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Statement of the European Union in response to the High Commissioner on National Minorities, Ambassador Rolf Ekéus

The European Union warmly welcomes Ambassador Ekéus back to the Permanent Council and thanks him for his final report at the end of his six year tenure.

It was a period full of challenges and important developments, such as the enlargement of the European Union; deepening co-operation among the countries of southeast Europe and with the European Union; the conclusion and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the signing of the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans with the three countries of Southern Caucasus. During this period the High Commissioner on National Minorities and his Office have continued to make a valuable contribution.

At the same time, the European Union has also played its part in promoting stability and co-operation in Europe. The so-called "Copenhagen Criteria" for accession to the European Union include a criterion on the respect for and protection of minorities which is important in this regard. In many respects the objectives of the Office of the High Commissioner and the EU are complementary. We are very pleased to note that other sub-regions and countries in the OSCE area have also intensified their cooperation with the High Commissioner.

In the past six years governments and peoples throughout the OSCE region have acted more than ever on the basis that the protection of national minorities is indispensable to stability, democracy and prosperity. They have increasingly realised the importance of pro-activity and prevention in this respect. The EU will continue to spare no effort to promote further understanding for this in the future.

The EU also welcomes the enhancement of bilateral and regional co-operation mechanisms for the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, of which the Ukrainian-Romanian joint monitoring commission and the inter-governmental co-operation between Hungary, Slovakia and Romania are good examples.

In this respect the EU also strongly supports the interstate-dialogue on minority education in Central Asia, launched by the High Commissioner in Tashkent, in November last year, and the process initiated by the High Commissioner with the objective of assisting the efforts towards reconciliation among all communities in Kosovo.

The EU pays tribute to the High Commissioner's co-operation with other international institutions active in the area of early warning, conflict prevention and protection of the specific rights of persons belonging to national minorities. We value the close contacts which the High Commissioner has developed with the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Commission.

The EU believes, that the issuing of thematic recommendations by the High Commissioner has proved itself as an important means of standard-setting, and commends the High Commissioner on having continued the work of his predecessor on this.

The EU is pleased that it was able to support the programmes and projects of the High Commissioner last year and notes the High Commissioner's need to be able to respond quickly and flexibly to opportunities which may arise for targeted small-scale pilot projects.

In concluding, the EU wishes to extend its warmest thanks to Ambassador Ekéus for his commitment and achievements during his six year tenure. He has made a significant and lasting contribution to the work of our organization.

The Candidate Countries Croatia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia, EFTA countries Iceland, Liechtenstein 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.