Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton at the end of her visit to Albania

Good afternoon everyone. I am very happy to visit Tirana today. I just met with President Nishani, Prime Minister Berisha and opposition leader Rama and had in-depth discussions with each of them.

My visit takes place the day after heated discussions in the Parliament on the preparation of the elections. We have followed very closely those discussions and I have today made clear to all sides our position.

The European Union considers it of crucial importance that the 2013 Parliamentary elections are in line with international and European standards. This will be a test for the smooth functioning of the country's democratic institutions and progress on the European Union path.

Yesterday we expressed publicly our concern over the possible repercussions of a vote in parliament on the people's confidence in the electoral process. It is the responsibility of all politicians to ensure the independence of institutions and to make sure that they enjoy the trust of everyone. There needs to be trust in the process. The European Union is committed to monitor and to support a free and fair electoral process, based on European and International standards. But overall, over past years Albania has made impressive progress. Albania is an appreciated member of the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe and NATO.

The European Union, too, is very much committed to the European perspective of Albania. We want to see the country progress at a good pace. But the progress on the path towards the European Union is in your hands.

A genuine and a constructive dialogue among all the political parties and the will to find compromises are key to progress.
We need to see a solid track record of reforms, especially in tackling corruption and organised crime, as stated repeatedly and most recently in the December Council conclusions. Commissioner Füle, to whom I pay tribute, is particularly engaged in helping you with your reform agenda and he has my full support.

Let me also say a word on Albania’s role in the region which was always appreciated. Of course, to maintain this constructive role, the use of nationalistic rhetoric has to be avoided. Albania needs to continue its traditional role of honest and constructive regional player. We need your support in our continuing efforts to stabilize the region and help it move forward.

I believe that Albania has the capacity to address these challenges and to make the necessary progress. So my message today overall is one of support, but also one of high expectations: as the potential candidate country Albania must embrace the challenges and move forward.

And in doing so, the European Union is here with you to help.

Thank you.