

Joint Press Release of European Commission and Serbian European Integration Office

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The Stabilisation and Association Committee (SA Committee) held its third meeting following the entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Serbia on 1 September 2013. Representatives of the Republic of Serbia and of the European Commission reviewed the implementation of the Copenhagen EU accession criteria and the implementation of the SAA. The fruitful exchanges allowed for the reviewing of key reforms which are being pursued first and foremost for the benefit of the citizens of Serbia.

This third meeting was co-chaired by Ms. Catherine Wendt, acting Director at Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations of the European Commission, and by Ms. Ksenija Milenkovic, Director of the Serbian European Integration Office (SEIO).

The SA Committee reviewed the developments related to the fulfilment of the **political criteria** by Serbia. The SA Committee stressed the importance of inclusive consultation of stakeholders in the legislative and accession process and the role of the Parliament in the oversight of the executive. It underlined the role of the Independent Regulatory Bodies and stressed the importance of the effective follow-up of their findings. It encouraged Serbia to make further progress on public administration reform and discussed the reforms on local self-government in Serbia. It also stressed the importance of strengthening regional cooperation and Serbia's progressive alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions.

In the area of the **judiciary and rule of law**, the SA Committee welcomed Serbia's adoption of the actions plans on Chapters 23 and 24. It acknowledged Serbia's determination to address the significant challenges that remain regarding independence, impartiality, accountability, efficiency and access to justice. The SA Committee reiterated the particular importance it attaches to the development of a solid track record in the fight against corruption and organised crime and to increase international cooperation in the fight against terrorism and radicalisation.

The SA Committee underlined that particular attention needs to be paid to the protection of fundamental rights. In this context, it welcomed the adoption of a dedicated action plan for the realisation of the rights of national minorities and of a national strategy for the social inclusion of the Roma.

The SA Committee commended Serbia for its efforts in addressing the refugee and migration crisis which has seriously affected the region. It underlined the need to intensify cooperation regionalin the area of migration management and border controls. It acknowledged Serbia's efforts to fight irregular migration and highlighted the need to further rationalise its asylum procedure.

The SA Committee also reviewed the **economic criteria**. It welcomed the strengthening of the Serbian economy in 2015 and in particular the significant decrease of the public deficit. It

underlined the need to maintain the efforts on budget consolidation, and to step up structural reforms, in particular to improve the business environment and to stimulate investment. The European Commission stressed it will continue assisting Serbia in improving its economic governance.

Regarding the **implementation of the SAA**, the SA Committee noted that the SAA had been implemented in an overall satisfactory manner. Overall, the liberalisation of trade brought about by these two agreements has contributed to the large increase of Serbian exports to the EU: over 70percent between 2010 and 2015.

The SA Committee reviewed the state of play of the various areas covered by the SAA, and took note of the recent developments in the area of trade, industry, customs and taxation, agriculture, internal market and competition, innovation information society and social policy, transport, environment and energy. The SAA Committee highlighted the areas where specific efforts are needed to improve compliance with the SAA, such as the improvement of the control of State aid, and the safeguard measures imposed by Serbia on certain agricultural products.

Finally, the SA Committee reviewed the extensive **financial assistance** provided by the EU to Serbia. The EU is committed to continue supporting Serbia's EU accession process including financially. Since 2007, close to €1.8 billion has been granted to support Serbia's accession. Following the floods in May 2014, the EU already allocated €73.6 million of grants to support reconstruction and recovery efforts. The current EU-wide refugee migratory crisis has seriously affected Serbia, as one of the main transit countries on the Western Balkans route. The EU has supported the Western Balkans in dealing with the crisis, in particular Serbia, which received more than €30 million since August 2015. Since 2000 the EU, together with its member states, has been by far the biggest donor with a contribution amounting to 75percent of all donations received by Serbia.

Both parties agreed that the SA Committee will continue to play an important role in ensuring continuity of the stabilisation and association process and the proper implementation of the SAA commitments, as an important framework for the assessment of the accession process in general.