

Republic of Macedonia

32. The Council notes that the political crisis which followed events in parliament late last year exposed deep divisions among political parties, affecting the functioning of parliament, and demonstrated the need for constructive politics in the national interest. The Council welcomes the fact that the EU agenda remains the country's strategic priority and that it has made further progress in improving its ability to take on the obligations of membership. The Council also welcomes the contribution of the High Level Accession Dialogue to progress in most priority areas, including the elimination of court backlogs and in the fight against corruption.

33. The Council underlines the importance of effective implementation and enforcement of existing legal and policy frameworks. Particular attention should be paid to the rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary and achieving further results in the fight against corruption and organised crime. Freedom of expression and the media situation in general also remain issues of concern. The review of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, particularly important for inter-ethnic relations, must be completed and its recommendations implemented. The Roma Strategy needs to be proactively implemented. The blurring of the distinction between state and party needs to be addressed, as highlighted by the OSCE/ODIHR in the electoral context. High unemployment needs to be tackled and public financial management strengthened.

34. As set out in the European Council conclusions of June 2008 and the General Affairs and External Relations Council conclusions of December 2008, maintaining good neighbourly relations, including a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue, under the auspices of the UN, remains essential. There is a need to bring the longstanding discussions on the name issue to a definitive conclusion without delay. The Council takes note of the recent contacts with the UN mediator. In light of the overall importance of maintaining good neighbourly relations, the Council notes the continued high level contacts between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria and looks forward to their translation into concrete actions and results.

35. The Council broadly shares the Commission's assessment that the political criteria continue to be sufficiently met and takes note of the Commission's recommendation that accession negotiations be opened with the Republic of Macedonia. With a view to a possible decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia, the Council will revert to the issue in 2014, on the basis of an update by the Commission on further implementation of reforms in the context of the High Level Accession Dialogue, including the implementation of the 1 March political agreement and on tangible steps taken to promote good neighbourly relations and to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue.