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PERMANENT MISSION
OF THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
TO THE INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATIONS
VIENNA

**Statement of the Delegation of Albania,
in response to the Report by the OSCE High Commissioner on National
Minorities, Ms. Astrid Thors
As delivered by the Permanent Representative, Ambassador Spiro Koçi,
at the 1026th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council
20 November 2014**

Thank you Mr. Chairperson,

My Delegation warmly welcomes High Commissioner Thors back to the OSCE Permanent Council and thanks her for the report. We wish to reiterate our continued appreciation for the work of the High Commissioner and her able team.

As highlighted in the report, High Commissioner Thors visited Albania last September. During this visit we exchanged views on regional cooperation, the effective exercise of her mandate in our region and the involvement of the High Commissioner in cases when tensions involving national minorities could develop into conflict situations. These were also the objectives of her visit, which were successfully accomplished.

The Albanian authorities welcomed her offer to assist our country in the process of improving the legal framework for the protection of national minorities. As the report put it and largely demonstrated by the recent visit in Albania of Pope Francis, a climate of respect and tolerance prevails in Albania, whereas the Constitution and the current legal framework guarantee the fundamental rights of persons belonging to minorities, including the right to freely express their ethnicity, to preserve and develop their national identity, education in the mother tongue, cultural identity and religion.

Albania has developed a solid track record with regard to the protection of persons belonging to national minorities, and is committed to fulfilling the relevant international standards in this field.

On this occasion, I wish to reiterate that we are working to implement the Council of Europe recommendations and the 5 priorities set by the European Commission in the framework of our EU integration process. They provide for, inter alia, the "improvement of the legal and policy framework for the protection of minorities". In this context, the Prime Minister has established an Intergovernmental Working Group, with participation of the representatives of all minority groups, to assess the legal and policy framework for minorities. By the end of this year this Working Group will present its recommendations for the necessary improvements.

We would welcome the cooperation with the HCNM during the implementation phase of the eventual recommendations. Contacts with the HCNM are already underway with a view to identify possible cooperation projects.

With regard to the term "non majority community", I would like to clarify that Albania recognizes two categories of minority: national minorities and ethno-linguistic minorities. This classification differentiates between minorities which have a kin state and those which do not, but it does not affect the individual rights of persons belonging to minorities. In this framework, let me make clear that the status of ethno-linguistic minority does not bear any negative or discriminatory effect in the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Albania's internal process of classification of minorities is based on a set of criteria, which include our national traditions, the objective criteria stipulated in international conventions, which relate to the existence of distinct ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic characteristics, as well as the expression of their will to preserve these characteristics and belong to a minority community.

Mr. Chairperson,

We are committed to further advance with the adoption of international standards for the protection of national minorities and we expect that those standards are fully and equally implemented with the same value by all participating States in our region and beyond.

The High Commissioner conducts substantial business in the Western Balkans. We encourage her to continue her active engagement in the region, with a view to address relevant issues related to her mandate.

Albania considers the requests of the Albanians of Preshevo Valley to be fully realistic and rational. In this respect, Albania welcomes the OSCE

commitments and a greater role in the mediation and the dialogue with the Serbian authorities.

The engagement of the Government of Serbia to the preservation of the national identity of the Albanian minority in Preshevo, as well as to their socio-economic prosperity, is a cornerstone for the further strengthening of relations between our two countries.

Let me take this opportunity to draw the attention on the Memorandum of Understanding on youth cooperation that is recently signed during the visit of the Albanian PM in Serbia. It is a selection of joint policies and programmes in support of the spirit of cooperation, tolerance and friendship between the youth of the two countries. It commits the countries than in the next 90 days, a common document in the field of education, ensuring the mutual recognition of university degrees and diplomas should be signed. The Albanian government is ready to fulfill this commitment, which was one of the engagements of the Berlin Conference on Western Balkans as well.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I would like to wish HCNM Thors and her team every success in their future endeavors.

Thank you for the attention!