President,

Honourable Members,

I am grateful for this opportunity to set out the Council's position on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. I would also like to thank this Parliament, and your rapporteur, Richard Howitt, in particular, for his valuable work on this issue and for your excellent Resolution. Both institutions very much share the same assessment of the situation and that helps us collectively in our ongoing contacts with the authorities in Skopje.

The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia has been a candidate country since December 2005, but of course has had close relations with the EU since well before then. The country is important in the region, being fully involved in regional initiatives such as the Regional Cooperation Council and the South East European Cooperation Process.

In its conclusions on enlargement from last December the Council welcomed the progress made in a number of key policy areas. These included the legislative framework for elections, freedom of expression, and public administration. The Council also took note of the review of the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and, as you do in your Resolution, encourages the government to move swiftly to the next stage of the review.
The High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) has acted as a catalyst for reform. This momentum has to be sustained, and particular attention is needed in the area of the rule of law, including on issues such as freedom of expression, the fight against corruption and inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation.

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

However, maintaining good neighbourly relations is essential. And that has to include a negotiated and mutually accepted solution to the name issue, under the auspices of the UN. I know that this Parliament shares our view that the longstanding discussions on the name issue should be brought to a definitive conclusion as soon as possible. The Council has welcomed the momentum generated by the Greek proposal for a memorandum of understanding. There has also been some positive progress in discussions between the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria.

With a view to a possible decision on opening accession negotiations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Council invited the Commission to report on progress. Last month the Commission presented that report. The report assesses progress on the implementation of EU-related reforms (under the High Level Accession Dialogue) as well as in the area of good neighbourly relations and specifically on the issue of the name.

The main conclusion of the Commission's report is that the reform process is largely back on track after the political crisis of January-February. Relations with neighbours remain good, and there have been some positive developments in bilateral relations with Bulgaria and Greece. Formal talks on the 'name issue' under the auspices of the UN have also made some progress during the period covered by the report.

The report also emphasised the importance of the timely implementation of the political agreement of 1 March 2013.
Honourable Members,

The Council is now considering the Commission's report, with a view to further discussion at the June General Affairs Council. Ireland, as EU Presidency, will facilitate discussion of the report and will seek to have the issue progressed.

In the meantime, it is vital that the political leadership in the country sustains and develops the EU integration process, despite the difficult background and circumstances. I know that this Parliament shares this view, and that you will use your contacts to help achieve this.

Thank you for your attention.

ENDS