

**EUROPEAN UNION****OSCE Permanent Council Nr 987
Vienna, 6 March 2014**

**EU Statement in Response to the Minister of Social Welfare
and Youth of Albania, H.E. Mr. Erion Veliaj**

The European Union warmly welcomes Minister Erion Veliaj and thanks him for his comprehensive intervention on the efforts of the Government of Albania to promote gender equality and combat domestic violence.

Promoting gender equality and combating discrimination and violence against women remains a crucial endeavor within the OSCE area. Violence against women is a widespread human rights violation of our time. We underscore the need to fully implement MC.DEC/15/05 on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, which calls on the participating States to take all necessary measures to promote and protect the full enjoyment of the human rights of women, and to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence against women and girls.

We commend Albania for being among the first States to ratify the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. We have listened with keen interest to the steps Albania has taken and is planning to take to comply with the obligations laid down in the Convention. We encourage other participating States to consider becoming a party to the Istanbul Convention.

As the Minister rightly pointed out, achieving greater equality between women and men will require sustained changes in attitudes, institutions, legal frameworks and decision-making structures.

We welcome the amendment of the Criminal Code in Albania last spring to introduce rape and sexual violence in the marriage as a criminal offence; we also welcome enhanced awareness raising efforts that led to an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence reported to the police.

We commend the fact that the gender quota has been respected in the composition of the new government of Albania, with six female ministers. However, women continue to be under-represented in public office. Further efforts are required to enforce laws and policies on women's rights.

We welcome the commitment for establishing the National Coordination and Referral Mechanism against Domestic Violence across the country, as well as the intention to create an online national registration system and a toll-free hotline for victims of domestic violence. Coordination between central and local institutions needs to be improved, and the missing structures need to be established, namely public shelters and relevant social services for victims.

However, there is room for more progress. We call for reinforced dialogue between the government and civil society. Implementation of policies to protect women against all forms of violence needs to be strengthened. The increasing number of reported cases of domestic violence in Albania is a matter of serious concern. The fact that as many as 50% of women who had filed for court protection withdrew their petitions subsequently is alarming. A system of victim compensation and reintegration needs to be established.

We concur with Minister Veliaj that the political and economic empowerment of women is of crucial importance in order to ensure gender equality. As you all recall, the need to guarantee equal opportunity in the economic and political spheres is highlighted among the priority areas in the OSCE 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality as well as combating violence against women, and encouraging women's participation in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction. We should aim for progress

across our region, including the adoption of an OSCE-wide Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.

As this year marks the tenth anniversary of the Action Plan, we will have an excellent opportunity to take stock of our efforts regarding the implementation of our gender equality commitments and to explore ways of addressing the remaining challenges. The EU looks forward to actively engaging in this work.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) published the findings of a major EU-wide survey on violence against women yesterday at a high level conference in Brussels. This is the first and widest survey on the subject in the EU. This study demonstrates the wide prevalence of violence against women within the EU area, highlighting the need to combat and prevent violence against women. The survey revealed that the scale of the violence against women often remains hidden in official figures; according to the survey results two thirds of female victims of physical and /or sexual violence did not contact the police or any other service after the most serious incident of violence they had experienced. These findings serve to underscore the crucial need to raise awareness on this issue. We look forward to sharing the results of this major study with all of you.

As the Minister rightly pointed out, protecting the rights of women is integral to human rights protection. While the legal framework for the protection of human rights and countering discrimination has been improved, legislative gaps still need to be addressed and its implementation continues to be a challenge, including in relation to Roma. Adoption of legislation in order to provide equal and non-discriminatory treatment of all persons belonging to national minorities is crucial. This will benefit also those women and girls who are part of minority groups.

The EU commends the commitment of the new government and its intensified efforts and encourages the authorities to maintain this new momentum in the reform process. Constructive and sustainable dialogue between the government

and the opposition on EU-related reforms will be vital in securing Albania's EU future.

Promoting a national reform agenda remains paramount to successful European integration. Building on the encouraging progress made so far, Albania should further intensify its efforts, particularly in the area of public administration reform, to strengthen the independence, efficiency and accountability of the judiciary, to fight against corruption and organised crime, and to protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities; continued implementation of anti-corruption and judicial reform strategies and of recently adopted relevant legislation, as well as a continued trend of pro-active investigations and prosecutions, including in the area of organised crime, are essential. We also stress the need to address persisting problems in the areas of property rights, restitution, compensation and property reform.

In the context of the above, we welcome the activities of the OSCE Presence in assisting Albania to meet its OSCE commitments. These activities also bring added value to the country's strategic objectives.

We hope that the second session of the High Level Dialogue (HLD) on the Key Priorities between Albania and the European Commission will be an impetus for pursuing reforms in a sustained manner so that the next European Commission's report evaluates positively Albania's progress in the required fields.

In conclusion, we thank the Minister once again for his presence today at the Permanent Council and wish him every success in his activity.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO*, ICELAND+ and SERBIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, as well as the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, GEORGIA and MONACO align themselves with this statement.

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

+ Iceland continues to be a member of the EFTA and of the European Economic Area.