-Ionian Charter, as well as its active participation in various initiatives in South Eastern Europe. The SA Council highlighted the particular importance of the implementation of the extradition agreements concluded with Serbia and Croatia and welcomed steps taken on signing such an agreement with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The SA Council reviewed the progress in meeting the Copenhagen criteria —particularly the political criteria. It took note that Montenegro continued to make further progress in addressing the areas of democracy and rule of law. The SA Council encouraged further efforts to strengthen the administrative capacity of the Parliament. As regards the election law, the SA Council took note with regret that Montenegro's 31 May deadline for harmonisation of the electoral legislation was not met and had to be extended for another two months. It encouraged political actors in Montenegro to work constructively in order to reach a compromise on outstanding issues and ensure the prompt adoption of the law, in line with recommendations of the OSCE-ODIHR and the Venice Commission.

The SA Council appreciated Montenegro's efforts towards finalising the legal framework in order to strengthen a de-politicised, professional, efficient and merit-based public administration. The EU encouraged Montenegro to meet the set deadline for passing the Law on Civil Servants based on these principles and to continue work on drafting the Law on Administrative Procedure.

As regards the judiciary, the SA Council was informed that the Montenegrin Government had adopted a proposal on amending the Constitution to strengthen judicial independence and submitted it to the Parliament for adoption, and that a number of laws relating to justice were in the procedure of adoption by the Government.

The SA Council supported the good progress achieved in enhancing the legal and administrative framework regarding efforts in the fight against corruption and organised crime and encouraged Montenegro to continue with its efforts towards achieving concrete results. The SA Council was informed that Montenegro had completed an organised crime threat assessment and had undertaken initial steps to develop a crime mapping in this area. The SA Council recalled that corruption and organised crime remain issues of particular serious concern and form part of the key priorities, as identified in the Commission's Opinion.

The SA Council welcomed that the legislative framework governing human rights and the respect for and protection of minorities, in accordance with the 'Copenhagen criteria' is largely in place and notes that further efforts are still needed for its implementation. This applies also to anti-discrimination policies, especially when it comes to vulnerable groups. The Council stressed the importance of adopting the Ombudsman Law, in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission as soon as possible.

The SA Council welcomed the decision of the Montenegrin Government to provide aid to electronic and printed media and supported efforts made to strengthen the right to freedom of expression. The Council welcomed efforts to abolish defamation and insult as criminal offences. In this sense, the SA Council emphasised the importance of consistent implementation of the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. The Council welcomed the cooperation between the Montenegrin Government and civil society, as well as civil society's increasingly active participation in the process of adoption of legislative acts and programmatic documents.

Montenegro informed the SA Council about efforts made to provide a legal status to displaced persons present in the country and to find a sustainable solution for the Konik Camp. In that context, both sides emphasised the importance they attach to the granting of legal status to displaced persons. The EU recalled that the Montenegrin Government needs to fully and effectively implement its action plan for displaced persons. Montenegro reported about further steps undertaken to this end.

The SA Council welcomed the progress made by Montenegro in preserving macroeconomic stability, by implementing appropriate fiscal policy and other measures which resulted in a 1,1% GDP growth in 2010. The SA Council also encouraged Montenegro to continue structural reforms, in particular strengthening the rule of law, physical infrastructure and human resources and to continue further measures for removal of business barriers and improvement of business environment.

The SA Council positively assessed Montenegro's progress in harmonising the legal framework and institutional capacity with European standards in a number of policy sectors and urged Montenegro to intensify efforts in this regard.

The SA Council commended Montenegro for the so far smooth implementation of the visa-free regime and effective implementation of the readmission agreement with the EU.

The SA Council welcomed the signing of the Agreement between Montenegro and the European Union on Security Procedures for Exchanging and Protecting Classified Information (entered into force on 1 December 2010) and the Agreement between Montenegro and the European Union Establishing a Framework for the Participation of Montenegro in European Crisis Management Operations (provisionally applied since 22 February 2011).

The SA Council noted with satisfaction Montenegro's continuous alignment with EU statements in the field of Common Foreign and Security Policy. Montenegro informed the SA Council that it has aligned with Council Decision 2011/168/CFSP on the International Criminal Court (ICC). The EU invited Montenegro to fully align its position on the ICC to that of the EU as soon as possible.

The SA Council noted an extraordinary high level of use of IPA funds and was informed of the status of implementation of approved projects under the annual programmes for 2007-2010, while programming of the national programme for 2011 is in its final phase. As a candidate country Montenegro will have access to all five components of the IPA programme. In this regard, the SA Council stressed the importance of intensifying preparations for accreditation to introduce the Decentralised Management System and training of national operational structures regarding management of European funds. The SA Council noted that the annual IPA financial allocations to Montenegro amount to around EUR 35 million per year.

The SA Council welcomed Montenegro's participation in the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Progress (FP7), the programme Culture 2007-2013, the Framework Programme for Competitiveness and Innovation – the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Programme (EIP) component and the component for support to the information and communication technologies development policy (ICT) as well as finalising the procedures for participation in the Customs 2013 Programme.

The SA Council established two Joint Consultative Committees; one between the European Economic and Social Committee and Montenegro's social partners and other civil society organisations, and another one between the Committee of the Regions of the European Union and Montenegrin local and regional authorities. Moreover, the Parliamentary dimension of relations is being strengthened through the SA Parliamentary Committee meetings. Montenegro informed the SA Council about its intention to become an observer to the Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna. This contributes to the intensification of our relations in all areas, at all levels.
