



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council Nr 1012 Vienna, 24 July 2014

EU Statement in Response to the Report by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Ralf Breth

The EU and its Member States warmly welcome the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, H.E. Ambassador Ralph Breth, back to the Permanent Council and thank him for his comprehensive report.

The EU 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 17 December 2013 General Affairs Council of the EU.

We welcome the Mission's ongoing work on the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) and take note of the Mission's evaluation that only modest progress has been made in this regard. The Ohrid Framework Agreement continues to be an essential element for democracy and rule of law in the country. The review of the OFA, particularly important for inter-community and inter-ethnic relations, needs to be completed and its recommendations implemented. This, as well as continued decentralisation, a key element of the Agreement, will contribute to stability in the country and beyond.

We share the concerns expressed by Ambassador Breth about the fragility of inter-community relations as shown by recent incidents in the country. We call on the citizens and the leaders of the country to come together in a spirit of constructive dialogue to pro-actively address issues that undermine mutual understanding and

cooperative interethnic relations. More long-term confidence-building measures at the political level are needed to increase trust between communities.

In this context, we support the OSCE's work on integrated education and call on the government to continue to work expeditiously and closely with the High Commissioner on National Minorities in this field.

The EU commends the Mission for its important support for electoral reform. We are however concerned about the ODIHR assessment of biased media coverage and the lack of separation between state and party activities in the April presidential and parliamentary elections leading to a lack of a level playing field. Similar concerns were raised in 2011 and 2013 and have not yet been properly addressed. We therefore call on the national authorities to address ODIHR's concerns to improve trust, the democratic process and institutions, as well as to enhance pluralism, diversity of opinion and free and independent media.

We note the report's comment that the country has the lowest ranking of press freedom in the Western Balkans and share Ambassador Breth's view that freedom of expression, and the media situation in general, remain serious challenges. The overall climate and media culture needs to improve, and we call on the government to take concrete steps in this regard. We note that new media laws were revised in a shortened procedure on 3 July 2014.

Stable and functioning democratic institutions are key to ensure further stability and progress. We call on the government to do its utmost to engage in a constructive spirit with all political parties to overcome the current crisis. The government has the primary responsibility to ensure that democratic institutions function properly and that the opposition has space to play its role. We call on both sides to build trust.

The EU fully supports the Mission's activities on promoting the rule of law, including its support for the adoption of laws relating to reform of the judiciary, its assistance in law-making and the promotion of the ongoing criminal justice reform.

We appreciate the continuing efforts of the Mission to promote a modern police service complying with international standards, including respect for human rights.

The EU notes the importance of transparency and accountability in retaining public confidence in state institutions, and expresses concern over the report's finding that political influence in public hiring processes and the blurring of state and party activities and finances remains a 'continuous reality'.

We reiterate our belief that the Mission, in carrying out its mandate and in close coordination with the EU and other international actors on the ground, should continue to assist 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, including through its office in Tetovo. We believe that the current mandate remains a sound basis for the Mission's work. We encourage the authorities of the host country to take full advantage of the OSCE's assistance when they pursue their ambitious reform agenda.

Finally, we underline that for all field operations effective evaluation is essential to ensure efficient use of resources and aids the development of best practices and the process of lesson learning. We would be grateful if Ambassador Breth could highlight some of the key impacts made by the Mission through its programmatic work in this reporting period.

The Candidate Countries MONTENEGRO*, ICELAND+, SERBIA* 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 and the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA align themselves with this statement.

* Montenegro, Serbia 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.