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Conference Services

At the request of the OSCE Delegation of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia the attached statement in response to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, H.E. Mr. Karel Schwarzenberg, delivered by Mr. Nenad Kolev, Head of Mission, to the 748th Meeting of the Permanent Council on 29 January 2009, is being distributed to all delegations.

**ADDRESS TO THE 748th PERMANENT COUNCIL
BY MR NENAD KOLEV,
HEAD OF MISSION OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA,
29 January 2009**

Thank you Madam Chairperson,

The Republic of Macedonia too welcomes H.E. Karel Schwarzenberg, Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic, and thanks him for his eloquent and comprehensive address.

We very much welcome the Czech Republic's intention to place the EU integration of the Western Balkans countries high on the Union's priority list. These countries deserve their rightful place within the great European family of nations sooner rather than later. Regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are among the best references to this effect.

European integration is a key strategic goal of the Macedonian Government. At the same time, it is an issue enjoying tremendous public support of around 90%. More specifically, the start of accession talks with the EC and visa liberalisation remain two of Macedonia's main priorities. To that end my country has continuously been showing sustainable progress in the implementation of the EC benchmarks and recommendations. Currently we are focused on the forthcoming presidential and local elections in March as well as on the advancing of police and judicial reforms, further fight against corruption, harmonisation of national laws with the European *acquis communautaire*, etc.

In the next 5 months under the Czech Presidency we expect the EU to leave the door open for a possible upgrade of Macedonia's EU-related status based on a mid-term assessment of the benchmarks' implementation. We have been a candidate country for too long – 4th year now, which is not sustainable. Moreover, it is very demotivating. The high level of compliance with the provisions of the SAA and the successful functioning of all of its committees over the last 5 years make us say that we have the political, administrative and institutional capacity to start the negotiations as of tomorrow. In the words of Macedonia's Deputy-Prime Minister, our strategy in 2009 will be to provide no excuse for anyone to argue in favour of a further delay of our integration into the Union.

On visa liberalisation, it is the EC's assessment that we have made significant progress as regards the Roadmap's implementation. During the Czech Chairmanship we expect the EC to submit to the Council a proposal to abolish visas for Macedonian citizens thereby paving the road for a visa-free regime to be introduced by the end of this year. Anything short of this will be the cause of great disappointment, especially among Macedonia's young generations, currently frustrated for not being able to travel to Prague, Vienna or any other city in the very Union they are going to spend most of their lives as citizens of.

On a different issue, Madam Chairperson, please be informed that the President of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia has scheduled the Presidential elections, as well as the elections for members of municipal councils and the council of the City of Skopje and for municipal mayors and the mayor of the City of Skopje for 22 March 2009. In this regard, I would like to invite the ODIHR, as an institution responsible for election observation in the OSCE framework, to organize an observation mission for the upcoming presidential and municipal

elections in the Republic of Macedonia. We firmly believe that the election process will contribute to further consolidation of democratic processes in my country and reaffirm our strong commitment to upholding democratic values we agreed upon in the OSCE area. The invitation to organize a mission is yet another demonstration of our dedication to free and fair elections.

Before I end, let me thank Ambassador Pocuch and the able staff at the Czech Mission for their regular meetings with the 3 EU candidate countries and close cooperation in general. It is much appreciated.

In conclusion, Mr. Minister, thank you for coming to the OSCE thereby demonstrating your personal and the commitment of your country as well as the EU to our Organisation.