

Republic of Macedonia

31. The Council reaffirms its conclusions regarding the Republic of Macedonia adopted in December 2014, April and June 2015, the EU commitment under the Thessaloniki agenda and the candidate status of the Republic of Macedonia. The Council reiterates its unequivocal commitment to the EU accession process of the 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 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 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 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.