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– Council conclusions

Delegations will find attached Council conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process as adopted by the Council on 15 December 2015.

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

**COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON ENLARGEMENT AND STABILISATION AND
ASSOCIATION PROCESS**

1. The Council takes note of the communication from the Commission of 10 November 2015 on the EU Enlargement Strategy and the reports on Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo^{*}, and of the conclusions and recommendations therein. The Council welcomes the Commission's increased focus on the state of play, the provision of more guidance, as well as the further harmonisation of reporting.
2. In line with the renewed consensus on enlargement approved by the European Council on 14 and 15 December 2006, and the Council conclusions of 16 December 2014, the Council reiterates that enlargement remains a key policy of the European Union and an investment in the peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability of our continent. In this context, the Council reiterates the EU's unequivocal commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Turkey remains a key partner in many areas. Active and credible accession negotiations, which respect the EU's commitments and established conditionality, will contribute to EU-Turkey relations to achieving their full potential.
3. In line with previous Council conclusions and in the framework of the Copenhagen political criteria and the Stabilisation and Association Process, that remains the common framework for relations with the Western Balkans, the Council reaffirms the need, in accordance with the renewed consensus on enlargement, for fair and rigorous conditionality and the principle of own merits, combined with the EU's capacity, in all its dimensions, to integrate new members.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

4. The Council continues to attach great importance to the credibility of the Enlargement Process, which remains crucial to maintaining the momentum of reform. Public support for and understanding of the benefits and obligations of enlargement should be enhanced through improved strategic communication. The Council looks forward to the plan of the Commission and the EEAS to step up their efforts and actions, along with the continued engagement of Member States and partners in this area. The Council welcomes the continued efforts of the Commission to strengthen the focus on addressing fundamental reforms early in the process, in particular on rule of law issues, fundamental rights, economic development and competitiveness, and on the strengthening of democratic institutions and public administration reform.

5. The rule of law is a fundamental value on which the EU is founded and which is at the heart of both the Enlargement Process and of the Stabilisation and Association Process. Strengthening the rule of law, including through judicial reforms and by tackling organised crime and corruption, as well as fundamental rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, the non-discriminatory treatment of national minorities, as well as tackling discrimination of vulnerable groups such as the Roma, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, remain key challenges. The Council is seriously concerned by the shortcomings in the area of freedom of expression and media which should be addressed in a decisive and effective way. Further work is also required to promote gender equality. Proper functioning of democratic institutions, requiring inclusive political dialogue and compromise, notably within parliaments, as well as public administration reform, are crucial. An enabling environment for civil society organisations needs to be ensured. Further efforts are needed to improve economic governance, competitiveness, business environment, growth, job creation, in order to ensure sustainable economic development. A solid track record of reform implementation, leading to tangible results, is to be established in all these fields.

6. Good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation are essential elements of the Enlargement Process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process, and contribute to prosperity, stability, reconciliation and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and the legacies of the past. In general, continued efforts are needed to tackle outstanding bilateral disputes, including border disputes, in order to ensure that they do not have a detrimental effect on the accession process. Outstanding disputes and issues should be solved in line with international law and established principles, including through implementation of legally binding agreements, inter alia the Agreement on Succession Issues.
7. The Council welcomes the positive developments in South Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in regional cooperation, in particular progress on connectivity within the region and with the EU, including on the connectivity agenda. It fully supports initiatives and structures which reinforce inclusive regional cooperation. The Council also welcomes the efforts made to overcome legacies of the past, foster reconciliation and support inclusive regional cooperation, including through promoting a climate of tolerance and condemning all forms of hate speech or wartime rhetoric. The Council reiterates the need to avoid any source of friction or actions that could damage good neighbourly relations and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Continuous efforts are needed in this regard, including the protection of all minorities, ensuring equal rights for all citizens, and addressing the issues of missing persons and refugee return. The Council underlines the need to continue handling domestic war crimes cases, as well as addressing impunity for war crimes and to ensure accountability, including fully cooperating with and supporting the work of ICTY and the EULEX Special Investigative Task Force and Specialist Chambers.
8. While recognising in particular the importance of visa liberalisation for citizens, the Council encourages the Commission to continue to closely monitor the implementation of all conditions set for visa liberalisation, including through its follow-up mechanism. The Council encourages the authorities concerned to actively continue their efforts to take all the necessary measures against the abuse of the visa free travel regime.

9. The Council underlines the growing importance of further deepening cooperation on foreign policy issues and of progressive alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions, notably on issues where major common interests are at stake, such as on restrictive measures.
10. In line with the orientations of the informal meeting of the Heads of State and Government of 12 February 2015 and the Council conclusions on the renewed European Union Internal Security Strategy for 2015-2020, the Council recalls the importance of a reinforced cooperation with the Western Balkans and Turkey to fight terrorism, in particular regarding the fight against illegal trafficking of firearms, the fight against financing of terrorism, combat and prevention of radicalisation and reinforced border checks, making best use of regional platforms such as the Western Balkans counter-terrorism initiative and the Salzburg Forum. The Council calls on Western Balkans partners to step up legal and operational measures against illegal trafficking of firearms, in particular by improving the use of existing databases and the exchange of information. The Commission is invited to address this issue in the framework of its pre-accession support.
11. The Council commends Turkey and the Western Balkans, at present in particular Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, for their efforts in addressing the refugee and migration crisis which has seriously affected the region. The Council calls for increased cooperation between the EU and the region, as well as within the region. This is urgently required to further address the situation, in order to identify people in need of protection, to provide assistance, to secure the EU's external borders, to fight trafficking and smuggling of migrants, and to prevent irregular migration. The Council calls for the continued implementation of the recommendations contained in the declaration of the High-Level Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans Route. The EU will use the financial instruments and technical assistance available within the Enlargement Process and the Stabilisation and Association Process, including the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II), to strengthen cooperation and provide support in this field.

12. The Council recalls the continued EU financial assistance for the Enlargement Process and the Stabilisation and Association Process, in particular in the form of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II), with a focus on key priorities and enhanced coherence between the financial assistance and the overall progress made in the implementation of the pre-accession strategy, increased budget support and prioritisation of projects.

ENLARGEMENT

TURKEY

13. The Council reaffirms the importance it attaches to EU relations with Turkey, a candidate country and a key partner for the Union, as underlined by the recent EU-Turkey Leaders' meeting. The EU should remain the anchor for Turkey's political and economic reforms. The Council welcomes the recently reaffirmed commitment of the new Turkish government to EU accession. Recalling the conclusions of the European Council of 15 October 2015, the accession process needs to be re-energized with a view to achieving progress in the negotiations in accordance with the negotiating framework and the relevant Council conclusions. In this regard, the Council welcomes the opening of chapter 17 – Economic and Monetary Policy on 14 December 2015. The Council stands ready to fully support Turkey in case it intends to intensify work to fulfil set opening benchmarks, in particular of chapters 5, 8 and 19. The Council takes note of the Commission's intention to present the preparatory documents of a number of chapters in the first quarter of 2016, without prejudice to Member States' positions. Turkey can accelerate the pace of negotiations by advancing in the fulfilment of the benchmarks, meeting the requirements of the negotiating framework and by respecting its contractual obligations towards the EU.

14. In this context and building on the outcome of the recent EU-Turkey Leaders' meeting, the Council welcomes the broad and coherent strategic engagement and comprehensive regular political dialogue within the established framework, including at Ministerial level. The Council also welcomes cooperation with Turkey in key areas of joint interest and challenges such as migration, counter-terrorism, energy, economy and trade, including the Customs Union, as provided for in the Council conclusions of 16 December 2014. These important engagements complement the accession negotiations and the Council stands ready to further develop the cooperation with Turkey within established frameworks. The Council calls on Turkey to progressively align with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy in line with the Negotiating Framework.
15. The Council commends Turkey for its generosity in hosting and addressing the needs of over 2 million Syrian refugees. The Council welcomes the activation, on 29 November 2015, of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan for refugees and migration management, as part of a comprehensive cooperation agenda based on shared responsibility, mutual commitments and delivery. The Council looks forward to monitoring, in close cooperation with the Commission, its swift and effective implementation, with a view to achieving results in particular in stemming the influx of irregular migrants and the dismantling of criminal smuggling networks.

16. The Council notes positively that Turkey, as regards alignment with the EU *acquis*, has reached a good level of preparation in many areas, in particular as regards economic criteria. However, a number of developments give cause for serious concern. Turkey urgently needs to remedy and further address major shortcomings identified in the Commission's report, notably in the areas of rule of law and fundamental rights. Steps should be taken as a matter of urgency, particularly towards reversing the undermining of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, and the significant backsliding in the area of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The Council notes with particular concern the judicial proceedings brought against critical media, journalists, writers, as well as social media platforms and users. The Council calls on Turkey to ensure the full respect for the principle of separation of powers and for human rights, including rights of women, children and persons belonging to minorities, freedom of religion and property rights, as well as to enhance implementation of all the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. The Council recalls that under Article 46 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the contracting parties undertake to abide by the final judgments of the Court in any case to which they are parties. Addressing other important areas where little or no progress has been noted, such as the fight against corruption, should also be a priority. In order to address these and other issues, the Council considers that stepping up cooperation in the area of rule of law and fundamental rights will bring Turkey closer to the EU. In this regard, the Council takes note of the Commission's commitment to complete, in the first quarter of 2016, preparatory work in these key areas, without prejudice to Member States' positions.
17. The Council condemns all terrorist attacks and violence in Turkey and expresses its solidarity with the people of Turkey. The Council pledges its support to fight terrorism, while respecting human rights, fundamental freedoms, and international law.
18. With regard to the situation in the South East of Turkey, the Council calls for the immediate cessation of terrorist violence and strongly urges the parties to resume the peace talks, aiming for a sustained political solution to the Kurdish issue. This could put an end to related terrorism and facilitate economic and social development in the region.

19. With regard to visa liberalisation, the Council notes that successful implementation of the joint Action Plan for refugees and migration management between the EU and Turkey could contribute to accelerating the fulfilment of the visa liberalisation roadmap towards all participating Member States. While regretting Turkey's unilateral statements in this regard, which have no legal effect, the Council underlines the importance of full and effective implementation of both the readmission agreement and the visa roadmap vis-à-vis all Member States, including cooperation on JHA issues and non-discriminatory visa free access to the Turkish territory for the citizens of all EU Member States. Pending this, adequate implementation of existing bilateral readmission agreements and provisions contained in similar agreements between Turkey and EU Member States, as well as reinforced management of the common borders with all EU Member States, remain a priority. The Council looks forward to the Commission's forthcoming reports on progress by Turkey in fulfilling the requirements of its visa liberalisation roadmap, in 2016.
20. In line with the Negotiating Framework and previous European Council and Council conclusions, the Council reiterates that Turkey needs to commit itself unequivocally to good neighbourly relations and to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the United Nations Charter, having recourse, if necessary, to the International Court of Justice. In this context, the Union expresses once again serious concern, and urges Turkey to avoid any kind of threat or action directed against a Member State, or source of friction or actions, which damage good neighbourly relations and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Moreover, the EU stresses again all the sovereign rights of EU Member States. This includes, inter alia, the right to enter into bilateral agreements and to explore and exploit natural resources in accordance with the EU *acquis* and international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and also stresses the need to respect the sovereignty of Member States over their territorial sea and airspace. The Council recalls that the European Council, in its conclusions of 24 October 2014, expressed serious concern about the renewed tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean and urged Turkey to show restraint and to respect Cyprus' sovereignty over its territorial sea and Cyprus' sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone.

21. Recalling its conclusions of 11 December 2006 and the declaration of 21 September 2005, the Council notes with deep regret that Turkey, despite repeated calls, continues refusing to fulfil its obligation of full, non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement towards all Member States, the fulfilment of which could provide a significant boost to the negotiation process. In the absence of progress on this issue, the Council will maintain its measures from 2006, which will have a continuous effect on the overall progress of the negotiations. Furthermore, Turkey has regrettably still not made progress towards the necessary normalisation of its relations with the Republic of Cyprus. The Council recalls its position on accession of EU Member States to international organisations. The Council reiterates that recognition of all Member States is a necessary component of the accession process. The Council invites the Commission to continue to monitor closely and specifically report on all issues covered by the declaration of 21 September 2005 in its forthcoming annual report. On this basis, the Council will continue to closely follow and review progress made, in accordance with its relevant conclusions. The Council reiterates its call for progress without any further delay.
22. The Council welcomes the engagement by the parties to the settlement of the Cyprus problem, as demonstrated in the joint declaration of 11 February 2014, and as reaffirmed by the statement of 30 October 2015. Noting the recent encouraging developments over the past year, and as emphasised by the Negotiating Framework, the Council expects Turkey to actively support the negotiations aimed at a fair, comprehensive and viable settlement of the Cyprus problem within the UN framework, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and in line with the principles on which the Union is founded. Turkey's commitment and contribution in concrete terms to such a comprehensive settlement remains crucial.

MONTENEGRO

23. The Council welcomes the continued progress in the accession negotiations with Montenegro. The Council takes positive note of improvements in the legal framework in the area of the rule of law and work on the establishment of new institutions. It is now essential for the overall pace of the negotiating process that the entire rule of law system deliver concrete results, in particular to establish a solid track record in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Further efforts are needed to guarantee the freedom of expression and of the media, to pursue the public administration reform, to strengthen the independence of institutions, as well as to improve the business environment.
24. The Council calls upon all political parties to show responsibility and re-engage in a constructive dialogue, with parliament being the key forum for political debate. Moreover, ensuring the full implementation of the new electoral legislation will be important.
25. The Council notes with satisfaction Montenegro's positive role in further developing regional cooperation and advancing good neighbourly relations. Moreover, the Council commends Montenegro for its cooperation on foreign policy issues, and in particular its full alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions.
26. The Council looks forward to the next meeting of the Accession Conference on 21 December 2015, with a view to the opening of further negotiating chapters.

SERBIA

27. The Council welcomes the major steps Serbia has taken in the past year which led to the opening of the first chapters of the EU accession negotiations at the Accession Conference on 14 December 2015. The Council takes positive note of Serbia's submission of its Action Plans for chapters 23 - Judiciary and fundamental rights, and 24 - Justice, freedom and security, which should provide clear guidance for future reforms and for developing a solid track-record in these areas. The Council recalls that progress under these chapters will need to be made in parallel with progress in negotiations overall.

28. The Council encourages Serbia to take this positive momentum forward and to intensify legislative reforms and their effective implementation in the key areas of judicial reform, fight against corruption and organised crime, and freedom of expression and the media. Particular attention needs to be paid to the full respect of fundamental rights, including protection of the most vulnerable groups, particularly the Roma, as well as to the effective implementation of legislation on the protection of minorities, the non-discriminatory treatment of national minorities throughout Serbia, including in the areas of education, use of minority languages, access to media and religious services in minority languages, and tackling discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The Council looks forward to Serbia's submission of the already foreseen strategic documents. Further progress is also required in the areas of independence of democratic institutions, public administration, as well as in developing a functioning market economy and improving the business environment.
29. The Council welcomes the significant progress in the EU facilitated Dialogue, in particular with the 25 August agreements. The Council urges Serbia to swiftly implement its part of these agreements and to engage constructively with Kosovo in formulating and implementing future agreements. Serbia needs to maintain its active and constructive engagement in the normalisation process with Kosovo, which has seen significant progress, in particular with the agreements reached on 25 August 2015. The Council will continue to monitor closely Serbia's continued engagement towards visible and sustainable progress in the normalisation of relations with Kosovo, including the implementation in good faith of all agreements reached so far, so that Serbia and Kosovo can continue on their respective European paths, while avoiding that either can block the other in these efforts and with the prospect of both being able to fully exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities. The Council recalls that progress in the process of normalisation of relations with Kosovo under chapter 35 needs to be made in parallel with progress in Serbia's accession negotiations, in line with the Negotiating Framework.
30. The Council notes with satisfaction Serbia's increasingly constructive engagement in regional cooperation. Serbia should continue strengthening good neighbourly relations. The Council calls on Serbia to progressively align with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy in line with the Negotiating Framework.

STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION PROCESS

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

31. The Council reaffirms its conclusions regarding the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia adopted in December 2014, April and June 2015, the EU commitment under the Thessaloniki agenda and the candidate status of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The Council reiterates its unequivocal commitment to the EU accession process of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
32. The Council reiterates its grave concern about the situation in the country, in particular the serious political crisis, marked by a divisive political culture, lack of culture of compromise, backsliding on freedom of expression and judicial independence, as well as further erosion of trust in public institutions. The Council welcomes the June/July political agreement, noting steps taken so far to implement it, including the opposition's return to Parliament and the adoption of changes to the electoral code, and calls for its full and constructive implementation by all parties, according to the agreed timetable and objectives, in the interest of the country and its citizens. The Council repeats its call for more constructive and inclusive political dialogue within the country. The Council stresses the importance of the April 2016 elections being conducted in a credible way in accordance with international standards and calls on all parties to ensure a level playing field and electoral reforms in line with OSCE/ODIHR recommendations.
33. The Council reiterates the importance of a thorough and independent investigation, without hindrance, of the allegations of wrong-doing brought to the fore by the wiretaps, and the related failures of oversight and welcomes the appointment of a Special Prosecutor and the creation of a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry to look, respectively, into legal accountability and political responsibility. It calls upon the relevant authorities to support the independent functioning of those bodies.
34. The Council repeats its call on the relevant authorities to fully investigate the events in Kumanovo of 9-10 May 2015 in an objective and transparent manner.

35. The Council repeats its call on all parties to honour their undertaking to implement the Urgent Reform Priorities, to address systemic rule of law issues including in relation to breaches of fundamental rights, judicial independence, media freedom, elections, corruption, politicisation of state institutions and state/party blurring and failures of oversight. In order to assess systemic failures in the areas of justice, corruption, fundamental rights, and home affairs, as reflected in the Urgent Reform Priorities, the Council welcomes the Commission's intention to continue close monitoring in these areas, including within the context of the High Level Accession Dialogue.
36. The review of the Ohrid Framework Agreement needs to be completed rapidly and its recommendations implemented.
37. As set out in previous European Council and Council Conclusions, maintaining good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue, under the auspices of the UN, remains essential. In this regard, the Council notes positively the relevant commitment by the main political party leaders under the 2 June agreement. There is a need to bring the longstanding discussions on the name issue to a definitive conclusion without delay. Actions and statements which negatively impact on good neighbourly relations should be avoided. The Council notes the continued high level and expert contacts between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria, aimed at strengthening good neighbourly relations, and looks forward to their translation into concrete results.
38. The Council takes note that the Commission is prepared to extend its recommendation to open accession negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia conditional on the continued implementation of the June/July political agreement and substantial progress in the implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities.
39. The Council will revert to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia after its elections in April 2016 on the basis of an update by the Commission expected before the summer, in line with its December 2014 conclusions and established conditionality.

ALBANIA

40. The Council welcomes the steady progress made by Albania in addressing the key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations, in particular in public administration reform and in preparations for a thorough reform of the judicial system and encourages Albania to continue with its efforts.
41. The Council recalls that the opening of accession negotiations will be considered by the European Council, in line with established practice, once the Commission has assessed that Albania has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria. Recalling its earlier Council conclusions, including those of June 2014, the Council reiterates that Albania will need to meet the five key priorities for the opening of accession negotiations, and that the Commission is invited to report, in addition to its 2016 Report, in a comprehensive and detailed manner, on Albania's progress on the key priorities. The Council also recalls that a sustained, comprehensive and inclusive implementation of the key priorities has to be ensured.

The Council notes that further efforts on these key priorities will be required, in particular the adoption of the judicial reform package as well as further progress with a view to establishing a solid track record of pro-active investigations, prosecutions and final convictions at all levels in the fight against corruption and organised crime, including the fight against arms and drug trafficking. The Council underlines that judicial reform is a key to further forward movement on Albania's EU accession process and could be transformative for other reforms. At the same time, the Council reiterates the need for effective legislative and policy measures to reinforce the protection of human rights and anti-discrimination policies, including the equal treatment of all minorities and access to rights for persons belonging to them throughout Albania, as well as to implement property rights.

42. The Council looks forward to adoption and implementation of legislation on the exclusion of criminal offenders from public office, which should enhance citizens' trust in their political representatives and public institutions. It reiterates that Albania should pursue economic reforms aimed at increasing competitiveness and encourages Albania to continue to address the high level of informality in the economy and improve the business and investment environment, where further efforts are needed.
43. The Council underlines that constructive and sustainable dialogue between the government and the opposition on EU-related reforms will be vital for progress towards the EU.
44. The Council welcomes Albania's continued constructive engagement in regional cooperation and underlines the importance of ensuring good neighbourly relations, which remain essential. The Council also appreciates Albania's continued full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

45. The Council welcomes that Bosnia and Herzegovina is back on the reform path necessary to move forward in its EU integration process. The Council welcomes the adoption of the Reform Agenda in July 2015 and of the accompanying Action Plan in October 2015 by Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities. Noting that the country has started moving towards the Union this year, the Council calls on Bosnia and Herzegovina's leadership to maintain positive momentum by continuing to implement the reforms, in cooperation with civil society. Meaningful progress in the implementation of the Reform Agenda is necessary for the EU to consider a membership application from Bosnia and Herzegovina, in line with previous Council Conclusions, in particular those of December 2014.

46. The Council therefore encourages Bosnia and Herzegovina's authorities to continue translating the Written Commitment into action by further adoption and continued implementation of the necessary reforms, in particular in the rule of law field, including in the fight against corruption and organised crime, public administration reform, as well as socio-economic reforms. The Council notes with concern the backsliding on the conditions for exercising the right of freedom of expression and media. Strengthening public administration, and establishing functionality and efficiency at all levels of government, including the swift establishment of an effective coordination mechanism on EU matters will also be necessary for the country to be able to face the challenges ahead on the EU path. Progress in this regard will open the way for Bosnia and Herzegovina to fully benefit from the EU funding available.
47. The Council recalls that when requesting the Commission's Opinion on the membership application, the Council will ask the Commission to pay particular attention to the implementation of the Sejdić-Finci ruling.
48. The Council reiterates that following the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), Bosnia and Herzegovina should fully uphold its commitments and obligations under this Agreement, including, as a matter of urgency, those relating to the adaptation of the SAA following the accession of Croatia to the EU. The full implementation of the SAA, including its adaptation, is an important element of the country's commitment to the EU integration process.
49. The Council recalls that the Structured Dialogue on Justice is the instrument to address any outstanding shortcomings in Bosnia and Herzegovina's judiciary, in line with the Venice Commission's recommendations of 2013. The Council reiterates its serious concern about the preparations for holding an entity-level referendum on the state-level judiciary in *Republika Srpska*. The holding of such a referendum would challenge the cohesion, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It would also risk undermining the efforts to improve the socio-economic situation of all Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens and to make further progress in EU integration.

KOSOVO

50. The Council takes good note of the signing in October of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Kosovo. This EU-only agreement is the first comprehensive agreement between the EU and Kosovo. Its forthcoming conclusion, entry into force and implementation is without prejudice to Member States' positions on status. In view of the Commission's upcoming report on Kosovo's progress in meeting the requirements of its visa roadmap, the Council stresses the importance of the fulfilment of all conditions set for visa liberalisation and encourages Kosovo to pursue its efforts in order to make progress in its visa liberalisation process. The Council's intention to resume discussions on a framework agreement allowing Kosovo to participate in European Union programmes is without prejudice to Member States' positions on status.
51. The Council welcomes Kosovo's decision to establish the Specialist Chambers and urges Kosovo to complete all procedures without further delay so that the Specialist Chambers can function as soon as possible.
52. The current political stand-off in Kosovo needs to be resolved urgently. The Council condemns this use of violence, in particular for political purposes and the obstruction of the assembly by opposition parties and calls for its immediate cessation. The Council calls for respect of rule of law and for the resumption of normal parliamentary business, in line with the relevant rules and procedures. All sides concerned should address the challenges as part of a joint effort through political dialogue, and engage swiftly on the implementation of all aspects of Kosovo's European reform agenda.

53. The Council calls on Kosovo to focus on the implementation of the comprehensive reforms necessary to meet its obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). This, and Kosovo's numerous challenges, will require continued strong political will from Kosovo and sustained assistance from the EU. Particular attention should be paid to improving the rule of law, including judicial independence. Kosovo needs to intensify the fight against organised crime and corruption, and build a track record of successful prosecutions in high-profile cases. Important reforms, such as electoral reform and public administration reform, need to be undertaken as a priority. Effective promotion and protection of human rights throughout Kosovo should be pursued, including the full protection of cultural and religious heritage. In this context, the Council notes positively Kosovo's recent commitments. The inclusion and protection of persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups should be addressed, as well as the strengthening of social cohesion.
54. The EU will continue to support Kosovo's socio-economic development as part of its European reform agenda, including through financial and technical assistance. The Council encourages Kosovo to use its 2016 Economic Reform Programme as a platform for growth and employment. The Programme should reflect the recommendations provided in the Joint conclusions of the Economic and Financial Dialogue between the EU and the Western Balkans of May 2015. Within this framework, the Council urges Kosovo to address the socio-economic issues of direct concern to its people and to build broad public support for this reform agenda. Regulatory and supervisory bodies should be fully operational. Kosovo needs to follow up on its commitment to decommission and rehabilitate the Kosovo A power plant, the single biggest source of pollution in the Western Balkans.

55. The Council welcomes the significant progress in the EU facilitated Dialogue, in particular with the agreements reached on 25 August 2015. The Council urges Kosovo to swiftly implement its part of these agreements and to engage constructively with Serbia in formulating and implementing future agreements. Kosovo needs to maintain its active and constructive engagement in the normalisation process with Serbia. The Council will continue to monitor closely Kosovo's continued engagement towards visible and sustainable progress in the normalisation of relations with Serbia, including the implementation in good faith of all agreements reached so far, so that Kosovo and Serbia can continue on their respective European paths, while avoiding that either can block the other in these efforts and with the prospect of both being able to fully exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities. The Council recalls that progress in the process of normalisation of relations with Serbia is an essential principle of the SAA and underpins the development of relations and cooperation between the EU and Kosovo.
56. Kosovo should continue to cooperate closely and effectively with EULEX and contribute actively to the full and unhindered execution by EULEX of its mandate, including a revised mandate after June 2016.
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