



**EU-CROATIA  
- The Stabilisation and  
Association Council -**



Brussels, 28 April 2008  
UE-HR 4353/08 (Presse 114)

**Fourth meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Council  
between the European Union and Croatia  
(Luxembourg, 28 April 2008)**

**JOINT PRESS RELEASE**

1. The EU-Croatia Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) held its fourth meeting on Monday 28 April 2008. The meeting was chaired by Mr Gordan JANDROKOVIĆ, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia and Head of the delegation of the Republic of Croatia. Mr Dimitrij RUPEL, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Slovenia, led the European Union Delegation (Troika format). Mr Olli REHN, Commissioner responsible for Enlargement, represented the European Commission.
2. The SA Council welcomed the advancement of the accession negotiations between the EU and Croatia and noted that negotiations continue to be on the right track, as confirmed by the Accession Conference at Deputy level which took place in Brussels on 21 April.

**P R E S S**

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The SA Council commended Croatia for the overall progress it continued to make in the past year, which allowed the country to enter an increasingly important and demanding stage. The SA Council noted that Croatia has made substantial progress in meeting the requirements of the process and eighteen chapters (out of 35) have been opened, of which two have been provisionally closed, in the accession negotiations.

The SA Council recalled that the advancement of the enlargement negotiations is guided above all by Croatia's progress in addressing opening and closing benchmarks as well as the requirements of the Negotiating Framework, and in fulfilling its obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The implementation of the revised Accession Partnership, which was adopted by the Council last February, is equally important to prepare for further integration with the European Union.

The SA Council noted the recently adopted 2008 National Programme for the Integration of Croatia into the EU which provides Croatia's updated response to the recommendations contained in the revised Accession Partnership. The SA Council encouraged Croatia to build on its achievements and implementing record and to further transpose and implement effectively the acquis, in order to be able to meet the obligations of membership in good time.

3. The SA Council reviewed the state of Croatia's preparations for accession, in particular in the light of the revised Accession Partnership and of the Commission's 2007 Progress Report. The SA Council noted that Croatia continues to fulfil the Copenhagen political criteria but considered several areas where further sustained efforts are needed. Most of these issues are covered in the revised Accession Partnership as key priorities that Croatia needs to fulfil. In this regard this SA Council, while noting progress made so far with the implementation of the judicial reform strategy, recalled that the establishment of an independent, impartial, reliable, transparent and efficient judicial system is of the utmost importance and an essential condition for strengthening the rule of law and the proper implementation of the acquis, and underlined that further efforts are needed in this regard. The SA Council also encouraged Croatia to step up the process of public administration reform and its efforts to proactively prevent, detect and effectively prosecute corruption.

The SA Council welcomed continued full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and underlined its importance. As regards prosecution of war crimes trials in Croatia itself, the SA Council noted the progress made towards impartial prosecution of cases but recalled that improvements in the conduct of these trials are still necessary.

As regards refugee return, the SA Council reviewed the overall progress achieved as regards reconstruction of housing; in this context, it stressed the need to accelerate the implementation of housing care programmes for former tenancy rights holders wishing to return to Croatia. The SA Council encouraged Croatia to continue to engage in regional discussions on refugee return.

The SA Council welcomed the continued political integration of minorities in Croatia and the high-level commitment to this issue, as well as the adoption of a recruitment plan for minorities in 2007. Furthermore, the SA Council called on Croatia to ensure that the legal framework for minority rights leads to real improvements on the ground, especially for Serbs and Roma.

The SA Council also welcomed progress made in the area of regional cooperation and underlined the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations in the process of moving towards the European Union. In this context, it noted in particular Croatia's chairmanship of the South-East Europe Cooperation Process, as well as the entering into force of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) 2006. The SA Council encouraged Croatia to continue its efforts towards good neighbourly relations and to enhance work on finding mutually acceptable definitive solutions to all pending bilateral issues with neighbouring countries, especially as regards border issues. The SA Council also encouraged Croatia to pursue efforts aimed at reconciliation among citizens in the region. Furthermore, the SA Council, in light of the June 2004 agreement and of the relevant Council conclusions, welcomed the Decision of the Croatian Parliament on 13 March 2008 not to apply any aspect of the Ecological and Fisheries Protection Zone to the EU Member States.

4. The SA Council recalled that Croatia is a functioning market economy that should be able to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union in the medium term, provided that it implements its comprehensive reform programme with determination in order to reduce structural weaknesses. In this context, the SA Council invited Croatia to accelerate the pace of enterprise restructuring.
5. The SA Council noted that Croatia has improved its ability to take on the obligations of membership and that preparations for meeting EU requirements are moving forward at a steady pace and alignment is high in some sectors. The SA Council devoted particular attention to issues linked to the functioning of the internal market, information society and media, agriculture and rural development, regional policy, food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary policy, fisheries, energy, transport, environment, social policy and employment, justice and home affairs and economic and monetary policy. Key priorities under the revised Accession Partnership remain to be fulfilled in many areas, especially as regards the building of the necessary administrative capacity.

6. The SA Council reviewed the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement which has largely continued without major difficulty. The SA Council acknowledged that Croatia has contributed to the smooth functioning of the various joint bodies of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. At the same time, the SA Council noted that further work is needed in some areas, such as state aid, free movement of goods, free movement of capital, taxation and financial institutions.

The SA Council welcomed completion of negotiations on an Enlargement Protocol to the SAA in order to take account of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, and looked forward to the signature of this Protocol.

The SA Council noted Croatia's participation in a number of Community programmes. As regards financial cooperation, the SA Council recalled that weaknesses need to be address without delay and that the institutions involved in the management of EU funds need to have a sufficient amount of qualified staff to guarantee the timely implementation of EU pre-accession assistance and sound financial management of Community funds.

7. The SA Council welcomed Croatia's continuous alignment with EU positions and declarations in the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, its support for the International Criminal Court and its commitment to preserving the integrity of the Rome statute. The SA Council welcomed again the fact that Croatia has not signed a bilateral agreement on non-extradition to the International Criminal Court.

Finally the SA Council had an exchange of views concerning recent developments in the Western Balkans region.

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