Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Affairs Council and General Affairs Council

2012-12-06

Foreign Office Minister David Lidington said:

My Right Honourable Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and I will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 10 December, and I will attend the General Affairs Council (GAC) on 11 December in Brussels. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Ashton of Upholland, and the General Affairs Council will be chaired by the Cypriot Presidency.

Foreign Affairs Council

EU-Russia Summit

Ministers will discuss the EU-Russia Summit which will be held in Brussels on 21 December. Whilst I do not expect conclusions to be issued, we will aim to ensure that this meeting, the 30th such summit, delivers concrete results for the EU in its relationship with Russia. The discussion provides an opportunity for the UK to steer the EU's objectives for the Summit and to ensure discussion focuses on concrete achievable outcomes, such as: resolution of the Siberian overflight charges; movement on market reform; positive developments in the energy relationship; underlining Member States' concerns on human rights and democratic standards; and a more effective Partnership for Modernisation.

Western Balkans

Ministers will review the situation in the countries of the Western Balkans, in advance of the discussion of EU enlargement at the GAC the following day. This will be an opportunity to consider the latest developments in the EU-facilitated dialogue between the Prime Ministers of Serbia and Kosovo: the UK welcomes the leadership of Baroness Ashton on this and is keen to see further improvement in the relations between the two sides. There may also be some discussion of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the pace of reform has recently slowed and renewed progress is badly needed, as well as consideration of the situations in Macedonia and Albania. I do not expect conclusions.

Southern Neighbourhood

There will be a discussion on Syria. Further to a UK drive to increase EU support to Syrian civil society, I anticipate that the EEAS will present its vision on how the EU can support civil society in coping with the consequences of the ongoing conflict and better prepare it for political transition. We also expect discussion on the relationship between EU Member States and the newly formed Syrian National Coalition. Having successfully amended the EU arms embargo (and sanctions package) by setting a three-month renewal period, we will make fresh arguments in support of amending the arms embargo ahead of the March 2013 deadline in a way that offers sufficient flexibility to increase practical support to the Syrian opposition.

Ministers may also take stock of recent events in Libya, including how to support the priorities of the new Prime Minister, Ali Zidan, and his government which has now taken office. There will be an opportunity to discuss the provision and coordination of international assistance to the new Libyan authorities.

The Council may discuss events in Egypt following President Mursi's 22 November Constitutional Declaration. The situation on the ground is changing rapidly, but we will argue for the EU to respond appropriately to the latest developments and clearly underline support for continued progress towards democracy.

Middle East Peace Process

The discussions on the Middle East Peace Process will focus on follow-up to the 29 November UN General Assembly Resolution, including the EU's response to the Israeli decisions to build 3,000 new housing units in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, to unfreeze planning in the area known as E1 and to withhold tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority. EU Ministers will also discuss facilitating a rapid return to credible negotiations in order to secure a two-state solution. We will reiterate our condemnation of the Israeli decision, underlining the threat this poses to the two-state solution, and stress the need to continue work to build on the May FAC conclusions. We will also emphasise the need for the US, with the strong and active support of the EU, to do all it can in the coming weeks and months to take a decisive lead and push the peace process forward urgently. Additionally the UK will stress the need to build on the Gaza ceasefire and to address the underlying causes of the conflict including more open access to and from Gaza for trade as well as humanitarian assistance, and an end to the smuggling of weapons. The UK will support conclusions covering these points.

EU-US

This item has been re-scheduled from November's FAC. Ministers will have the opportunity to discuss the EU's priorities with the US following the US presidential elections on 6 November and the re-election of President Obama. I expect the discussion to cover a spectrum of

leading international issues, including the global economy and a possible EU-US free trade deal.

Ukraine and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

We also expect Ministers to agree conclusions on Ukraine and the DRC.

General Affairs Council

There is a substantial agenda for the GAC in December. There is a legislative deliberation on the Statute of the Court of Justice of the European Union; a presentation by the Commission on the Annual Growth Survey; Preparation for the European Council on 13 and 14 December; endorsement of the 18 month programme for the Presidencies of Ireland, Lithuania and Greece; and a discussion on Enlargement, covering all potential candidates and including the adoption of EU Common positions for the Accession Conference with Iceland. Due to the large agenda, I expect many of these items to be brief and I expect most of the discussion to focus on the preparation for the European Council on 13 and 14 December and on Enlargement.

Statute of the Court of Justice of the European Union

The Cypriot Presidency hopes to secure agreement on a selection method for additional judges at the General Court of the Court of Justice of the European Union: we have not yet received the final proposal for this. I remain concerned at the current backlog at the General Court, which is damaging to the interests of British business. My priorities in the discussion will be: to ensure that there is proportionate common law representation among any additional judges; that the costs of additional judges are covered within existing budgets; and that the selection method provides the Court with the stability it requires to function effectively.

European Semester and the Annual Growth Survey

The Commission will present key elements of the 2013 annual growth survey which can be found on the Commission’s website.

The annual growth survey sets out the Commission’s views on the economic priorities for Europe for 2013, focusing on fiscal consolidation, promoting economic growth and employment. The survey, which represents the first stage of the 2013 European Semester, focuses on growth-friendly fiscal consolidation measures across the EU. The European Semester is the EU-wide framework for coordinating structural reforms and growth-enhancing policies. We do not expect this item to be opened for substantive discussion but, in the event that it is, I will be supporting the focus on growth.

Preparation for the December European Council

The agenda for the December European Council will cover: economic policy, including Economic and Monetary Union and Banking Union; defence; enlargement; and foreign policy. The last two items are covered by the separate sections of this Written Ministerial Statement on enlargement and on the Foreign Affairs Council.

The bulk of the European Council meeting will focus on agreeing a legislative framework for Banking Union and an agenda for further Economic and Monetary integration in the Eurozone.

At the December European Council the Prime Minister will seek to ensure the integrity of the Single Market at 27, including in the context of the Banking Union and the European Banking Authority. We will also press for further progress on growth and ensure that the timetable for further integration in the Eurozone progresses at the right pace and in the right way. I will argue that these concerns should be addressed prior to the December European Council so that solutions to these issues can be put to leaders on 13 and 14 December.

The December European Council agenda item on defence will pave the way for further discussion in 2013. I will argue for a focus on developing capabilities, enhancing operational effectiveness and strengthening the European defence industry.

The 18-month programme for the Presidencies of Ireland, Lithuania and Greece

The GAC has been asked to endorse the 18-month programme of the Council. This sets out the combined programme for the Irish, Lithuanian and Greek Presidencies of the European Council covering the period January 2013 to June 2014. I expect the programme to be published shortly.

Enlargement

Ministers will seek to agree conclusions taking stock of progress on EU enlargement, and on the stabilisation and association process in the Western Balkans. The Commission released their Annual Enlargement Package on 10 October. In this communication, the Commission recommended: (i) opening accession negotiations with Macedonia; and (ii) granting Albania candidate status subject to the completion of three specific measures and evidence of continued commitment in the fight against organised crime and corruption. We believe the communication to be a broadly fair and balanced assessment.

We will seek conclusions reconfirming the European Council’s support for EU enlargement and recognising that the accession process gives strong encouragement to political and economic reform and reinforces peace, democracy and stability. We agree with the Commission’s view that closer relations with the EU should be based on the principles of delivery on commitments, fair and rigorous conditionality, and good communication with the public. We agree that key challenges remain for most enlargement countries, including in the

area of the rule of law. We also support a focus on freedom of expression and regional co-operation, particularly for the Western Balkans countries.

I set out the Government's views on the Commission's reports in my explanatory memorandum of 18 October. We will seek Council conclusions welcoming Croatia's continued progress towards meeting all of its commitments in full before its expected accession on 1 July 2013, while reiterating the Commission's call for Croatia to sharpen its focus to ensure this is achieved.

I will seek conclusions that provide a fair and balanced assessment of Turkey's progress, which will inject much needed momentum into the process to allow accession negotiations to move forward in 2013. I will argue that Iceland should be commended on the progress made in accession negotiations this year, while recalling the need for Iceland to address existing obligations, such as those identified by the European Free Trade Association Surveillance Authority under the European Economic Area Agreement.

I also expect the Council to welcome the opening of accession negotiations with Montenegro in June 2012, while calling for early progress in the area of the rule of law, in line with the new approach to accession negotiations endorsed by the Council in December 2011.

Following the FAC discussion of 10 December, the GAC will discuss the Commission's enlargement package for the Western Balkans countries. We remain fully supportive of a future for all of the Western Balkans countries in the EU, once conditions are met. We want the European Council to commend good progress on reform in Macedonia through the High Level Accession Dialogue, and hope the European Council will be able to build on this by agreeing to the Commission's fourth successive recommendation to open accession negotiations.

In the absence of a further report from the Commission, the December European Council will not be in a position to grant candidate status to Albania; we will want it to call on Albania to make early progress on reform implementation and establish a track record on tackling organised crime and corruption to enable a decision in 2013. I will argue for Council conclusions that underline that Serbia still needs to make real progress to deliver a "visible and sustainable improvement" in its relations with Pristina before accession negotiations can be opened, while noting that this remains in reach if recent progress continues. We want the Council to welcome the Commission's assessment that a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Kosovo is feasible and to signal that negotiations should begin as soon as possible. We agree with the Commission's assessment that Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress on its EU agenda has stalled. We will want the Council to press the leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina to make progress and deliver quickly on those issues they themselves have agreed to, for example, on the EU road map agreed in June.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-affairs-council-and-general-affairs-council