

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' press conference following his meetings in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Skopje, 20 February 2014)

E. VENIZELOS: Thank you very much for coming. My introductory remarks will be very short and concise. As you know very well I am here in my double capacity, as the current President of the Council of the European Union, and secondly in my national capacity as the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Greece.

In my European capacity, I am here in order to discuss with the local authorities in order to enhance the European and the Euroatlantic perspective of this country, because the complete European integration of this country is something very important for regional stability and also for our priorities as the current presidency.

Because, as you know, this presidency is the fifth one after the accession of Greece to the European Union, and the legacy and the institutional memory of the previous Greek European Presidency, in accordance with the famous Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003, was the enlargement with the accession of the countries of our common area of the Western Balkans. And now I am here in order for this regional policy to be implemented as a European one.

In my national capacity I have a very clear, a very friendly and very constructive message. We are always ready to intensify our cooperation, because we have two de facto interconnected national economies, and we have before us the possibility to organize many things together, because our common need is to give a very concrete and optimistic answer towards our two civil societies for growth, development, job creation.

It's absolutely vital for the new European generation to accept a totally new European narrative on the basis of a future of prosperity, stability, peace and creativity – and this is something very important for both countries in this historical region, historical with many burdens. I am at your disposal in order to give some answers to you.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Venizelos, I wish you welcome here, will you come again? And the second question, why Greece is [...] about the proposal of the European Commission to start the negotiation in parallel with the name issue?

E. VENIZELOS: As you know, the Enlargement Policy, according to the treaty of Lisbon belongs to the competencies and the responsibilities of the Council, and not of the European Commission.

We appreciate very much the work done by the Commission and the reports and the assessments presented by the Commission, but the final decision is a political one, according to the evaluation and the priorities of the Council.

More specifically, the enlargement procedure is an intergovernmental one. On behalf of the Council, and my capacity as the representative of the current Presidency, I must clarify that, for me, the unique text of reference for the case of this country, for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, is the Conclusions of the last European Council, of December last year, on the enlargement for the six countries of the Western Balkans.

According to the wording of this critical text of reference, the Council is ready to make a new assessment on the case of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia later this year. But the critical point is the compliance with the principle of good neighbourly relations. This something very important, not only for the case of the bilateral relationships between Skopje and Athens, but also for the bilateral relationships between Skopje and other capitals, like Sofia.

According to the wording of the same text, we are waiting for some tangible, material, concrete and tangible steps, always in this critical field of good neighborly relations, and more especially towards the full implementation of the cross-party agreement of 1 March 2013.

This is the last word from the part of the Council, and in my European capacity, I have the obligation and the duty to present the common European position and to underline the priorities and the critical points of this very important text. We understand very well how important is the role of the European Commission, also within the framework of the so-called High Level Accession Dialogue between the European Commission and the local authorities. But, also within the framework of this High Level Accession Dialogue, a very critical point is the respect and the fulfillment of this sensitive criterion of good neighborly relations.

JOURNALIST: [Off microphone]

E. VENIZELOS: An important Ministerial meeting in Thessaloniki, in the last week of April, with the participation of the 28 member states of the European Union, the High Representative, the Commission, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the six countries of the Western Balkans, because we have the possibility and the opportunity, during the semester of this Greek Presidency, to celebrate the famous 2003 Thessaloniki Agenda. And this Ministerial Meeting is a great opportunity to give new impetus towards the European and Euroatlantic integration of our region.

Maybe after the meeting of Thessaloniki, we have the possibility to organize a new bilateral meeting, here or in Athens, because I am always ready to discuss

with my counterpart. My discussion this morning with Mr. Poposki was the third since my appointment as Foreign Minister last June.

JOURNALIST: Are you any more optimistic on the future of the negotiations on the name issue after the discussions you had here with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister?

E. VENIZELOS: After my meeting with the Prime Minister, here in Skopje, my impression is that the common denominator is our willingness to use the procedure directed by the Secretary General, through Ambassador Nimetz, because our common willingness is to intensify this procedure and to understand this procedure as the unique way to express our respect for the relevant resolutions of the Security Council of the United Nations.

If I can express an additional personal remark. Yes, after today's meetings, I have the impression that the government, the local political system, the civil society here in Skopje are ready to participate in a dialogue, not only on the name issue, but also for the enhancement of bilateral cooperation, because everybody here is in a position to understand very well that Greece is the real gateway towards the European perspective, towards the European and Euroatlantic destiny of this country.

JOURNALIST: Mr. Venizelos, the agenda for the European integration of the Western Balkans [...] as you said in Thessaloniki in 2003. Don't you think it's hypocritical of Greece to officially declare support of the European integration and yet to continue blocking our country's integration, even though [...] and even though it is contrary to international law, provided by International Court of Justice in The Hague?

E. VENIZELOS: The European integration of the six countries of the Western Balkans is always our first regional priority. For me, it was a great honor and a great pleasure to chair the first Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels, last January, for the opening of the negotiation procedure between the European Union and Serbia.

The opening of this procedure is something very important not only for Serbia, but also for Kosovo, because, as you know, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina is something very positive not only for the two sides, but also for wider regional stability.

The accession procedure for Montenegro is a more or less successful story. The last decision of the Council was to open the negotiations for five new chapters.

The situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is always very fragile, very critical, and my presence in Sarajevo, yesterday, was an excellent opportunity for the Greek Presidency to express our willingness toward the facilitation of the internal

dialogue. And we know very well that the European perspective of this country is the first and most substantial and critical common denominator for the future of this entity.

I am ready now to visit Tirana. And our target is to grant candidate-country status as soon as possible to Albania. And our national position was in favor of this status during the last Council, in December. And now our hope and our willingness is to organize a new discussion on the European future of Albania during the semester of the Greek Presidency, in order to grant candidate-country status also for Albania.

Especially for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in the past our position was very flexible and very constructive. Thanks to this constructive and friendly Greek position, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has the status of the candidate country. The existence of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Union and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a very creative and a very solid basis for the European future of your country.

My new gesture, in my national capacity, this morning, was the official statement that Greece is ready to accept the participation, under the status of observer, of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in the fundamental rights European agency in Vienna.

Within the European procedure, Greece is always part of the so-called mainstream. The main obstacle to the European perspective of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is not bilateral pending and open issues, like the famous name issue, but the obligation to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, and especially the major criterion of compliance with the principle of good neighbourly relations.

This is not a kind of national objection. It's a general European and national obligation: respect for the principle of good neighbourly relations; the acceptance of the resolutions of the Security Council. The acceptance of the international legal order is something absolutely important and vital for every candidate country, and not just for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.