



**COUNCIL OF  
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Brussels, 23 March 2010  
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**Sixth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council  
between the European Union and Croatia  
Brussels, 23 March 2010**

**JOINT PRESS RELEASE**

1. The EU-Croatia Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) held its sixth meeting on Tuesday 23 March 2010. The meeting was chaired by Mr Gordan JANDROKOVIĆ, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia and Head of delegation of the Republic of Croatia. Mr Ángel LOSSADA, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of Spain, led the European Union delegation. Mr Štefan FÜLE, Commissioner responsible for Enlargement, represented the European Commission.
2. The SA Council noted that accession negotiations with Croatia have progressed significantly and have entered their final phase. In this light, the SA Council welcomed the setting up of a working group for the drafting of the Accession Treaty of Croatia and the Commission communication outlining a financial package for the accession negotiations with Croatia. The SA Council commended Croatia for the considerable efforts it has made over the past year, and the good overall progress made, in particular in meeting the benchmarks set in the negotiations. Overall, 30 chapters (out of 35) have been opened, of which 17 have been provisionally closed, since the opening of the negotiations.

**P R E S S**

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Building on the progress already made, the SA Council recalled that Croatia must continue its reform efforts, in particular in key areas such as judiciary and public administration, the fight against corruption and organised crime, respect for and protection of minorities, including the return of refugees, prosecution of war crimes and in pursuing further economic reforms, to build up a convincing track record in these areas.

The SA Council also recalled that Croatia's progress towards the conclusion of the negotiations depends in particular on its completion of the necessary political, economic, legislative and administrative reforms. In this light, addressing the above reforms, as well as meeting all outstanding benchmarks in time will be essential for Croatia if it is to meet its objective to conclude accession negotiations in 2010.

The SA Council encouraged Croatia to additionally increase attention to further transposition and effective implementation of the acquis, in order to be able to meet the obligations of membership in good time. The SA Council reaffirmed that the pace of negotiations continues to depend in particular on progress made by Croatia in fulfilling the conditions laid down, including fulfilment of opening and closing benchmarks and the requirements specified in the Negotiating Framework, which cover inter alia the fulfilment of Croatia's obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and the implementation of the revised Accession Partnership.

3. The SA Council reviewed the state of Croatia's preparations for accession, in particular in the light of the Commission's 2009 Progress Report. As regards the judicial system, the SA Council noted that a large volume of new legislation was adopted, in line with the key Accession Partnership priority in this area. However, the SA Council encouraged Croatia to put further efforts to fully implement its action plan for judicial reform, to ensure proper and full execution of court rulings, to rationalise the court network and to pay particular attention to the implementation of an open, fair and transparent system for the appointment, training, evaluation and disciplining of judicial officials. The SA Council also noted that Croatia continues its efforts to reform its public administration, including by adopting a new Law on General Administrative Procedures and by establishing a new post of Minister for Administration within the Government and encouraged Croatia to sustain further efforts in this area, so that this political commitment translates into concrete actions. Furthermore, while noting that some results are being achieved, the SA Council recalled that important further efforts are needed in Croatia to proactively prevent, detect, effectively prosecute and judge corruption, especially high level corruption, and organised crime, including a convincing track record of convictions.

The SA Council noted the generally good cooperation of Croatia with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on the majority of requests while recalling that full cooperation remains essential in line with the Negotiating Framework (including the necessary steps to complete a comprehensive and credible investigation for certain military documents). As regards prosecution of war crimes trials in Croatia itself, the SA Council noted that Croatia continues to be active in trying war crimes cases on its own initiative, and that a more balanced approach is emerging. However, the SA Council stressed the need for further important improvements in the conduct of war crimes trials in Croatia, in order to ensure fully unbiased, impartial trials as well as tackling impunity, and to improve witness protection.

As regards refugee return, the SA Council welcomed the overall progress achieved on the reconstruction of housing, inviting Croatia to further step up its efforts towards addressing the issues of repossession of occupied property, pension rights convalidation, and the ensuring of the economic and social conditions for sustainable refugee return.

The SA Council noted that the situation of minorities continues to improve and welcomed the continued political integration of minorities in Croatia and the high-level commitment to this issue. In this context, the SA Council recalled the need to ensure that improvements on the ground are achieved, by effectively implementing the relevant legal framework, in particular the constitutional law on the rights of national minorities, and by encouraging a spirit of tolerance towards minorities.

The SA Council welcomed progress made in the area of regional cooperation and encouraged Croatia to continue its efforts towards good neighbourly relations, which remain key. In this context, the SA Council also welcomed the Arbitration Agreement reached between Croatia and Slovenia on 11 September 2009, that was signed on 4 November 2009 and ratified by Croatia on 20 November 2009. The SA Council invited Croatia to continue working on finding mutually acceptable definitive solutions to all pending bilateral issues with neighbouring countries, especially as regards border issues, and to pursue efforts aimed at reconciliation among citizens in the region.

4. The SA Council recalled that Croatia is a functioning market economy that should be able to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union in the medium term, provided that it implements its comprehensive reform programme with determination in order to reduce structural weaknesses. The SA Council noted that the global financial and economic crisis strongly affected Croatian economy which went into a recession in 2009 but the macroeconomic policy response has by and large been appropriate. The SA Council underlined that further fiscal consolidation efforts are required in view of financing constraints and that structural reforms would be essential to ensure sustainability of public finances.

5. The SA Council noted that Croatia has improved its ability to take on the obligations of membership and that preparations for meeting EU requirements are moving forward at a steady pace and alignment with EU rules is generally high. The SA Council devoted once more particular attention to issues linked to the functioning of the internal market, public procurement, competition, taxation, agriculture and rural development, food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy, fisheries, energy, transport policy, environment and justice and home affairs. The SA Council noted that there has been progress, both in terms of legislative alignment and of administrative capacity, but Croatia should continue its efforts towards meeting EU accession requirements.
  
6. The SA Council reviewed the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement which has largely continued without major difficulty with some exceptions which require close attention, in particular as regards the completion of the restructuring of the shipyards and the need to ensure a track record of improved implementation under all IPA components. The SA Council also welcomed that Croatia has contributed to the smooth functioning of the various joint institutions and noted Croatia's continued participation in a number of Community programmes.
  
7. Finally the SA Council had an exchange of views concerning recent developments in the Western Balkans region.

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