

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

Let me end by saying a few words about the situation in Montenegro.

The Council has welcomed the progress Montenegro had made over the past year, including constitutional amendments to strengthen the independence of the judiciary and the adoption of comprehensive Action Plans for the chapters on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights [Chapter 23] and Justice, Freedom and Security [Chapter 24].

Montenegro has also continued to implement its obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and to play an active role in the region.

The Council has also noted with satisfaction Montenegro's involvement in further developing regional cooperation which, together with good neighbourly relations, remain essential parts of the accession process

We believe that Montenegro now needs to further intensify its reform process in order to address the shortcomings identified in the Commission's Report. Particular attention needs to be paid to further developing a solid track record in the area of rule of law and with respect to the fight against organised crime and corruption.

Further efforts are also needed to implement constitutional amendments, strengthen political inclusiveness, and guarantee freedom of expression and citizens' trust in public institutions.

Montenegro also needs to implement the public administration reform strategy, as well as tackle politicisation and increase transparency, and improve the business environment. Many of the issues are covered in your report, including the need to ensure media freedom and properly investigate and prosecute violence against journalists.

It is important to underline that these reforms should not be carried out purely for the sake of the EU, but first and foremost to meet the legitimate expectations of the Montenegrin citizens.

The accession negotiations with Montenegro remain on track. We took a very significant step forward in December with the opening of 5 new negotiating chapters, including the key chapters Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Justice, Freedom and Security. The Council has also considered all screening reports and the outstanding chapters will be examined in the coming months. We expect the screening process to be completed in our semester.

Overall, out of a total of 35 negotiation chapters, 7 chapters have now been opened for negotiations of which 2 chapters have already been provisionally closed.

Two further Accession Conferences are envisaged to open further chapters.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me close by acknowledging and welcoming, on behalf of the Council of the E.U., the work of this Parliament in supporting the overall process of stabilisation in the region. We are grateful to you for your contribution towards the EU's enlargement process. We value your expertise and your commitment to this purpose. I would like to thank the rapporteurs, Doris Pack, Richard Howitt and Charles Tannock, for the commitment and the hard work.

I thank you for your attention.