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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee

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Subject: Draft Council conclusions on Enlargement

In view of the General Affairs Council to be held on 17 December 2024, delegations will find attached draft Council conclusions on Enlargement, as proposed by the Presidency following discussions in the Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU.

The Permanent Representatives' Committee is invited to discuss and agree to the text of the draft Council conclusions, as set out in the Annex.

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

DRAFT COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON ENLARGEMENT

1. The Council takes good note of the Communication from the Commission of 30 October 2024 on the EU Enlargement Policy including the reports on Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Türkiye, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova (hereinafter: Moldova) and Georgia.
2. The Council reaffirms its commitment to enlargement in line with the **renewed consensus** on enlargement approved by the European Council in December 2006, subsequent Council and European Council conclusions, and the **EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 of June 2024**. In line with previous Council conclusions, and in the framework of the Copenhagen political criteria, the Council reaffirms the need for fair and rigorous conditionality, the principle of own merits and reversibility. The Council stresses the importance of ensuring that the EU can maintain and deepen its own development, including its capacity to integrate new members. Welcoming that there is new dynamism in the enlargement process, the Council underlines the need for partners to take ownership and demonstrate the credibility of their commitments and political will through the implementation of necessary reforms and tangible progress on the fundamentals.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

3. Enlargement is a **geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity**. It is a driver for improving the economic and social conditions of European citizens, reducing disparities between countries, and must foster the values on which the Union is founded. EU enlargement will bring far reaching socio-economic benefits to its current and future members. Looking ahead to the prospect of a further enlarged Union, both the EU and future Member States need to be ready. Aspiring members need to step up their reform efforts, notably in the area of rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU. In parallel, the EU needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms. This will make the EU stronger and will enhance European sovereignty.
4. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine underlines the importance of enlargement as a strategic priority for the EU. The Council **reaffirms** its full and unequivocal commitment to the **EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova**. The Council takes note of the Georgian government's recent statement on suspending the accession talks until 2028, and at the same time reiterates the EU's steadfast solidarity with the Georgian people and its readiness to continue supporting Georgians on their path towards a European future. **Türkiye** remains a candidate country and a key partner in many areas of joint interest.
5. Respecting and committing to promote the values on which the EU is founded, and meeting the obligations required for EU membership, continue to be essential for all partners who aspire to join. Sustained and irreversible reform achievements on the **fundamentals**, including the rule of law and fundamental rights, the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration and the economic criteria continue to be the key benchmarks against which progress towards EU membership is assessed. The Commission's recommendations in these areas should be addressed as a matter of priority.
6. The Council reiterates that the **rule of law** is among the fundamental values on which the EU is founded, a crucial aspect of democratic transformation, and an indispensable requisite for progress towards EU membership.

7. The protection of **fundamental rights** is at the core of EU values. The Council will continue to closely monitor partners' progress in this area and recalls that credible measures to address reported shortcomings is an overall priority. In this context, the Council underlines the particular importance of upholding the rights of the child and the rights and non-discriminatory treatment of persons belonging to minorities and persons in vulnerable situations, such as the Roma, persons with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, persons belonging to national minorities. On gender equality, the Council reiterates that empowerment and the full enjoyment of fundamental rights of women and girls must be ensured. The Council recalls that freedom of expression, the protection of journalists, media freedom and pluralism are key pillars of a democratic society that aspiring partners need to ensure. Ensuring an enabling environment and a stronger role for civil society organisations, including in the reform process also remain essential elements of a well-functioning democracy. The Council calls on all partners to urgently address reported shortcomings, paying special attention to addressing systemic issues noted by the Commission.
8. The Council also highlights that partners need to make sustainable progress on comprehensive **justice reform, the fight against corruption, including de-oligarchisation, and the fight against organised crime**. Establishing a solid implementation of reforms and sustained track records in these critical areas remain essential.
9. In the Western Balkans, the Council notes that decisive efforts are still required to foster **reconciliation and regional stability**. The Council strongly encourages partners to solve their bilateral disputes and issues rooted in the legacy of the past, in line with international law and established principles, including the Agreement on Succession Issues.

10. A further strengthening of the cooperation on foreign policy issues remains of crucial importance, and the Council expects partners to fully align with the EU **Common Foreign and Security Policy** (CFSP), including restrictive measures, a key aspect of the EU integration process and a strong expression of a partner's strategic choice and place in a community of values. The EU continues to stand by partners and provide assistance, in particular to those fully aligned. Preventing the circumvention of EU restrictive measures, including those adopted in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, remains of paramount importance. The Council welcomes partners' continued commitment to the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), including the contribution to EU's missions and operations by most.
11. Countering the challenges of **hybrid threats** is a key priority. The EU is committed to further deepening cooperation with partners, inter alia on countering information manipulation activities, including disinformation. The EU is intensifying its work with partners to counter false Russian narratives and disinformation about Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.
12. Combatting **terrorism, violent extremism, radicalisation and organised crime**, continue to be essential. The Council remains committed to further deepening the successful cooperation with partners in these areas.
13. **Irregular migration** remains a pressing challenge that requires continued cooperation and coordination with all partners. The Council once again commends the Western Balkans partners for their constructive cooperation, and Türkiye for its continued efforts in hosting one of the world's largest refugee populations.
14. The Council underlines the crucial importance of partners aligning their **visa policies** with the EU.
15. The Council expects all partners to clearly and regularly **communicate** to their populations the benefits and obligations stemming from their respective EU paths, as well as their own commitment to EU values and the required reforms. At the same time, the EU will strengthen its strategic communication on the enlargement process.

16. On the **economic criteria**, the Council positively notes that most of the partner economies have demonstrated significant resilience despite Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. It is important that partners accelerate structural reforms required for a sustainable growth and make progress on meeting the economic criteria for EU membership.
17. The EU will continue to extend **support** at all levels to aspiring members' political, economic and social transformation, based on tangible progress on rule of law and socio-economic reforms, as well as on partners' adherence to EU values, rules and standards. The EU will continue to provide substantial financial assistance to partners under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe), as well as technical assistance, in particular through Twinning and TAIEX.
18. The Council remains committed to bringing partners closer to the EU, preparing the ground for accession, and bringing concrete benefits to their citizens already during the enlargement process. The Council welcomes the progress on gradual integration achieved over the past year. The Council will continue to encourage further advancing **gradual integration** in a merit-based and reversible manner, in line with the European Council conclusions of 2022 and 2023 and building on the revised enlargement methodology. Gradual integration remains subject to relevant EU *acquis* alignment. The Council underlines the importance of fully using the potential of existing legal instruments. Building on progress achieved so far, the Council looks forward to examining further proposals by the Commission.
19. The Council welcomes the on-going implementation of the **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility**, which are on track to deliver unprecedented financial support and reform assistance. The Council welcomes the ambitious Reform Agendas and Ukraine Plan that Western Balkan partners and Ukraine respectively have adopted and recalls that the effective implementation of the reforms specified therein determines the payments. The Council welcomes the Commission's communication on a new Growth Plan for Moldova and looks forward to reaching political agreement on the **Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova** as soon as possible.

MONTENEGRO

20. The Council welcomes the very positive results on the delivery on longstanding reform commitments. The Council commends the government's **objective** to continue Montenegro's swift advances on its EU path, and encourages all political forces to follow their ambitious plan for the closing of the accession negotiations.
21. The Council welcomes **good progress** made in the accession negotiations so far, with all 33 screened chapters opened and 3 provisionally closed. The Council particularly commends Montenegro for having, overall, met the interim benchmarks of the rule of law chapters 23 and 24: an important milestone that marks the beginning of a new and final phase in the accession negotiations. The Council encourages Montenegro to swiftly proceed to the implementation of the closing benchmarks for the rule of law chapters 23 and 24. The Council looks forward to be able to provisionally close further chapters as soon as possible, when the conditions are met. Provided Montenegro maintains its steadfast reform progress and delivers on required reforms, the Council stands ready to initiate the preparations for the drafting of the accession treaty.
22. The Council welcomes Montenegro's progress towards restoring the **functioning of the main judicial bodies**, for accelerating and deepening the implementation of key judicial reforms and, adopting a new strategic framework, and finalising a number of pending judicial appointments, through transparent and merit-based procedures. These measures help improve the independence, accountability, impartiality, integrity, efficiency, and professionalism of the judicial system. The Council welcomes the appointment of a new permanent President of the Supreme Court.

23. The Council **welcomes the good progress** and encourages Montenegro to continue its reform efforts, in particular in pivotal areas such as the freedom of expression and media, including the protection of journalists and the **fight against corruption and organised crime**, and public administration reforms. While acknowledging progress made, the Council reiterates that Montenegro must improve its track record of investigations, prosecutions, final convictions and seizure and confiscation of criminal assets, including at the high level. Montenegro should also make progress on a comprehensive electoral reform, including amending its law on financing of political entities to bring it in line with European standards, ensuring the independence of the election commission, and the transparency of the voter register.
24. The Council recognizes the good progress made on migration management, while stressing the need for full alignment with **EU's visa policy** and a strengthening of its border control capacity.
25. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes the strong rebound and steady growth of the economy, the stability of the banking and financial sectors and the improvement in the labour market. The Council encourages Montenegro to implement necessary structural reforms, and, inter alia, reduce public debt and continue its efforts to strengthen fiscal governance and transparency.
26. The Council notes that **good neighbourly relations** and regional cooperation remain essential elements of the enlargement process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process.
27. The Council strongly commends Montenegro for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues, and its steadfast and long-standing full alignment with the **EU CFSP**, including on EU restrictive measures – a strong signal of Montenegro's strategic commitment to its EU path. It also welcomes Montenegro's continued active participation in EU missions and operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

SERBIA

28. While welcoming that Serbia has reaffirmed EU integration as its strategic goal, the Council underlines the importance for Serbia to demonstrate strong political will and consistency in the implementation of EU-related reforms as well as to communicate objectively and unambiguously on the EU.
29. The Council welcomes the **overall progress** made in the accession negotiations so far, with 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters opened and 2 chapters provisionally closed. The Council recalls that Serbia's progress on the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo will continue to determine the overall pace of accession negotiations.
30. The Council encourages Serbia to demonstrate more **political will** by further accelerating reforms and delivering concrete and tangible results on the **fundamentals**, in particular by continuing to focus on fulfilling the interim benchmarks of the rule of law chapters 23 and 24. The Council takes good note of the adoption of the new anti-corruption strategy and the by-laws to the laws implementing the constitutional amendments. While positively noting some progress made in the fight against corruption, the Council notes limited progress on the judiciary and the fight against organised crime and reiterates the need to step up efforts in these domains, including by establishing a track record with effective investigations, prosecutions, final convictions, freezing and confiscation of criminal assets, including at the high level.
31. The Council reiterates its concern about the lack of progress on improving the **freedom of expression** and the **independence of the media** and calls on Serbia to implement the adopted media legislation and ensure its further alignment with EU *acquis* and standards as well as to actively engage in preventing and tackling all forms of disinformation and foreign information manipulation in all media channels. The Council also encourages Serbia to ensure an enabling environment and a stronger role for civil society organisations.

32. Serbia also needs to continue to pay particular attention to the full respect of **fundamental rights**, including protection of the most vulnerable groups, as well as to the non-discriminatory treatment of persons belonging to minorities throughout Serbia.
33. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes Serbia's good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy and encourages Serbia to continue efforts to advance in its capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union and to implement the necessary structural reforms. The Council also welcomes Serbia's enhanced cooperation with the EU, notably the strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials.
34. The Council acknowledges the Commission's assessment that Serbia maintains its level of preparedness on the opening benchmarks in **cluster 3** (Competitiveness and inclusive growth).
35. The Council welcomes that Serbia has maintained its commitment in a number of **regional cooperation** initiatives and encourages Serbia to further strengthen **good neighbourly relations** and contribute to stability and reconciliation with all partners in the region.
36. The Council continues to underscore the importance of meaningful regional cooperation in the **domestic handling of war crimes**, resolving the remaining cases of missing persons and full cooperation with the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals. There should be no support for convicted war criminals nor for glorification or denial of their crimes.
37. Recalling that the proper functioning of democratic institutions is a fundamental element of the EU accession process, the Council notes the reports on the December 2023 and June 2024 **elections** by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In view of these findings, the electoral process requires tangible improvements and further reforms. The Council strongly encourages Serbia to address the OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe bodies' recommendations, including those pertaining to key aspects of the electoral process.

38. The Council commends Serbia for significantly contributing to the management of mixed migration flows towards the EU and continues to stress the need for further progress on asylum procedures and full alignment with EU's **visa policy**.
39. The Council reiterates its strong expectation of Serbia to step up its efforts towards full alignment with **EU CFSP** positions and restrictive measures, including on Russia and Belarus, as a matter of utmost priority. The Council also calls on Serbian authorities to refrain from actions and statements against the EU positions on foreign policy and other strategic matters. The Council welcomes Serbia's humanitarian and other assistance to Ukraine and encourages Serbia to continue its good cooperation with the EU on preventing the circumvention of EU restrictive measures. The Council welcomes Serbia's continued active participation in and important contribution to EU missions and operations under the EU CSDP.
40. Serbia and Kosovo must pursue sustained de-escalation efforts, refrain from unilateral and provocative actions that could lead to tensions and violence and avoid divisive rhetoric. The Council expects both Serbia and Kosovo to find a sustainable solution to the situation in the north of Kosovo that guarantees safety, security and participatory democracy for all citizens, in a coordinated manner. The Council recalls Serbia's obligations to uphold Dialogue agreements during the legislative process.
41. The Council reiterates its strong condemnation of the violent acts by Kosovo Serb protesters against citizens, KFOR troops, law enforcement, and media on 29 May 2023 and the violent attack against Kosovo Police on 24 September 2023 in the north of Kosovo. There is no justification for violence. The Council reiterates its expectations that Serbia will fully cooperate and take all the necessary measures to apprehend and urgently bring to justice the perpetrators of the 2023 attacks. The Council underlines the need for full accountability and deeply regrets that Serbia has taken insufficient actions in this respect.

42. The Council takes note of the call by Serbia in September 2024 for Kosovo Serbs' participation in future elections in Kosovo and for reintegration of Kosovo Serbs into all Kosovo institutions they left in 2022. The Council reiterates its expectation for their timely and swift reintegration without any preconditions by Serbia, in accordance with the Dialogue agreements and with full respect for Kosovo's legal framework.
43. The Council expects Serbia to engage in the **EU-facilitated Dialogue** in good faith and achieve a comprehensive legally binding agreement with Kosovo on normalisation of relations in accordance with international law and EU *acquis* without further delay. Normalisation of relations and implementing their Dialogue commitments are essential conditions on the European path of both parties and both risk losing important opportunities in absence of progress.
44. The Council welcomes that Serbia and Kosovo recently reaffirmed their commitment to the process of **normalisation of their relations** and pledged constructive engagement in the process to move it forward quickly. It also welcomes the conclusion of the commercial agreement on electricity supply in the north of Kosovo in December 2023 and the mutual recognition of licence plates in January 2024.
45. The Council reiterates that the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia and its Implementation Annex adopted in February and March 2023 respectively, must be fully respected and implemented as soon as possible without preconditions as all EU-related commitments, along with other pending commitments reached in the EU-facilitated Dialogue, led by the High Representative and supported by the EU Special Representative. This includes the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities on the basis of the draft Statute presented to the parties by the EU Facilitator. Serbia is expected to initiate the recognition of Kosovo's documents and symbols in line with Article 1 of the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation. The Council reiterates that the status of Serbia-supported structures and services is foreseen to be resolved in line with agreements reached in the EU-facilitated Dialogue and Kosovo law.

46. The Council recalls that the benchmarks of **chapter 35** of Serbia's accession negotiations have been amended to reflect Serbia's commitments stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex.

ALBANIA

47. The Council welcomes the opening of the fundamentals cluster with Albania at the **accession conference** on 15 October 2024. The Council commends the government's **ambition** to continue Albania's advances on its EU path, encourages all political forces to follow their ambitious plan for the closing of the accession negotiations, and looks forward to be able to open further negotiating clusters as soon as possible, when the conditions are met.
48. Noting that political polarisation continues to affect the activities of the **parliament**, the Council recalls that inclusive and constructive political dialogue in the country remains crucial for progress on EU-related reforms.
49. The Council welcomes the reform progress made, notably in the areas of **the fundamentals and the rule of law**. The Council positively notes Albania's continued implementation of the justice reform which needs to be consolidated, delivering further improvements in impartiality, independence, and professionalism of the judicial system. The Council also welcomes the advancement of the vetting process and, in particular the completion of processing of cases at first instance, and encourages Albania to conclude the entire process in a timely manner. The Council reiterates that binding decisions of the Constitutional Court should be fully respected and implemented. The Council takes positive note of the good results achieved by the Specialised Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK) and its courts including in high level corruption cases, and of the good cooperation with EU and Member States' law enforcement agencies. This should continue, including cooperation on financial investigations. Strengthened controls and consolidated capacities to protect EU financial interests are also needed. The Council recalls the importance of maintaining the efforts to establish a solid track record in the fight against organised crime and corruption, including at high level. The Council welcomes the progress made in the area of public administration reform and encourages Albania to continue the implementation.

50. The Council calls on Albania to continue strengthening the protection of **fundamental rights**, including the protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and notes with concern that no progress was made on media freedom and freedom of expression. Albania needs to step up its efforts to strengthen media independence and pluralism by increasing the transparency of media ownership and ensuring a safe and secure environment for journalists. Recalling the EU common position on cluster 1, the Council welcomes the adoption of the secondary legislation on minorities and expects Albania to swiftly adopt and implement the remaining by-laws relating to the 2017 framework law on the protection of persons belonging to national minorities in line with European standards and with the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. In the same vein, the Council encourages the implementation of a comprehensive land-sector reform and the consolidation of property rights in a transparent manner. The role of civil society needs to be further strengthened and meaningful consultations reinforced.
51. On **electoral reforms**, the Council underlines the need to address outstanding recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission in an inclusive and timely manner.
52. The Council recognizes the progress made on **migration** and border management, while stressing the need for further progress on asylum procedures and full alignment with the EU's visa policy.
53. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes Albania's good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy and encourages Albania to continue efforts to advance in its capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union and to implement necessary structural reforms.
54. The Council welcomes Albania's continued constructive engagement in regional cooperation. The Council notes that **good neighbourly relations** and regional cooperation remain essential elements of the enlargement process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process.

55. The Council strongly commends Albania for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues and in particular its steadfast and long-standing full alignment with the **EU CFSP**, including on EU restrictive measures – a strong signal of Albania’s strategic commitment to its EU path. The Council also welcomes Albania’s continued active participation in EU missions and operations under the CSDP, and the new Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and Albania which paves the way for increased collaboration in key areas.

NORTH MACEDONIA

56. The Council welcomes that the new government in North Macedonia has affirmed EU integration as its strategic goal. Recalling its conclusions of July 2022, the Council notes that North Macedonia has not yet completed **the constitutional changes** to which it has committed itself. Reiterating the European Council’s call on North Macedonia **to accelerate the completion** of these changes, the Council reaffirms its readiness to convene another intergovernmental conference, without further delays nor additional political decision, as soon as North Macedonia has implemented its commitment, in line with its internal procedures. Thereafter, the Council stands ready to open the first negotiating cluster as soon as possible, in line with the Negotiating Framework.
57. The Council encourages all parties in **parliament** to ensure cross-party collaboration, with a focus on advancing the implementation of EU-related reforms.

58. The Council welcomes the level of preparation of North Macedonia in key areas. It notes that permanent and decisive steps still are required in order to accelerate the implementation of EU-related reforms, notably in the areas of the **fundamentals and the rule of law** where only limited progress was made. The Council reiterates that North Macedonia needs to deliver on the independence, professionalism, efficiency and impartiality of the judiciary and on the public administration reform. The Judicial Council needs to be strengthened in line with the recommendations of the 2023 EU peer review mission. The fight against corruption and organised crime needs to be reinforced. The Council remain seriously concerned about the amendments to the Criminal Code, affecting a large number of high-level corruption cases. The Council calls on North Macedonia to adopt a new Criminal Code in line with the EU *acquis* and international standards. The Council also renews its call on North Macedonia to further strengthen **fundamental rights**, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, media freedom and freedom of expression.
59. While welcoming that recent parliamentary and presidential elections held in 2024 were competitive, the Council notes that further progress is needed on **electoral reform**, including the addressing of the outstanding recommendations from the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission.
60. The Council commends North Macedonia on its continued good cooperation regarding **migration** management, border management and alignment with the EU's visa policy.
61. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes the good level of preparation and some progress made by North Macedonia in developing a functioning market economy and encourages North Macedonia to continue efforts to advance in its capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union and to implement necessary structural reforms.

62. The Council notes that **good neighbourly relations** and regional cooperation remain essential elements of the enlargement process, as well as of the Stabilisation and Association Process. The Council recalls the importance of achieving tangible results and implementing in good faith bilateral agreements, including the Prespa agreement with Greece and the Treaty on Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria.
63. The Council strongly commends North Macedonia for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues and in particular its steadfast and long-standing full alignment with the **EU CFSP**, including on EU restrictive measures – a strong signal of North Macedonia’s strategic commitment to its EU path. The Council also welcomes North Macedonia’s continued active participation in EU missions and operations under the CSDP, and the new Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and North Macedonia which paves the way for increased collaboration in key areas.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

64. The Council welcomes the **decision** of the European Council on 21-22 March 2024 **to open accession negotiations** with Bosnia and Herzegovina, building on the Commission’s recommendation of 12 March 2024. The Council looks forward to Bosnia and Herzegovina taking all relevant steps set out in the Commission’s recommendation of 12 October 2022 with a view to the adoption of the negotiating framework by the Council the moment conditions are met. Further efforts are needed in fulfilling the 14 key priorities set out in the Commission Opinion on its EU membership application as endorsed by the Council in 2019, and taking into account the European Council conclusions of June 2022.

65. The Council welcomes the commitment of the political leadership that brought tangible results and contributed to the March decision to open accession negotiations but notes with regret that the reform dynamic has since stalled. The Council urges all political actors to renew the country's focus on progressing on the EU path, taking resolute actions to implement the necessary reforms. Bosnia and Herzegovina should appoint a chief negotiator and a national IPA coordinator under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) III as well as develop a national programme for the adoption of the EU *acquis*. The Council recalls the importance of ensuring compliance of all adopted laws with the EU *acquis* and European standards, including the Venice Commission recommendations.
66. The Council welcomes that local elections, held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 6 October 2024 on the basis of the state-level election law, were managed in a competitive and efficient way, addressing some long-standing ODIHR recommendations. With reference to the **institutional mechanisms** which were set by the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to undertake further constitutional and electoral reforms to ensure equality and non-discrimination of all citizens, notably by implementing the *Sejdić-Finci* and related case law of the European Court of Human Rights. No steps should be taken which would make the implementation of these rulings more challenging or further deepen divisions.
67. The Council reiterates its **unequivocal commitment** to Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU perspective as a single, united and sovereign country. The Council urges all political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina to refrain from and renounce provocative divisive rhetoric and actions, including questioning the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the country, and to end the glorification of convicted war criminals as well as to actively promote reconciliation.

68. The Council remains seriously concerned about legislation and initiatives in the *Republika Srpska* entity that run counter to the EU path of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including secessionist rhetoric and questioning the constitutional order of the country. The sovereignty, territorial integrity, constitutional order, including Constitutional Court decisions, and international personality of Bosnia and Herzegovina need to be respected. Any action against these principles will lead to serious consequences.
69. While noting the limited progress made in the area of the judiciary, notably the adoption of the integrity amendments to the Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, the Council underlines the need to reinforce the **rule of law**, including by adopting the new Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, and the Law on Courts. Constitutional Court decisions must be fully respected.
70. The Council notes that limited efforts were made in the area of **fundamental rights** and reiterates its call on Bosnia and Herzegovina to significantly intensify efforts in this regard. Noting that no progress was achieved on freedom of expression and of the media and the protection of journalists, the Council calls on Bosnia and Herzegovina to ensure full respect, protection and promotion of the freedom of assembly, association and expression, and refrain from further actions that adversely impact their exercise.
71. The Council positively notes that some progress was made in the **fight against corruption and organised crime**, in particular the adoption of the laws on the prevention of conflict of interest and on anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism as well as the signing of the Eurojust agreement on judicial cooperation with the EU. The Council calls on Bosnia and Herzegovina to take further decisive steps in these domains, including by establishing a track record of investigations and convictions, including at high-level and adopting the Law on personal data protection.

72. On the **economic criteria**, the Council encourages Bosnia and Herzegovina to advance its capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union and to implement the necessary structural reforms.
73. The Council welcomes that migration management continued to improve and calls on the country to fully align with the EU **visa policy** and to adopt the Law on border control. The Council welcomes that the negotiations on the Frontex status agreement have advanced and calls for its swift signing.
74. With regard to the implementation of the **Growth Plan** for the Western Balkans, the Council urges Bosnia and Herzegovina to submit its Reform Agenda without further delays. This is a basic general requirement for possible payments under the Reform and Growth Facility, and Bosnia and Herzegovina risks losing important benefits in the absence of progress.
75. The EU stands in solidarity with Bosnia and Herzegovina following the devastating **floods** and landslides on 3 October 2024. The EU provided emergency assistance through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism with the participation of ten Member States, as well as through EUFOR Althea. The EU stands ready to provide further assistance as necessary.
76. The Council welcomes the renewal of the mandate of **EUFOR Althea**, which continues to play a key role in supporting the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in maintaining a safe and secure environment for all citizens.
77. The Council reiterates the importance of continued cooperation among **international actors** and expresses its support to the mission of the High Representative and his Office towards fulfilling the 5+2 Agenda.
78. The Council reiterates its call on Bosnia and Herzegovina to swiftly ratify all regional **mobility agreements** under the Berlin Process.

79. The Council commends Bosnia and Herzegovina's full alignment with **EU CFSP** signalling its clear commitment to the EU path and encourages it to maintain it and to fully implement restrictive measures, including on Russia and Belarus.

KOSOVO

80. The Council welcomes Kosovo's continued **commitment** to its European path and related reforms. The EU will continue to assist Kosovo further in its reforms and their sustained implementation, including those focused on its European path. The Council welcomes the entry into force of visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens.
81. The Council positively notes some progress in the **fight against organised crime**, in particular through increased cooperation with Europol, while limited progress was made with regard to the **fight against corruption** and the protection of **fundamental rights**. Kosovo should continue its efforts to ensure the accountability, independence, efficiency and integrity of the judicial system, to protect freedom of expression, and to ensure that legislation in these areas is fully aligned with EU *acquis* and European standards. The Council underlines the importance of strengthening the public administration. The Council encourages Kosovo to make additional progress to effectively promote fundamental rights. In these regards, the Council welcomes the implementation of the Constitutional Court's decision on the Dečani Monastery. The Council positively notes that Kosovo set up a central secretariat for combating gender-based violence and appointed a national coordinator.
82. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes the good progress achieved by Kosovo in developing a functioning market economy and encourages Kosovo to implement necessary structural reforms.
83. The Council welcomes that the February 2025 parliamentary **elections** will be held under Kosovo's new electoral framework, which implements recommendations from successive EU election observation missions. The Council invites Kosovo to continue consolidating this framework, underlining the importance of a transparent, well administered, inclusive and competitive electoral process.

84. The Council remains deeply concerned about the situation in the **north of Kosovo**. Kosovo and Serbia must pursue sustained de-escalation efforts, refrain from unilateral and provocative actions that could lead to tensions and violence and avoid divisive rhetoric. The Council supports the reinforced presence of KFOR, in particular at the border/boundary demarcation between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as the fixed presence at the bridge in Mitrovica. Several uncoordinated actions by Kosovo including those directed against Serbia-supported structures and services operating in Kosovo negatively impacted Kosovo Serbs and other communities and their access to basic public and social services. The Council expects both Kosovo and Serbia to find a sustainable solution to the situation in the north of Kosovo, that guarantees safety, security and participatory democracy for all citizens, in a coordinated manner.
85. The Council reiterates its strong condemnation of the violent acts by Kosovo Serb protesters against citizens, KFOR troops, law enforcement, and media on 29 May 2023 and the violent attack against Kosovo Police on 24 September 2023 in the north of Kosovo. There is no justification for violence. The Council takes note of the ongoing judicial proceedings in Kosovo and reiterates the need for accountability.
86. The Council condemns the recent attack on the Iber Lepenc/Ibar Lepenac canal in the north of Kosovo and stands in solidarity with the affected people. The Council expects the perpetrators to be apprehended and brought to justice. In this respect, the Council calls on all stakeholders to cooperate fully with relevant authorities.
87. The Council calls on Kosovo to enable the reintegration of Kosovo Serb judges, prosecutors, police officers and other personnel into all Kosovo institutions they left in 2022. The Council expects that the reintegration will be done in accordance with Dialogue agreements and with full respect for Kosovo's legal framework.

The measures implemented vis-à-vis Kosovo due to the lack of decisive action to de-escalate the tensions in the north of Kosovo remain in place. The Council recalls that the EU stands ready to lift its measures in case the EU's requests in this regard are fulfilled.

88. The Council regrets that a majority of Kosovo Serbs boycotted the mayoral recall vote in April 2024. It is essential to hold inclusive local elections, with the full participation of Kosovo Serbs without any preconditions, in all four northern municipalities. The right to vote should be facilitated for all eligible citizens. The Council encourages all Kosovo Serb members of the Kosovo Assembly to engage actively and constructively in the work of the Assembly.
89. The Council expects Kosovo to engage in the **EU-facilitated Dialogue** in good faith and achieve a comprehensive legally binding agreement with Serbia on normalisation of relations in accordance with international law and EU *acquis* without further delay. Normalisation of relations and implementing their Dialogue commitments are essential conditions on the European path of both parties and both risk losing important opportunities in absence of progress.
90. The Council welcomes that Kosovo and Serbia recently reaffirmed their commitment to the process of normalisation of their relations and pledged constructive engagement in the process to move it forward quickly. It also welcomes the conclusion of the commercial agreement on electricity supply in the north of Kosovo in December 2023 and the mutual recognition of licence plates in January 2024.
91. The Council reiterates that the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia and its Implementation Annex adopted in February and March 2023 respectively, must be fully respected and implemented as soon as possible without preconditions as all-EU-related commitments, along with other pending commitments reached in the EU-facilitated Dialogue, led by the High Representative and supported by the EU Special Representative.

92. This includes the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities starting with the transmission of the draft Statute presented to the parties by the EU Facilitator by decision of the Government of Kosovo, to the Kosovo Constitutional Court without further delay. The Council reiterates that the status of Serbia-supported structures and services is foreseen to be resolved in line with agreements reached in the EU-facilitated Dialogue and Kosovo law.
93. The Council recalls the need to amend the agenda of **Kosovo's Special Group on Normalisation** to reflect Kosovo's commitments stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex.
94. The Council reiterates the importance of and its support to the work of the **Kosovo Specialist Chambers and the Specialist Prosecutor's Office** and underlines its readiness to assist them in the implementation of their mandate.
95. The Council recalls the importance of Kosovo's close cooperation with the **EULEX** mission, as well as other relevant international actors.
96. The Council welcomes the steps taken by Kosovo towards meeting its commitments in **CEFTA**, including by lifting its decision to ban the import of goods of Serbian origin, which should be swiftly implemented in full.
97. The Council strongly commends Kosovo's condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, its continued voluntary alignment with the **EU CFSP** and implementation of the EU restrictive measures, which is a strong expression of Kosovo's strategic choice and place in a community of values.

TÜRKIYE

98. In line with all previous Council and European Council conclusions on relations with Türkiye, the Council emphasises the EU's **strategic interest** in a stable and secure environment in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the development of a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Türkiye.

99. The EU reiterates its **readiness to engage** with Türkiye in areas of common interest in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner, in line with the European Council conclusions of April 2024, and subject to established conditionalities.
100. The Council takes good note of the **concrete steps** that have been taken in that context, such as the holding of the first High-Level Dialogue on Trade, the reinstatement of the High-Level Dialogue on Economy, and the invitation to the European Investment Bank to examine conditions for gradual re-engagement in priority areas, with focus on the private sector. The Council also takes good note of the continuation of the dialogues on foreign policy and regional issues, and of the High-Level Dialogues between the EU and Türkiye in sectoral areas of joint interest. Türkiye's own constructive engagement will be instrumental in advancing the various areas of cooperation. In this regard, the European Union attaches particular importance to resumption of and progress in the Cyprus settlement talks in further enhancing EU- Türkiye cooperation.
101. The Council welcomes the continued **improvements in relations** between Türkiye and Greece, and the de-escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean, and expects them to be sustained.
102. The Council continues to expect Türkiye to unequivocally commit to **good neighbourly relations** and the peaceful settlement of disputes, having recourse, if necessary, to the International Court of Justice. The Council, as stated in all relevant Council conclusions, as well as in the Declaration of 21 September 2005, reiterates that Türkiye needs to fulfil its obligations under the Negotiating Framework, including the full, non-discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement towards all Member States. Recognition of all Member States is essential. Türkiye must normalise its relations with the Republic of Cyprus and respect the sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all EU Member States, as, well as all their sovereign rights, in accordance with EU and international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

103. The Council reiterates the EU's full commitment to a **comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus problem**, within the UN agreed framework, in accordance with all relevant UNSC resolutions and in line with the principles on which the Union is founded and the *acquis*. It remains crucial that Türkiye commits and actively contributes to such a peaceful settlement, including its external aspects. Welcoming the recent steps taken by the UN Secretary-General towards a resumption of settlement talks, the EU remains ready to play an active role in supporting all stages of the UN-led process, with all appropriate means at its disposal. The Council recalls the importance of the status of Varosha, condemns all Türkiye's unilateral actions that run contrary to UN Security Resolutions, and reiterates its call for their immediate reversal. The Council calls on Türkiye to respect all the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, in particular Resolutions 541, 550, 789 and 1251.
104. Recalling previous years' Council and European Council conclusions as well as Türkiye's related international commitments, the Council reiterates its serious concerns about the continued and deeply worrying situation in the areas of **democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights**. Particularly worrisome is the continued systemic lack of independence and undue pressure on the judiciary, and the many restrictions on free and safe expression, including media freedom and dissemination of information, as well as the dismissals and replacements of democratically elected municipal mayors. The Council notes with concern that civil society organisations, especially those dealing with women, LGBTI persons and human rights, continue to face pressure. The Council reiterates its calls on Türkiye to step up cooperation with the **Council of Europe** and its relevant bodies and institutions, address their key recommendations, fully implement the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other international human rights instruments to which Türkiye is a party, as well as execute all judgments of the European Court of Human Rights in line with Article 46 of the ECHR. Türkiye continued failure to implement rulings of the ECHR raises questions about its commitment to the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights and to its international obligations. The Council calls on Türkiye to urgently reverse the negative trends in all these areas and credibly address the many serious shortcomings identified in the Commission's report.

105. On the **economic criteria**, the Council welcomes a shift towards more conventional and tighter economic policies since mid-2023. The Council encourages Türkiye to continue implementing stability-oriented macroeconomic policies and to continue addressing concerns about the proper functioning of Türkiye's market economy and institutional and regulatory environment.
106. The **EU-Turkey Statement** remains the key framework for the cooperation on migration and continues to deliver results. Türkiye and the EU continued to cooperate effectively in supporting refugees and host communities in Türkiye. The Council reiterates the importance of the full and non-discriminatory implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, including vis-à-vis the Republic of Cyprus, to resume returns and prevent irregular arrivals. In this context, the Council also stresses the need for Türkiye to fully and effectively implement the EU-Turkey Readmission Agreement and to cooperate in the area of justice and home affairs with all EU Member States, as well as to align with the EU visa policy.
107. The Council recalls the need for Türkiye to fulfil its obligations as regards the implementation of the **EU-Turkey Customs Union**, ensuring its effective application to all Member States. While acknowledging the recent progress achieved towards resolving trade barriers and removing certain restrictions, the Council expects Türkiye to continue and step up work to remove remaining trade irritants.
108. The Council acknowledges the concrete measures taken by Türkiye to stop the **circumvention of EU sanctions** against Russia through its territory, which need to be implemented and complemented by further efforts where appropriate. Active cooperation with the EU in preventing and detecting the circumvention of EU sanctions, including on dual-use goods, as well as false transit and the re-export of goods to Russia through third country intermediaries, remains essential. The Council acknowledges Türkiye's important role played in the Black Sea Grain Initiative and in the prisoners' exchange in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The Council invites the EU Special Envoy for Sanctions to prepare an assessment outlining the results of the actions taken by Türkiye in this regard and possible ways to improve their efficiency.

109. The Council deeply regrets Türkiye's very low alignment rate with **EU CFSP** and its non-alignment with EU restrictive measures adopted in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and reiterates its strong call on Türkiye to step up its alignment with EU CFSP positions and restrictive measures as a matter of utmost priority. Türkiye's foreign policy remains at odds with the EU's priorities. This needs to be addressed by the Turkish authorities, including in the framework of the dialogues between the EU and Türkiye on foreign policy and regional issues.
110. Reaffirming previous year's conclusions, the Council notes that Türkiye's accession negotiations have effectively come to a standstill and that no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing.

UKRAINE

111. The Council reiterates its resolute **condemnation of Russia's war of aggression** against Ukraine, which constitutes a manifest violation of the UN Charter, and reaffirms its continued support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and its inherent right of self-defence. Reaffirming the EU's commitment to a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace based on the principles of the UN Charter and international law, in line with the key principles and objectives of Ukraine's Peace Formula, and where no initiative about Ukraine can be taken without Ukraine, the Council also reconfirms the EU's unwavering commitment to providing continued support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes and as intensely as needed, also in line with the EU-Ukraine joint security commitments signed in June 2024.

112. The Council reiterates the EU's steadfast support for Ukraine and its EU accession path, and commends Ukraine's commitment to the EU reform process. The Council welcomes the formal **opening of the accession negotiations** with Ukraine in June 2024 and the considerable reform progress made in the past year despite the exceptional challenges caused by Russia's war of aggression. The Council welcomes that the screening process is progressing according to plan and looks forward to its conclusion, and to the next steps in Ukraine's accession process by opening the fundamental cluster as soon as possible, when the conditions are met. The Council remains committed to supporting Ukraine's repair, recovery and reconstruction.
113. The Council positively notes the progress achieved in the important areas of **rule of law and judicial and public administration reform**, which remain vital for strengthening Ukraine's resilience and for further progress in the enlargement process. The Council welcomes the ongoing renewal process of the judicial governance bodies, notably the High Council of Justice and the High Qualification Commission of Judges of Ukraine, and the Constitutional Court. The implementation of transparent and merit-based selection processes remains important and should continue. The Council looks forward to the continued renewal process of the judiciary, notably the Supreme Court. The Council also welcomes Ukraine's ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and invites Ukraine to take further steps to ensure full domestic alignment.
114. The Council welcomes that the legislative and institutional framework on **fundamental rights** is in place and looks forward to its further implementation and consolidation. The Council encourages Ukraine to continue its efforts to strengthen freedom of expression and media in line with the Commission's recommendations, despite the existing challenges caused by Russia's war of aggression, including to continue its efforts to maintain and gradually restore a transparent, pluralistic and independent media landscape. Efforts to counter foreign interference and information manipulation must be in line with international standards on freedom of expression.

115. Particular attention should be given to the protection and non-discriminatory treatment of persons belonging to national minorities. The rights of **persons belonging to national minorities** should be protected, in line with the Constitution of Ukraine. The Council takes note of the amended legislation on the protection of the rights of persons belonging to **national minorities**. The implementation of this legislation should continue, in close cooperation with national minority representatives. To ensure the irreversibility of progress in these areas and its full and effective implementation, progress will continue to be closely monitored by the Commission, which will report regularly on it to the Council. Ukraine should adopt, through an inclusive process, an Action Plan dedicated to the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, including, inter alia, in the field of non-discrimination, fight against hate speech, the use of minority languages and minority language education, setting up effective measures, reporting mechanisms and identifying respective responsible institutions. Furthermore, Ukraine is expected to implement in good faith relevant **bilateral agreements** with EU Member States.
116. The Council welcomes Ukraine's progress towards ensuring the independent and effective functioning of **anti-corruption** institutions. The Council encourages Ukraine to continue addressing remaining challenges and to further strengthen its anti-corruption institutional framework, limitations in the criminal procedure legislation, staffing constraints and the track record on high-level corruption cases. Additionally, the Council encourages Ukraine to further strengthen its financial investigations and anti-money laundering measures.
117. On the economic criteria, the Council acknowledges the exceptional difficulties for Ukraine in conducting monetary policy and overall **economic** governance under the current circumstances, and in these regards takes positive note that Ukraine has made some progress towards establishing a functioning market economy.

118. The Council commends Ukraine's efforts to enhance **energy security** and independence of supply in a context marked by Russia's persistent attacks against Ukraine's energy and civilian infrastructure. The EU stands ready to continue providing support to urgently increase Ukraine's energy security and strengthen the resilience of Ukraine's energy system .
119. The Council remains committed to further deepen the **EU's sectoral cooperation** with Ukraine and its integration in the EU internal market, on the basis of enhanced implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.
120. The Council welcomes Ukraine's strategic commitment to its EU path and its high alignment with the **EU CFSP** positions and restrictive measures. It encourages Ukraine to continue its positive trend towards full alignment, including in line with the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

MOLDOVA

121. The Council reiterates the EU's steadfast support for Moldova and its EU accession path, and commends Moldova's commitment to the EU reform process. The Council welcomes the formal opening of the accession negotiations with Moldova in June 2024 and the considerable reform progress made in the past year despite the significant challenges caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and hybrid attacks against Moldova itself. The Council welcomes that the screening process is progressing according to plan and looks forward to its conclusion, and to the next steps in Moldova's accession process by opening the fundamental cluster as soon as possible, when the conditions are met.
122. On the **fundamentals**, the Council underlines the importance of continued reform progress, notably in the areas of the rule of law and fundamental rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

123. Building on the significant progress made, Moldova should continue advancing on its comprehensive **justice reform**, including the vetting process, as well as advancing the **fight against corruption**, focusing on strengthening relevant institutions and building further a solid track record of investigations and convictions, including on high-level corruption cases. The Council welcomes Moldova's systemic approach to de-oligarchisation and encourages the continued implementation of the related action plan.
124. The Council takes note of the preliminary findings by OSCE/ODIHR, indicating that the Presidential **elections** and the **referendum on EU membership** on 20 October were calm and well-managed, despite Russia's persistent attempts to use foreign information manipulation and interference to undermine the democratic processes. The Council welcomes the outcome of the referendum, which reaffirms Moldova's commitment to its EU future.
125. The Council commends Moldova's resilience in the face of Russia's unprecedented **hybrid** attacks and reconfirms the EU's continued support, including through the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova. Countering external malign interference, addressing the disinformation impacting its citizens, and fostering voter participation are particularly important in view of the upcoming 2025 parliamentary elections. Efforts to counter foreign interference and information manipulation must be in line with international standards on freedom of expression.
126. The Council welcomes Moldova's steady progress to enhance its **energy security** and independence of supply. Moldova needs to further accelerate infrastructure projects related to electricity interconnections in order to reduce structural vulnerabilities.
127. On the **economic criteria**, the Council highlights the importance of continuing transformative **economic reforms**, sectoral cooperation and further integration in the EU internal market, on the basis of enhanced implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The Council welcomes the Commission's communication on the new Growth Plan for Moldova, aiming to support Moldova's socio-economic and fundamental reforms and enhance access to the EU's single market.

128. The Council positively notes Moldova's sustained efforts to strengthen its **public administration** and public finance management framework. The administrative and institutional capacity needs to be strengthened at all levels. The systemic engagement with civil society on reforms should continue.
129. The Council reiterates its commitment to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova within its internationally recognised borders.
130. The Council strongly commends Moldova for its consistent cooperation on foreign policy issues, and its steadfast efforts towards full alignment with the **EU CFSP**, including on EU restrictive measures – a strong signal of Moldova's strategic commitment to its EU path. The Council also commends the important cooperation on preventing the circumvention of sanctions against Russia and Belarus, and welcomes Moldova's continued active participation in EU missions and operations under the EU CSDP. It encourages Moldova to continue its positive alignment trend. The Council welcomes the Security and Defence Partnership between the EU and Moldova which paves the way for increased collaboration in key areas.

GEORGIA

131. The Council takes note of the Georgian government's recent statement on suspending the accession talks until 2028, and recalls that the European Council in June noted that the government's course of action jeopardises Georgia's European path, de facto leading to a halt of the accession process. In light of recent European Council conclusions, the Council reaffirms the Union's readiness to support the Georgian people on their European path. At the same time, it reiterates its serious concern regarding the course of action taken by the Georgian government, including the adoption of the law on transparency of foreign influence, which represents backsliding on the steps set out in the Commission's recommendation for candidate status.

132. The Georgian authorities must respect the right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, and refrain from using force against peaceful protesters, politicians and media representatives.
133. The Council calls on the Georgian authorities to urgently revert to the EU path and adopt **democratic, comprehensive and sustainable reforms**, in line with the core principles of European integration. The Council underlines the importance of reverting to the implementation of the nine steps set in the 2023 Enlargement communication of the Commission. If Georgia reverses the current course of action and addresses outstanding concerns and key reforms, the accession process can be resumed.
134. The Council is deeply concerned about the backsliding in the areas of **democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights**. Georgia needs to guarantee the full respect for fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression and assembly, and the freedom, independence and pluralism of the media, **as well as the rights of LGBTI persons**.
135. The intimidations, violence and discrimination against Georgia's civil society representatives, political leaders, civil activists and journalists in Georgia need to cease. Recalling that a **functioning civil society** is a crucial component of any democratic system, the Council calls on Georgia to ensure that its vibrant civil society is able to function without restrictions, and actively, inclusively and meaningfully engage in the policymaking process.
136. The Council notes with serious concern the preliminary findings by OSCE/ODIHR, which indicate that the parliamentary **elections** on 26 October were characterised by several shortcomings and a tense and highly polarised environment. In order to improve the conditions for the proper functioning of democratic institutions, the Council strongly encourages Georgia to investigate and address electoral irregularities and allegations thereof, and to address these and other OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe bodies' recommendations, also recalling that a comprehensive electoral reform is part of the nine steps.

137. The Council calls on the Georgian authorities to take concrete actions to overcome the increasing **polarisation** and refrain from actions that could further deepen the political tensions, such as anti-EU rhetoric and disinformation.
138. The Council regrets the backsliding in the **functioning of the judiciary**, and the growing lack of independence of institutions in general. Substantial efforts towards a comprehensive reform of the judiciary, in line with European standards and recommendations of the Venice Commission, are still required. Of equal importance is the development of a strong track record in fighting corruption and organised crime, and the implementation of de-oligarchisation actions.
139. On the **economic criteria**, the Council notes the moderate level of preparation and limited progress in developing a functioning market economy. The Council commends the continued implementation of sound fiscal and monetary policies and encourages Georgia to strengthen the independence of the central bank and implement other necessary structural reforms.
140. The Council calls on Georgia to urgently fulfil the outstanding **visa** liberalisation benchmarks including by aligning with the EU visa policy, addressing unfounded asylum applications and ensuring compliance with the fundamental rights requirements.
141. The Council takes note of Georgia's continued implementation of the EU-Georgia **Association Agreement** including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.
142. The Council reaffirms the EU's support to Georgia's **sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity** within its internationally recognised borders and underlines that the EU remains firmly committed to peaceful conflict resolution and its policy of non-recognition and engagement, including through the presence of the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia.

143. The Council reiterates its strong expectation for Georgia to substantially step up its efforts towards full alignment with **EU CFSP** positions and restrictive measures as a matter of utmost priority, including those against Russia and Belarus, and in line with the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Council also calls on Georgia's authorities to refrain from actions and statements against the EU positions on foreign policy and other strategic matters. The Council encourages Georgia to continue its cooperation on preventing the circumvention of EU restrictive measures.

Agence Europe