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Statement of the European Union in response to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, H.E. Mr Vartan Oskanian

The European Union warmly welcomes H.E. the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, Mr Vartan Oskanian, back to the Permanent Council. We thank him for his presentation which we have listened to with great interest.

The EU was greatly saddened to hear of the death of Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan. He will be long remembered for his many years of faithful service to Armenia. We extend our sincere condolences to the family of Mr. Margaryan, and to the people of Armenia.

Mr Chairman, on the occasion of Foreign Minister Oskanian's last visit to the Permanent Council the European Union expressed its readiness to strengthen relations with Armenia on the basis of the shared values and principles at the heart of the European Neighbourhood Policy - of democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, good governance and the market economy. We are delighted that individual Action Plans have since been concluded with the three countries of the Southern Caucasus. These provide the framework for these countries to pursue political and economic reforms and to foster a closer relationship with the EU.

We repeat our commitment to further strengthening our relationship with Armenia, and thank Foreign Minister Oskanian and the Armenian Government for the close rapport they maintain with the EU Special Representative for the Caucasus, Ambassador Peter Semneby. The European Union welcomes the steps undertaken by Armenia in recent years to advance political reform thereby contributing to our

shared goals under the ENP. We believe the OSCE Office in Yerevan can make an important contribution to the continuation of this process, and welcome reports from the Office of good cooperation with the host government. We call on all political forces in Armenia to engage in a continued reform process and to take full advantage of the expertise and advice offered by the OSCE Office, OSCE/ODIHR, the EU and the Council of Europe.

The EU appreciates the stated determination of the Armenian Authorities [repeated again today by Foreign Minister Oskanian] to hold democratic parliamentary elections in Armenia on 12 May in line with OSCE commitments. The good conduct of the elections would be a clear indication of Armenia's commitment to the values that underpin the European Neighbourhood Policy. The EU welcomes the invitation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the OSCE/ODIHR to monitor the election process and is confident that international observers will continue to be afforded every assistance in carrying out their tasks.

We commend the Armenian Government for acting on the suggestions of the Council of Europe Venice Commission to improve the electoral legislation over the last year. According to the first interim report of the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, the election code provides a solid foundation for the conduct of democratic elections. We value the co-operation between the Armenian Government and ODIHR.

The EU attaches great importance to the conduct of elections in line with participating States' Copenhagen commitments. In addition to putting in place the correct legislative framework, this requires other insurances, including equitable access to the media, transparency of campaign financing, unimpeded rights of assembly, and non-interference from officials in the management of the election. The EU hopes that the 12 May parliamentary elections will be run in line with OSCE commitments. We are concerned by recent reports on attacks on Political Party Offices in Armenia and strongly condemn acts of violence aimed at disturbing the orderly conduct of the elections.

Mr Chairman, progress towards the negotiated and peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a key objective of the ENP Action Plan. The EU fully

supports the work of the OSCE Minsk Group and its Co-Chairmen and will continue to do so. It calls on both parties to continue discussions on the basic principles for a future settlement as proposed by the Co-chairs, which remain the core of the negotiations. The EU welcomes the intention of the ministers of Foreign Affairs to meet tomorrow and in May to prepare the ground for a future presidential summit. It recalls the necessity of preparing public opinion for a compromise and of avoiding any aggressive rhetoric.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, we would like once again to thank H.E. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian for addressing the Permanent Council today, and wish him and his country all the best for the challenging tasks ahead.

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, as well as EFTA country Norway, a member of the European Economic Area, align themselves with this statement.

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