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Statement of the European Union in response to the head of the OSCE presence in Albania

The European Union welcomes the Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Pavel Vacek, back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his comprehensive report.

The European Union is pleased to note that certain encouraging developments have taken place in Albania since Ambassador Vacek's last appearance before the Permanent Council one year ago.

During this period the Government of Albania has pursued its reform programme and its anti-corruption and crime-fighting policies, in line with the commitments it made on 12 June 2006, when it signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union.

The European Union would like to note in particular that the presidential electoral process in the Albanian Parliament was concluded in accordance with the Constitution. We welcome the commitments expressed by President Bamir Topi to make the EU integration a priority, to represent all the people of Albania and to preserve equilibrium among Albania's state institutions.

We would like to recall that in their conclusions of 23 July 2007, the EU Foreign Ministers reiterated their support for Albania's European perspective, subject to fulfilment of the EU criteria, and encouraged all political forces to work together in moving forward with the reforms. In this regard, we note that Parliament has reconvened, after a period of political deadlock, and we hope it will deal quickly and effectively with the important reform issues, particularly those requiring consensus of all political actors.

The importance of the electoral reform process should be specifically emphasized. The OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission assessed the local elections on February 18th such that "only partly met OSCE commitments". The EU welcomes the intention of the Albanian authorities and political parties to address the identified shortcomings and to make full use of the expertise and assistance offered by ODIHR to implement the recommendations of the Election Observation Mission's final report to make the 2009 parliamentary elections a success. In this regard, the European Union looks forward to the necessary draft amendments to the country's electoral legislation. We expect the electoral reforms to be in line with the recommendations made by the OSCE/ODIHR and the "Venice Commission" of the Council of Europe, in July 2007.

We would also like to draw attention to the longer term project on civil and voter register modernization. We encourage the Albanian authorities to speed up the creation of a functioning address system, the modernization of the civil registration system and the creation of the personal data protection framework, with a view to establishing a permanent voter register which should be functional ahead of the 2009 parliamentary elections.

The EU considers that the OSCE Presence in Albania should continue to play a major role in the ambitious process of reforms in which the country is currently engaged. As explained by Ambassador Vacek, it is particularly important to focus the Presence's work on reforms in key areas, such as legislation, judiciary, police training and border crossing management, good governance, fight against corruption and trafficking. We welcome the intention to continue support for civil society and independence of the media. Given the magnitude of the challenges

faced by Albania in its transition process, the European Union believes that the current mandate of the OSCE Presence, as updated at the end of 2003, provides a solid base for work, and we welcome the Presence's improved cooperation with the host country. We encourage the Albanian authorities to make full use of the OSCE expertise and technical assistance.

We also welcome the continued close co-operation of the OSCE Presence with other international partners on the ground, and in particular with the Delegation of the European Commission in Tirana. We consider close co-operation and the avoidance of duplication to be prerequisites for the Presence's successful work in its mandated areas.

The European Union underlines the importance of Albania's continued constructive role in the region. In this regard, we would like to point out that regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations are essential for overall stability in the region.

As this is Ambassador Vacek's last appearance before the Permanent Council, the European Union would like to congratulate the OSCE presence in Tirana on its valuable work and wish Ambassador Vacek all the best in the future.

The Candidate Countries Turkey, Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, EFTA countries Iceland and Norway, members of the European Economic Area, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Armenia and Georgia align themselves with this statement.

* Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.