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ALBANIA

Statement by H.E. Ms Ermelinda Meksi Minister of Economic Cooperation and Trade

(Speaking as an Observer)

This is the first time that a representative from Albania has the opportunity to make a statement at such a high-level Conference of the World Trade Organization. I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to express my gratitude for the invitation and for the support Albania has received from all the WTO structures we have addressed. I would also like to express my sincerest wishes for a successful Conference. As WTO General-Director Mike Moore said in his Marrakesh speech last September, I quote, "The WTO is a family where each Member has its own seat around the table." It is my belief that if each of us makes its contribution, however modest it may be, this Forum will certainly achieve its ultimate objective.

From its very first steps towards democracy and the establishment of a market economy, Albania expressed its intent to become a WTO Member. Its efforts in this direction have enormously intensified during the last two years. Its will to pursue this objective was not even broken by the nearly insurmountable obstacles presented by the hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees who came to Albania after being expelled from their homes in Kosovo because of the notorious regime of Milosevic and its genocide.

The accession of Albania to the WTO heralds the establishment of an open economy in the context of the integration of the countries of the region into the global system of trade.

We are determined to work alongside our partners to lift all political and administrative barriers to the free movement of goods, services and capital in order to boost economic cooperation, trade and investments among countries of the region and the rest of Europe and the World. This accession, bringing with it significant legislative reforms and other trade-related rules, is another step towards meeting the conditions and objectives of the Stability Pact.

I would like to briefly update this Conference regarding the efforts and achievements of my country in this direction. Judging that liberalization was the only possible choice to convert the centralized Albanian economy to the open market, the Albanian Government made it the inseparable part of the main objective of its programme – a stable economic growth, macroeconomic stability, an open market to the expansion of trade and investments in the private sector, effective and transparent customs procedures, a liberal trade regime and diversified property that lead to prosperity.

The establishment of the Albanian Negotiating Group and the Albanian Permanent Secretariat of the Coordination of Relations with the WTO made it possible to further intensify efforts in order to present, within an extremely brief period of time, our offer of market access in goods, the schedule in the field of services, a package of the actual legislation and several amendments, and acts that led to the overall improvement in the reform process. We also presented a considerable number of

memoranda including the Memorandum on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights, Memorandum on Public Procurement, Memorandum on Restrictions on Export and Import Licensing, Memorandum on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, Memorandum on Technical Barriers to Trade, the Schedule on Agriculture, and the Memorandum on Trade-Related Investment Measures.

Our objective to accede to the WTO prior to this Conference justified our intensive efforts and kept us fully motivated throughout the process. In order to meet this challenge Albania overcame problems generated from severe domestic political debate regarding the change in mentality and the economic and political costs of accession. I must mention the support the Albanian Parliament gave to this difficult process by the approval of a new legislative framework that accounts for a transforming and emancipated political class in Albania. This new legislation will regulate the former chaotic environment perceived as liberalization and economic integration and make way for an economic environment characterized by transparency and fair rules in order to wage a struggle with corruption. The challenge ahead lies in institutionally applying and enforcing these rules.

With high consideration for the enormous efforts and brilliant performance of the Albanian Negotiating Group, all the Member countries engaged in bilateral talks with Albania have willingly expressed their wishes for and belief in the Albanian accession. I also avail myself of this opportunity to say how much we appreciate, not only the encouragement received from all the countries whose demands we had to meet, but also their willingness to respond to our accelerated accession process in order to reach this Conference with a completed legislative framework.

The outcome of these efforts is the Conclusion of the Bilateral Negotiations and signing of respective agreements with 14 Members who expressed interest in taking part in this process. So, in terms of its obligations, Albania has successfully concluded the accession process. The last stage is the approval of the accession report during the final Working Party.

The only obstacle to the final decision of the WTO General Council regarding Albania's accession and the official signing of the agreement between Albania and this Organization concerns the commitments in the field of audiovisual services. Some WTO Members, specifically, EU countries and the United States, have been engaged in a lasting debate concerning their differences problem. I would accent the fact that the commitment of Albania in this field is in line with the US and EU demands. There is a general unanimity prevailing among EU members, with the exception of one country that has expressed objections to this commitment. This is more a matter of principle concerning strategies to be implemented in the future by the two main axis of this world trade organism, both of whom, I underline, have contributed significantly to the accession efforts of Albania. Albania's accession depends exclusively on the settling of this issue, even though the country itself represents but a small and undeveloped audiovisual market. On the other hand, it is difficult for the public back home in Albania, a public that has constantly been updated on the systematic progress achieved by Albania in getting to this point, to understand that the accession procedure is blocked only because of a dispute concerning audiovisuals. Furthermore, the image and credibility of the WTO itself will be compromised by reducing the matter of accession to a single service area.

I call on all participants in the WTO process, not to turn Albania into a hostage of a lasting debate between other Members. We insist that and invite you all to be constructive in resolving the issue of national heritage at this Conference, so that no more obstacles block the immediate accession of Albania or of other countries in the region in a similar situation and to allow us full participation as Member in the new multilateral round of negotiations.
