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EU statement in reply to the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan, H.E. Ambassador John MacGregor

The European Union and its Member States warmly welcome H.E. Ambassador John MacGregor back to the Permanent Council as Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan and thank him for his comprehensive report.

We welcome the Project Co-ordinator's continued close relations with the host country and other project partners aimed at assisting the Government of Uzbekistan with the implementation of the OSCE principles and commitments in all three dimensions and pursuing the reform and democratization agenda. We appreciate that in designing the project activities, the Project Co-ordinator has taken into consideration the priority areas outlined by the Government of Uzbekistan in its reform strategy 2017 – 2021, as well as Uzbekistan's efforts to build on and improve good neighbourly relations.

In the politico – military dimension, we welcome the Project Co-ordinator's continued assistance in countering transnational security threats, with particular focus on counter-terrorism. We value that the Project Co-ordinator has engaged with the Government of Uzbekistan in developing and implementing a comprehensive national strategy and action plan to counter violent extremism and terrorism. We also appreciate project activities which support and facilitate Uzbekistan's international co-operation in the field of countering drug trafficking. We underline that countering transnational security threats requires regional co-operation and co-ordination with relevant actors on the ground, with the aim to achieve a synergy of efforts.

In the economic and environmental dimension, the EU continues to highly value activities related to good governance and the rule of law, such as projects on

combating money laundering, financing of terrorism and fight against corruption. We also support activities focusing on promoting entrepreneurship, in particular women's entrepreneurship in rural areas. Furthermore we support efforts aimed at promotion of legal knowledge of entrepreneurs and the development of public examination of the legislation related to private entrepreneurship. We generally encourage reforms and activities which will improve rights of entrepreneurs, including their social and economic rights. We welcome the signing by Uzbekistan of the Paris Climate Agreement last April, therefore becoming the 195th signatory.

In the human dimension, we appreciate the Project Co-ordinator's continued cooperation with national human rights institutions aimed at capacity building. The support provided by the Ombudsperson institution has proven to be highly effective, shown by the high popularity of its online complaint mechanism as well as host country authorities following through with responses. We support activities focusing on human rights education and training of police and judiciary. We value the continued assistance in combatting human trafficking. We also welcome activities in the field of media freedom, an area where much remains to be done. We welcome that the Government of Uzbekistan has signalled its readiness to host the Central Asian Media Freedom Conference in Tashkent in October 2017. We encourage the Government of Uzbekistan and the Project Co-ordinator to use the expertise of the Representative on Freedom of the Media and broaden the mutual cooperation with the RFoM.

We have also taken positive note of the intention of the Government of Uzbekistan to engage more with ODIHR. During the visit of the Director of ODIHR Mr Link to Uzbekistan on 16–17 March 2017, the ODIHR delegation discussed with Uzbek authorities possible election-related joint project activities, involving the national Central Election Commission, the ODIHR and the Project Co-ordinator. They also discussed possible ways to support the implementation of the national strategy 2017-2021. The EU very much encourages such co-operation.

We welcome efforts to encourage participation of government officials and civil society representatives in OSCE regional and international events and hope that

the government will self-fund its representatives in the future. Furthermore we take positive note of the fact that the Project Co-ordinator has maintained the emphasis on activities reaching out to regions, as well as on gender mainstreaming. We also acknowledge the Project co-ordinator's focus on outcomes and encourage increased impact-based evaluation to ensure efficient use of resources. Last but not least we appreciate the fruitful cooperation that has been established between the Project Co-ordinator's office and the EU Delegation in Tashkent, resulting in frequent exchange of opinions and consultations.

Uzbekistan is a key partner country of the European Union in Central Asia. The EU stands ready to step up its current engagement with Uzbekistan in a comprehensive way. The EU has repeatedly expressed support for the national reform strategy 2017 - 2021 and encourages its implementation. These reforms will strengthen Uzbekistan's democratic governance and economic and social development. The EU has engaged with the new leadership of Uzbekistan through repeated visits by Members of the European Parliament, the EU Special Representative for Central Asia and other senior officials. We appreciate that Uzbekistan will host the EU – Central Asia meeting of foreign ministers later this year.

In December 2016 the European Parliament gave its consent to the Textile Protocol of the EU-Uzbekistan Partnership & Cooperation Agreement, which had been suspended since 2011. We worked diligently to this end. Joint efforts with the International Labour Organisation and civil society organisations are needed to ensure that both child and forced labour become things of the past. The entry into force of the Protocol now opens new perspectives for the mutual relations between the EU and Uzbekistan, not least in the economic field where Uzbekistan is making significant efforts to improve the business climate and overall governance. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has already reengaged with the country and the European Investment Bank currently discusses a framework agreement with Uzbekistan.

In the area of human rights and fundamental freedoms, we have taken note that several human rights defenders have been released from prison since the

beginning of 2017, while a growing number of individuals are being imprisoned or remain under house arrest because of their religious beliefs. We call on the Government of Uzbekistan to release all prisoners of conscience. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited the country for the first time on 11 - 12 May this year. We welcome that one of the outcomes of this visit is an agreement that the OHCHR regional office in Central Asia will start working closely with Uzbekistan.

Before concluding, the EU would like to take this opportunity to call on Uzbekistan to consider the issue of taxation of local staff salaries in the Project Co-ordinator's Office.

Finally the EU would like to ensure H.E. Ambassador MacGregor about its continued support for the Project Co-ordinator's activities and we thank him and his able team for their dedicated work.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, SERBIA* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.