

Republic of Macedonia

38. The Council welcomes the progress achieved in a number of key policy areas, including with respect to the legislative framework for elections, in the area of freedom of expression, and public administration. The Council takes note of the review of the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and encourages the government of the Republic of Macedonia to move swiftly to the next stage of the review.

39. The Council notes in particular the contribution of the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) which acted as a catalyst for reforms. Noting that continuous efforts are needed, the Council urges the reform momentum to be sustained, with continued focus on the rule of law, including as regards freedom of expression, the fight against corruption and on inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation. The Council recalls that the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement remains an essential element of democracy and rule of law.

40. The Council largely shares the Commission's assessment that the political criteria continue to be sufficiently met and takes note of its recommendation that accession negotiations be opened with the Republic of Macedonia.

41. As set out in the European Council conclusions of June 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 welcomes the momentum that has been generated by recent contacts/exchanges between the two parties, following the Greek proposal for a memorandum of understanding. The Council is, moreover, encouraged by recent contacts with the UN mediator. In light of the overall importance of maintaining good neighbourly relations, the Council also notes the recent high level contacts between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria and looks forward to their translation into concrete actions and results.

42. With a view to a possible decision of the European Council to open accession negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia, the Council will examine, on the basis of a report to be presented by the Commission in Spring 2013, implementation of reforms in the context of the HLAD, as well as steps taken to promote good neighbourly relations and to reach a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue under the auspices of the UN. In this perspective, the Council will assess the report during the next Presidency. Provided that the assessment is positive, the Commission will be invited by the European Council to: (1) submit without delay a proposal for a framework for negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia, in line with the European Council's December 2006 conclusions and established practice; (2) carry out the process of analytical examination of the EU acquis beginning with the chapters on the judiciary and fundamental rights, and justice, freedom and security. The Council takes note of the intention of the Commission to conduct all the necessary preparatory work in this respect.