

## **Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' intervention on the FYROM progress report at the European Parliament Plenary (Strasbourg, 5 February 2014)**

Regarding the issue of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. I remind you that the Council, in its December 2013 conclusions, noted the political crisis caused by the well-known events in Parliament on 24 December 2013. These events brought to the surface profound disagreements between the political parties; differences that undermined the Parliament's ability to function correctly. The political crisis also pointed up the problems with the government's treatment of the news media, as well as the need for immediate reopening of the dialogue between the government and the news media.

The fact that the European perspective remains a strategic priority for this country is a positive trend, and I think this is the basis for our debate.

The Council welcomes the contribution of the High Level Accession Dialogue to progress made on most of the priority issues, including those that concern the pending cases in court, which must be dealt with, and the combatting of corruption.

The Council noted the need for special attention to be given to the rule of law – including the independence of the judiciary – the combatting of corruption and of organized crime, the need to protect freedom of speech, as well as to the legal and practical situation regarding the news media. These are all pending issues that must be dealt with. There needs to be clarification of the relations between the state and the governing party. This was also noted by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, within the framework of the election process.

The Council's view is that the evaluation of the implementation of the Ohrid framework agreement, which is particularly important for inter-ethnic relations, must be completed and the proposals implemented.

The strategy being implemented for the Roma must be implemented actively. The high unemployment must be dealt with, and management of public finances must become more effective.

The maintaining of good neighbourly relations is a critical point. This includes good neighbourly relations and respect for international law, the matter of finding a mutually acceptable solution on the name issue, within the context of the negotiations being carried out within the framework of the relevant UN Security Council resolutions, under the auspices of the Secretary General, through his personal envoy Mr. Nimetz. These negotiations on the name issue, which have been under way for many years, must be completed and conclude on a definitive solution.

Speaking as the government now, as the Greek Foreign Minister, we want this to happen fast – at the soonest possible time.

Allow me a short parenthesis of a national nature. The Greek position is a moderate, specific, compromise position. I had the opportunity, on 30 January, addressing the Hellenic Parliament, to reiterate once again that Greece accepts a name that is a compound name, with a geographical qualifier for the term Macedonia. This allows for differentiation between the Greek regions that are also called Macedonia. In this way, we overcome any intimation of irredentism, a framework for good neighbourly relations is shaped, and we respect the resolutions of the UN Security Council and the efforts of the Secretary General and Mr. Nimetz.

The proposal is very specific. It is a proposal that guarantees the dignity of the whole dialogue and all of the parties, but this solution must be definitive, it must be conclusive, it must be complete. Thus, we agree to a compromise compound name with a geographical qualifier, but a name for all uses, domestic and international. The objection that the constitutional name cannot be changed and that the Constitution cannot be amended is not comprehensible in the EU, because the member states of the EU adapt to changes in European law or to the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights. The single European constitutional space is shaped through constant changes in national constitutions – and of course the Ohrid Agreement itself already functions as a mechanism for constitutional changes.

This closes my parenthesis, which was of a national nature, taking advantage of this opportunity to address you.

And I return to the positions of the Council, which has also noted the continuing high level contacts between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria, and looks forward to these evolving into specific actions and results. We have issues of good neighbourly relations here, as well.

The Council has noted the Commission proposal for the opening of accession negotiations. We will examine this in the coming time, later, towards June, but, of course, what is important is that we see, within the framework of the High Level Accession Dialogue, what reforms will have been implemented in the meantime, including the implementation of the political agreement of 1 March 2013. The Council asked that there be tangible steps in the direction of promoting good neighbourly relations and achieving an acceptable solution on the name issue.

Allow me to add that, despite this country's active participation in various regional initiatives – such as the Regional Cooperation Council and the South East European Cooperation Process – greater efforts must be made for there to be a clear, constructive role within the framework of the wider region.

Reply

In my opening statement, I thanked the three rapporteurs for the European Parliament, and now, in my reply, I want to thank Commissioner Stefan Füle for his

work, for his dedication to this goal, to the enlargement of the EU and to the accession perspective of the states of the Western Balkans. We work together very closely, and he is very well aware that in the coming days I will be visiting all six capitals in the region, in my capacity as President of the Council, and naturally I will also visit Skopje, because the Hellenic Presidency is an opportunity for a direct discussion of the issues that concern the region's common European and, allow me to say, Euroatlantic future.

I will not refer to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro – Commissioner Füle already did so in a very concise and incisive manner. Allow me, not just as President of the Council, but also as the Greek Foreign Minister, to make some clarifications with regard to the matter of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

I heard many honorable MEPs make the claim that there is a bilateral dispute between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece with regard to the name, and that this pending issue, this pending bilateral issue, is hindering the accession course of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This description is utterly mistaken.

The name issue is not a bilateral dispute – I think Mr. Chountis put it very characteristically earlier. It is a pending international issue. The dialogue, the negotiations, the mediation initiative of the Secretary General and his person envoy, Mr. Nimetz, derive from two UN Security Council resolutions, and the basic principle that governs the functioning of the EU, a basic element of the European acquis and European law, is respect for the resolutions of the UN Security Council.

It is not the name issue that is acting as an obstacle to the acceleration of the process and opening of the accession negotiations with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The problem is compliance with and respect for the general criteria that must be met by all the member states, by all the candidates for accession, that is, and what is in effect for all the candidate countries is also in effect for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Behind the name, there is the matter of respect for international law, there is the issue of regional stability, there is the matter of a latent, or even manifest, irredentism, there is the issue of good neighbourly relations. If we supposed that the name issue were to be magically resolved tomorrow, it would not mean that, suddenly, we will have solved all the problems concerning the accession criteria.

You heard the statements from Mr. Kovatchev and Mr. Stoyanov. These are not statements that express the Greek perspective. There is an issue of good neighbourly relations with other countries as well. There is a problem that arises generally, and, naturally, I clarify that these are not the responses of the Council; these are the statements I have the opportunity to make, addressing you as the Greek Foreign Minister.

So the issue is nothing more than that which was included in the Council conclusions of 19 December 2013. Therein, it is expressly stated and underscored that there must be tangible steps in the direction of the implementation of the Agreement of 1 March 2013. Therein, it says expressly that tangible steps must be taken in the direction of good neighbourly relations.

This is the issue. And what is paradoxical is – you will allow me to say here – that, where the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is concerned, Greece is perhaps the friendliest country in the region. We continue to be the top foreign direct investor in this country. Greece is the favorite tourism destination for the citizens of this country. The Port of Thessaloniki is this country's natural outlet to the Mediterranean. Thus, we have the groundwork for very good and intense cooperation. But, naturally, if we are to be able to impart the momentum we would like, the causes of the problem, which concern the criterion of good neighbourly relations, have to be removed.

I have already spoken a number of times with my counterpart. I have spoken with the heads of other political parties. I attach very great importance to my visit to Skopje in the coming days. I believe that we will have a clearer picture. But I want to make it crystal clear that this is not a superficial approach that concerns an obsession or a stereotype, the name. There is a problem that we have to look at in its historical dimension, in its institutional dimension, and we have to look at it based on the criterion I mentioned; that is, of what conditions have to be met by every country that is a candidate for accession to the EU.

I would like to hope that the honorable Members of the European Parliament who had a different view of the real events and the history of the issue will now bear in mind the observations that I have made.

We can very clearly distinguish the duties of the Presidency of the Council from our national sensitivities and priorities. On a national level, we are participating in the Nimetz initiative in a constructive manner, stating a moderate, compromise proposal for a compound name with a geographical qualifier, for every use; a name for all uses. As the Presidency of the Council, with complete composure and objectivity – as we do in general regarding enlargement policy and good neighbourly relations, regarding the neighbourhood policy – we will respect and implement the Council conclusions set down on 19 December 2013.

Thank you very much.