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**EU STATEMENT ON THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS
IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA**

The European Union takes note of the Preliminary Findings and Conclusions of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) deployed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe for the 13 March municipal elections in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. As the European Union attaches great importance to the proper implementation of all legislation related to the Ohrid Framework Agreement and in view of the recent application for EU membership, it has followed the first round of the elections under the new law on decentralisation with strong interest.

The European Union is concerned about the preliminary conclusions of the International Election Observation Mission. ODIHR concluded that although the elections were conducted in accordance with most OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards, they failed to meet key commitments to guarantee universal and equal suffrage and the secrecy of the ballot. ODIHR reported persistent irregularities in a significant number of municipalities, including intimidation, ballot stuffing and group voting. The tolerance of such widespread violations is inconsistent with the country's aspirations for EU membership.

The European Union therefore urges the Government of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to take without delay all necessary steps to address the shortcomings identified by the IEOM in anticipation of the second round of the municipal elections on 27th of March 2005 and to make sure that frauds and abuses are not tolerated and that action is taken against persistent offenders. The European Union reiterates its readiness to assist the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in any efforts to improve the conduct of future elections.

The Candidate Countries Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey and Croatia¹ align themselves with this statement.

¹Croatia continues to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process